The Long Leash: Irritated Dragon

by Ryoko21

Summary

With five assets now in his care and one on the brink of death, agent Zeke Price has to balance the safety of his slaves with the goals of his mission. His two youngest slaves - temperamental Ruby and untested fighter Red - are in dire need of training, but both his trainers are out of commission. His newest asset, a medical scholar called Lee, could be the piece that Zeke needs to get his mission back on track. Or, with his keen insight and strong principles, he could derail it even further.

Notes

I hope everyone had a good holiday! I'm just happy it's over. :) Too much craziness!

And I'm back! New chapters! Not as many as I'd hoped, but we've got at least fourteen chapters before I have to sweat. I couldn't have done it without my beta team: Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress have been helping me out during this section, and they have been AMAZING! I can't thank them enough. They rock!

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal. I am going to try to do better about blogging on both of them.
I'm anticipating that my normal posting day will fall somewhere between Thursday evening and Friday morning, although that could change as I settle into my schedule for the new year. (My sister got a new job, which flips around all the days I will be babysitting my niece, and I'm also going to be doing a second job a couple hours a week cleaning for some elderly people near my work.) So I might have to rearrange some things as I settle in, but the weekly updates will continue.

Thank you so much for sticking with me! I hope you enjoy the new section!
“It's been three days, Lee. I think it's safe for you to leave the room. Come to breakfast with me.”

This is the first time he's had a chance to speak with me privately since I treated the blonde clone. Since then, Zero has been a constant occupant of this room, along with myself. Today is the first time that Zeke has ordered Zero to leave the room to shower and sleep, likely because Kip seems to be improving steadily. There's still the risk of his vitals fluctuating, but he's finally regaining some color and vitality. It's a good sign.

“You have an error in your logic,” I respond evenly.

“Oh?” he responds, leaning casually against the doorway.

“It is not for his safety that I do not leave this room. It is because I choose not to.” I lean closer and growl in a hushed tone, “Do not attempt to order me. I am not one of your slaves. I will not tolerate it.”

He smirks, and there's something in it deeper than the pleasant, carefully neutral expression that he wears around his assets.

“As you wish,” he responds. “Should I have them send up your usual? Weak tea and unbuttered toast?”

From his expression, I can tell that he thinks that I'm being stubborn, accepting only the bare minimum from him. I don't correct him, but the truth is that after so long without food, I have to be cautious about how quickly I reintroduce sustenance into my diet. The first cup of tea had been too strong and too sweet, and had made me violently ill for the better part of an hour. Thankfully, the small medical unit comes equipped with a full bathroom, so I was able to cover my retching with the noise from the shower.

“Have Ruby bring it,” I respond, in no way backing down from his criticism. “And tell him to send honey on the side.”

His grin widens. His reaction is unfathomable. It might be novel for a slave to give him orders like this, but I've no idea why it makes him happy. Nor does there appear to be any malice in the expression – he seems genuinely amused.

It irritates me and I bristle, glaring at him.

“We're going to need to speak soon,” he says, changing topics. “There wasn't much time when...”

When he'd blurted out that he was a secret agent for the Federation Space Justice Department, intent on finding the identity of the Controller and disbanding the human-trafficking ring known as The Leash.

I'd laughed at him.

“This is new!” I had sneered. He'd taken me to his torture chamber, and the bravado was partially to cover how nervous I was. If he used any of these implements before I could get back into my trance, I'd have to experience the full effects of them, without the moderating barrier of meditation. “I'll give you credit for ingenuity. This is the first time an owner has tried this tactic to gain my compliance. And I suppose that you're so deep undercover that there's no record of you ever being
an agent? No way to actually verify your story?”

He had looked... stricken. His face pale, his eyes gaunt, his expression... haunted.

“That... would be accurate,” he'd said grimly.

“Then there's nothing else to speak about,” I'd responded harshly. “Beat me or take me back.”

“Wait,” he'd said quickly. “I have a contact. She's known. If she's willing to verify,” then he'd cut himself off, running an angry hand through his hair. “Damn it, there isn't time!”

He had looked so desperate... that I started to doubt myself. Why would he tell this lie? Isn't it more dangerous than my skills are worth? And why all this trouble for a single asset? What possible benefit could he have that would outweigh the risk in this situation?

“Her name,” I'd growled.

“What?”

“Give me her name. Your contact. I will verify her on my own.” It was a stupid plan, and I knew it even then. He could have looked up the name of an agent to verify his story. “I will want to contact her to verify your identity.”

“I... She doesn't know that I'm doing this. She will not be pleased that I have compromised my cover.”

I had glared at him, and he’d deflated.

“Her name is Mari Thompson.”

There was a control screen on the wall near the door and I moved to it, then had to wait for him to come unlock it and bring up a search. I typed in the name, bringing up the anticipated results. Meanwhile, my mind was racing. Could I believe this? As far as tricks went, it was unexpected but completely irrational. There was no guarantee it would sway me, and it was hard to justify the risk he was taking.

“Call her,” I demanded.

“We don't have time...”

“Then make time!” I snarled. “I will not cave to tricks and deceptions! If you want my help, prove yourself to me.”

“Fine,” he growled, and I was half surprised that he would cave so easily to my demands. A part of me was hoping that he'd resist, proving that it was all a lie. The possibility that it wasn't...

Hope and fear warred in me at the thought.

Rescue, my mind screamed. Salvation!

Death, another part of my warned. He will be found out. We will all be killed, gruesomely and slowly. This group is neither weak nor stupid. We cannot succeed. He endangers his own life and the lives of those in his care.

“Why did you bring me here?” I asked him while he dialed, if only to distract my racing thoughts. “Why this... torture chamber, if you had no intent of harming me?”
“The walls are sound-proof,” he responded as the call went out, “and the door is sturdier than my office. I wasn't sure...” he hesitated, his eyes glancing toward me. “I thought you might attack again.”

So he hadn't trusted my word either, then. Perhaps he wasn't as foolish as he seemed.

The line picked up, and a woman in her night-dress appeared on the screen. It was the same face as the one in the Department database.

“This had better be...” her eyes found me and she sighed, an angry and resigned noise. “Damn it, Zeke. Are you kidding me?”

“I don't know what you expected,” Zeke growled back at her, his posture going tense and his voice irritated. “I told you he wouldn't cooperate and...”

“You're risking the whole damn mission for one person!” she snapped. “You can't justify all their lives just for one!”

“I don't have to justify anything!” Zeke responded, yelling now. “I won't lose him!”

“You'll lose all of them! You'll be lucky if command doesn't pull your ass out!”

“And how would they manage that, exactly? It's not like they're giving me any damn support! You think they can just rip me out as easily as they threw me in this mess?”

“These aren't your decisions to make! You can't...”

“Enough!” I snapped, and the outburst was enough to silence both of them. “We haven't time for your squabbling.” I pushed my way in front of the screen, meeting eyes with the dark-haired woman for the first time. “Can you confirm his identity as an agent with the Federation Space Justice Department?” I surveyed her countenance for signs of deceit, but found none. The corners of her mouth turned down in a look of bitter distaste, but she nodded. “I will want a more thorough briefing at a later date,” I informed her. Her eyes were resigned and she gave me a second short, silent nod. Without saying anything else, I severed the connection, unwilling to wait through any more bickering.

I turned to Zeke next, who stared back at me with a tired, hollow expression. This was the man they'd sent to save us? He hardly seemed to be holding himself together.

“I will not be your slave,” I told him firmly. “I will not take your orders. I will not grovel at your feet. I will not be your whore.”

“I'm not asking for that,” he replied, his voice small and hopeless.

“You're not asking for it right now,” I pointed out, “but this isn't the end. We will need to negotiate terms to this arrangement when we have more time. I want to be clear that you do not hold dominion over me. I will not tolerate efforts to...” I cast my eyes around the room, “…intimidate or incentivize me.”

“I understand,” he responded evenly.

“I want your word that you will not take aggressive actions against me, even if I am unable to save your asset.”

“I will not harm you. You have my word.”
“And you guarantee that there will be no repercussions if Kip is not as you remember him.”

“I've already promised not to harm you.”

“I mean repercussions for him,” I growled. “You will care for him regardless of his condition. You will not kill him if he does not fully recover.”

“Of course,” he responded, obviously surprised. “I would never hurt Kip.”

Call me a fool, but I believed him.

“Come then,” I replied, standing and moving without waiting for him. “I have a patient to see.”

Things had been a blur after that. Having fought against my own instincts for so long, being able to use my skills was something of a relief. I am not accustomed to letting people suffer, and it was difficult for me to hold myself back when I knew my intervention could save him. With my resistance gone, skills hard won by long practice flowed back like I’d never stopped. Even the unfamiliar surroundings and substandard tools posed little barrier to me. Within hours, Kip was stabilized and recovering.

“Lee?” Zeke calls me back to the present. “Did you hear me?”

I shake myself, pulling myself away from my thoughts. I am still not fully recovered, and I’ve found my mind drifting more than once. Kip doesn't need much direct intervention now that he's stable, but he does need near-constant monitoring. In my weakened and exhausted state, it's been all I can manage to keep up with Kip's care and see to my own recovery. I haven't even been able to examine the other prisoners yet, despite my intention to check them each over for injury and illnesses.

“I'm busy,” I growl, unwilling to admit that I'd missed the previous query. “What do you want?”

“I just wanted to make sure you'll be ready when we arrive at the supply station in a few hours. Will you be able to get the medications you need?”

“I've already submitted a request and they've pulled my items from stock. I had to make some minor adjustments based on available supplies, but nothing that would hinder Kip's recovery. It's a fairly simple pickup at this point.”

“And they'll let you just... pay and go?”

“I am a certified medical professional,” I remind him. “My credentials are impeccable. Regulations allow me to purchase class one and two medical supplies anywhere in Federation space.” I give it a second thought and then add, “I am not able to purchase mass quantities of narcotics without an established facility backing me.”

“Why would I...” He catches up and says, “For recreational use. No, that won't be necessary.”

I give a nod, expecting him to leave. Instead, he maintains his stance and stares at me.

“Are you okay?” he asks eventually. I blink at him.

“I'm recovering from prolonged starvation,” I growl. “Of course I'm not!”

“Right,” he replies, and at least has the sense to look embarrassed. “I didn't mean... Is there anything I can do?”
“Sure. If you could monitor Kip's brainwave patterns and inter-cranial pressure levels, I could get a couple hours of uninterrupted sleep. Just go ahead and perform another lumbar puncture if it gets too high. I'm sure you're familiar with the technique.”

“...I don't appreciate your sarcasm.”

“I don't appreciate your asinine attempts to patronize me!”

“I wasn't...” He lets out a frustrated breath and finally straightens from the wall. “I'm sorry. Please, let me know if there's anything you need.” He smiles again, schooling his expression into something calm and charming, and I answer it with a haughty glare. “Don't forget, we'll need to talk soon. I'll send Ruby up with your tea.”

Then he's gone in a swirl of golden hair. His long legs take him in confident strides out into the cargo bay. I move to the doorway and watch him go, regretting it even as I'm unable to stop myself. I feel proprietary of this place, and a part of me wants to make sure that I'm secure in my space again.

Another part of me... Damn me, another part of me just wants to watch him go.

“It would be easier if he weren't so damned handsome,” I whisper harshly. “I'm not going to fall for it. The surface is all charm and glamour, but underneath he's still...” Not the monster I thought he was, perhaps, but... “He's still an arrogant ass.”

I find myself unsteady as I walk back into the medical area. I seat myself heavily in the chair near Kip’s head. I glance at his monitors, but I'm aware that his vitals are all holding steady. I have set up a series of alarms that will trip if any of his levels spike to high or drop too low. The problem is that I have a limited amount of time to intervene before the situation becomes critical, so I don't dare sleep too long or too deeply.

“It will be easier once you’re on medication,” I tell him softly, aware that he might hear me even now. I wonder what he might have thought of my conversation with Zeke if he overheard it, but I was careful not to say anything incriminating. Whatever he's heard will probably return in bits and pieces anyway, if he's overheard anything at all. Unlike my time in the trance, Kip could be fully unconscious and unaware.

I lean back and let my eyes fall closed. There isn't enough time to really sleep, but I allow myself to doze. An alarm will signal me in an hour to check Kip's readings again, make sure there are no abnormalities that might signal his condition worsening. A trained medical professional can generally spot trends before they become obvious enough to trigger the alarms. Unfortunately, I'm the only competent medical professional available.

Ruby enters several minutes later with my tea on a wooden tray. He's brought a cup, a pot of steaming water, a premeasured teabag, but has not actually combined the ingredients. As requested, I can see a small jar of honey as well. I've learned from experience not to let Ruby sweeten my tea, as he makes it almost unpalatable with honey and sugar. It's probably a misguided attempt to get more calories in me, but the over-saturated drink unfortunately has the opposite effect. Last time, it was entirely undrinkable.

“Thank you, Ruby,” I tell him softly as he lays the tray on the counter. The toast, I can see, is a bit darker than entirely necessary, but not to the point of actually burnt. It's fine. I got used to substandard cuisine early in my time as an asset. Before I was purchased by Ellaine as a trainer, I worked as a surgeon at BloodSports Arena. What they fed the assets there hardly qualified as dog food. Ruby's amateur cooking still ranks miles ahead of that.
“Can I grab anything else for ya?” he asks. He asks me that every morning, probably worried that I'll starve on him.

“No, thank you. How’s the throat?” Although I haven’t had time to do a full exam of the assets yet, I was able to take a quick look at Ruby's throat and Red's lacerations. Both were recovering well and didn't need any intervention from me. I managed to get a quick explanation of the injuries from both of them at the time.

Red's injuries were sustained during his introductory fight at BloodSports. I have no reason to doubt this, as I am aware that the arena uses a brutal hazing ritual to separate good fighters from bad ones. Red fits the profile for typical fighters; tall, broad, muscular. Too bad that's all he seems to have as far as fighting goes, as his movements are indicative of someone who is not aware of how to use their size and strength. If Zeke hadn't taken him, he'd likely have been killed.

Ruby's injuries were more troubling to me at first. I thought that the strangulation marks were proof that Zeke's intentions were malicious, that he was willing to play the part of an owner to the fullest, most monstrous conclusion. When my questions had probed into more details about the injury, Ruby had admitted that Zero was actually responsible. Zeke had stepped in and saved Ruby by using his owner commands on Zero.

I don't really know how to feel about that information. Relieved, I suppose, that Zeke hasn't proven himself capable of such brutality. And yet somehow oddly disappointed. As though facing it now would be better than learning it later. Life has proven to me that nothing good ever comes without a price, and I just wish I knew what cost I'll have to pay by the end. I'm willing a sacrifice my life, but what else will be asked of me? My dignity? My honor? The lives of those around me? It was easier when I knew the game, when I understood the circumstances of my bondage under Ellaine and Petir before her. Now I'm uncertain and simply too exhausted to fight for better footing.

“How’s Kip doing?” Ruby asks. “Any signs?”

I shake my head.

“He could wake up today or six months from now. There's no way to know.” Guilt flashes in Ruby's eyes and I sigh. “It wasn't your fault,” I tell him again. During the explanation of his injury, I was made to understand that he had not been where he was supposed to be when Kip first became ill. Due to that, Zero had directed his misplaced ire at Ruby. “Nothing would have changed if you were here.”

“I know,” he says softly, “but he wouldn't have been alone. I just keep imagining him all by himself, in pain, struggling to call for help and... and nobody comes. Zero said he found him on the floor by the bed. How long was he there before he passed out? How long did he call for me... and I wouldn't come.” His voice is thick now, his jaw tight as he holds back tears. “Kip was really kind to me. I didn't realize until after, but... he was just as much a prisoner as I was. I know I acted up because I didn't... because I don't want to be here,” he corrects himself, “but Kip never lost his temper with me, even when I lost mine with him.”

“Did you spend a lot of time with Kip?” I ask him.

“No,” he responds with a half-smile. “It was just a couple days, but... I was a real brat,” he says with a chuckle. “There were a couple times when I thought he was gonna smack me with a skillet, but he always pulled his temper back and showed me how to do it again.” His expression becomes regretful and he says, “Really wish I hadn't dragged my feet so much. I could use his help now.”

“It's not fair of Z-... of your owner,” I catch myself, unwilling to cast suspicion by using his first
name but equally unwilling to call him Master, “to expect so much from you so quickly.”

Ruby shrugs and says, “He hasn't disciplined me for it. I just... It's hard, you know? I don't even like cooking.” His eyes flare angrily and he says, “He didn't even ask! Just... now you're this. Now you're that. I didn't even get a say in the matter.” The anger fades to something more defeated and he says, “I guess it's better than the first thing he tried to make me.”

It's not hard to assume that Zeke originally intended Ruby to be a pleasure asset, given Ruby's age and his striking appearance. I'll have to make a note to check for sexual assault injuries when I manage to do a full exam. From the way he walks, I can pretty much assume that any injuries he sustained have healed by now, but I'd like to be aware of the extent of them as part of his medical history.

“Anyway,” Ruby says, “I'm sure Kip will be up soon. You're a good doctor.”

There's no way to respond to that without sounding arrogant or falsely modest, so I ask, “How's Red?”

Ruby hesitates.

“He's... I guess he's doing okay. That ointment you gave him really helped with his cuts. He's been trying to work out but he's still pretty sore.”

“Tell him not to overdo it,” I warn. “If he pulls a muscle, he'll be worse off than not training at all. Who's supervising him?”

Ruby's expression turns sour.

“Zero is supposed to be, but...” he trails, his eyes flicking to Kip's bed.

Ah. Zero has been spending the majority of his time here, at Kip's side. He's even been showering in the small bathroom at the rear of the medical bay, so he doesn't have to leave even for that. Today is the first day that Zeke ordered him to leave, and even now it's likely just to shower and sleep.

“It's probably for the best,” Ruby admits. “Red is... intimidated by Zero, after everything that happened. I think he's dreading lessons.”

“Intense stress can cause psychotic reactions in anyone,” I respond. “There's been no indication since the incident of tendency toward violence from Zero. However, I will do what I can to assess his mental state and ask your owner to intervene if necessary.”

Given Zero's fixation on Kip and his recent mental break, it might not be wise to ask or even allow him to train anyone. It's probably best that he's been in the medbay for most of his time, where I can monitor the situation.

“Thanks,” Ruby says as he moves toward the door. “You're really a good guy, you know that?”

“No,” I sigh softly when he's out of earshot, “I'm not. I'm just another coward pretending to be righteous.”

Ruby doesn't hear, and Kip doesn't contradict me.

I drink my tea and manage to keep it down despite a harsh wave of nausea that washes over me. I check Kip's vitals, which are holding steady despite the lack of medication; a situation that I'm hoping to remedy later today. I doze in the other bed for about an hour until Zero reappears, freshly
washed and in clean clothes. He takes his usual place at Kip's side and I force myself out of bed, uncomfortable lying down with an unknown person in my area.

“How is he?” Zero questions, his voice flat. He's been almost robotic since I arrived, behavior more typical of a zero than the violent outburst Ruby described. His attachment to Kip, though, is very un-zero-like, and I have to assume that Zeke has not only taken him off of emotional suppressants, but encouraged him to form attachments with the other assets. That could create a confusing, volatile mix for someone so strong and so unused to handling the complexities of emotion.

“Stable,” I respond. “We won't know anything else until he wakes,” I remind him again. He nods solemnly and takes Kip's hand in his own.

Given the new information Ruby provided me, I feel like I should try to assess Zero's mental state. That being said, I'm not a trained psychologist. I'm at something of a loss for where to start with the reticent fighter.

“Is he your...” I try, but then I'm uncertain of the wording. “Lover” loses all meaning in a place like this, where sex is traded like a commodity. “You two were close?”

I'm not surprised when Zero answers me. In the last few days, whatever misgivings he first had about me have faded, and we've formed an open if somewhat reserved line of communication. It seems that helping Kip has convinced Zero that he can trust me. Or perhaps his mental state is simply in too much turmoil to question my intentions at the moment.

Still, he seems to struggle, not with whether or not to answer me but with the question in general.

“We were... sexual partners,” he tells me stiltedly. “We performed together. I helped train him.”

“Performed...?” I repeat, unable to reach the conclusion that his input is leading me toward.

“I'm a pleasure asset,” Zero explains, and I have to admit that I simply stare at him until he gives a noise of amusement. “Yeah, I thought Zeke was crazy too.”

It doesn't pass my notice that Zero uses his first name with no honorific attached. I know that Zeke allows it, and I don't feel that now is the time to question that choice. Still, the way Zero addresses him seems almost... comfortable.

“Are you... alright?” I ask. With Kip in my care and Ruby obviously healthy, I hadn't thought to check anyone else for sexual injuries. It was a presumptuous conclusion that I can only blame on my state of exhaustion. I'm not usually so careless.

“Zeke is a kind and thorough lover,” Zero explains. “His sexual training has prepared me for a range of different situations. He has never injured me during our sexual encounters. He has taken great pains to see that I am able to enjoy them as well.”

His words are slow, but it doesn't sound rehearsed. Instead, it seems like he's choosing his words carefully because I might not understand them, that I'm not intelligent enough to understand what he's telling me.

“I see,” I respond, because I'm not going to argue with him. “And Kip?”

“Kip was also a pleasure asset, but he... he was not as well-adjusted as I was,” Zero admits. “I was trying to convince Zeke to change his designation when...” His gaze flicks pointedly to the form in the bed, then back to me.
“I suppose it's moot now,” I respond. “He certainly won't be recovered enough for that kind of heavy exertion any time soon.”

Zero does not look pleased or relieved by this news. Instead, his expression becomes even more morose.

“Were you two... intimate as well? Outside of performances?” I clarify, trying to get a sense of the situation. I already know that Ruby and Red are an item, that they managed against all odds to find each other even in this harsh landscape. Were Zero and Kip lovers as well?

“I love him,” Zero admits to me, but his eyes can't look at Kip when he says it and it signals to me that something is off.

“Does he love you?” I wonder, still trying to piece things together.

“He...” Zero hesitates, then sighs and lets his shoulders sag. “He doesn't think that I understand what love is. He thinks it's all too new for me, that I don't understand my own feelings.”

My estimation of Kip's intelligence rises a notch. It seems like he's one of the more level-headed men in this situation.

“I know that my feelings for Kip are different from my feelings for... for someone else,” he sidesteps. A previous lover, perhaps? “But it doesn't mean that I don't love Kip!”

“You don't have to be lovers for you to love him,” I inform. “Not every type of love has to be about sex. You and Kip were Zeke's first assets, correct? That makes you like brothers in some respects.”

Zero gives a distasteful twist of his mouth.

“I have slept with him,” he reminds me.

I roll my eyes and say, “Brothers-in-arms, then. I'm just saying, you don't have to be his lover to love him. Perhaps it is not supposed to be the same as what you felt for this... this other person.”

Relationship advice is not my forte. I have so little experience in it that giving advice is almost laughable. Still, I know people, and sometimes it's more important to talk it out than to actually be given good instruction. Most of the time, I find that people already know what their problems are, they’re just loathe to admit it. Because if they admit it, then they have to work on the actual problem instead of stepping around the issue.

“Sometimes I think that neither of them want me,” Zero says, bringing Kip's hand up to press against his forehead. “No matter how hard I try, Kip doesn't believe me and Zeke doesn't trust me. Maybe... maybe I don't deserve either of them.”

He makes a frustrated noise then, dropping Kip's hand and shoving himself out of his chair. He storms out of the room, and I find myself following him to the doorway.

“By the ancients,” I swear softly as Zero flees the medical bay, only to stop short in the cargo area, unwilling to put too much space between himself and Kip. “He's in love with Zeke.”

And Kip, the only person who might be able to give me a sane perspective in all this, is predictably silent behind me.

“What the hell have I gotten myself into?”
A Much Anticipated Meeting - Zeke POV

Chapter Notes

We've made it to the new year! Happy 2018 everyone! I hope the start of your year is drier and warmer than mine. :/

I wanted to give a shout-out to a couple super-generous readers: Farah and Aonian have given me donations through the Ko-fi website, along with an anonymous donator. I honestly wasn't expecting such a quick response and I really appreciate it! I don't currently make any money from my fiction, so the extra income really helps!

Speaking of things I appreciate: My beta team is still all the awesome. Ygrainne has jumped in with Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, and they're all beating me silly about my grammar and plot structure. But... like... in a good way? I feel like maybe only authors can understand what a relief it is to have someone saying, "That's not how you spell that," and "He already ate that," and "Where even are they?" Because then YOU (the author) don't have to analyze every single detail for that one tiny thing that you missed/forgot, because now someone else is taking a look at it. Does that make any sense?

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal. I am not, as of yet, doing better about blogging on them, but I'm going to try.

I got a ton of reactions to the first chapter, I'm hoping the second chapter is just as enjoyable! As always, thank you for reading!

It's another two days before Lee decides to speak with me privately. I say “decides” because no amount of asking or convincing managed to sway him, and orders simply made him dig in his heels. In all honesty, he made the decision of when we would speak and then basically ordered me to attend.

It's a frustrating and welcome change of pace.

"Kip has stabilized nicely on the new meds," he tells me as soon as we sit down in my office. I made the decision early on that this room would do better for our second meeting than the playroom, given that it's also soundproof but without being so unsettling for Lee. I'm fairly certain now that he won't attack me... unless I do something very stupid.

"The ones you picked up at our last stop?" I question. I had expected the process of getting the drugs to be complicated and arduous, but given Lee's medical credentials it was little more than a stop at the pharmacy. Expensive, but hardly taking any time at all. We were able to make the order remotely at Satellite 39, where I had previously taken Zero and Kip shopping. Zero and I took the jump-ship and retrieved the items, while Lee stayed on the ship to continue monitoring Kip. I was also able to pick up some clothes for Ruby and Red, so that they no longer had to wear ill-fitting hand-me-downs, and some spare clothes in a range of sizes for... just in case.
“Yes, those meds,” Lee says irritably, with an undertone of, “What other meds would it possibly be, idiot?” but he doesn't express that thought with any more than his tone. “I've been able to scale back my monitoring and haven't had to do a manual drain since I started them. I can't offer any guarantees, but the chances of Kip waking up in the few days are high.”

“Thank you,” I respond. “I know you're probably not going to believe me, but I really appreciate all the effort you've put into saving him.”

He bristles again and snaps, “I didn't help him for your sake. I did it because I'm a doctor, and this is what I do.”

“Okay,” I reply softly, and back the hell off.

It hardly seems to matter what I say to him, I tend to get this reaction. Like my very presence is an irritation that he can hardly tolerate. While I've seen his calm, patient attitude often enough when he interacts with the others, he seems to have no time for my foolishness. Another benefit of being in the position of an owner, I suppose. I can't think of anything else I've done to warrant such a response.

I take a moment to let his ire cool and his temper calm. I look him over, noting that his pallor has improved drastically, although he doesn't seem to have put on much weight. His skin has a darker tone than Kip's, even despite the paleness of it, and is more of a light olive than Kip's pure cream. I have to wonder if Lee's skin will have the same robust tone as Zero's once he recovers. His eyes are a dark brown, almost black from a distance, but without Zero's metallic undertones. His hair is straight and coal black, and he wears it pulled back in a short ponytail. There's a dullness to the strands that speaks of his illness, but already it looks much improved simply from the washing and brushing.

Thinking back on it, I remember catching Red helping Lee untangle the mess, with Lee leaned over the back of a chair while Red perched on the edge of the empty bed, working through the tangles. I'd hesitated in the doorway, surprised enough to halt. Red had seen me and grinned, taking my surprise to be about his hair-care abilities.

“There were always girls at the center looking for somebody to brush their hair,” he'd explained easily. “Long hair's in fashion, but it's a pain in the ass.”

I bit back on telling him, “I'm aware of that,” when I noticed Lee shooting me a smoldering glare from under the mess of wet tangles.

“I can do a pretty good french braid,” Red teased, now aiming the comment at Lee, who gave a snort of derision.

“Don't even contemplate it,” he growled, but it somehow lacked the same heat it did when speaking with me.

I had quickly taken my leave after that, uncertain of my welcome during such a situation and feeling a bit like an intruder on my own ship.

Looking at him now, his demeanor carefully neutral, his expression cold and closed off, I have to wonder if I'll ever manage to convince him to be so open with me. Or if this is what I'll have to be satisfied with – cold and professional, but at least not actively trying to kill me.

“I am sure that you have questions for me,” I continue, “but I'd like to pose one first. How are you feeling?”

“Better,” he responds, his expression neutral.
Red had mentioned in passing that Lee suffered from nausea in the previous days, and Zero confirmed that he had been eating sparsely and carefully. Given how stubborn and resilient Lee has proven himself, I have to conclude that his symptoms were probably far worse than he let on. I should have noticed, should have realized that it would not be easy to adjust from eating through a tube to reintroducing solid foods, especially under the strain of taking care of Kip. Still, he had not complained, and I had been too wrapped up in Kip's problems to notice.

“I'm sorry I was not able to offer more help in the beginning. I did not realize...”

“I did not require your assistance,” he cuts me off, giving me another sharp glare. “I was fine on my own.”

“Of course,” is all I can think to say without irritating him further.

We lapse into another awkward silence while he lets his anger fade.

He's very pretty, I think absently, waiting for him to school his features back into careful neutrality. His features are more classically Asian than Zero's, with narrow eyes and an oval face. I like the way his eyes flash when he's angry. Would they do the same thing in the heat of passion? His mouth is small but expressive, his lips an enticing shade of pink. I wonder what they'd feel like against my own. Would they burn with the same intensity as his words do?

It must be this place, I think to myself as I pull away from that train of thought. I can't have a simple conversation without sexualizing it. God, what is wrong with me?

“I will be conducting examinations on the others next week,” he informs me, his tone cool and professional again. “Please let them know to expect a full physical.” He gives me a narrow-eyed look. “You should probably come in as well, so that I have a medical history for you.”

“Thank you, but I am fine.”

His mouth turns down in displeasure, but he doesn’t fight me on it.

Silence again, awkward and obvious.

I sigh.

“Perhaps this would go better if I just gave you an overview and then we went from there?”

He nods once, but whether it's agreement or permission is uncertain. I stifle a surge of annoyance.

“I started this mission roughly three months ago with the intention of infiltrating the human-trafficking ring known as the Leash. I have been working undercover as an owner in an effort to identify the head of the slave ring, who is known only by his alias as the Controller. During that time, my only contact with the Department has been through Mari, who relays the information that I provide about other owners and active locations. I am hoping to enter this year's Competition in order to gain access to the Leash's inner circle and find the identity of the Controller.”

He frowns.

“They're hoping you manage to win the Competition in your first year?”

I nod.

“What kind of budget are they giving you?”
They're... not. I am self-funded in this endeavor.”

“I'm sorry?” he says, his frown deepening.

“I am wealthy in my own right. Everything you see before you was purchased with my funds. I have been assured that upon successful completion of my mission my investment will be returned.”

“And if you fail?”

“Well, I can't imagine I'll be capable of making the request should I fail,” I respond, trying for a teasing smile. He does not react to my attempt to lighten the mood, his expression souring further as he contemplates the information I've given him.

“So you're essentially on your own,” he surmises. “You're taking all the risk, they're getting all the benefits.”

“That's... That's a very rough overview.”

“But inaccurate?”

“...” It makes me hesitate, and I can't find a flaw in his logic. “No, I suppose not.”

His frown doesn't lessen, but he presses on.

“What's the reason for all this? Why now? Why send an infiltration agent?”

“There was an item found during one of the investigations that led the Department to believe that the Leash could be using some kind of mind-altering technology to control their prisoners. The item pulled from the corpses was round like a straw and roughly an inch in length. We believe they're being surgically implanted into the assets' brains. These items deteriorate upon extraction, but we think that they're what's known as the chip. If we could locate and extract one without damaging it...”

“Impossible.”

“I understand that it would be dangerous to the health of the asset, and I'm not asking you to harm anyone. However, getting a working copy of this technology could be our only way to counteract the Leash's control.

“You misunderstand me,” he responds. “It is impossible because it doesn't exist.”

Now it's my turn to blink in confusion.

“I'm sorry?” I ask, echoing his earlier line.

“I've just spent several days doing every possible type of scan on Kip's brain. If there were anything foreign in there larger than a hair, I would have found it. There's no way something that large is in his brain. I'm his doctor,” he says forcefully, “I would know.”

“Then...” I stammer, unbalanced by this information. “Then what...”

“Possible options,” he says succinctly, “are that the item you’re describing was once housed in the brain, but is no longer placed there because of advances in technology. A second option is that the item shifted when it deteriorated and was found in or near the brain, but is actually placed somewhere else. For it to be undetectable in most scans...” he hesitates, his eyes distant as he thinks, “perhaps buried deep in the bone-matter somewhere. But then how would it move?” he whispers to
himself. “Or could the corpses have been in bad enough condition when found that the Department
simply assumed the item came from the brain instead of looking for other clues? Or as a third
option...”

He pauses, looking almost hesitant.

“The third option is?” I prompt.

“That the item you found was never actually used to control assets, that it served some other
function. Or possibly... it could be a diversion.”

“A fake?”

“Potentially. If the Department knew that the slaves were being controlled somehow, perhaps the
Leash put this out as a distraction.”

“Then how… What are they using to control the assets? Certainly the effects of the chip aren’t
psychosomatic.”

“No,” he says dryly. “I can attest to the effects being very real.”

“So what’s causing it?”

“Sadly, I don’t have that information. In my services as a medical asset, I have never discovered
anything inside of an asset that I believe could be causing the reactions that I’ve seen and
experienced. I do believe, based on the range of controls available to owners, that it is something
affecting the nervous system. What it is and where it is hiding, however, is knowledge that I do not
have.”

“Damn,” I growl. “I was really hoping...”

“I know,” he says, and his voice is laced with bitterness and disappointment. “Believe me, I know
better than you do how much this would mean.”

“I’m sorry,” I respond, embarrassed. “Of course, you’re right.”

We’re silent for several seconds, and when I glance at Lee I see that his expression is troubled and
pensive.

“What is it?” I ask him.

“Just...” he raises his eyes to me, worry and concern bleeding through his frown. “Why now?
Why you?”

I suppress another flash of irritation and defend, “I’ve been an undercover agent for the
Department for fifteen years. I have participated in undercover work to expose drug rings, illegal
prostitution, illegal gambling, human trafficking, smuggling, and extortion. I am well-qualified for a
mission of this caliber.”

“Fifteen years?” he questions. “How old were you...”

“I don’t see how that’s relevant.”

“You can’t be older than mid-thirties,” he says, and is irritatingly accurate. “What did they do, grab
you from your high-school graduation?”
"Lee," I say tightly, meeting his eyes with a heated stare. "I don't want to discuss my past with you. Can we agree that I was a logical selection for this mission given my experience, my background, and my looks? Can we leave it at that?"

He blinks and then nods.

"Agreed. I... apologize. I did not mean to pry."

"I understand that you want to gather as much information as possible," I explain. "However, you don't know me at all."

"I'm starting to see that," he responds, and from his voice I can tell that he's surprised by this fact. Am I shattering some of his original opinions about me? I can only hope so, given how much he seemed to dislike me.

Silence again, but at least this time it's not filled with tension. Lee mulls over what I've told him, and I can almost see the data processing in his head. I rub at my forehead, feeling a tension headache coming on.

"Is that all?" he asks at length.

"What do you mean?"

"Your plan? That's it? Just... act like an owner until you find the Controller?" He gives me a flat look and says, "You must see how insane that is."

"Why?" I counter defensively. "I told you, the Department wants to deal a solid strike to the organization. The best way to do that is to take out the heart. No more cutting away pieces, they want to kill it in one move. To do that, I've got to find the Controller."

"You're never going to get close," he growls. "They're going to figure it out."

"You didn't," I protest.

"I'd been around you for less than fifteen minutes before I decided you were abnormal," he snaps, losing his patience with me. "Do you think that people looking for suspicious activity aren't going to find it? You can't be that stupid!"

"I don't act this casual around other owners!" I snap back. "Zero and Kip..."

"...Are still far less traumatized than other assets! They act normal! They're healthy – or as healthy as can reasonably be expected given the state you received them in. And I can only judge from Zero, but he's not afraid of you. He's..."

He cuts himself off with a frustrated noise.

"He's what?" I ask, but he shakes his head.

"That is not normal asset behavior," he finishes. "Assets are quite capable of pretending to feel attachment to their owners, but that's a self-preservation tactic. Zero truly cares about you. And it's easy to tell that you truly care about him."

His point hits home because I know he's right. Still, I won't believe that I'm doing such a poor job at my cover.

"You were on my ship, seeing me react with less caution than I use with other owners, and you
He growls in frustration.

“I never thought anyone would be stupid enough to try this! That the Department would send a lamb to the slaughter...”

“I am not...!” I start, then cut myself off. “I told you, they don't want to keep cutting away pieces. They want to go for the head...”

“Bullshit!” he cuts me off with a snarl. “They can't get any other pieces! That's why they threw you into it! You don't take apart an organization like this from center! You pull out that piece, the whole thing falls apart...”

“Exactly!”

“...And all the pieces get scattered,” he finishes coldly. “You don't end up saving anyone. The assets get killed or dispersed as the remaining owners minimize damage and cut their losses. You get left with a power vacuum and you're back in the same situation in a couple years. Your boss isn't stupid enough to expend resources on making that happen.”

“What are you saying?”

“I'm saying,” he tells me slowly, like he's fighting for patience, “that someone is not being honest with you. That the plan you've been told doesn't make sense.”

“What do you think is happening?”

He pauses, his dark eyes lost in thought. It's fascinating to watch, almost like I can see the thoughts firing across his brain. It almost distracts me from how irritated this conversation is making me.

“Think of this like a spider's nest,” he says softly. “When you deal with a spider's nest, you cut away the web until the spiders have no place left to go.” His piercing eyes meet mine. “You don't throw a fly into the center of the web and hope they choke on it.”

“That's not the situation!”

“No? She sends you here with no backup, no intel, and no supplies? Telling you to find the most dangerous man in this place and... what? Tag him for her to pick up?”

“I...”

“You don't even know! You don't have an extraction plan at all! And what about you? Or your assets? Is the plan to shoot the Controller with a dart gun and then call a damn taxi?”

“We haven't gotten to that stage of the operation yet...”

“And you won't,” he shoots back, “because this entire plan is idiotic, and the head of the Department is not an idiot.”

“So what do you think she's doing?”

He goes quiet for several seconds, his fingers steepled in front of him.

“She throws a fly into the center of the web and waits for the big spider to come out,” he says, his voice hushed and pained. “Then she sets the whole thing on fire, and to hell with any flies still
caught in the web.”

“No.”

“Zeke...”

“No, damn it!” I shove myself to my feet in frustration and pace across the room. For the first time, I feel my resolve crumbling. I feel doubt creeping into my mind, making me question the organization that sent me.

He can't be right, can he? There's no way. I can't believe it. He doesn't know the Department like I do, he doesn't understand the situation.

“This is not unusual from how I normally function,” I tell him calmly. “I am a lone operative. They send me in, I get the intel, and then they send in a team to make the bust. This is standard.”

It's always been like this with the Department, I remind myself. They've always used me like this, always sent me in alone to the dangerous situations, only to show up in the nick of time with a rescue. The only difference now is that I've got more than myself to protect.

“This is not like cracking a drug ring or breaking up some pimps!” Lee counters. “This is a much larger scale than that. You'd have to be an idiot to think that sending in a couple dozen agency officers will be enough to break this up. This needs to be a precise, strategic military maneuver!”

“What do you want from me, Lee? I'm telling you what they’ve told me!”

“By the gods, that's what scares me!” he shouts back. “Would you stop and think for a minute?” He growls. “None of this makes sense.”

“What are you saying? That they're... lying to me?”

“I don't know,” he answers back. “Sadly, I don't actually have any more information than you do. What I can tell you is that the information you've been given doesn't make any sense. There's no rhyme or reason to it, and there's no risk to the Department if you should fail. They're not putting any effort into your situation, which either means that they're planning a sweep and burn operation no matter what you find, or...”

“Or what?”

“Or there are things happening behind the scenes that you're not privy to. There's a plan that makes sense, and they're not telling you about it.”

It takes me several seconds to think that over.

It takes me several more to decide that... by god, he might be right.

“Can I trust them?” I ask suddenly, and have to bite down on a hysterical chuckle when I realize what a stupid question that is. I've worked for them for years. If anyone should know if I can trust them, it should be me.

Lee doesn’t answer immediately. His expression goes contemplative, and he spends a long moment reflecting on the issue. When he answers, his voice is more thoughtful and less aggravated.

“Before I became a slave, I spent a long time advocating for my home satellite to end its isolation and join the Earth-orbital community. To this end, I dabbled in political sciences. My knowledge is
second hand and years out of date, but…”

“But what?” I prompt, because any opinion at this point is better than mine, which I’m starting to think is highly biased and naive.

“The Department has shown itself to be clinically efficient. I have never heard of corruption in its ranks. As the law arm of Earth in outer space, The Department enforces an overall system of rules and doctrine that protects Earth from anything that might be considered a threat to planetary stability. They have no actual authority on any of the independent satellites unless requested to intervene, which is what makes their position so tenuous. That being said, they’ve always shown themselves to be dedicated to peace throughout the universe.”

He's quiet for several more seconds.

I force myself to ask, “Can we trust that they will be here to rescue us instead of burn the place to the ground?”

“I don't know,” he replies softly. “I have to hope so. They're the only chance we have left.”
Red's Exam - Lee POV

Chapter Notes

Good morning everyone! I can't believe it's been three weeks already!

I have to give all my appreciation to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

“I'm telling you,” comes the harsh whisper as I approach the kitchen on the lower deck, “we should have tried to sneak away when they stopped for supplies!”

“Please, Ruby,” comes Red's hushed reply. “Just stop. You know they'll kill us.”

“There has to be a range on this thing!” Ruby hisses. “They're just trying to scare us into thinking we can't get away! If we can just get far enough...”

“We'll die trying to run!” Red snaps. “You need to focus on your cooking. You're still...”

“I don't care about any of this!” Ruby shouts, and there's the sound of a metal pan hitting the floor, along with a splash of water.

“Damn it!” Red snarls, and there's the sound of a fist hitting a hard surface, like a table or counter. “What the hell do you want from me? I'm trying to keep you safe!”

There's silence and I halt my steps, waiting for this to play out.

“Sorry,” comes a small, thick whisper. “I'm sorry. I just... I don't...”

“I know,” says another thick voice. I hear movement, and I can assume that they're holding each other.

“I'm just so scared for you...” comes Ruby again, his voice muffled like his face is pressed against fabric.

“Shh,” Red soothes. “I'm gonna be fine. Training is going great. But you...” he hesitates, his voice concerned. “Baby, you've got to take this more seriously. There's a lot to learn about this stuff, and I can't be here to help you all the time.”

“It's just... it's so stupid. What does it matter if the carrots are cut in chunks or slices? I just don't get it.”

“I know, but please try? For me?”

“...Yeah, okay.”
“Alright, let's clean this up and we can try again. Then I really have to get back to practice.”

It seems like the argument is over, so I take that as my cue to push the door open and step into the room. Predictably, the two are standing together near an overturned metal bowl of raw carrots. They separate when they see me and Ruby kneels to start cleaning up the mess.

“I mentioned wanting to do a physical today?” I prompt gently.

Red sighs reluctantly but says, “Yeah, okay.” He turns to Ruby and says, “I'll stop down here before I go to practice, okay? Just to make sure you've got it.”

Ruby shrugs and then murmurs a very soft, “Okay,” before turning away from us with the mess from the floor. It looks like Red wants to say something else, but he bites back on it and then precedes me out the door.

The walk from the kitchen on the lower floor to the medbay isn't very long. Still, I wait until we're sufficiently far away before I say, “You know he wouldn't have managed to get anywhere even if he'd tried. Zero specifically looked for him before we left. I've been told that it isn't the first time he's tried something like that.”

“I know,” he responds softly.

“And he definitely wouldn't get far enough before he was discovered to be beyond the reach of the owners. If there is a range on this technology, I've never heard of it.”

“Yeah, some of the guys at the arena said the same thing.”

“Then why do you seem so depressed about it?” I question. “You're doing the right thing.”

He gives me a sad half-smile and says, “Because Ruby is nothing if not a stubborn bastard. I'm afraid that if I can't convince him I'm right or convince him that it's worth staying here, then he'll try to make a run for it on his own.”

“I don't think he'd leave you behind,” I tell him, giving a small frown of confusion. This environment is not nurturing to a relationship, but I've taken notice of their dedication to each other. Two lost soul clinging to each other in an ocean, I can't imagine Ruby swimming for shore by himself.

“No” Red agrees, “but if he thinks he can rescue me or he thinks I might be in danger, then he might try something reckless.”

“Ah,” I respond, seeing the issue more clearly. Swimming to get help for a drowning partner is entirely different, and Ruby might consider it worth the risk. “I don't know that he'll get the chance.”

“Don't let the innocent face fool you,” Red replies, and there's an odd mix of bitterness and pride in his tone. “Ruby's crafty. If he really wants out, he'll find a way.”

I refrain from comment, and then we're arriving at the medbay.

I've set up a privacy curtain to separate the beds from the rest of the medbay. Not so much because I'm worried that Kip will wake up, but more because I don't want my patients to be uncomfortable with undressing in front of him. I have a folding gurney functioning as an exam table, and I ask Red to strip before slipping through the curtain to give him some privacy. I settle on my bed and glance over at Kip's still unconscious form, waiting until I hear Red settle onto the gurney before I make my way through the fabric barrier.
He's still in his boxers, which isn't an issue for the first part of the exam. I have him lie back and run a hand-held scanner over him, then take a quick blood sample from his finger. As expected, his scans tell me that he's recently been through a traumatic injury, but that he's healing quickly. There's no evidence of broken bones, confirming the readings Zeke took during Red's initial exam. Given Zeke's lack of experience, however, I felt it was necessary to recheck his readings. There are fractures on three of his ribs – two on the left side and one on the right. While these injuries don't need intervention and will heal on their own in a few weeks, I make a mental note to speak with Red about his training schedule. I know that he's started exercising despite Zero's lack of interest, and I don't want his practice to aggravate his wounds.

The bruises on Red's face and torso have started to fade from dark purple to a yellowish color. I've come to understand that it's been less than a week since Red was acquired by Zeke, so it's a fairly decent healing rate, probably due in part to his age and his pre-capture health. I don a pair of medical gloves and probe gently at the cuts on his face and lips, then at the ones on his midsection. The stitches on his shoulder and cheek are ready to come out – actually might not have been needed in the first place – and I take the time to remove them and re-bandage the wound. Then I move my attention to his torso. I apply slow pressure to his abdomen and check for organ damage that the scan might have missed. Once again, everything checks out as well as to be expected.

We fall into a familiar pattern of conversation during the exam. I keep my voice quiet and professional, careful to explain what I'm doing. I've learned that it's important for prisoners of the Leash to be aware of what's happening, as many of them haven't been exposed to proper medical checks and feel a great deal of anxiety during my exams. Red seems comfortable enough, answering all my questions without reluctance. He does seem a bit subdued, something that I attribute to his earlier disagreement with Ruby.

The only time he shows any hesitance is when I ask him to stand and remove the rest of his clothing. He stands easily enough, but his fingers pause at the waistband of his shorts. He gives a frustrated sigh and then shoves them down.

“Listen,” he says, and I can tell from his posture and tone that he's feeling uncertain. “It's not really a big deal because I don't have any issue with nudity, but if you're checking for... for sex stuff, then you should know that they... didn't.”

“Oh?” I question, fishing for more information.

“Yeah,” he says, his eyes unable to meet mine. “Not that they wouldn't have, just that they didn't get the chance. Didn't want any of us injured for the first fight, you know? Wanted us to be at top form to assess our skills. The older guys talked about it, talked about what you could do without injuring the other party enough that it pissed off the trainers, but I... I got out before it got there.”

“I understand,” I tell him, and his words add up with what I know about BloodSports from the time I worked as a medic there. “Do you mind if I check anyway?”

He shrugs and turns away from me, bracing himself on the gurney while I do a quick inspection of his genitalia. As he said, I find no evidence of injury.

“Get dressed,” I tell him as I remove the gloves and toss them in the bin. “Let me know when you're decent.”

I slip back through the curtain again. There's a brief pause, then I hear Red shuffling his clothing. For something to do, I check Kip’s vitals again, but there’s no change. By the time I'm finished checking them, Red is already calling me back.
I slip through the curtain and take a seat on the rolling chair, pulling out the tablet where I've logged Red's medical data so far.

“Are there any injuries that are particularly bothering you?” I ask.

“Nah,” he responds, giving a shake of his head for emphasis. “I've been jumped a couple times on the streets, so I know what it's like to take a beating. This one isn't actually that bad.”

“Most of the wounds are superficial,” I agree, “but you still need to be careful not to aggravate them.”

“Didn't feel superficial when I got them,” he responds, his tone going flat and I can almost see the memories surfacing in his mind. “Felt like they were damn well trying to kill me.”

“They might have been,” I agree warily. “It's not unheard of for new fighters to die in their first match at the Arena. Still, trainers receive special instruction on how to injure without killing the new assets. It's ingrained in them, becomes almost second nature. Even the fighters receive instruction on how to make a battle last longer. It's less... entertaining,” I tell him, unable to hide my disgust, “if the fight only lasts a few minutes.”

“You seem to know a lot about it,” he says, and there's a question in the comment but he doesn't press for an answer.

“I was the primary medical asset for BloodSports Arena for several years before Ellaine purchased me.”

“Oh. That's shitty,” he says. “I guess it's better than being a fighter, though.”

“In some ways,” I agree. “In others, it was harder. There were times where I would have volunteered to fight, if it would have spared my patients from returning to the ring. Being there, seeing all the misery and despair... It broke something in me. Watching men come to my table again and again, knowing that the only peace they would find was death. Eventually, I started giving them... peace.”

It wasn't evident, at first, that I was letting fighters die on my table. Death was not an uncommon effect of the kind of fighting these men were made to do. Still, when my body count continued to rise even among less traumatic injuries, someone eventually figured it out. What can you do with a medical asset you don't trust? There's really nothing left at that point but to punish them and recoup your losses. If Ellaine hadn't shown an early interest in me, hadn't been after Vikram to sell me to her for years, I probably would have been killed and made an example of. It would have been the preferred option, if I'd been given a choice.

Red makes a noise of surprise and I realize that I've said far more than I meant to.

“Holy shit,” comes Red's voice, pulling my attention away from my memories. He gestures to the curtain behind me, concealing Kip's form. “Is that why...?”

“No really,” I reply. “After the Arena, I was purchased by another owner who wanted to use me to train scholarly assets. I must admit that I was quite taken-in by her ideals, I thought I was helping young men in the only way I could, by providing them with skills that would make them valuable to owners. But the price of training them proved to be more than I could bear, and I eventually resolved that there was no escape for assets except death.”

A silence descends while he digests that.
Then he asks, “What changed your mind?”

“I don't know,” I respond, and it's the truth. I don't know why I've chosen to trust Zeke, why I think there's even the slightest possibility that he'll accomplish his mission. The odds are stacked against him, and any reasonable calculation tells me that this will all end badly. “A change of scenery? A spark of... hope?”

“Zeke seems... different,” he puts out tentatively, confirming my suspicion that even the newest of Zeke's assets can sense how strange he is compared to other owners. Why can't Zeke see that? “Maybe... Maybe not as bad as the others?”

I nod my head, a single motion of agreement without giving anything away. I have to be careful here. I don't want to prompt his suspicion further.

“Maybe because he's new, too?” Red asks, and I let his train of thought continue in that direction, glad that he's filling in the incorrect conclusions for himself. “I know he's only got so many slots open for assets. One left, right? And he's trying to assemble a Competition team...”

I have to wonder where he's getting all his information, and then I realize that it's probably from Ruby. With Ruby training as a domestic, he probably spoke quite frequently with Kip, which is likely the ultimate source of his knowledge. Given the amount of information Ruby has managed to spread in a relatively short time, I'd go as far as to say Kip is probably quite... chatty.

“I believe you're correct,” I respond, keeping my responses short. I don't want to let anything slip to cause suspicion of Zeke. Although I doubt Red would have the inkling or opportunity to use that information, it's still best not to hand it to him in the first place.

“It's why I'm trying to convince Ruby to train harder,” Red continues, a note of frustration in his voice. “He doesn't know what it's like... out there. For someone like him.”

New pleasure assets are killed at a rate even higher than the combat assets, and their deaths are just as brutal. Ruby would be shattered and discarded, unlikely to survive.

“I just...” he says softly, “I just don't know how to protect him. And he's always pulling some stupid stunt or another. I don't know what I'd do if he got himself...”

His sentence trails, unable to put those thoughts into words.

Sold.
Raped.
Beaten.
Tortured.
Killed.

The list of things that can happen to a young pleasure asset in this place echoes through the stark silence of the room. Yet there is nothing I can say to reassure the fighter. If Ruby doesn't take this more seriously, if he does something rash that humiliates Zeke, then there's no telling what Zeke will have to do to maintain his disguise as an owner. Allowing Ruby as much leeway as he has so far is probably a mistake, as was taking in two untrained assets when he's hoping to compete.

“How is training going?” I ask.
“Subtle change of topic,” Red responds with a smirk.

“Brooding about the situation won't change it,” I respond. “And you can't control Ruby's actions no matter how much you want. So helping him with domestic training and working on your own combat training are the only ways you'll manage to improve your standing.”

“Yeah,” he says with a sigh. “It's... you know. Training is...” he hesitates, his eyes flicking to the screen behind us.

“It's just the two of us,” I assure him, with the sudden realization that he hasn't been able to see Zero's empty chair yet. “I sent Zero down to the gym for a few hours.”

Zero has the least amount of visible injuries, and I've used that as justification for my decision to examine him last. The truth is, though, that I have a feeling that Zero will cause trouble during my exam, and I feel like I'm a bit out of practice with this kind of elective procedure. Checking on Ruby and Red first seemed like the best idea.

“I guess I should try to get down there soon,” Red says, his expression doing an odd dance between anxiety and hopefulness. “He doesn't come down to the gym that often. He's supposed to be training me, but...”

But he spends most of his time sitting at Kip's bedside. When he does leave, it's because Zeke or I have thrown him out of the medbay, and during his brief expulsions he generally exercises to exhaustion, showers, sleeps, and then tries to return to Kip's side.

“It's only been a week,” I remind him. “How are you doing with solo-training?”

He sighs and runs a hand across his bare scalp. It's the gesture of someone used to running their hands through their hair, and it reminds me again of just how recently he was brought in, that it's only been a few weeks or a month since they shaved his head. He really is new to all of this.

“I don't know,” he says softly, and away from Ruby I can hear all the frustration and uncertainty in his voice. He just shrugs his shoulders in a small, defeated movement, all signs of the earlier brave facade gone. “I'm trying to work out, but without a trainer...” His eyes settle on the curtain behind us, again targeting the concealed, rarely-vacated chair by Kip's bedside. “I don't really know what to do without him. Strength has never been a problem, it's just that... I'm not a fighter, I guess. I never really had to, with my size. Everybody just backed off when they saw me. Only times I ever really got beat up was if there was a gang, and there's nothing you can do about that.”

“I'll see if I can talk to Zero,” I assure him, although I'm not sure if it will do any good until Kip wakes up.

“I'd appreciate that,” he says, giving me a small smile. Then his eyes flick to the curtain again and he gestures to it. “Do you mind?” he asks. “Zero's always here, so I don't get to see Kip.”

I shake my head, and Red stands and moves away from the gurney. He parts the curtain, exposing the unconscious blonde in the bed. Red moves to the bed and settles into the rolling chair that Zero usually occupies, taking one of Kip's hands in his own. There's a soft smile playing over his face, something warm and wistful. There's a gentleness to the bulky fighter's movements, a tenderness in the way he holds Kip's pale fingers in his own. I wonder if he'll manage to hold on to that soft touch.
once Zero starts training him.

“Ruby says he's a real nice guy,” Red drawls as he stares at Kip, a hint of street-lingo seeping into his voice. “I wish I coulda gotten to know him.”

“Chances are good that you'll still have the opportunity,” I counter. “He could wake up any day now.”

“I wish he would,” Red says. “Ruby could really use the help in the kitchen.”

“I don't know if he'll be up for that any time soon,” I warn. “We don't know the extent of the damage yet.”

“Still, even just someone to talk him through it. Even just someone there. Anyone. I know Ruby's lonely with being by himself all the time, and I can't...”

Can't skip training to go help him, when Red so clearly needs all the practice he can get.

“I should probably...” he trails, a frown stealing over his face. He licks his still-scabbed lips, his posture hunched and reluctant. “I mean, I guess I need to...”

He hesitates again, making no move to rise.

“You don't really want to see Zero, do you?” I guess. “It's why you've been avoiding it down here, sending Ruby with my meals, only coming to see me when you know he's with Zeke.”

“I knew Ruby'd be safe with you around,” he justifies. “I've heard that you took Zero down when you first got here.”

“I got a lucky shot in,” I tell him. “And you're deflecting. Do you have a problem with Zero?”

“Of course I do!” he snarls. “After what he did...”

He cuts himself off and runs his free hand over his eyes.

“That guy scares the shit out of me,” he admits, his voice rough. “After what he did to Ruby? I just wanna...” he makes a frustrated noise and drops Kip's hand, grasping the dented bed-rail instead. He notices the finger-sized indentations when his hands touch them, pulls back with a jerk and a look of surprise. His mouth twists into a bitter expression when he says, “I guess this is Zero too, huh?”

I nod, and he glances up just long enough to catch it before looking back down at the metal bar in his hands.

“You know what he did to Ruby? What he... what he tried to do?”

“I do,” I answer.

“I can't...” his voice is thick and he chokes on his own words. “I won't forgive him for that. If Zeke hadn't stepped in...”

“Zero would have killed him,” I finish for him.

“I just want to smash his fucking face,” he snarls, “but I know he'd trounce me if I tried. Which just makes it worse because I know there's no way I could stop him if he tried again.”

“Do you think he'll try?” I ask softly.
He gives a frustrated sigh and says, “No. When it happened before... it was like he was a different person. Like he just... like he snapped.” Then he turns to me and asks, “Do you think he'll do something like that again?”

Damn. I was hoping that I wouldn't have to weigh in on Zero's stability. I don't really have enough data to form a solid conclusion.

I give a sigh and move to sit on my bed, across from Red and Kip.

“Given Zero's background and strength, I think he's more than capable of violent actions at any given time. The question being, do I think he'll attack Ruby again if given the opportunity?” My eyes settle on Kip and I can almost see Zero sitting in Red's place, his shoulders hunched, Kip's hand clutched in his own. Can almost see the guilt that pierces those steel eyes every time Ruby comes into the room. “…No, I don't.”

Red sags into his chair and I can tell that my agreement has come as a relief to him.

“I know,” he says softly. “I know. I can't.... I see him sitting here with Kip and he just looks so…” Red doesn't have words to describe seeing the steel-eyed fighter sitting here, holding Kip's hand. “And I just can't reconcile that with the heartless monster who almost killed my boyfriend.”

“There's no justification for what he did. I won't try to convince you that he isn't dangerous, because that's simply not true. As far as his mental state goes, it seems like his stability is directly linked to the well-being of those he cares for. I have a strong suspicion that he would react just as violently if something were to happen to Zeke.”

“You're not makin' me feel better,” Red quips, but he seems more relaxed despite his words to the contrary. It seems to be helping just to have me acknowledge these facts about Zero, these dangers that are clearly evident.

“What I'm saying,” I press, “is that he is dangerous, but you're better off working with him than against him.” He doesn't look convinced, so I continue with, “You have to understand Zero's mindset. He isn't like you. He's been here a lot longer, and even before that his upbringing was... abnormal.” I've heard all the theories about zeros being lab experiments, and while I don't believe all of them, I do believe that there's an inkling of truth in the rumors. The idea of any of it being true is chilling. “Killing is something that he has been trained to do all his life. It's understandable that he would fall back on that training in times of extreme stress.” Find the threat and eliminate it. Logical, cold, brutal, efficient. Nothing like the man who sits in that chair every day. “To be honest with you, his behavior with Kip is the true abnormality. I don't know how Kip and Zeke have managed to bring him so far so quickly.”

And that's the honest truth, because the other zeros that I've met were practically machines, with no life in them at all. The fact that this one is a functional, feeling human being is nothing short of a miracle. It's one of the things that convinced me that maybe Zeke could really pull all of this off.

“You think I can work with him?”

“I don't think you've got any choice.”

“Yeah,” he says, and his tone is resigned. He pushes himself to his feet.

“I should get going,” he says at length. “I... I actually feel a lot better about... about everything,” he admits, giving me a small smile. “I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me.”

“I do what I can to help,” I respond. I stand and give him a small bow as he heads for the door.
“Hey,” he calls, turning back. “Ruby's next, right? I just... I want you to know that he's not... not injured like that either.” He's blushing, and it takes me a minute to realize that he's talking about the last part of the exam. “Nobody... Zeke didn't...”

“He wasn't harmed sexually?” I clarify, and he looks relieved that I put it into words for him.

“I checked him, and he's fine. He said that Zeke planned to use him as a sex-slave, but then backed off and changed his mind. I just wanted to let you know because I don't have a problem with being nude, but Ruby gets really paranoid when he's naked. At the center, he used to get harassed in the showers a lot by the other guys, because he's pretty and petite. It makes him jumpy, and he might not react well to your exam.”

“I'll keep that in mind. Can I trust you on this? If he is wounded, I need to see to it.”

“If he'd been hurt,” Red says seriously, “I'd have dragged him down here myself.”

He leaves, and I watch him go just long enough to see him turn in the direction of the gym before the door slides shut.

“Well,” I say quietly to myself, “that went about as well as could be expected.”

Then I turn back to get ready for my next patient.
Awakening - Zeke POV

Chapter Notes

I'm gonna catch some heat for this chapter, I just know it. :) Well good. It's cold out here.

I have to give all my appreciation to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

The first thing I hear when I walk into the medbay is Ruby's voice, sharp and petulant.

"'M not takin' off my damn underpants!" he says, his voice louder than strictly necessary. "You're all a bunch 'a fuckin' pervs!"

"Ruby," comes Lee's calm response, "I am a medical professional. I just want to make sure you're not hurt from..."

"I already told you," Ruby's voice rises in volume, "that I'm fine! Nothing... They didn't... I..." he stutters to a stop, then finishes with a snarl of, "It's just not fuckin' happenin', okay?"

"That's not the kind of language I expect from one of my assets," I say sharply, stepping through the curtain. The two of them are standing in front of a collapsible gurney. Ruby is in his white boxer shorts, his fists clenched at his side. Lee is in the black scrubs that he purchased on our last stop, a frown of displeasure on his face.

Ruby opens his mouth to say something, but then closes it again when I shoot him a glare. He hangs his head, his face disappearing behind a curtain of curly red hair. His shoulders sag, and it seems like he knows better than to argue with me over something so trivial.

"Apologize to the medic," I demand.

"I... Sorry. I'm sorry, Lee."

"Now stop giving him a hard time and let him finish his exam."

Ruby's head comes up revealing a sullen and miserable expression. He doesn't look at either of us, but he hooks his thumbs into the waistband of his shorts and starts to pull them down.

Lee's hand grabs Ruby's wrist, arresting the movement.

"Stop," Lee says, and pulls Ruby's hand away from his clothing. Keeping his eyes on Ruby, he says, "Go get dressed. You're dismissed."

Then he turns a murderous glare in my direction.
Surprised, I remain silent while Ruby hurriedly grabs his clothes and disappears through the curtain. There's the sound of shuffling and then the soft pad of his feed as he scrambles out the door.

I hold my tongue as Lee begins to take down the gurney. I can see the tension in his shoulders, can see the anger in his movement. It dawns on me that perhaps my intervention was not appreciated.

“I... seem to have overstepped,” I comment softly.

He gives a derisive snort and says, “Finally caught on to that, did you?”

“I'm sorry, I don't understand...”

“Oh, obviously,” he growls, “or you wouldn't have tried to undermine the trust that I'm building with Ruby.” He slams the gurney down and turns to face me, feet spread wide, piercing brown eyes meeting mine. “Do not come into my medbay uninvited and interrupt my exam. Do not meddle in affairs that you do not understand. If I want your help, I'll... Actually, there's no scenario in which your intervention will be needed. Am I being clear enough? You do not get to come in here and terrorize these men into silence. I won't stand for it!”

He’s practically shaking with anger, and now that he's laid out the scenario from a different point of view, I can see how my actions might not have been... wise.

“I... I apologize,” I tell him quietly. “I didn't mean to...”

“Ordering the assets around might get obedience,” he cuts me off, “but it won't gain their trust.”

He turns his back to me, turns the gurney onto its short side and puts it into a storage space.

“You should know that Ruby isn't... I didn't...” I stutter. “He wasn't lying. I never harmed him sexually.”

He gives me another piercing, calculating look, and then nods.

“I know. Red already confirmed that.”

“Then why...?”

“It's about building trust,” he says, and his tone tells me that he's fighting for patience. “I was requesting that he allow me to finish my exam, not demanding it. I need to prove that he can trust me now, while he's uninjured, so that he will come to me if anything happens in the future. Do you understand? I am useless if I don't have the trust of my patient.”

A silence falls between us. It's a surreal feeling, being called out for doing something wrong. I'm upset with myself, but also... oddly relieved. I know I've done things wrong on this mission. Hell, I'm lucky Zero survived my first few weeks of learning, considering he wasn't independent enough to feed himself. Having all the control without being questioned or challenged puts the burden of mistakes solely on me. It's an interesting conflict of emotions as Lee forcibly removes some of that control from my grasp.

“What did you need to speak with me about so urgently that you would barge in during an exam?” Lee asks, his voice calmer after the brief pause.

“Oh,” and suddenly it doesn't seem as pressing as it did earlier. Certainly it could have waited another few minutes, but it's too late now. “I'm having lunch with another owner at the end of the week. I was thinking I could show off how far you and Zero have both come. Are you able to come
with me?”

“No.”

“But...” I glance at Kip, with his healthier pallor and steady breathing. “Surely you can leave Kip in Ruby's care for a couple hours? And he might be awake by then.”

“Kip... is not the problem.”

I give him a perplexed look.

“Then... why?”

He shoots me another irritated glare and growls, “Because it's the stupidest idea on a long list of stupid ideas from you.”

I bristle and argue, “It would be a great opportunity to show off my skills as an owner.”

“If I obey,” Lee shoots back, “which I promise you that I won’t if put in a room full of assets being subjugated and abused, let alone allowing you to rape Zero in front of me!”

I flinch, taking a full step away from him.

Damn, that hurt.

“Even if that's not what's happening,” he continues in a softer voice, “that's all that I'm going to see. You have to understand that, from my perspective, Zero isn't able to give you consent. He doesn't know that he's ever had the option to say no.”

I think back to my early training with Zero, to my attempts to ingrain a safe-word into his training, but... I know deep down that it's not the same. It was a last-ditch effort to save my conscience and ensure Zero's safety, but it's not the same as consent.

“My acting skills are subpar at best,” he continues when I still find nothing to interject, “and my temper tends to get the best of my rationality at times.” There’s a hint of a self-deprecating smile on his face, and I probably would have laughed if I weren't still bleeding from his earlier comment. “You will not be able to show me off or use me to advance your standing,” he reasons. “I can probably enter the Competition for you, if I'm kept away from the general populace, but I'm useless as a showpiece.” He hesitates a moment, then says, “The medical knowledge that I bring more than makes up for my lack of social skills,” like he's daring me to argue.

Maybe I would on another day, but something cold and heavy has settled at the bottom of my stomach. I feel like I might throw up, but I'm afraid it would only make it worse.

I nod and say, “Of course,” in a voice far softer than I'd meant it to be. Then I turn from him, feeling the need to retreat.

“Zeke,” he calls softly. When I turn back, I find that he's no longer looking at me, his eyes fixed on the countertop. “I'm sorry. I know your intentions are honorable. No one should be put in the position that you have been. No man should have to perpetuate these crimes in the hopes of stopping them. I do not envy your circumstances, but I also cannot forget those who are being harmed in the service of your mission. I have not been able to reconcile those two facts into one.”

I nod but say nothing. What is there for me to say? My intentions are beyond reproach. My actions are inexcusable. I know these things. It's not even an unfamiliar sentiment. This isn't the first time a
missions has asked me to do something reprehensible.

But it is different, because I care so damn much this time. Because knowing that I'm hurting these men... hurts me as well.

Before I can turn to leave again, there's a soft chirp from one of the machines. It's neither loud nor alarming, but it is persistent and it spurs Lee to Kip's side.

“What's happening?” I ask.

He spares me only a glance, but there's a smile spreading across his face that piques my curiosity more than the noise.

“Call for Zero,” he orders. “I think Kip is waking up.”

My turmoil all but forgotten, I move to the wall panel and use the intercom to bring Zero down from the gym. He appears in the doorway only minutes later, still covered in sweat and looking like he sprinted the whole way.

“He's awake?” Zero asks, his voice breathless.

“Not yet,” Lee cautions, “and it could be a false alarm. Come sit by him. Try not to make any loud noises or sudden movements. He's likely to be disoriented, so it's important to keep him calm.”

Zero settles in his customary seat and I take a position by the foot of the bed. I notice that Kip is still on his side, as he has been since the first time Lee drained his cerebral fluid to take some pressure off of his brain. I wonder if Lee had to do multiple drains, or if the first one was enough.

Lee needn't have worried about the possibility of a false alarm. Almost as soon as Zero settles, Kip begins to stir. His brow crinkles at first, his breathing pattern changing. His eyelashes flutter, although he doesn't open his eyes, and he shifts his head on the pillow.

“Kip?” Zero calls softly.

“Z'ro?” his voice comes back, barely a whisper. “Wh' happ'n'd? D' you get the fight'r?”

Zero lets out a startled, exuberant chuckle and says, “Yeah. We got him.”

“Where...” Kip trails, and I see him try to shift.

“Stay still,” Zero chides softly, tangling his fingers with Kip's. “You were sick. You need to stay down.”

“Had 'nother headache,” Kip admits, his voice tired and thready. “I'm sorry I'm such a burden.”

There's a catch in Zero's voice when he says, “You're not. You're... you just have to get better.” But his voice is so strained that even Kip notices. Kip shifts his head again, his expression puzzled. I can see that his eyes are open, but barely more than slits. I can see the glimmer of his pale irises, the lingering redness of broken blood vessels in his sclera.

“'re you okay?” Kip asks, his voice still barely a whisper. “Did somethin' happen?”

“Nothing's wrong now,” Zero says more firmly, his tone evening out as he tries to cover his slip. Kip doesn't seem to buy it, shifting again although still too weak to do more than raise his head.

“Cue th' lights?” Kip asks, his voice still tired but threaded with worry for Zero. Concern for
others is a strong motivator in Kip, and concern for Zero is almost second nature. It manages to reach him even through his disoriented state.


“The lights,” he asks again, and I feel my heart drop. “'S so dark in here.”

There’s a moment of echoing silence, and I can see the moment when Kip starts to notice that something is off even through his haze.

“Zero?” he asks, his voice trembling. “What's wrong?”

I can see Lee frowning, can see Kip growing restless and upset. Zero stares at Kip, stunned and unable to intervene. In an instant, I make the choice to step in.

“We can't turn the lights back up until we've checked on your eyes,” I soothe gently, moving in by Kip's side.

“Master?” Kip asks, his voice confused but thankfully not alarmed by my presence.

“I'm right here,” I assure him, stroking my fingers over the back of his hand, his fingers still held loosely in Zero’s. I notice that Zero's hand is shaking, glance at him to find his jaw clenched, his eyes fixed on their locked hands.

“W' h'p'ned?” he slurs.

“You took a fall and hit your head,” I explain, fully aware that the fall had little to do with his current condition but perfectly willing to supply an easy lie over the complicated truth. “Zero was worried about you, but everything’s okay now.” Zero gives me a pained glance, but I ignore it.

Kip lets himself be soothed, his head falling back to the bed.

“We're right here,” I continue with the gentle litany, watching as he relaxes onto the pillows. “Go back to sleep.”

“Hurts,” Kip complains muzzily, his eyes slipping shut again as he abandons the struggle to see.

“What hurts?”

“M' head,” he slurs. “Back.”

I cast a questioning glance at Lee, who says softly, “The drain can cause residual soreness. I'll give him something for it.”

Lee fetches a pain-patch and unwraps it, pressing the sticky pad against Kip's neck.

“No,” Kip moans, “Zero, you'll get in trouble.”

“No, I...” Zero tries, but he's so upset that he stumbles over his words.


“M'kay.”

Kip drifts off slowly, his breathing steadying as he slips deeper. Behind him, Lee is busily checking monitors and making notes in his tablet. Beside me, Zero is practically buzzing with
anxiety, his hand still trembling where it cradles Kip's. I feel oddly calm, despite my concern about Kip's vision.

One thing at a time.

"Zero," I call, keeping my voice soft but firm. "You're going to need to bathe. I'd like you to come upstairs with me and take a long shower."

"But..."

"Lee is more than capable of handling Kip," I cut him off. "You can come back down when we're done. I doubt Kip will be awake again before that anyway."

"Yes, sir," he responds, his voice subdued as he retracts his hand from Kip's.

"Lee," I call, my voice going from gentle to professional, "can I assume that this is a good sign? That Kip is more stable now?"

"It is," he confirms. "We obviously still have some issues to overcome," he says, acknowledging Kip's vision loss, "but he's in no immediate danger."

"I would like more information about his condition as soon as possible. Is he stable enough to have one of the others sit with him?"

"Yes."

"Then I would appreciate it if you would come find me once you're finished and give me your prognosis. I'll be in the Master suite on the third floor."

His mouth curls in a small frown, but he gives me a nod of acknowledgment. I forgot that Lee doesn't like to leave the safety of the medbay, and that he's rarely ventured out to the rest of the ship since his arrival.

I stand and turn to leave, hearing Zero shuffle at my heels. I turn and cast a single glance at Kip, once again asleep in the small bed. Despite looking much the same as he did an hour ago, it feels like we're worlds away from that.

He's awake.

He's going to be okay.

In the Master suite, I start the water running in the ridiculously lavish, room-sized waterfall shower. I wait until there's a thick layer of steam in the room before prompting Zero to get undressed. He complies with no resistance, but makes no comment and his movements seem oddly subdued given the recent events. He doesn't look at me as he steps under the spray, just stands back and lets the water cascade over him.

I give him time. There are a lot of emotions to deal with, a lot of information to process. Undressing as well, I get the soap and help him wash in silence. I let him stand there like a statue while I run my fingers through his hair, finding that it has suddenly gotten long enough for me to grip. I run a washcloth down his sides and over his legs, watching the play of muscles beneath my hands, the flex of old and faded scars. My hands hesitate at his hip, wondering if Lee has gotten time to look over Zero, wondering what we'll have to go through to get Zero fixed as well.

The vacant expression has not faded by the time Zero is clean. I pull him into my arms, his back to
my chest, but still he does not stir.

“What's wrong?” I whisper to him. “You should be happy.”

“Happy?” he questions with a surprised bark. “He's fucking blind!”

I flinch at the stark assessment.

“You don't know that,” I counter. “That's the worst-case scenario. He could still recover.”

“And if he doesn't?” he asks, his voice hedging toward hysterical. “Do you know what they do to blind assets?”

“Shhh,” I sooth, feeling the tension ripple through the muscular body in my arms. “No one's going to harm Kip. I won't allow it.”

“He won't be able... He'll be...”

Useless.

The word hovers in the air between us, resonating but unspoken.

“He'll still be mine,” I growl. “I protect what's mine.”

He takes a breath and it catches, chokes on a sob. I let him turn in my arms and hide his face against my shoulder – not that I could see his tears in all this water anyway. Arms like a vice wrap around my chest and I have to take shallow breaths because of the constriction, but I don't complain.

“Everything was supposed to be okay when he woke up,” Zero says, his voice hollow. Despite the heat from the water, he's trembling. “If he would just wake up, I thought everything would be okay.”

“It is okay!” I snap at him. I push him back and he stumbles, not expecting the movement, but I keep a hold of his shoulders. My eyes meet his and I try to convey the intensity of my dedication in a look. “Kip is going to live! He might make a full recovery! And even if he doesn't, even if the worst scenario is true and he is completely blind with no hope of rehabilitation, I will still take care of him. Do you understand?”

Dark eyes meet mine for several seconds, searching for signs of weakness or deceit. But there isn't any there to find, and eventually his eyes slip away from mine.

“If anything happens to you...” he says quietly.

“I know,” I cut him off. If anything happens to me, Kip has no hope of finding another owner. Not with his medical problems, not with his eyesight dwindling or gone entirely. Not even if Zero would let him go without a fight, which is something I doubt as well. I am aware that their lives are both inexorably tied to mine. “Nothing will happen to me. I'm careful. I know what I'm doing.”

Again, something unspoken hangs in the air between us. Zero's questions about my true intention are unresolved. If he asked me about it now I would hold nothing back, but he doesn't utter a word. It takes me a moment to realize that he understands what is being offered here. His eyes remain downcast and I realize that he's avoiding my gaze, avoiding seeing the offer in my eyes. He knows that he could have his answers if he asked me, but he doesn't want them. Or, perhaps more honestly, he knows that he can't handle them right now. There's already too much on his shoulders with Kip's illness, and maybe it's unfair of me to even offer this right now. Maybe it's just another attempt at
unburdening myself from a weight that is mine alone to bear.

I break the moment by invading his space again, stepping forward until his wet skin is pressed against mine. My hand finds the back of his head and I tilt it until I can capture his lips. I feel his startled gasp against my mouth, but then he's leaning into me, hungry and desperate. I have a surreal moment where Lee's words echo back to me and I doubt myself, wondering if I'm taking advantage of Zero, wondering if this is really the best thing for him right now. Unconsciously, I must start to pull away, because Zero's arms come around me and he makes a pained noise of denial, like I'm threatening to deprive him of something precious. I shake off my uncertainty. Damn Lee, he doesn't know anything about Zero, about what he needs or wants. I can't allow his prejudice to make me doubt myself. Not about this.

“It's okay,” I whisper, forehead resting against his. “I understand.”

There's no response but the press of his lips against mine, like he's afraid the secrets will come spilling out if he doesn't cut them off. Like he knows that he simply can't handle anything more right now, and he needs to physically prevent me from adding my own issues to his. Kissing me to shut me up - it's so far from the cold-hearted killer that people see him as, it's almost laughable. If I show a hint of amusement, then it's lost under the moan Zero gives as he presses himself against me. He always turns to sex when he's upset, a coping mechanism that's likely my doing. Have I trained him to use sex as a way to deflect unpleasant emotions? Or has he simply realized that it's a good way to release stress?

Either way, he's in no mood to be patient while I contemplate. He turns away from me and braces himself on the imitation stone wall, bending at the waist to offer himself to me. It's obvious that he wants to be taken and taken hard, but I force him to wait while I fetch the lubricant from a shelf and tease him open with my fingers. I'm hesitant to give him too much control when he's like this, and I take my time fingering him even though he bucks his hips in encouragement. When I finally press my cock against his entrance, I grip his hips firmly and press in with agonizing slowness. Only when I'm fully seated do I let Zero rock against me, and even then I keep control of the pace, pounding him with deep, long strokes that make him gasp and cling to the stone.

What we're doing is more about release than pleasure, so while I set a moderate pace, I don't draw it out. Heat gathers between my legs and I allow it to build unchecked. My rhythm intensifies, strokes becoming faster and deeper. I feel Zero's cock bobbing with each of my thrusts until he finally takes himself in hand, bracing on his forearm as he uses the other to stroke himself. I hear his gasping breath and know that he's close, but I hold myself back until I hear a hitch in his breath, until I feel him constrict around me, and I know that he's spent himself. When his tremors have subsided, I allow the heat to consume me and press him against the wall as I find my own completion.

There's only the soft patter of water and panting breaths for several minutes. Eventually, I shift away from Zero, pulling my cock free of his body. He straightens and casts a glance at me, then moves back under the spray of the water to clean up. I follow suit, washing myself down before turning to exit the shower. His hand finds my wrist and arrests my movement. I glance at him, only to find a somewhat sheepish expression on his face.

“Thank you,” he says quietly. “I... I think that helped.”

I can't quite manage a grin, but I smile softly instead.

“I'm always here for you,” I offer as I lace my fingers into his hair and pull him in for another kiss. He comes willingly, but the desperation of earlier is gone. I can feel that he's calmed, that some of the tension has left him. I can only hope that it lasts long enough for me to allay some of his fears.
There's a cough from somewhere near the shower exit, and Zero goes rigid in my arms. I glance up to find Lee standing outside the shower, his eyes blatantly averted.

“When you're ready,” he says, “I can give you my assessment. I will be waiting in the other chamber.”

I wonder what he thought of the intimate moment that he caught us in. I wonder if he thinks that Zero is merely coping or pretending. I wonder if he thinks I might have forced myself on Zero. And I wonder if I can possibly change his mind.

“I’d like to go be with Kip,” Zero says softly, his eyes tracking Lee’s exit before turning to me. “He could wake up again.”

There’s little point in telling Zero that it’s unlikely, that Kip will probably sleep through the night. Zero already knows. This is more about Zero needing to stay close than it is about Kip needing him close, and I can’t bring myself to deny him that.

Zero dries himself quickly and grabs a robe from the closet. He spares me a glance before leaving, but I only wave him away. I wrap a towel around my waist as he departs, following him into the main room to find clean clothes. Lee averts his eyes as I pull on fresh pants, but glances up before I have time to pull on a shirt.

“You look tired,” Lee points out. “Should we wait?”

“No,” I respond. “I’ll be fine. Being with Zero can be draining, that’s all.”

He makes a derisive sound. I hesitate in my dressing, my shirt forgotten as I feel a stab of irritation.


He scoffs, and I feel my face heat in anger. I turn and step in front of him, trapping him against the wall he’s been leaning against. He does not back down, his eyes hot with challenge. Even when I lay my hand against the bare skin where his throat meets his shoulder, his eyes do not drop from mine. I feel his pulse quicken beneath my fingers.

“Sometimes,” I tell him softly, feeling the anger dissipate, “you just need a little physical contact.”

He nods once, his cold stare turning into something a bit more contemplative. I remove my hand before it can become awkward.

“Kip was Zero’s first friend,” I explain. “He was integral to Zero’s emotional development. One of the first emotional attachments Zero even made. It’s no surprise that Zero is so affected by this.”

“Not the first, though,” Lee points out.

“I don’t follow.”

“Kip wasn’t the first emotional attachment Zero developed. You were.”

“I… I don’t think that’s the same,” I respond, uncertainty showing in my voice. I hadn’t thought about it much. I suppose he’s right, in a way, but Zero’s relationship with me is different than the one with Kip.

“Isn’t it?” he asks, then shrugs. “Perhaps not.”

It’s obvious that he’s placating me, but I let it go.
“So Kip?” I change the subject, moving to retrieve my shirt.

“There’s probably not much that I can tell you that you don’t already know. The pressure in his skull damaged his optic nerve. As the swelling diminishes, we’ll have a better idea of how much of his vision will return, if any. Until then, we’ll simply have to wait.”

“Did you know this was a possibility?”

“Of course.”

“Then why wasn’t I informed?”

“Do you want a detailed list of every possible side effect of his condition? I did not tell you because it was not relevant at the time. Either there was damage or there wasn’t; I had no reason to worry you needlessly about something that you could do nothing about.”

His words rankle only because in his shoes I would likely have done the same thing.

“I would have liked to know,” I counter. “Being surprised with it was not pleasant.”

“He is in good hands,” Lee says, and it seems that he’s bristling as well. “And you assured me that you would take care of him no matter what. So why would it matter?”

Damn. I feel a surge of frustration that I don’t have a counter for that either.

“I would appreciate,” I grind out, “being better informed about my asset’s condition. It might be hard for you to believe, but I care about them. I think I deserve to at least know what the worst-case scenarios are. Can we agree on that?”

He nods then, more of a bow than an acknowledgement.

“I will endeavor to do better,” he assures me. “If I am honest, I have to admit that I am no longer used to my patients having an interested party. Outside of an asset’s functionality, none of the other owners ever cared.”

“I care,” I tell him, and it comes out sounding grave even to my own ears. “Probably a hell of a lot more than I should.”

He smirks in reply, a half-grin that makes him look charming and a bit rebellious.

“Good.”
Kip is in and out of conscious for the next few days. He has a plethora of issues that he’s recovering from, including traumatic pressure on his brain, adjusting to his new meds, withdrawal from the painkillers he used to combat his symptoms, and healing from the cerebral drain. Even with all that, it seems a bit convenient that he doesn’t ask or seem to notice the blindfold that I settle over his still-healing eyes. Zero is always at his side, an almost overbearing presence. I somehow doubt that Kip has failed to notice how much Zero hovers, how overly attentive he is. It seems more likely that Kip has an inkling about his situation, even if he hasn’t fully processed it yet, and he’s making a conscious decision not to ask. Truth be told, I don’t blame him for not wanting to face it yet.

Despite the still uncertain state of Kip’s eyes, he isn’t the one that gives me cause for concern in the following days.

Three days after Kip wakes up, I seek out Zeke and ask for a private meeting. I can tell that my request causes him concern, but he does not press me for immediate details. He merely nods and lets me know when he'll be available. I have come to understand that supervising the company he owns takes a lot of his time. Probably more time than would be necessary if he weren't pushing for higher profits and dividends. Essentially, if it weren't the only source of funding for this mission, Zeke would probably have a lot more time to ensure the success of said mission. I have thoughts about the practicality of this arrangement, but I keep them to myself.

When I meet with Zeke in his office, I feel an unfamiliar stab of uncertainty. Am I overreaching? Overreacting? I don't want to ignore the symptoms of another potential disaster, but I also don't want to make things worse by interceding too soon or too much. If this were a normal situation, I wouldn't be this hesitant, but... It's too late now. I'm committed.

Zeke is in a blue button-down shirt, with the top several buttons undone. His hair is golden and silken, hanging around his shoulders in glossy waves. He must have been on a conference with some important individuals, because everything about his appearance is neat and professional, except for his open collar. After a moment of thought, I realize that it was probably intentional as well, to increase his sex appeal. Zeke is handsome. He acts like a man who knows how he looks and is not afraid to use it.
“Please, sit down,” he bids me, gesturing to a chair on the other side of a large, oak desk. Like everything else on the upper floors of the ship, the room is decorated in antique, earth-style fixtures. Hardwoods and thick carpets, unnecessary and expensive for space travel. The height of fashion, most likely.

Sitting on opposite sides of the desk seems too much like being called in front of a superior, so I ignore the chair he indicates. I walk around to his side, removing the barrier between us, and settle in another chair along the wall. Zeke does not give any indication of annoyance. Instead, he simply turns and shifts his chair closer to mine, until we’re practically knee to knee.

“What did you want to speak to me about?” he asks, prompting me again. There are arms on the chair that I’ve selected, and I feel my fingers wrap around them. I meet his eyes, challenging him, but he only meets my glare with an even stare of his own.

“Just to be clear,” I tell him firmly, “I will not use drugs to adjust your slave's natural personality traits to something you find more acceptable.”

He blinks once, in a very slow manner.

“Okay.”

“I don't want any miscommunication,” I emphasize. “I will not use my medical training in a way that I believe could be detrimental to my patient.”

“I never asked you to--”

“I want to make sure we understand each other,” I snap, cutting him off. “Any treatments that I put forth are because I believe that they are the best option for my patient, not because they're the most convenient for you. My priority is the safety and well-being of these men.”

My words cause him to hesitate, and I can see the confusion turning to concern.

“What's going on?” he asks, his voice softer and more hesitant than before. Perhaps he already has an inkling of what I'm about to say. How could he not? When the signs are so clear?

“I think Zero is depressed. I think that he's still adjusting from being off of suppressants, and I don't think he'll be able to come out of this on his own. I would like to chemically intervene.”

“You want to... put him on anti-depressants.”

“With his permission,” I stipulate. Psychoactive drugs are rarely my first suggestion for treatment, but depression can be tricky and Zero is already in a susceptible condition. “For a short period of time. I am concerned that he might become a danger to himself if this continues. His conduct with Ruby indicates that he might be... unstable.”

“Have you talked to him about it yet?”

“I have not,” I admit. “He has been resistant to treatment from me. I was able to convince him to submit to a blood test, but he has refused a full physical so far.” Zeke frowns, but I shake my head. “He seems to be in good health, so I don't think your intervention is necessary.”

Instead of looking less upset, Zeke's expression clouds with frustration.

“I should have addressed this with you earlier,” he says, running a hand over his eyes. “With Kip being ill and everything else...” He makes an exasperated sigh and then looks at me. “Zero was hit...
with a pulse rifle prior to being purchased by me. I need to have his hip looked at and treated, and he'll need a full physical to assess his condition. I'm hoping to enter him in the Competition.”

“Alright,” I agree, running my mind through the list of things I'll need to look Zero over for, “but that's not relevant to this situation. Skeletal damage is a problem, but not an immediate threat to his well-being.”

“You're right,” he agrees. “Did you want me to speak with him, or...?”

“I will discuss this with him. However, I thought it might go more smoothly if you were present. Zero... values your opinion. As I said, he has not been willing to submit to an exam.”

“I know you're trying to build trust with my assets,” Zeke says, “but I will not risk Zero's health because of sheer stubbornness. He will submit to a full physical.”

I don't argue the point at this stage. With Zeke's support of the anti-depressants and the new knowledge of Zero's damaged hip, a full examination will be necessary.

“When did you want to meet with him?” I ask instead. Zeke glances at his watch, a frown stealing over his face.

“I have time now,” he says, “Before another meeting this evening. Is he still in the medbay?”

I nod. Zero rarely leaves except when forced to. It's one of the more worrying trends now that Kip is partially recovered and no longer in need of constant supervision.

Zeke rises without another word and precedes me to the exit, not even glancing back to make sure I follow. His attitude chafes at me, but not enough for me to push back when he's complying with my wishes. We are silent as we take the lift down to the cargo bay and then cross to the medical room. I signal Zeke to wait outside the door, intending to bring Zero out. I don't want him to feel attacked by cornering him in the smaller room, and I don't want to make him feel threatened in a space that has been considered safe so far.

“Zero,” I call at the doorway. “Could you come out here? I need to discuss something with you.”

There's a brief pause, and then the sound of a rolling chair being shifted and soft, almost inaudible footfalls. Zero walks like a soldier, not the heavy, obnoxious steps of a combat asset who's never seen action outside of a planned battle. His fighting style, from the single clash we've had, is straightforward but not without finesse. At peak performance, he would be a dangerous fighter. If it weren't for the element of surprise, I'm not sure I would have been victorious in our battle.

I try to remember this when he steps out of the medbay and into the alcove of the cargo bay where Zeke and I are waiting. Zero is not the same man who faced me so fiercely only scant weeks ago. His shoulders are slumped, his arms held listlessly at his side. His skin is pale and his short hair greasy, testament to his reluctance to leave even to shower. His steps, though quiet, seem lethargic and nervous at the same time. He moves slowly, but shifts his weight from foot to foot, telling me clearly that he is unsettled. His longing glance back toward the door tells me that he'd rather avoid this meeting, if he were able.

His eyes settle on Zeke and I see tension steal across his shoulders, a frown deepening his face.

“Why are you here?” Zero asks, aiming the question to Zeke.

“I'm making sure that you hear Lee out,” Zeke says.
“Hear him out about what?” Zero snaps, turning his irritated gaze on me. “What do you want?”

There's no sense in coddling Zero; he isn't of a temperament to appreciate it.

“You're exhibiting signs of clinical depression.”

He blinks for a moment, shock slackening his features. Then my words sink in and his face scrunches into a frown, his eyes aiming a glare at me.

“Kip is sick,” he responds. “I'm... unhappy about it.”

“Kip is getting better, and yet you do not seem to be relieved.”

“I am relieved!” he denies. “I'm just still...” he hesitates, seems to have difficulty naming the emotion that he's trying to convey. “...worried.”

“You don't leave his bedside unless forced. You don't eat unless food is brought to you. You don't train, and you haven't taken any interest in Red's combat progress. You've been completely frozen since my arrival despite Kip steadily regaining health. I think you need help. Kip is merely an excuse.”

He glances at Zeke, gauging his stance on the situation. He must not find the reaction that he wants, because he frowns darkly.

“Have neither of you noticed that he's blind?”

“Blind,” Zeke cuts in, “but not dead.”

It makes Zero hesitate and drop his gaze.

I don't want him to feel tag-teamed, so I intervene.

“It's not your fault that you feel this way. If your brain is having trouble maintaining your dopamine and serotonin levels, it will cause you to feel sad. I would like to run some more tests, but I think this could be a side effect of coming off of suppressants.”

“You want to fix the damage caused by one mind-altering substance by using another?” Zero snarls. “That's your solution? Keep experimenting until I start acting normal?”

I meet his glare with a steady look of my own, aware that backing down would signal an admission of guilt. I stand firm in the face of his accusations, solidly aware that it's not true. I really am trying to help.

“I won't force you,” I assure him. Zero's eyes dart to Zeke, then back to me. “I won't do anything without your permission,” I reaffirm, “but I think you should seriously consider letting me help.”

“No,” he balks, his jaw set stubbornly.

I suppress a sigh and say, “We could start slowly, as a trial run.”

“No.”

“It would only be temporary until we see how you react...”

“No, damn it!” he snarls, backing away from me. Zeke snakes a hand out and grabs Zero's wrist. Zero flinches, and for a moment I'm worried that he might lash out. Then Zero goes still, his gaze
It's the first time Zeke has intervened so far, and I think only because he could see that I had hit a dead end with Zero. I feel a surge of irritation at Zeke. I meant what I said, I won't force Zero to accept treatment unwillingly. It would be better to let Zero retreat and calm down instead of forcing him to remain. What point is there in holding him here if we've reached an impasse? It doesn't seem like there's any way to change his mind.

"Either you let him help you, or I do," the blonde owner says calmly. "You cannot continue like this."

They match gazes for several seconds, like an unseen battle of wills is happening between them. Then Zero nods sharply and Zeke releases him. Zero retreats back into the medbay.

"What..." I hesitate, uncertain of what has just transpired. "What are you going to do?"

"I have my own way of helping Zero," Zeke assures me. "If it doesn't work, I might have to insist that he go on the medication. You're right, he can't continue like this."

And then Zeke turns and walks away from me, leaving me gawking and still confused.

*I have my own way of helping Zero.*

What does that mean?

What have I done?

I stand in shocked stillness for several minutes, my mind racing and trying to piece together Zeke's intentions. None of them reassure me. I find myself moving into the medbay, taking in Zero's hunched form at Kip's bedside, holding the sleeping blonde's hand. I find myself bombarding him with quiet, anxious questions, but to no avail. He steadfastly ignores me, not even casting a glance in my direction.

Is this the treatment I deserve? Have I put Zero in peril?

But Zero does not seem alarmed, as I would expect from someone being... what? Threatened? Is that what I think Zeke is doing? Will he harm Zero? Do I truly believe that? I don't want to, but how well do I actually know this man? Can he be trusted with someone in a vulnerable position, as Zero is now? Can he be trusted not to harm him, even unintentionally?

The questions overwhelm me. Not knowing is the worst feeling. Having no way to defend or retaliate. No way to prepare. The waiting is almost torture in itself.

With Zero unresponsive and Zeke unavailable, I have no means to gather intel. I settle on my bed in the lotus position, trying to calm my rabid thoughts with meditation. It is difficult, and I am unable to sink as deeply as I usually go. I wish I dared go to the gym instead, to work off some of this nervous energy. But I don't know what I'd do if I returned to find Zero gone.

Zeke must have moved up the timeframe for his meeting or cut it short, because he returns sooner than I expect. He calls for Zero and the combat asset does not hesitate to rise from his chair and exit the room. I find myself following, unwilling to let Zero face this alone.

Zeke stops me with a raised hand and a gentle, "We'll be fine, Lee. Stay here and keep an eye on Kip. I'll bring Zero back down when we're finished."
Bring him back down.

The words echo in my mind even as the two men disappear into the cargo bay. Bring him, not send him, not lead him, bring him. As though whatever he has planned will be so intense that Zero won’t be able to stand on his own. Or is it that he’ll need to be brought down, because he'll need medical attention when they're finished?

I try to calm my racing heart. Zeke has been kind to Zero in the past. I have never seen him act abusively. Zero does not seem afraid of Zeke, did not hesitate to go with him alone. Do these facts support the idea that Zeke intends to harm Zero? Or are my conclusions incorrect? Could Zero be hiding his fear, or simply not care what is done to him? Have I gotten it all wrong? Do I dare take that chance, when Zero is the one who will face the consequences if I've made a mistake?

I glance at the door, my heart pounding in my chest. The urge to follow them is overwhelming, but I stay myself. I have to consider, will I simply make everything worse if I intervene? Do I have any real power here? Or will Zeke simply punish me as well? Acceptable, but only if it shifts some of the attention away from Zero and leaves me well enough to look after him once it's finished. Getting us both damaged to the point of needing medical attention would only make things worse.

No.

I shake my head, trying to clear my panicked thoughts.

I know Zeke. I've seen him with Zero. Whatever misguided technique he's using to attempt to help Zero, I don't believe that Zeke would damage him to that extent. Zeke cares about Zero. He wouldn't harm him.

He wouldn't.

Right?

I call Ruby from the kitchen and ask him to sit with Kip. Although no longer in need of constant supervision, I don't know how long I'll be unavailable. I don't want to risk the blonde asset waking in confusion or distress and harming himself. The wait for Ruby to finish in the kitchen and cross to the medbay seems to take ages, and I'm ready to physically retrieve him by the time he makes his entrance. I give quick instructions on Kip's care, and then leave a worried-looking Ruby sitting at his bedside.

I bolt to the middle level, heading for the torture chamber where Zeke first attempted to convince me of his altruistic intentions. I tell myself that if Zeke is truly noble, then I won't find them inside. But opening the door proves that I was wrong about everything. About Zeke's character and Zero's emotions, about trusting him and interfering with Zero. I should have known better.

Zero is suspended on a metal bar, his arms held wide, his feet dangling inches above the ground. He's naked from the waist up, in cotton pants that don't appear to be the ones he was wearing earlier. His back is to me, and all I can see for a moment is the half dozen criss-crossing red welts already covering his back. Zeke has his hand raised again, poised with a long, black rod held in his fingers, ready to deliver another strike.

I'm moving before I can think about it, placing myself in between them. I close my eyes, knowing that the strike aimed for Zero's back is likely to hit me in the face, as I am closer to Zeke and lower that Zero. I close my eyes and keep my hands at my side, refusing to block the weapon.

How could I have trusted this person?
I deserve whatever happens to me for being such a fool.

Zeke utters a curse and I feel the breeze as Zeke twists the weapon away from me.

“Damn it, Lee!” he snarls. “I could have hurt you! What were you thinking?”

“That beating someone who's depressed isn't going to improve morale!” I yell back, hardly able to hear it over the pounding of my own heart. “If you need someone to vent your anger on, then choose me.”

Zeke flinches. His eyes flick above me, to Zero's turned form, and his face clouds with uncertainty.

Can I convince him that this is the wrong path? Could it be that easy?

There's a soft sound behind me, and I turn to come nose to nose with Zero. His glare is dark and smoldering, and in no way the kind of expression I would expect from a subjugated slave who needs rescued.

An apparently unrestrained, subjugated slave.

“Get the hell out of the way!” he snarls, and it leaves me agape with surprise.

What is going on here?

“Zero,” comes the smooth voice from behind me, all uncertainty gone. “I understand that we've been interrupted, but you did not have permission to get down unless you want to end this.”

Zero's eyes narrow like they're daring me to say anything else, then he turns and puts his back to me. He jumps and grabs onto the metal bar, holding himself with his arms spread wide, his hands resting on either side of a raised groove that must guide his position. I can see from the strain in his shoulders that it's a difficult position to hold, especially while enduring something as painful as a lashing. Why he'd submit to it unrestrained – possibly voluntarily – is not something I can comprehend.

I turn back to Zeke, finding myself pinned by cold, impassive blue eyes.

“You need to leave,” he tells me, his voice stern and impersonal.

I tense, moving into a fighter's stance, aware that it's a futile movement with the control he wields over me. But I have to try.

“I'm not leaving.”

He takes my response with a slow blink and a calming breath.

“If you wish to observe, you will be restrained. I cannot risk you interrupting again and injuring yourself.”

“No.”

“Those are your options,” he replies, his tone resolved. “Leave or submit.”

I grind my teeth and realize that I can't stop him from removing me. Given the two options, restraint at least allows me to be aware of what's happening, although I won't be able to intervene unless I can escape my bindings. But perhaps I can talk to Zeke again, possibly convince him of how
insane this whole situation is.

“Restrained how?” I ask. He gestures to the side of the room, where there are a set of manacles tethered to the wall over some kind of cushioned padding. The idea makes me bristle, but I push it down and give a curt nod instead. I'd been hoping for something I might be able to twist out of, like handcuffs or rope.

The manacles are low to the floor, and I find myself blushing when I have to kneel at Zeke’s feet for him to lock them on. I notice a fur-lined collar amongst the restraints, and I’m relieved that he forgoes it. I’m not sure I could have controlled myself if he were to attempt to restrain me with that. Electronic locks click in place as soon as the manacles close around my wrists, eliminating even the vague idea I had of trying to pick them. Not that I have the tools or necessary skill set for that plan to have much hope.

Firmly tethered, that only leaves me with the ability to reason with Zeke. For Zero's sake, I have to try.

“Zeke, think about this,” I tell him as he's standing up from locking the manacles in place. “This isn't a solution, it's only going to make the problem worse. You can't just abuse Zero like this! He...”

“Shut up, Lee!” Zero barks. It makes me hesitate, but I have come to the conclusion that he's just as deluded as Zeke in this matter. Or perhaps Zeke has skewed his perspective. Either way, if I can convince Zero of how irrational this is, perhaps we can change Zeke's mind together.

“I won't! Zero, you don't deserve...”

“To hell with what I deserve!” he snarls, twisting so that he can look over his shoulder without dropping from the bar. “I need this.”

“Zero...” I try again, and his conviction makes me feel uncertain of my own resolve. “I can help you without... this. You don't need to be punished. There's something wrong, but we can fix it together.”

“I don't want your medicine!” he snaps at me. “I've had enough of people drugging me to make me feel how they think I should feel. I want... this.”

I still don't fully understand what this is.

“Enough, both of you,” Zeke says, in a tone that expects to be obeyed. Without giving either of us a chance to disregard his orders, he turns to Zero, who has turned away again and is looking at the blank wall. “I'm going to assume that your earlier drop was due to the interruption,” he tells the suspended slave. “To reiterate, if you let go of that bar, this ends and your choices are to tell me what's wrong or accept a trial period of medication. Do you understand?”

“Nothing is wrong!” he grinds out, but it fails to get a rise out of Zeke. From where I am now, I'm able to see the profile of Zeke's face, to see the calm, unimpressed look he gives Zero's denial.

“If that were true, you wouldn't be acting this way.”

Zero doesn't respond to that, so Zeke turns his attention to me. His face holds the same steely expression as he glances my way. In an even tone, he says, “If you make noise to interrupt us, I will take away your ability to speak.”

It’s the first time he's used his power as an owner to threaten me, and I have to admit that it stings more than I expected, even in the current situation. I say nothing, but Zeke doesn't wait for a
response before turning back to Zero and raising the crop again.

“I've noticed that you and I seem to have a problem with communication. Understanding that, today's exercise is about honesty.” Zeke's eyes flick to me, and it takes me a moment to realize that he's explaining for my benefit. Zero has likely already heard it. “I will ask you a question, and for every untrue or incorrect answer, I will deliver one or more strokes, depending on the level of dishonesty.” From the look of Zero's back, he's already made several mistakes. “I was not finished when we were interrupted. Prepare yourself.”

He gives Zero a moment to tense, then makes two successive hits along the asset's shoulder blades, leaving long, angry red welts. When Zeke stands back, I take a moment to look over the damage, noting that the wounds are well away from any vital organs, staying high along his back. A glance at the weapon tells me that the injuries probably look and feel worse than they actually are, and likely aren't as dangerous as I'd originally feared. Nor does Zeke seem to be making the strikes out of anger. Instead, his lashes and his actions seem tightly controlled. It doesn't make me like the situation any better, but it does remove some of the intrinsic panic I'd been feeling earlier.

“Please repeat my last question.”

A beat of hesitation, then Zero says, “You asked why I've been depressed since Kip woke up.”

“And your response?”

“I'm not.”

Zeke's expression doesn't change, but he tilts his head in a contemplating manner before he says, “Maybe that question was too straightforward. So let me ask this instead: why aren't you happy that Kip is awake?”

“I am!” Zero snarls.

There's a moment of silence with Zero tense and waiting to be hit, but nothing comes.

“I believe you,” Zeke says gently. “So why have you been so miserable?”

“I'm not!”

Two more strikes fall, one after another. Zero arches away from the pain, but doesn't drop from the bar. I... remain silent. I'm starting to realize that I don't understand what's happening here as much as I thought I did. I'm starting to doubt that there is any real threat to Zero's health present, that Zeke has a mastery of this skill and an understanding of the psyche that, while perhaps still misguided, is at least not immediately dangerous.

“You won't leave Kip's bedside. You don't eat unless it's brought to you. You don't train. You hardly sleep. Why can't you stand down? Do you not trust us to watch Kip?”

“I do!”

“Then why do you keep watch on him?”

“I don't want... He needs me!”

One strike, and I have to agree. It's patently incorrect. Kip is stable and in excellent care.

“What do you think will happen if you leave him?”
“I...” Zero hesitates, and it's clear that he's becoming frustrated. The combination of stressors from the pain and holding his position is clearly an interrogation technique, although I have no doubt that Zero could resist if he wanted to. In this manner, it seems to be pushing him into introspection.

“You're acting like Kip hasn't recovered at all. Like you're still in the first days when he was ill.”

“I'm not!”

Two strikes.

“I don't know why you can't understand how much Kip has recovered already, how well he's doing…”

Zeke must hit Zero's breaking point, because Zero yells, “He's not getting better! He might be blind!”

Zeke isn't fazed by the outburst. He delivers another three lashes, likely because Zeke disagrees with Zero's conclusion that Kip isn't getting any better. The possibility of Kip being blind is accurate.

“Why are you so stuck on this?”

“He might be blind,” Zero reiterates in a sullen voice.

“Yes,” Zeke says, and it's not followed by any lashes as it's technically correct. “Or he might recover. And if he doesn't, he can still live a full life.”

“What kind of life is there for a blind asset?” Zero snarls. “Owners call them target practice.”

Zeke flinches, but Zero can't see it.

“Kip is under my protection,” Zeke replies, and there's heat to it, like he's daring Zero to challenge that. “Nothing will happen to him.”

“It shouldn't be like this,” Zero responds. I can't see his face, but his voice sounds... haunted. “I should have...” he cuts himself off, casting a wary glance over his shoulder.

“Should have what?”

“Should have done something.”

Two strikes.

“You are not responsible for his decision to hide things from me, nor are you to blame for the disease itself. You are only responsible for your own decision to continue the deception, which you did at Kip's bequest. Can you honestly tell me that you knew it was getting this bad? Or that you wouldn't have told me if you realized his life was in danger?”

“No, I... I didn't know....”

“You were just as shocked by his condition as I was. I don't believe that you left here knowing that his situation was so dire. You would never have left him in that state.”

“It doesn't matter...”

Strike.
“It does matter. You can't control everything. Only your own actions.”

“My actions, my decision is what got him where he is!”

Strike.

“One wrong choice didn't put him in that bed. You made a mistake, but so did Kip. So did I.”

“It doesn't matter.”

Strike.

“Why not?”

“I should have known.”

Strike.

“Now you’re psychic? Omniscient perhaps? Things happen that we can't foresee or control.”

“I should have done something. I should have realized.”

Strike.

“You aren't to blame.”

“I killed him!” Zero shouts. “It's my fault-...”

Another sharp strike with the rod, another line of red flesh.

“He is not dead!” Zeke snarls back. “You will not give up on him now! Do you understand me? He is alive! He will recover! And your attitude is not helping!”

It's followed by another three strikes, each one hard enough that Zero arches away from the pain. When they finish, Zero's head sags in exhaustion, but he doesn't release the bar. His skin is covered in a sheen of sweat, his back liberally covered with red lines, but Zeke won't let him rest. Zeke moves to stand in front of him, taking a fist full or hair and forcing his head up.

“Pull yourself together, or I'll ban you from seeing him.”

There's a shocked, desperate gasp from Zero and he struggles to pull away from Zeke's grasp. Zeke releases Zero's hair – it's unnecessary now. Zero's eyes are wide and pleading, locked on Zeke's own.

“You c-... You can't!” he stutters. “Master, please!”

“I can and I will,” he tells Zero gravely. “This isn't about you anymore. If you're around Kip with this attitude, you'll poison his recovery. He needs to be surrounded with people who will support him, not people who think he's already dead. You act like you've given up on him.”

“I haven't!” Zero denies. “I just... I'm...”

“Scared,” Zeke finished for him, his voice still hard and unforgiving. “This is the first time you've seen a loved one almost die. This is the first time you've loved anyone enough to care if they die. And it's scared you into immobility.”
It takes a long time, but Zero nods.

“Get over it.”

Zero jerks like he's been stung.

“You want me to just forget about it?” Zero snarls. “To forget that Kip almost died? To forget what I did because of it?” Dark eyes smoulder and he growls, “Or do you want me to forget that I care now?”

“No,” Zeke responds, unflinching at Zero’s anger. “I want you to acknowledge it, and then move on. This is how people who feel their emotions live every day. Pain is the price of love.”

“I don't want to lose him,” Zero says, his voice cracking.

“If you give up on him, then you already have.”

It takes a long moment of them staring at each other, their expressions obscured by my vantage point. Then Zero nods and lets himself sag, his hands loosening their grip on the rod until he drops into a crouch on the floor. Zeke kneels with him, shoring him up, and I can see Zero clinging in a way I hadn't thought possible for the hardened fighter. His shoulders shake as he vents his grief in Zeke's arms. Zeke just holds on, his expression concerned but unsurprised, and it takes me a moment to realize that Zeke knew this was under there, that his methods managed to dig it out with excruciating meticulousness. I realize that the design of this session was to bring Zero to a place where he could admit his pain and accept it as a natural part being human.

It dawns on me that Zeke knows Zero far better than I do, and at least in this respect is far more intelligent than I gave him credit for.
Aftercare - Lee POV

Chapter Notes

Is anyone else entirely sick of winter? Then again... is anyone else even experiencing winter? :) Lol. Not sure where everyone is, but I hope you're having a better time in the snow than I am.

I have to give all my appreciation to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

It takes some time for Zero to pull away from Zeke, and Zeke waits far past the breakdown until Zero is actively showing discomfort. I see Zeke rubbing at Zero's hands and wrists, and I appreciated that Zeke is aware of the strain he's put on Zero's limbs. There are whispered words between them, too quiet for me to hear, and then Zeke rises and comes to me while Zero remains on his knees. The mechanical locks are released from the wall panel, and then Zeke helps pull away the open cuffs even though it isn't strictly necessary.

“I'm going to take Zero to the upper floor to clean up,” he tells me, “and I would appreciate it if you didn't interrupt. There shouldn't be anything you find objectionable. Feel free to follow. We will discuss this situation once Zero is tended to.”

Zeke returns to Zero, letting the shorter man lean on him for support as they exit the room. I trail at a distance, but am forced closer by necessity when they board the elevator, unless I want to wait for it to come back down. Now that I can see Zero's face, I notice that he looks tired, but in a genuine way, not with the miserable, desperate edge of before. I take note of the way he leans into Zeke, touching shoulders even when he doesn't need the support. If Zeke's punishment has traumatized him, Zero isn't showing any signs of it.

I'm unsurprised to find us heading for the Master's chamber, the suite of rooms on the top floor that Zeke occupies, and then through it to the overlarge bathroom. This isn't the first time I've been to this particular room, and I'm still a bit stunned by the opulence. While it is likely the same level of extravagance that other owners enjoy, I have spent the last several years of my life in austere conditions, first in squalor at the Arena and then in clinical sterility with Ellaine. The room-sized, rock-walled shower and the functional waterfall within give me pause as Zeke cues it on the wall panel. The water flows heavily at first, but Zeke reduces it to a more gentle stream. I take a moment to watch the flowing water, and am reminded of the few good memories I have of my home.

“Let's get you cooled off,” Zeke says gently, pulling me out of my memories and putting my attention back on Zero. I realize that Zeke has moderated the temperature to something cool without actually being cold. It's a wise move, given the type of injury Zero has sustained. Hot water would only exacerbate the swelling at this stage.

Zeke helps Zero out of his pants and then guides Zero into the water, letting him lean forward
against the wall as Zeke divests himself of his own clothing and enters with him. Zero makes a noise of pleasure as the water sluices over his body, the cool water starting the job of numbing and healing his damaged skin. Zeke chuckles and moves into Zero's space, running a cloth over Zero's shoulders and neck, avoiding the damaged areas as much as possible. Zero lets him work, his arms crossed and his head leaned against them on the wall, giving Zeke unhindered access to his body.

I watch. I'd like to blame it on my innate curiosity, but the truth is that I simply can't pull myself away from this moment, from watching how they interact in the aftermath of such a violent and invasive session. I can't tear my eyes away from Zero. The way he allows himself to be vulnerable with Zeke, the way he leans his head against his arms so that he can't even see what Zeke is doing. At that angle, the lean pane of his injured back is totally exposed, water running down his body like precipitation on polished stone. He's totally at ease. Not upset. Not traumatized. Just... trusting.

Zeke moves and partially obscures my view, giving me a moment to contrast the two of them. Wet flesh looks like granite and marble, side by side. Zero's darker, scarred skin and Zeke's smooth, pale tones. They could be statues. Perfection intertwined.

There isn't any sex. I'm surprised only because I'd been looking for it, been thinking in the back of my mind that this would lead to sex. Isn't that the point? But while the two of them are naked and the moment is certainly intimate, it never turns sexual. Zeke does not become aroused. Zero's body seems to show some interest, but he ignores it well enough that I attribute it to a mixture of endorphins and unintentional stimulation from Zeke. They show a level of comfort with each other's nudity that speaks of more than simply being lovers, but isn't sexual in itself.

They touch, they bathe, and then they exit the shower. Zeke taps Zero on the shoulder to signal that it's time to get out, and Zero doesn't even flinch from the touch. They dry off using the forced air system, although Zeke also rubs a towel over his hair to absorb the excess moisture. I had feared that Zeke might try to continue the scene from the torture room; however, their behavior in the bath has put those fears to rest. It seems that the punishment – or whatever that was – is truly over.

It dawns on me that my presence is not needed, and might even be intrusive. I can see that Zero is not seriously harmed, and my fears of continued violence have been quelled. However, instead of leaving, I perch myself on the edge of a nearby night stand and watch as Zeke helps Zero to lie face-down on the duvet.

It doesn't really strike me that their actions could still turn sexual, that the bedroom is a more intimate setting than the shower, and the bed even more suggestive than that. For some reason, the shower seemed to be the more likely place for sex. Perhaps my perception is tainted by the last time I walked in on them post-coitus in the shower.

Regardless, it doesn't turn into sex. Zeke retrieves a tube of ointment from the bathroom, then kneels on the bed to stroke it over the darkening welts on Zero's back. Zeke's hands are gentle and Zero stays relaxed, impervious to any discomfort that Zeke might be causing. I lean over and snag the tube where it lies discarded on the bed. Reading the back, I'm pleased to find that it contains a mild antiseptic, an anti-inflammatory, and a numbing agent.

“A painkiller?” I question without really thinking about it.

Zero snorts, turning his half-lidded gaze in my direction.

“Ridiculous, right?” Zero drawls tiredly.

“We've gone over this,” Zeke says patiently, without turning from his task. “It's not over until I've tended to you. Taking care of you afterwards is important for both of us.”
“’M fine,” Zero grouses, closing his eyes again.

Zeke smiles indulgently and leans over to kiss Zero on the shoulder, just above one of the welts that's slowly darkening into a bruise.

It's such an affectionate gesture that I find myself averting my eyes. I set the tube back on the bed, and Zeke picks it up a moment later.

“Let me clean up,” Zeke says as he caps the ointment, “then we can talk while Zero recovers.”

“’S nothin’ t’ recover from,” Zero protests flatly. “’M fine!”

Zeke heads to the bathroom, not even throwing a glance in Zero's direction. Zero gives a gruff, resigned noise of displeasure. I follow Zeke with my eyes, my mind still trying to piece all of this together. The room falls oddly quiet when Zeke disappears into the bathroom, leaving the two of us in the relative privacy of the adjacent room.

My attention drifts to the occupant of the bed, and I find my eyes tracing over the interlacing scars running over his hip. It isn't the first time I've seen them, but it's the first good look I've gotten of them. Last time, Zeke and Zero had just coupled in the shower when I walked in, and they were still...entangled. My embarrassment at catching them in the act had caused me to avert my eyes. If I'd gotten more than a passing glance I certainly would have followed up with a full exam. Zeke is right, it will need to be corrected if Zero wants to compete – it's a weak-point that would be too easy to expose. I look at the jagged scars cracking their way out from the center-point on Zero's hip. The trauma would have been severe. If it wasn't treated at the time of the damage, then repairing it now will be an uphill battle.

Zero sighs and turns his face in my direction.

“C’n feel you starin’ at me,” he says, his voice a bit wry.

“Apologies,” I respond. “I was just...” My eyes are pulled toward his hip again, and I find my fingers reaching out to trace the lines, like I can smooth away the marks and the damage beneath. I stop just short of touching him, suddenly feeling that it would be too forward given the surroundings.

“They're old marks,” he says, seeming a bit more awake, and I let my hand fall away. “They don't hurt.”

“But do they hinder?” I ask. He hesitates for a long moment, then gives a curt nod. I can tell that it's difficult for him to admit a weakness, so I make an effort to pull my attention away from his scars. There's nothing to do about it at this moment anyway.

Pulling my gaze away, I find my eyes arrested by the network of crisscrossing lines on his back, many already darkening into long lines of bruising. The puffiness around the lines has started to fade already, but I find myself frowning at the damage.

“I didn't understand this part for a long time,” Zero says softly, and it snaps my attention back to his face. “I couldn't see why he needed to do this. Cause the hurt and then soothe it after.”

“And why is it?” I ask. I glance back toward the bathroom doorway, wondering if he'll have time to explain before Zeke returns.

“It isn't about the pain,” Zero responds. His hand touches mine and it makes me look at him again. Steel-colored eyes meet mine openly, and I'm surprised by their intensity. “It's about pushing further. Delving deeper. When it's over, he has to make sure he hasn't pushed too far or delved too deep.”
There's sincerity in his voice and his eyes – he truly believes that Zeke is trying to help him.

“And what does Zeke get out of this?” I find myself asking. The mission, the scene, the stress over his slave's failing health – what pushes Zeke to get so invested in them? A noble sense of purpose? It sounds right, but somehow it doesn’t fit. What motivates the enigmatic man? What makes him care so deeply, love so passionately?

Because he does love them. I can't doubt that any longer. Maybe not in a way that's healthy, maybe not in the way that they deserve. But he does love them, and he's doing his best to protect them.

Zero shrugs in reply to my question. Says, “He likes to take care of people,” in a casual voice. Like maybe he's never really thought about it before, never wondered what Zeke gets out of the equation. I have to ask myself how much there is of Zeke that Zero can actually see, and how much Zero is blinded by the image of “Master” and “Owner.” How much of their perceptions of each other are colored by the roles they’ve been forced to play?

“Lee?” Zeke calls, and I realize that he's finished washing up and is standing in the bathroom doorway. “Did you want to speak?”

“Yes,” I reply, a bit flustered at being caught distracted. Zero lets his eyes slip closed, clearly exhausted, as I rise and meet Zeke in the doorway. We step outside, into the lavish hall that connects the Master's suite to the other guest suites.

The silence in the hall is more oppressive than in the bedroom. A thousand half-formed questions race through my mind, but none of them complete the journey to my lips. I can feel Zeke's eyes on me, tracing over my form. I have to wonder what he's seeing, but I can’t bring myself to lift my gaze. If I'm honest, I'm embarrassed with myself. I charged into a situation that I knew too little about and almost made a mess of it. I inserted myself where I was neither needed nor wanted, and I did so because of a lack of trust in a man who has shown himself to be honorable several times over.

Even knowing this, if the situation were to rewind, I'd do it all the same. Because the risk of Zero being harmed far outweighs my current embarrassment. Still, I'm not sure where to start in expressing that sentiment.

I take a breath and say, “I won't apologize for...”

“I'm not asking you to apologize,” Zeke cuts me off. I lift my eyes to his, find the placid blue depths focused on me. Not angry or annoyed, simply calm and accepting. Perhaps a bit weary? But certainly not irate.

“Oh.”

“I suppose I should apologize to you,” he continues, a bit of strained amusement seeping into his voice. “I imagine that my actions seemed quite hostile from an outside perspective.” He hesitates then, and his eyes become a bit sterner. “I trust that your fears have been allayed? That you no longer think me a monster who brutalizes my assets into submission?”

“You've proven to be different,” I admit.

“Then I'll also trust you not to interfere in such a manner again. Not only is it dangerous to yourself, but interrupting a scene like that can be detrimental to both participants.”

“I... cannot guarantee that I will not intervene again if I feel it is necessary.” He bristles, and I continue, “But I will try to do it in a less dramatic way.”
That earns me a quirk of the lips.

“You seem to have a flair for drama. Perhaps you should have gone into theater instead of medicine?” he teases. I give him a flat look, but it doesn't appear to have much effect. After a moment, he soberes and says, “I would have preferred to let Zero work this out on his own, but I don't have the time. I'm meeting with another owner tomorrow, and I'm hoping to take him with me.”

That surprises me, and I reply, “He hasn't mentioned it.”

“I haven't told him yet,” Zeke admits. “I was contemplating going alone, or taking a different asset. But I'd rather not, especially after speaking with the board today.”

“Didn't go well?” I ask, judging by the look on his face.

“There's no way I'm going to have the necessary capital to compete this year unless I sell something.” He thinks about it, and then says, “Property, I mean. Real-estate or holdings or shares. Not...”

Not people. Not us.

“I understand. What does that have to do with your meeting tomorrow? Unless...”

“Unless I'm meeting with someone who might be able to invest capital in me, in my skills as an owner.”

“And that person would be?”

“Dillon Arcrest,” Zeke responds, and I feel myself tense. Before I can protest, Zeke cuts me off. “Don't,” he warns, and then more softly, “I know he's dangerous.”

“That's putting it mildly. He was at the arena while I was there. Fought some of his combat assets, let them bleed out on the floor instead of letting me treat them.” My fist clenches at the memory. I'd had to be restrained and physically dragged away from the scene. I'd never been quite sure if they aimed to stop me from offering aid despite the owner's wishes, or if they feared I might attack him. I'd been more than willing to do both. “That man is psychotic.”

“Probably, and I think there's a good chance that he's the Controller as well.”

“Is it worth the risk?” I question. “If he starts to suspect...”

“I don't have any reason to think he's suspicious yet. If he is the Controller, then getting closer to him is necessary. If not, then I still need to get his financial backing.”

“Why the rush? Couldn't you simply enter next year, when your position and your finances are more stable?”

I don't bother suggesting that he ask his department for funds. The argument has gotten stale, and at this point I honestly don't think they'd give Zeke anything even if he demanded it. There's no feasible way for him to leave this situation without causing catastrophic damage to people he cares about, and I have the feeling that his employer knows it.

“I...” he hesitates, his shoulders sagging even at the thought of delaying his plans. “I don't know if I can wait that long. If I can do this... for another full year.”

“Ah,” I respond, because there's nothing else to be said. The strain of this operation is already
starting to show on Zeke – it's probably a good thing that he can admit his limitations.

“Dillon has shown an interest in Zero in the past. I want to bring him along to help with negotiations.”

“As a bargaining chip?” I hiss.

“Not... in the way you mean,” Zeke responds, his tone subdued. “I won't let him harm Zero, and I certainly won't let him have Zero. However, Zero is a trained pleasure asset now, and he's proven that he’s able to handle himself around owners. I need him there with me as backup, if possible.”

“That's why you pushed Zero so hard today.”

“Zero reacts better to pressure than others do. It lets him clear his mind and focus on the problem at hand.”

“I see.”

“It's not for everyone,” he explains. “Kip, in particular, needs an approach with more finesse than this. For Zero, putting him under stress helps to center him. It clears his mind and brings out the source of the real issues. For Kip, it only makes him panic.”

“You know your assets well.”

“There was a period of trial and error,” he admits. “I wasn't prepared for Kip's strong will and stubbornness. I was equally surprised with how easily Zero could bend and adapt to new situations. But yes, I like to think that I know them pretty well at this point.”

“And what would you use to guide your newer assets? What would you use on Ruby or Red?” I wonder idly.

“A bulldozer,” he says flatly, and wins a genuine laugh from me.

“They do seem... ah... like a handful.”

“They're just so young,” he says, and there's a melancholy undertone to his words.

“You never really get used to it,” I respond. “Every year, they seem a bit younger. Safe to say, I don't think either of them would have survived very long if you hadn't taken them. They're too rigid for this kind of environment.”

“Yes, well,” he shifts away from me, and I can feel the conversation come to a close. “If Ruby sets my breakfast ablaze again and tries to convince me it's flambé, I'm going to regret ever picking him up.”

It wins another chuckle from me, as I've been on the wrong end of Ruby's culinary skills more than once myself. It seems to give Zeke pause, perhaps surprised at winning a second sound of amusement so quickly. He stalls in heading back toward the bedroom, gives me a second glance.

“You're pretty when you laugh,” he tells me. It's an idle comment, and I can see in his eyes that he regrets it immediately. Second-guessing himself eliminates my suspicion that it might have been an attempt to manipulate me, so I smirk in response.

“Can't turn the charm off?” I ask.

He gives a lopsided grin and a sheepish shrug.
“I’d like to claim that it’s innate, but honestly I’ve probably just grown too used to being around people that I need to charm or seduce, usually both.”

There’s a moment where I contemplate how sad it is that he’s grown so accustomed to being around enemies that he hardly knows how to interact with someone outside of those roles. Surrounded by nothing but targets and victims, enemies and allies, how on edge must his psyche be from the constant strain of dancing between them?

Dismissing the thought, I quip, “See that you do neither with me,” before preceding him into the room.

If the sound of his laugh makes me quirk a smile of my own, I make sure he’s none the wiser about it.

Inside the bedroom, Zero seems to have had enough resting. He's already standing, dressed in a loose pair of cotton pants and a button-down sleeping shirt, both of which hang on him and appear to be pilfered from Zeke's closet.

“What are you doing?” Zeke queries, entering only a few steps behind me.

“Going to see Kip,” Zero responds. When Zeke hesitates, Zero becomes visibly agitated. His voice rises as he says, “You said... You said I could see him! You can't just change-...”

“That’s not it,” Zeke placates. “I'm not banning you from him, I just wanted you to rest a little longer. You will be taking better care of yourself,” Zeke says, and there's an emphasis that tells me it's not a suggestion.

“Kip is likely sleeping,” I add in. “He's still on pretty heavy levels of painkillers and sedatives.”

In a patient where stress can literally kill him, it's the best course of action. The swelling on his brain is still subsiding, as well as the after effects of withdrawal. Kip's body needs as much rest as possible, so he's only awake in short bursts.

“I...” Zero hesitates. “What if I just check up on him? And then... and then spend the night here?”

It would be a far improvement from most nights, where he falls asleep in the chair.

“Acceptable,” Zeke replies, and Zero hardly waits for him to finish the word before heading into the hall. Zeke and I follow and meet Zero at the elevator, where he's waiting impatiently inside.

In the medbay, Ruby is sitting by Kip's bed, speaking in low tones to the injured blonde. As if to prove me wrong, Kip is conscious and responsive. He shifts toward Zero when the fighter resumes his customary seat, despite being unable to actually see Zero. Ruby, I notice, vacates his chair and exits the room quickly. Zero casts a glance at the retreating redhead, and I notice the look of guilt in his metallic eyes. Then Kip is taking up all of Zero's attention, even as Zeke and I pause in the doorway.

With Kip and Zero occupied, I take a moment to glance at Zeke. I don't think it's my imagination making him look so tired. He leans against the door frame, and it seems like he might fall over if it weren't for the support. I fight the innate urge to offer aid or advice – my earlier actions prove that I don't understand him well enough to offer such council.

Still, I take note that Zero never once casts a glance toward Zeke. I have to wonder about what I saw earlier. I can say with some certainty that it was cathartic for Zero, although I have no idea what the long-term effect of such treatment on his psyche might be. But the scenario that Zeke set up, the
situation that he put Zero in, once again placed all the onus of control on Zeke.

I have to wonder at it. This thing that they're doing...

...Shouldn't it work both ways?

Zeke's eyes are fixated across the room, and I follow his gaze over to Kip, still laying in his bed. I move closer to Zeke, leaning against the wall beside him.

“We're going to need to talk to him soon,” I tell Zeke softly. “I don't like the idea of stressing him at this stage of his recovery, but he’s going to figure it out eventually. We’ve been lucky that he’s so out of it, or he would have realized already. And we can't just pretend that there's no risk of permanent damage. We've got no guarantee that his sight will come back.”

He looks very old then. Not in the usual way of aging, but old like a marble statue that has been worn away by years of abuse from the elements. Like somehow there was more of him, but he's been whittled down, the edges rounded off. I can almost imagine him crumbling into dust.

“Give it some more time,” he says. “I'd like to be here when you talk to him. And we should discuss options...”

“There aren't any,” I cut him off.

“But prosthetic eyes...”

“Will kill him,” I finish again. “His body is too unstable. Trying to operate on his cranium would disturb the tenuous balance in his skull, likely putting us in the same situation we're in now. With the added trauma of surgery, he's unlikely to survive it. Either his sight comes back, or it doesn't.”

“I understand,” he replies, and somehow manages to put an eon of weariness into the two words.

I hesitate for a full moment.

Then, “This changes nothing.”

“This changes everything,” Zeke counters. “But it doesn't change how I feel. He's mine, sight or no. I will protect him, whatever the cost.”

“Good,” I reply curtly.

All I can think is: Who protects you?
Return to Red Seven - Zeke POV

Chapter Notes

It has been SUCH a week. Sick cat, broken car, ice-snow. Ugh. I am getting this posted by the skin of my teeth (if that's a saying people still use.) I really appreciate all the comments that I've been getting, and I apologize for getting back to them late. Have I mentioned that it's been a hectic week? Lol.

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If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

The party is in Reynard's club, even though Dillon is technically hosting. The difference seems to be intention, as Reynard’s green-collared assets are nowhere to be found this time. Instead, the room is filled with milling owners and their accompanying black-collared assets. It’s a strikingly similar room to the one I visited previously - possibly the same one, given how lost I get here last time. Then again, it’s likely there are several of these rooms that are similar or identical. I haven’t been here enough to know.

Zero is in the pool of water that occupies the center of the room. He's naked except for his black collar, but he seems relaxed. It's a striking change from the sullen, hesitant slave I brought last time. He doesn't smile, but there's a smug smirk playing on his lips, and his eyes look pleased. Maybe it's the sparse crowd that's allowing him to be so calm – only a dozen or so owners and a few dozen assets in the big, open room. Not a lot of places to hide, and most occupants are nude or close to it, so not a lot of places to conceal a weapon either. Still, I see Zero's eyes flick back to me every few minutes, his gaze assessing. He may submit like a pleasure asset, but he's still a soldier at heart.

“Do you think they'll be okay?” the other occupant at the table asks me. It's Leonid Saal, the artist that I met at The Line when I first introduced Zero as a pleasure asset. Sand-colored hair falls around a narrow face, wire-rimmed glasses accent his greenish eyes and likely do little else. A petite man, looking even more so with a tall, muscular asset standing behind him. I think it might be the same one that was with him the first time we met, but it's hard to remember. Regardless, it seems that I'm not the only one who likes athletic pleasure assets – along with this one, Leonid has brought two more muscular men, and I'm told that all three are designated as pleasure assets. Then again, Zero is a pleasure asset, and that doesn't make him any less dangerous.

I let my gaze fall toward the pool, where the two assets are approaching Zero. Both are taller than he is, and both have muscular, defined shoulders and rippling abdominal muscles. Neither is particularly bulky, but certainly more heavily muscled than the usual willowy pleasure assets that dart around the room. They might even have a bit of weight on Zero, although I doubt that would mean much when facing an asset with his skills. One has cream-colored skin and brown hair, the second with tawny skin and black hair. The two approach Zero cautiously, their postures a bit wary but not aggressive. Zero stills in the hip-deep water, his head cocked to the side as he assesses them. His
posture stays relaxed and confident, telling me that he's willing to tolerate them in his space, but also that he knows he could wipe the floor with them if need be.

“I think they're fine as long as they don't attack him,” I respond, giving Leonid a reassuring smile.

I see the dark-skinned one take a breath and step into Zero's space, looming over my smaller asset. Zero holds his ground, his eyes narrowing in challenge. The asset's fingers skim the top of Zero's hip, spreading water over the dry skin there. It's a clear message of intent, and I see Zero's eyes widen in surprise, then flick to me for guidance. I give a nod and Zero's posture relaxes, the wariness leaving his eyes. The dark-skinned asset moves closer, wet fingers skimming up Zero's sides. The lighter asset moves behind Zero, bracketing him from both sides.

“Should I...”

“Not that kind of attack,” I respond, trying to cover a grin by sipping at my cocktail.

In the water, Zero rocks against the dark-skinned asset's leg, the water obscuring the actual action from view. Pale hands touch Zero's sides as the asset behind him moves closer. Zero leans back, accepting the asset's hands on him. The dark-skinned asset in front stays where he is, letting Zero set the distance between the three of them instead of caging Zero in the middle. Zero angles himself, his shoulders leaning back against the asset behind him, his hips brushing against the asset in front, but still maintaining enough space to retreat if needed. He's letting them close, but he doesn't know these two, doesn't trust them. It's wise that he's taking his own mental state into account – or perhaps the setup is instinctual. Either way, I see Zero's focus narrow to the assets with him as they move together, the rhythm languid and teasing. His hips undulate with no urgency, his fingers settling lightly on the dark-skinned asset's shoulders.

He's taken completely by surprise when a cascade of water comes from his left side and hits him in the face. The two assets with him jump and retreat several steps as Zero shakes the water from his eyes and turns with a murderous look to the newcomer. Then he stills.

It's the long-haired asset from the Arcrest hunt, his hair now pinned in an elaborate style on his head, only a few stray chestnut strands falling artfully around his face. I'm not close enough to see the bright violet of his eyes, but the memory gives me pause. Those eyes caused me to pass on him the last time we met, and I'd rather not repeat the same mistake. I glance at his collar only to find that it's black. Not for sale right now, or not for sale at all? I glance around, but I don't see Jackson, the surly owner who'd held him before.

“You don't scare me!” the long-haired asset says, grinning like a naughty child. The words are barely audible from where I'm sitting, but the effect on Zero is immediately visible. His body tenses, and I'm just about to intervene when Zero strikes, almost impossibly fast. One moment, the asset is standing just out of arm's reach, and the next he's in Zero's arms, bridal style, looking stunned. The “Oh shit!” is inaudible, but I can clearly see it in the asset's expression. Another instant, and he's flying toward the deeper water, landing with a loud splash, and then completely submerged in the crystal liquid.

He surfaces with a laugh that is so honest and genuine that it attracts the attention of any owners left in the room who hadn't been watching the scene unfold.

Still chuckling, the asset reaches his hand out to Zero, an obvious bid for truce. Zero hesitates only an instant before reaching out, using the grasped hand to help pull the brunet to his feet and toward the shallower water at the edge of the pool. Once on sure footing, the asset uses the same hand to pull Zero closer, moving his body sensually against Zero's slick skin. Another moment, and Zero has the brunet by the hips, rocking against him. When they settle, the brunet has replaced dark-skinned
I watch the two of them for several seconds. They look good together – a nice contrast between Zero's stern, serious features and the brunet's whimsical, elven ones. The brunet is lean and lithe where Zero is muscular and sturdy. Large, intelligent purple eyes survey the crowd at the edges of the pool. His concentration never leaves Zero, but I notice that the brunet stays turned so their backs are always away from the most populated area of the poolside, giving the owners a side-view of the two of them. The long-haired asset appears to be enjoying himself, but there's no doubt that he's working as well.

My concentration is broken when Leonid's two assets approach, both dripping wet. They don't seem upset at having their fun interrupted, instead settling on a towel beside the table and returning to some languid kissing. Leonid hardly casts a glance at them, his attention captured by the two in the water.

It strikes me in that moment that the brunet might have orchestrated this. That he likely watched Leonid settle at the table with me and bid his assets to go into the water with Zero. The brunet easily could have inserted himself in the small group – there are generally no limits on assets interacting when showing off for their owners. The brunet likely would have overshadowed Zero, causing him to retreat. Instead, he took a chance on separating Zero from the two others, letting the two other assets gracefully retreat instead of being pushed out of the picture. Masterful maneuvering, all covered as a prank.

Or maybe it was just a prank. Maybe I'm overthinking it.

James Peterson approaches our table, pulling my attention away from the brunet, who is laying kisses across Zero's collar bone. Peterson is the owner of the Leash-exclusive bar called The Line, and I've been dodging his calls and messages since gifting him with a bottle of Earth-vintage wine. I am aware that he wants to use my ties to Earth to secure a higher-end product for his bar, but I'm not sure it's worth the money he's offering compared to the risk of having my product noticed by export officials and seized, as well as the fine I would likely incur. In addition, James has turned out not to be the high-stakes player that I was hoping he would be. He isn't a Champion or a Dealer, so it seems unlikely that he would be part of the inner circle. He isn't in the same league as Vikram or Dillon.

“Leo,” James says as he takes a seat at the table. “How did the pictures come out?”

“Simply perfect,” Leo gushes, “the lighting was exactly what I'd hoped it would be. Beautiful contrast.” Then to me he explains, “I took some photos at The Line of my newest two assets. James was kind enough to lend me the space.”

“It certainly wasn't an imposition, given what a great promotional piece your next exhibition will be.”

Leo laughs and says, “Well, I hope the background doesn't overshadow my assets, but it certainly did make a striking scene. And I'll list your nightclub in the brochure, so it will definitely give you some additional exposure.” Turning to me again, Leo says, “I host a gallery show of my artwork twice a year, open to both Leash members and the general public on different nights. My work is rather explicit, so I include an explanation in my brochure that my models have all signed confidentiality agreements and prefer not to be disclosed. On Leash-only nights, I'll have the two assets give a performance and then go up for sale. I was hoping to drum up some extra interest today, but...”

“Ah,” I glance over my shoulder to where Zero and the long-haired asset are still interacting in the
water, holding the attention of most of the crowd. “My apologies. I can-...”

He laughs and cuts me off. “Please don’t! I have to admit, I'm quite enjoying the show. Incubus looks rather stunning with your zero. I usually pick more obscure assets to photograph, but I have to say that Incubus has rather caught my interest.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” I admit, then prod for more information. “Do you suppose he's still for sale, or does the collar mean someone has taken him?”

“A little of both,” James cuts in. “He's still available, but I've paid Jackson for him. He'll be entered as one of the prizes at my grand opening next month.”

“For the casino expansion?” Leo asks. “Is it true you've partnered with Dillon for the new venue?”

“Yes,” James replies, and there's a note of pride in that tone. It seems he's impressed himself by getting the attention of such an influential investor. “Dillon contributed financially to the construction of the new wing. He's in favor of closing the The Line to outsiders and making it member-only. Before the expansion, it wasn't financially feasible. With the addition of the new wing, I have to admit that I'm more amenable to the idea. It will all depend on how well the opening goes.” James glances at me, the first time he's actually acknowledged me since he sat down. “You haven't responded to my invitation yet. Will you not be able to attend?”

I had been considering blowing off the event, thinking that encouraging a friendship with Peterson wouldn't be of any benefit to my mission. Now that I know he's in a partnership with Dillon, however, it casts the relationship in a new light. I'm fairly certain the response date has already passed. I'll have to try to salvage the situation.

“I apologize, I've simply had my hands so full with the three new assets that it slipped my mind. Of course, I'll be there, if you still have space.” To sweeten it, I add, “Could I bring anything?”

James' frosty attitude warms somewhat and he smiles at me. “We'd love to have you. I don't suppose you could bring a couple bottles of your vintage wines? I'd be thrilled to have them available. Just let me know the price.”

I hide a flinch and say, “Absolutely not. Consider them a congratulatory gift.”

He grins wider. It's a gamble. I'm taking a loss on the bottles – and not an insubstantial one. I'll have to pay the export fee myself, which is why there's no point in selling the bottles to James, who is only interested in smuggled merchandise. I've asked Mari to see if she could get a waiver for the export tax through the Department, but once again we were denied due to the Department's “hands off” approach to this mission. But I'm hoping the gift will serve a two-fold purpose: buying an alliance with James at the same time as fulfilling his interest in my collection of wines without actually entering a business agreement with him. It's a bit of a gamble, though, as James isn't my actual target. I just need to use him to get closer to Dillon.

“That's quite a gift,” James responds, and he doesn't know the half of it. I'll have to pay for expedited shipping on the bottles as well just to get them here in time. “You have my thanks.”

“It's the least I could do for being so tardy with my response,” I reply.

“So,” Leo interjects, sensing the lull in our conversation, “what game is Incubus going to be the prize for?”

“Ah ah,” James denies. “That would take all the fun out of it. Safe to say, we'll have the standard gambling – slots, cards, races – but we'll also feature games of chance and skill where the assets are
the focus. I've got about a dozen prime assets slotted as prizes. I asked Jackson to let me bring Incubus out here to attract some additional interest.”

“He's certainly doing a good job of that!” Leo says with a laugh. I glance over my shoulder to find Zero intertwined with Incubus at the edge of the water, the two of them “dry-humping” despite being soaked from the water. Zero is on the top, Incubus partially reclined under him, his head thrown back and making small noises of pleasure. I glance around to find several owners staring, then bring my attention back to the table only to find Leo staring just as avidly.

“He'd make a gorgeous image,” Leo admits wistfully. “I usually don't take assets that are so well-known already, but if I could win him...” he trails off, then pulls his attention away and turns to me. “Will you loan me your zero if I get Incubus?” Leo asks, then rushes to say, “Just for the photos and the expo. I know how attached you are to him.”

“I would consider it,” I respond evenly. “It would depend on our availability at the time, but I have no other objections.”

“Wonderful!” Leo gushes. “I would just love to get some shots of the two of them together. And if I can get Incubus from the game of chance, then I won't have to raise his value that much to turn a profit.”

It hits me like a bucket of ice water, being reminded that Leonid sells his assets once he's tired of them. I had been thinking that it might not be such a bad idea for Incubus go to Leo, who seems kind and stable, whose other assets seem healthy and well-adjusted. But I'd forgotten that owners don't see their assets as people, so the asset can never really be safe, no matter how kind the owner. It's just a fact of their existence.

“I'm thinking something natural,” Leonid continues, oblivious to my epiphany. “Vincent is a wonderful gardener,” he gestures to the asset behind him, standing protectively a polite distance away. “I think we could probably manage something jungle-like for the shoot. Or perhaps Dillon would let me host it at the Arcrest Manor? No, I need something more exotic. Curling vines and brightly colored flowers. We'll simply have to do it at my ship.”

“Getting a bit ahead of yourself, aren't you?” James cuts in, chuckling. Leo blushes.

“Perhaps, but an artist has to have vision! You can't just cut it off at the start, it has to be seen through to the end. An artist needs to be inspired!”

“Speaking of inspiration,” James says in a teasing tone. “Perhaps we should call those two off before they start to chafe?”

I glance over my shoulder, and the two are still interlocked. Positions have been reversed, and now Zero is on the bottom, with Incubus straddling his right thigh and thrusting his pelvis against Zero's hip. From observation, I've come to understand that assets are allowed almost any level of kissing and grinding for an audience, but any other sexual acts are prohibited without the instruction of an owner. Orgasms are also denied without explicit permission to do so.

Zero must see my movement, because he looks my way only a moment after I turn toward him. I gesture, and he prods at Incubus's hip. They separate, and Incubus follows Zero to the table, remaining partially behind him even when they stop.

“Would you mind if they continued?” Leonid asks. “I was quite enjoying this show. I'd love...” He hesitates, then follows with, “I mean, if it wouldn't be too much trouble, I'd love to see them sucking each other off on the table.”
I shrug and glance at James. “I've got no problem with it.”

He nods and says, “No orgasms unless we say otherwise.”

Zero starts to take an immediate step forward, but a light touch on his arms stops him. He glances at Incubus and something passes between them, then Incubus is stepping out from behind Zero and climbing onto the table.

It's the first unimpeded, naked view of Incubus that I've gotten, and I have to say that I'm impressed. Not just with the lithe, muscular form or the smooth, flawless skin, but with the sheer size of the cock between his legs. It's possibly as long as my own, with a thick, slightly curved shaft and a bead of precome at the tip. The deep red color likely comes from too much stimulation without an orgasm. As he climbs on the table, I can see a couple veins on the underside, standing out against the otherwise flawless skin.

Incubus lays down on his back, his cock standing almost perpendicular to his body. As Zero climbs onto the table from the other direction, it dawns on me why Incubus would want to go first. The person on bottom has almost no control over the cock he's swallowing, a challenge made more difficult by the angle of their bodies. It isn't a problem with a more average-sized cock like Zero's, but a larger cock like Incubus's could choke a less experienced asset. It’s telling that Incubus purposefully puts the less experienced asset on top, putting himself in the more difficult position. Having Zero on top allows him to control the pace and only take what he can without choking, eliminating any risk that my asset might embarrass himself.

A small crowd gathers around us, and finally I spot Dillon among the onlookers. As the host, he'd been greeting guests and making rounds when I arrived, but had directed me to Leo's table to make an acquaintance with the photographer. Dillon gestures at me, and I rise just as Incubus's cock is slowly disappearing down Zero's throat, and Incubus moans loud and low around the cock in his own mouth. I'm not concerned about leaving the two alone – Zero is skilled enough to handle oral without my direct supervision.

I follow Dillon to a less-populated part of the room, snagging a glass of amber liquid as I go. Courage or cover, I'm not really sure, but Dillon already has his own glass so it's probably wise to match him. We pause between two white pillars, Dillon leaning casually against one, all the attention in those sharp, brown eyes focused on me. He just screams danger, all lean muscle and sharp planes. I try for nonchalant and take a sip of my drink.

“How did your meeting go with my wife?” he asks.

“I'm not sure I have words to describe it,” I respond, aware that I could be treading on dangerous ground by giving my opinion of his new spouse.

Dillon gives a sharp bark of laughter and says, “Oh yes, she's indescribable, isn't she?” in a way that doesn't sound particularly like a compliment.

“She's... ah... very good with the scholarly assets. Her facilities appear to be in impeccable order.”

“Yes yes,” he says with a vague wave of his glass. “Her little nerds are fantastic. I'm glad she has something to occupy her time. Keeps her out of my hair. She's a bit more of a handful than I expected.”

“She does seem rather independent.”

“Still, you can’t beat bloodlines like those. Her lineage goes back to the very start of space
exploration. Lots of family connections.”

Bloodlines. Lineage. Family connections.

“So are you two thinking about...?”

“More than thinking,” he says, grinning. “What else is the point? Thankfully, she's just as happy to go non-traditional for the creation. I've got a couple samples on ice, just waiting for when the time is right.”

A child. They want to create another generation of this. They want to hand this down as a legacy to their offspring. It's horrifying. It's madness.

“Congratulations,” I tell him. “This is exciting news.”

“Well, it's certainly expected since we're married. There's just something about recent events that makes me optimistic.” He gives me an enigmatic smile, and I'd give my right arm to know what's behind it. Then he says, “You should think about procreating.” His smile turn sly and he teases, “I'm sure Magdelene would give you a couple. She wouldn't even make you use in-vitro.”

I choke on my drink and he laughs. When I finally clear my airway, I tell him, “Thank you, but I'm not ready to think about settling down.”

“Nonsense! There's no reason you have to settle down. In a place like this, you can have kids and still get away with everything you did before. Just buy a couple extra domestics to nanny it.”

I laugh because he says it like a joke, but the image of Ellaine's daughter being led away by the castrated asset flashes through my mind and makes my stomach turn.

“Well, I won't keep you any longer,” Dillon says before I can find an appropriate response. “I can see that your Zero is popular tonight.”

It's on the tip of my tongue to stall him. I need to know if he'd be willing to sponsor me if I can't get the funds together. I can't spend another year in this place. I can't. I won't make it.

But I'm panicking and I know it. I haven't exhausted my other options yet. I haven't created a strong enough alliance with Dillon. Asking now would be a mistake. It would make me seem desperate. Even mentioning it in this setting would seem tactless.

I calm myself and respond, “I think only half that attention is due to him.”

“Incubus is very popular.”

“I can tell. Speaking of which, I hear congratulations are in order on another front. James tells me you've invested in his new expansion at The Line.”

Dillon waves a hand and says, “I just put the money into it. James is the one who did all the real work.”

“Still,” I respond, “it sounds like a big investment.”

Another enigmatic smile and he steps closer to me, until we're almost touching. His hand settles on my bare wrist, the warm skin of his palm laying heavily on my own flesh.

“I only gamble when I'm sure I'll win.” The fingers slip higher, dipping suggestively under the cuff of my shirt. “I'll be seeing you again,” he whispers, practically against my face.
Then he walks away from me, the skin of my arm still tingling from his touch. I can almost taste the tension in the air, and my ears are ringing with surprise.

What the hell was that?

But no answer is forthcoming, and I force myself to shake it off. I don't want anyone to notice me standing here looking puzzled, it won't do anything good for my credibility. I finish my drink in one shot, the strong liquor burning its way into my gut as I shake off the paralysis. I set the empty glass on a vacant table and move back toward my table.

Which is when I get the feeling that I'm being watched and glance around. It's Carter, the pleasure-asset Champion that I met at Dillon's hunt. Sun-glass covered eyes are pinned on me while he lounges on a beach chair, sipping on a tall glass of brightly colored liquid. He gestures to me and I hesitate, already unbalanced, before deciding that I can't turn down the invitation without being rude. I settle into the lounge chair next to him and he makes a gesture to one of the serving-assets. In another moment, I find myself holding my own hurricane glass of swirling orange and pink liquid. Ice clinks in the glass as I sip at the straw, my mouth filling with the taste of citrus fruits and an underlying tang of alcohol.

“I just love sitting by the pool with a mimosa,” he says, relaxing back in his chair. “The only thing that can make it better is good company.” I'm still off-balance enough that I don't have a ready answer for that, but he continues anyway. “I'm surprised that you've decided not to swim today.” He gestures at my outfit: a light cotton collar shirt and breezy but professional slacks. “I hear you made quite a stir last time.”

I went into the water last time I was here, naked and trying to garner some attention from the crowd of unknown owners. Now that I'm a little more established, I'm wondering how such displays affect my image. Last time, there had been a larger crowd and other owners in the water as well. Today, I would be the only one among the assets, and while it would certainly get me noticed, I'm not sure it's the kind of attention I want.

“I've had my hands full today,” I respond, gesturing back to my original table. Zero must have needed a break, because they've switched positions again. Now Incubus is sitting on the table, his legs dangling over the side, with Zero kneeling on the ground between his feet. I can see Incubus's large cock disappearing down Zero's throat, can hear Incubus's moans even from here. I really need to intervene soon and insist on letting both of them orgasm. They've been teasing each other for more than half an hour.

“Speaking of having your hands full,” he replies, pulling my attention back. “How did your meeting go with Ellaine?”

“I think it went well. She's an interesting woman.”

“Did she give you that scholarly asset that's been driving her mad?” he asks. I nod and he grins. “How's it going with him?”

“He's certainly been a challenge,” I admit.

“But?” he prods, looking at me over the rim of his sunglasses.

“But I've made some progress. He's at least conscious, if not obedient.”

“I knew it!” he exclaims, pulling his sunglasses off to share an unimpeded grin with me. “I told her it would just take a different touch to wake that one. She can be so stubborn at times.”
“I should thank you, I'm told that you intervened on my behalf as well.”

“It's nothing,” he replies casually. “Ellaine is a good friend, and I thought she would be the best person to help you out. I think you have a lot of promise here, and I'd like to help you gain some momentum. Starting out here can be a big adjustment, and I'd like to help in whatever way I can to get you settled.”

“That's very kind of you,” I reply. There's a beat of quiet as I try to think of something to say without sounding too formal, but I'm still off-balance from Dillon's unexpected gesture. Finally, I ask, “Was it difficult for you to make the transition?”

He hesitates, and I can tell from his stillness that I've taken him by surprise. I'm just starting to regret asking when he responds, his voice contemplative.

“It wasn't such an abrupt transition for me,” he says, his eyes peering across the water. “My family has been tied up in this kind of venture going back generations, so I never had to acclimate lifestyle.”

I hesitate again. I just can't seem to find my footing tonight. Generations? That can't be true.

He must see my puzzled look, because he smiles and says, “This technology is new, but the practice actually dates back to the start of civilization. There's nothing modern about human trafficking, and my family has participated in the many facets of it stretching all the way back to our days on Earth.”

My heart-rate slows a bit. Of course. I should have realized.

“I suppose,” he continues, rocking the liquid in his glass until the colors have melded into a dull orange, “that I grew up in this. It was always expected that I would become an owner once I came of age. My father helped bring in the first shipment of assets, did you know that?”

“I... can't say that I did.”

“Mm,” he acknowledges. “Pleasure assets.”

I have a brief bio on Carter Powers - I know that his father died several years ago, leaving behind a wealthy widow and a young son. There is little information on Carter’s activities, likely shielded by his mother’s wealth and influence. The same cannot be said for his father, who was a black-market entrepreneur. The information I have says that he rose from obscurity and married into wealth. Knowing that he brought in and sold pleasure assets for the Leash creates a clearer picture of how those tasks were accomplished.

“Oh,” I respond, my brow wrinkling in confusion. “But then…”

“Shouldn’t I be the pleasure asset Dealer? I’m afraid it doesn’t work like that. The Controller chooses Dealers, it isn’t passed down through a lineage.”

That’s an interesting tidbit. So the Controller has power even over the Dealers and his inner circle.

“I just thought… With Petir being Vikram’s uncle…”

“Well,” he says with a crisp smile, “I’m sure there’s something to be said for Dealers who are already trained in their field. Vikram already knew everything about running the Arena. It was probably easier just to let him take over. And people naturally look to family member to get involved in their business - I’d be surprised if Ellaine didn’t groom her daughter to take over the scholarly asset dealing, but the girl will still have to earn the place on her own merit.”
And Carter… didn’t earn that place. Or perhaps Reynard, the current pleasure Dealer, was simply a more appealing alliance for the Controller to choose. Still, where does that leave Carter’s standing? He’s a Champion, after all, but could he still be out of favor with the Controller? Or is he still angry over the slight? Over the fact that he was not chosen to carry on his father’s legacy?

“It seems,” I say carefully, “like you would have been a good choice for the pleasure asset Dealer. You’re certainly skilled, considering how young you are to be a Champion.”

He laughs, and it’s not the reaction I was hoping for. He’d be a valuable ally if he were to be resentful of the Controller’s choice. If he were bitter enough to give me the information I’m after.

“I’ve no interest in spending all my time babysitting a harem of vapid, unskilled slaves. I much prefer to finely craft a single asset into perfection. I’ve little interest in following in my father’s footsteps - I’d prefer to find my own path. Perhaps we have that in common?”

“I suppose,” I agree, careful to keep my tone neutral so as not to reveal my disappointment.

I will have to keep a closer eye on Carter. Pursue a friendship. He seems well-versed in this society, although he lacks the influence I’m looking for. Compared to Dillon, who is constantly networking and investing in the infrastructure of the Leash, Carter seems more like an observer. His indifferent attitude will make him more difficult to manipulate than Dillon, and I don’t know if he even has the standing to get me close to the Controller. Still, he could prove to be a valuable ally if Dillon’s interest in me cools.

Carter finishes his drink with a long, last sip and moves to stand. I follow suit, feeling like I might have missed my chance to ingratiate myself. However, he smiles in a placid way and shakes my hand. As though reading my thoughts, he says, “It was nice speaking with you. I’d like meet up again in less public surroundings. Shall I message you?”

“I’ll be looking forward to it,” I respond easily, trying to keep the relief from my voice. His smile broadens into a pleased grin before he puts his sunglasses back on and turns toward the bar. I take my chance to head back toward my own asset, still at the table with Leo and Peterson, a small group of other owners milling around the edges.

The scene that I’m greeted with is... not what I’d been hoping for. Both the assets are gone from the table, and instead someone has brought out a small vial and a liquid dropper. It’s likely a substance called Angel Tears, a mildly addictive narcotic often used as a recreational drug. I curse myself – I should have realized. I’d seen several people at Dillon’s party who appeared to be inebriated, although it was difficult to differentiate between the ones using alcohol and the ones using other narcotic substances.

There can be no mistake today, with the bright lighting in this room and the source sitting openly on the table. Leo sees me first and turns to me with a somewhat vacant expression. One of his pupils is larger than the other, a typical symptom of the drug, which causes temporary vision impairment severe enough that it is usually only administered to one eye. He waves at me and lists a bit to the side. He must have had several drops – from my own experience, the drug tends to be fairly mild if taken in small doses.

Reynard has joined the crowd, the narrow-faced owner of this establishment surveying his domain with casual interest. I assume that he produced the drug. Despite being illegal on most Satellites, I am aware that it is readily available on Red Seven, which obviously has no qualms about supplying the dangerous and possibly deadly substance.

“Does anyone else want a hit?” Peterson asks, and I notice that one of his pupils is enlarged as
well, although his words seem clear and his expression is not as vacant as Leo’s. He also has Incubus in his lap, facing him. From the position, I have to assume that Incubus is riding Peterson's cock, although I'm blocked from actually seeing it because of the angle.

Incubus casts a desperate, longing look over his shoulder. I feel a pang of sympathy for him, despite the worrisome gesture. I’ve been where he is, in some ways. Given my looks, many of my previous operations had me going undercover as a prostitute, sometimes taking clients and performing sexual acts to get closer to my target. I understand the desperation felt in that kind of situation, pushing your body to the limit, knowing that you have very little control of the situation – in his case, none at all. I can't blame him for wanting to dull the sensations for what will likely be a long evening of accepting unlimited sexual acts.

“How about you?” Peterson offers.

“Mm, I don’t think so.” It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve used Angel Tears, but it’s been long enough that my tolerance is questionable. I usually take minuscule doses of any narcotics that I think I might encounter on a mission, but the length and uncertainty of this mission made that impossible. There are a hundred other drugs that could have shown up here tonight, not to mention custom made or custom mixed drugs. I'm not inherently averse to putting substances in my body, as it is a necessary risk in my line of work. Still, it doesn't seem advantageous at this point.

“Come on, I've already paid for the bottle,” Peterson teases. Angel Tears isn't cheap – he must be trying to show off some of the expected windfall from his new venture.

“Incubus seems interested,” I deflect, moving closer to the asset. “Could I give him a hit?”

Incubus casts an eager but wary look over his shoulder. Peterson gives a shrug.

“Sure,” Peterson says. “It might loosen him up.” And he rocks his hips in a suggestive manner.

I pick up the vial and measure out a careful amount of the clear liquid. It's a small dose – enough to take the edge off without making him sloppy or confused. I move around the side of the table until I'm beside the seated pair. Before I can move further, Incubus leans back in a graceful arch, turning and contorting his body until his head brushes against my torso. He looks at me upside-down, his deep, violet eyes meeting my own. This time, I'm better prepared for the stab of guilt I feel, and I don't flinch away from him. I use my left hand to brace his head, feeling the thick, plaited hair against my fingers like a pillow. The other hand goes to his face, and I use my smallest finger to hold his bottom lid while I squeeze a drop into his eye. He doesn't blink until the drop hits, confirming my suspicion that he's had plenty of experience with this drug. He flutters his lashes against the strange sensation, then grins before sitting back up.

I'm putting the vial back on the table when I hear Leo say, “What about the zero?” in a slightly slurred voice.

“How much do you think it would take to make your pleasure asset unwind?”

Zero is on the ground kneeling in a pleasure-asset pose, his back arched and his body on display. Presumably, he settled there after Incubus was pulled away, yielding the table for the new pass time. I force myself not to look at him.

“I don't know if that's wise,” I reply, trying to keep my tone neutral and contemplative when I'm actually feeling revolted by the idea. “I don't know how he’ll react. He could hurt someone.”
“Nonsense,” Dillon chimes in, and I jerk my head up to find him leaning against one of the pillars, watching the scene unfold. “You can always use the chip to control him. I don't care what gossip says about zero’s, he's still just a man.”

Damn. Now that I know Dillon is watching, I'll have to be more cautious. This could be some kind of test. So far, I haven't been asked to do anything extreme – and even this isn't far out of ordinary levels of deviant behavior. Perhaps they’re seeing how I'll react if they up the stakes?

I glance around, feeling the pressure of the expectant crowd. Dillon leans against a pillar, his dark gaze appraising. Carter is also watching, now standing closer, possibly attracted by the gathered crowd. He holds his glasses, his fingers fiddling with the frames as his blue-green eyes contemplate the situation I've been placed in. Sitting on the other side of the table, Leo seems excited, unaware of the stress I'm under. Peterson, with Incubus now stilled on his lap, stares at me expectantly.

“Perhaps you're right,” I acknowledge, and take the vial to stand in front of my kneeling slave. Zero does not look alarmed. He watches as I approach him, his features showing a bit of trepidation but no real fear. Zero is neither stupid nor unobservant. He is well aware of what we've been discussing. However, as his almost-black metallic eyes look at me, the strongest emotion I find there is trust. If this is what I choose, Zero will submit.

And it would be a gross violation of his trust to drug him like this. The drugs would not make Zero relax. It’s likely he would panic as the iron-fisted control he holds on himself is ebbed away. His senses would be dulled, his thoughts slowed. Likely he would see a threat at every angle, and no way to defend against it.

But how can I cover my unwillingness to subject my asset to such torment? How do I make them believe that I'm interested only in my own selfish needs, and not that I care about the man in front of me?

I lean over Zero, and he obligingly tilts his head to give me better access. My hand cups the back of his head; soft, short hairs tickle my palm. The other hand holds the dropper, and I move it in front of Zero's face. His eyes focus on the clear glass, and I see a hint of apprehension steal through his expression.

And then I pause.

“No,” I say contemptuously, giving my expression a bit of a sneer as I pull away. “On second thought, you haven't done anything to deserve a reward like this.”

I raise the dropper to my own eye. Zero does flinch then, jumping in surprise as I let the first drop fall. I ignore him, focusing on my timing. As the first drop falls, I blink quickly, letting the drop hit my eyelid instead of making contact with my eye. I blink several times to conceal the fact that the first drop missed. The same for the second drop. The third, I let hit its target, knowing that I'll garner suspicion if my pupil doesn't dilate. I blink against the numbing sensation that falls over my eye and the burning feeling around the edges.

Then I put the vial aside.

There's a moment where the lapping of water in the center pool is the only sound.

Then Dillon laughs, and it breaks the silence.

“Unexpected,” he says, moving away from the pillar, “but I have to give you credit for style.”
He then takes the vial from the table, puts three drops into his own eye, and blinks as he sets the bottle back on the table. He gives me a smile and taps Peterson on the shoulder as he passes.

“Don't work him too hard,” Dillon cautions Peterson, indicating Incubus, who is once again bouncing on Peterson's cock.

Things go a little fuzzy after that.

Apparently, either my tolerance is lower than I expected, or this batch of Angel Tears is significantly stronger. It hits my brain like a swirl of color, with everything becoming brighter and more intense. My thoughts become disjointed, tumbling around my head, unable to settle or steady out.

Suddenly, I'm sitting at the table, laughing with Leo over a joke that I already can't remember. Then Zero is between my legs, his warm mouth wrapped around my shaft, my shirt missing and my pants open. Leo is beside me, his bodyguard/pleasure asset bent over the table. Leo is thrusting with abandon, his fake glasses forgotten somewhere on the floor. I glance around. Several other owners are in various stages of using their assets. Peterson has Incubus pinned against one of the columns, his long legs wrapped around Peterson's waist, his bare back sliding against the stone behind him.

Then Zero moans around my cock, and my attention narrows to him and the clever tricks his mouth is performing. I tangle my fingers in his short, dark hair and ride out the sensation. Pleasure builds between my legs and I moan, throwing my head back. Zero takes me to the root and swallows, the muscles of his throat constricting around my cock. His fingers roll my testicles, gently tugging at the sack. He gives another hard suck on my length, and then I'm coming, pouring hot seed down his throat. He swallows, pulling back only enough that he doesn't choke on it. Licks me clean when I sag in post-orgasmic pleasure.

Leo comes a few moments later, diving his cock deep into his larger asset. He settles back to his chair, and we sloppily fix our clothes. More drinks are brought to us. At some point, soft music begins to play. The crowd begins to thin. Eventually, Zero nudges my thigh and I get to my feet. Dillon bids me farewell with a casual wave, appearing to be in a heated discussion with Reynard. I don't see Peterson again. I cast a glance around the room before we exit, but there's no sign of Incubus either.

In the cockpit, everything quiets until it's almost muted, like moving through water. Zero helps me to the copilot chair, even though I'm in no shape to be of any help with piloting. He takes a moment to put on some pants before he takes over the pilot's chair and maneuvers the jump-ship away from Red Seven's docking area. There's some turbulence as we exit and I lay my head back, letting my eyes fall closed. I drift a bit, not quite asleep but not fully awake, trusting Zero to get us home.

We move into open space, where Zero no longer needs to focus on piloting. I feel him shift his attention to me, but I ignore it. I hear him moving in his seat, turning toward me.

“You shouldn't have done that,” Zero growls despite my lack of acknowledgement. “That was foolish. Reckless.”

“Mmm.”

“I would have been fine.”

“Mmm,” I agree again.

“You should have given me the drugs.”
“No,” I reply softly, forcing my eyes to open.

I glance at Zero, who's staring at me with a mix of anger and worry.

“I was the logical choice,” he grinds out. “You should have risked me.”

My clumsy fingers find the buckle of the belt holding me to my seat. In open space, where the ship's instruments do most of the flying, the caution is fairly unnecessary. Any unexpected collision strong enough to jostle the ship would likely destroy the craft. Still, Zero frowns as I unbuckle myself and stand on unsteady legs. I wobble as I cross the space between the two seats, and Zero jerks in surprise when I drop to my knees. He settles when I push his armrest aside and lay my head in his lap. My arms drape across his thighs. My face presses against the bare skin of his stomach, and I breathe deep, trying to find the scent of Zero under the smells of acrid sweat and stale alcohol.

“No,” I deny softly against his skin. “Never you.”

There's a brief pause where he sits quiet and still under me, the rise and fall of his chest the only movement I can sense. Finally, his fingers move to my temple, tracing my long locks down to my shoulder.

“Why do you always do this to me?” he asks in a whisper. It seems like a rhetorical question, so I let my eyes stay closed, focusing on Zero's fingers stroking through my hair and ignoring the dizzy, spinning feeling in my head. “Why do you have to make me feel like this?”

If Zero gets an answer, I'm asleep before he finds it.
I sleep a solid ten hours after we get back. I don't remember getting into bed, although I obviously do because that's where I wake up. I'm naked and still reeking of alcohol and sex when I open my eyes and take in my surroundings. I turn my attention inward and find that I don't feel too bad, all things considered. A bit hungover, perhaps, but likely more from the drink than the drugs. Despite being more potent than usual, Angel Tears is actually a pretty mild narcotic, with limited after-effects and lower addictive properties than other drugs. Still not something that I'd want to risk exposing myself to on a regular basis, but given my situation it's probably the least objectionable option.

Even with the hangover, I feel better than I have in weeks. Ten hours of uninterrupted sleep is something I haven't indulged in since before the mission. Recently I've been getting a scant few hours before I find myself awake and restless, exhausted by morning. I know stress is the main culprit, and it's only gotten worse since Kip took ill. There's a yawning chasm where my blonde asset should be, and it's all the more evident when I lay down to sleep. I know Zero feels it too, and his worry only compounds my own when I make him leave Kip's side to rest with me. Even knowing that Kip is recovering has not relieved my sense of unease.

I force myself to get up and shower, brush my teeth, untangle my hair. I take a swim, partially to loosen up stiff muscles, and partially because I haven't been as disciplined with my exercise routine lately. My body is one of the tools I use to my advantage, and I need every advantage I can get as I delve deeper into the Leash and its machinations.

It's late afternoon by the time I finish up. Bathing and exercising sapped all of my energy, so maybe I'm not quite as unaffected by last night as I thought. I find myself wishing for a nap, but there's simply too much on my plate for the day. I should probably check in with my corporate fund manager, although by this point I've pretty much accepted that I'm not going to get the money for the entrance to the Competition out of my business dividends. And selling my stock in the company will take too long and be too out of character. That leaves me with trying to sell some personal items to come up with the funds Smuggling them off-world would be an easy solution, as Earth-originated items are much more valuable and have a higher demand in space, but I don't think the Department will agree to overlook my sneaking. The export taxes make it useless to sell through legal channels, as they would eat virtually all of the profit. If all else fails, I will try find an investor among already-established owners. More and more, that's seeming like the most likely solution, if also the most risky.
I try to put all of that from my mind as I enter the medbay to check in on Kip, who's been more awake and lucid as of late. My mood plummets when I step inside to find him weeping softly, his hands cupped over his bandaged eyes. Lee is standing beside him, speaking in hushed tones, his hands hovering awkwardly without actually touching Kip.

I pause in the doorway, startled and unsure of how to intervene. Lee catches my entrance, glances up, and shoots me an irritated look. His hair is caught up in a tail, making his face look more severe, his brown eyes more stern. The black medical scrubs that he wears look painfully similar to a martial arts uniform, and I'm reminded again that angering this man or endangering his patients could be a dangerous gamble. I'm not sure what I've done this time, but I take a wary step back as he moves to intercept me.

“What happened?” I ask in a whisper, not sure if my presence will improve or worsen Kip's state.

“Exactly what I told you would happen,” he responds, his voice terse. “He has regained enough lucidity to ask the obvious question.”

The question being, “Why can’t I see?”

“What did you tell him?” I ask quickly, wondering how much of this situation I can salvage. I see Lee’s countenance go from irritated to irate and I realize that he misinterpreted the question.

“I told him the truth!” Lee snarls. “I won't lie to a patient, even through omission!”

“I didn't mean it like that!” I defend. “I just...” and then I let it trail, because it doesn’t matter what I had intended. I put it off, and Lee was left to deal with the consequences. I should have been here to comfort and reassure Kip. It was my responsibility, and I let my guilt convince me to delay. I should have dealt with this before I left.

I take a second to breathe and regain my composure. Kip is the important one right now, the one still fragile and hurting. Another steadying breath and I can finally meet Lee's even gaze, his own temper having cooled in the interim.

“You're right. I should have talked to Kip about this earlier. I should have been here for him, and my own choices prevented me. It was my mistake.”

Lee inclines his head slightly, an acknowledgment without any condemnation, then says, “He really is recovering quickly, given the length and severity of his illness. We had a good day today, right up until the last few minutes. I took the IV out as he's had no trouble keeping down fluids or solids. He even got up and walked a bit. But he's still fragile, and this kind of upset isn’t good for his recovery.”

I glance at Kip's still-shaking form and think that “upset” is an understatement. Alone in the narrow bed, Kip seems to radiate misery. His skin seems almost as white as the sheets tangling his legs, with only his yellow hair standing out among the pale colors. He looks so fragile and alone.

Seeing his pain grounds me. I suddenly find my balance, even in Lee's domain. There can be no room for uncertainty, not when one of my assets need me.

“Is there any reason he needs to stay here?” I wonder, meeting Lee's gaze with my own. If he notices the change in my demeanor, he does not back down from it.

Lee throws a glance at Kip, his gaze considering. He hesitates, but it seems more to give himself time to think than any uncertainty. When his gaze turns back to me, it's got a calculating look to it. Like he's trying to decide what the best answer is for his patient, and what he needs to tell me to get
the best results.

“There's nothing left to tether him to this room,” Lee admits, “although I would like to keep him under observation...”

“Then observe,” I cut him off, moving past him to Kip's quietly sobbing form.

On the bed, Kip has curled on his side, his back to me, his face now hidden in his arms. He's on top of the covers, his legs tangled in the white sheets, his feet bare and pale, their color of little contrast to the plain bedclothes. He's wearing some kind of hospital shift that's fallen open in the back, revealing a dark bruise at the base of his spine. It's lingering evidence of the procedure that saved Kip's life, and reminds me of the debt that I owe to Lee. My fingers ache to brush over the marred skin, to soothe the ache there in whatever small way I can. Above the splotchy bruise, I can practically count the vertebrae going up his spine. Sometimes it's hard to remember that he's getting better, that he's starting to recover despite all the ground he's lost.

“Kip,” I call gently. He starts at my voice, too distracted by his misery to notice my approach, even though I carefully make my footfalls loud enough to be heard over his soft sobs.

“Master Zeke,” he says breathlessly, his voice trembling as he tries to get control of himself. “I'm sorry...”

I don't let him get started with the apologies. My hand touches his shoulder in warning, then slips behind his back. My other arm goes under his knees and then I lift him easily. Too easily. Worryingly easily, given that he's a full grown man. I shove that thought aside as his arms wrap around my neck. He makes a noise of surprise, but doesn't seem particularly frightened. This isn't the first time I've carried him, although I'm not sure he consciously remembers the last time. It had been right after he'd been transferred, when he'd been sick the first time.

If I'd known what was wrong then, could I have stopped all of this from happening? If I'd watched a little closer, if I'd been a little more careful? Could I have prevented the spirited person I met from becoming the quaking body in my arms? Does this fall on me, as another failure in a long line of them?

But he's alive, so there's still time for me to rectify my mistakes. I won't fail him again. I can't. He won't survive another trauma like this, and I... I can't imagine going on without him.

I take Kip out of the medbay. Lee trails behind us, worry fighting with righteous fury for dominance in his expression, but eventually concern wins out. He falls into step beside me, his jaw clenched but unwilling to start an argument with Kip in my arms. Kip hides his face in my shirt, his panting breaths hot against my chest as he tries to get his emotions under control. I ride it out with him, knowing that he has to get it out of his system, knowing too that this is unlikely to be the last of the tears I face tonight.

I take him all the way to the top floor. The suite that I've claimed as my own there isn't as cozy as the captain's quarters that I previously shared with Kip and Zero, but it does contain a massive shower, and that's what I'm interested in at the moment. I'd prefer a bath, but I don't want to disorient Kip any more than he already is. I'm also not sure if it's a good idea to submerge the wound on his back yet, although I'm fairly certain Lee would warn me if any of my actions seemed truly harmful. I suppose his vaguely disapproving silence is the most support I'm going to get as I take Kip into the bathroom and then the shower.

I set Kip on his feet, and he has to lean against the wall as I remove his shift and then quickly shrug out of my own clothes.
“Do you know where you are?” I ask before I turn on the water.

“No,” Kip responds, his voice weak and wet.

I tsk and lay my hand over his where it rests against the irregular surface of the rock wall.

“Think about it,” I chide, stepping behind him. I put an arm around his waist for support, taking some of the weight from his unsteady legs. “You know this ship better than anyone. What do you feel?”

He pauses thoughtfully, his tears all but forgotten as he focuses on the puzzle at hand. He cocks his head to the side, and there’s a tiredness in his expression, but I can also see a clarity there. He’s had too much time lately to focus on himself, too much time looking inward and wallowing in his own pain. Kip does not have a personality suited to dwelling. He needs to bulldoze forward, to keep going no matter what. For all Lee’s medical knowledge and skilled care, he’s overlooked that fundamental aspect of Kip’s well-being.

“Cold walls,” Kip says, his fingers thoughtfully tracing the surface. “Pebbled and uneven. Tiles under my feet. Humid. Lingering scent of your shampoo.” He hesitates, then says, “We’re in the in the shower? The one in the Master suite?”

“Mm-hm,” I confirm, pulling him closer as I tap the wall panel and start the water. “You're not helpless, even like this,” I remind him. “Don't give up on yourself. No one else has.”

“They should,” he says, and there's a sullen undertone that's unusual for him. Of course, long-term illness and heavy sedation can alter even the strongest of personalities. “I'm useless now.”

“Don't you dare!” I snap, and the harshness of my voice makes him jump and try to pull away, but he’s too weak. “Do not lessen yourself or what you've gone through. You have survived. You will continue to recover and grow stronger.”

“And if my eyes never heal?” he snarls back. “What then?”

“Then you will learn to function without your sight,” I respond evenly, giving no ground. “Of all my assets, you have the strongest will. You will persevere over any obstacle.”

“Even this?” he wails, his voice disbelieving.

“Even this,” I return, my voice certain. “You're stronger than you give yourself credit for.”

“I feel so weak,” he admits, and it's like all the anger has drained out of him. He sags in my arms. “Pathetic.”

“Never,” I respond. “A lesser man would have died. You lived. You're recovering still. I have no doubt that you will continue to improve.”

“My body,” he says, and it's a hollow whisper. His hand reaches toward his face, his fingers hovering just in front of his right eye. “But not my...”

“We don’t know yet,” I tell him gently, capturing his hand in my own. I pull him closer, turning him toward me, and let him press his cheek against my bare chest. “There are some things even I cannot give you.”

He lets out a muffled sob and I don't try to stop him. The warm steam of the water gathers on our skin, and his tears join with the precipitation. I let him mourn something lost that might never return. I
try not to let myself be overcome by his grief, knowing that I need to be strong for him. It is not an easy thing to do, knowing how close we came, knowing how much further we have left to go. If a few of my own tears joining Kip's under the cover of the warm spray, I doubt he notices.

The release is good for him, and when he finally settles there's an air of lethargy that has pushed away the misery that surrounded him like a cloud. I gently propel him under the spray. The white, cotton bandages that cover his eyes soak through immediately, but I'm not concerned. I've been assured that there is no external damage to his eyes, that the bandages only keep him from straining still-healing muscles and tissue. If I could trust him not to peek, I would remove them entirely. Unfortunately, I'm fairly certain that the temptation would be too much for Kip.

Despite the soggy wrappings around his head, Kip seems to luxuriate in the water. He makes an audible noise of relief, turning his body so that the warm water runs down his neck and chest. Kip was always fastidious, so the long convalescence without bathing must have been maddening.

Kip seems steady on his feet, so I move to retrieve a cloth from just beyond the shower. I find Lee waiting on the other side of the lip that divides the room-sized shower from the rest of the bathroom, a rag in one hand and a plain white bottle in the other. I have to admit that I'd forgotten about him altogether, and that I'm a bit startled by his continued presence. He hands me the bottle, and I find that I don't recognize it. Did he return to the medbay to get it? I open the top and sniff it, finding no scent to the clear gel within.

“It's medical soap,” Lee says, and there's an obviously in his tone that goes unspoken. “He's at high risk for infections, and scented soap could make him nauseous right now. Hair and body both, but try to keep the soap from getting under his bandages. I'll be in the other room when you finish.”

Then without waiting for a dismissal, he turns on his heel and leaves. I watch him go, a rueful smile playing on my lips. Sometimes he makes me question who commands whom. It's a nice change of pace.

I don't want to leave Kip for long, so I turn back to him a moment later. He's leaning against the wall again, and it's a testament to how weak he is that he can't even stay on his feet for more than a few moments at a time. I pad closer, just in case the weakness overcomes him and I need to arrest a fall, and then pause. He seems oblivious to my presence, facing the opposite wall and obviously enjoying the water that still streams over him. I don't want to risk startling him, especially since he's still adjusting to his sightless state.

“I'm going to help you wash,” I let him know, both an offer and a warning. His head turns in my direction, acknowledging my presence although his eyes would be staring somewhere over my left shoulder. I touch his arm before moving into his space, and he turns to give me access to his back. It dawns on me, as I run the cloth across the pale expanse of his skin, that I should probably make him wash himself. That if part of his recovery is forcing him to be self-reliant again, then washing himself would be a good way to start. Still, my hand doesn't waver, running down his sides and across his lean thighs. He makes a noise of appreciation as my hand roves back up to his shoulders, and I take a moment to gently massage the tender joints. It eases something in me, to be able to care for him. For so long now, I've only been able to watch him struggle while Lee does all the work. Even if Kip is the one still healing, this feels therapeutic for both of us.

By the time I've finished washing him, Kip is wavering on his feet. I'll admit that I took longer than strictly necessary, since Kip seemed to be enjoying the feel of the water and my careful touches. With only his hair left to wash, I let him lean heavily against me, his back to my chest, tilting his head against my shoulder as I endeavor to support his weight with one arm and wash his hair with the other. He doesn't complain, although he also doesn't try to assist. I think he might just be too tired to
lift his arms, and I have a feeling that his eyes would be shut at this point even without the blindfold. I manage to thoroughly soak the bandages around his eyes, but I keep the soap away from his face and his hair gets marginally cleaner. Once I've washed away the last of the suds, I give up on keeping him standing and simply lift him into my arms. His head lolls against my chest as we exit the shower, his body limp.

I set him on his feet by the sink, letting him use the countertop to hold himself up. I step away to grab towels from the closet and take a moment to wrap one around my waist. When I look back, Kip is leaning on the counter with both hands, and still he seems to be wavering uncertainly. He takes a staggering step to the side before I can get back to him, and I just barely manage to wrap an arm around him before he topples over.

“Are you alright?” I ask, concern evident in my voice.

“I'm fine!” he protests, but his hands clinging to my biceps reveal the lie. More softly, he admits, “Just... dizzy.”

“A side-effect of the medicines you're on,” comes Lee's voice from the doorway. “Also, this is the longest you've been on your feet in over a week. You're pushing too fast.”

“Doesn't feel very fast,” Kip replies sullenly. “Feels like I've been sleeping for ages.”

“Your body needs rest,” Lee replies. His tone is strained, like this is an old argument. Now that Kip's starting to recover, it's no surprise that Lee is having trouble getting my energetic asset to stay still. Kip was always industrious, even to his own detriment.

And I know from long experience that arguing with him will get you nowhere.

With that thought in mind, I sweep him into my arms again, towels forgotten. He makes a noise of surprise and protest, but I think it's mostly to save face in the argument. He doesn't struggle, although it's possible that he's simply too tired. I carry him into the bedroom and put his damp form on the end of the bed, then turn to go retrieve the towels only to find that Lee has brought them behind me. I wrap a fluffy towel around Kip's shoulders to keep his hair from dripping. The comforter ends up absorbing most of the water from his body. Kip tries to stand, but gives a strangled moan and flops back to the bed.

“Get behind him,” Lee orders. “Give him something to lean against.” I obey without question, understanding that we're once again in his area of expertise.

Kip leans heavily on me when I sit him up. He makes a sick-sounding noise, and I have a moment to worry about nausea and its effects on my duvet before Lee is there with a cap full of a thick, purplish liquid. He feeds it to Kip, who makes a louder noise of protest but must be used to this kind of treatment, because he swallows the liquid.

“I would have given you this before the ill-advised trip upstairs,” Lee says, a note of rebuke in his voice as he eyes me, “had I been made aware of the full extent of the plans.”

I nod, understanding the chastisement and accepting it. I am unused to justifying my actions when it comes to Zero and Kip. It had not struck me to consult Lee, although in retrospect it would have been wise.

“That's vile,” Kip complains, still swallowing against the taste.

“It will settle your stomach immediately,” Lee promises, and already Kip is seeming a little better. Lee reaches to the side table and retrieves a glass of water, letting Kip carefully sip at it. I notice that
Lee has brought several things with him, more than just the water and the medicine. Lee puts the water aside and retrieves a pair of scissors. He warns, “Stay still, I need to cut away those wet bandages,” before carefully slicing through the cotton material. “Keep your eyes closed,” he warns, then pulls away the sodden pieces.

I lean over Kip's shoulder, anxious to get a glance at his full face. There's nothing to see, though. Simply his pale, hollow-cheeked face, eyes closed, brow furrowed in a frown. His eyes are bruised, but no more than a few days without sleep would cause. I'd expected to feel at least a portion of the same horror that I experienced on the night he seized, as though that moment could bleed into his countenance. But he only looks pale and ill, skinnier than I've seen him in the past but not as sick.

Oblivious to my turmoil, Lee makes short work of placing new cotton pads over Kip's eyes, then securing them with a cotton swathe around his head. His eyes are only uncovered for a few seconds, hardly enough time to tempt him to peak.

Bandages reset, I move aside, willing to let Kip lie back down and sleep in a more familiar bed. He surprises me, though, by levering himself up into a half-sitting position.

“Do I...” he starts, then trails uncertainly. He finds his determination and asks, “Do I have to go back to the medbay?”

I hold myself back from responding, leaving it to Lee, who casts a casual glance over his shoulder as he cleans up his supplies.

“There's no need,” Lee answers. “You're stable enough now that you don't need constant supervision, and I can bring your meds to you. Assuming you don't do anything foolish,” he says warningly, shooting a glare at me that Kip is unaware of, “then you shouldn't need to come down to the medbay for anything other than progress checks.”

“Good,” Kip sighs, then suddenly straightens, the slightest bit of pink dotting his cheeks, just under the bandages. “I didn't mean-”

“I understand,” Lee cuts him off. “I'm sure the bed here is far more comfortable than the medical cots.”

Which reminds me that I really need to work on getting Lee out of the medbay and into a room of his own. I understand that he didn't trust me at first and wanted to have his own space away from the rest of the group, but certainly by this point he should be ready to concede to moving into a better room? An actual room, if nothing else, given that the medbay isn't set up for long-term occupancy. He can't keep sleeping in the spare cot.

“The dizzy spells will continue for some time,” Lee continues, and I tuck my previous thought away for later. “So be careful when you stand. Make sure to have support close by. I'll let you settle in and then check on you later on.”

“Thank you,” Kip says warmly, ever polite.

“It is my honor,” Lee responds, and there's a formal tone to it that makes me think it might be a traditional response in his culture. He gives me a short bow, then turns and exits the room.

“Let's get you settled,” I tell Kip as Lee retreats, then help the pale blonde move to the head of the bed, tossing aside the comforter and letting him slide between the silken sheets beneath. He stretches, his fingers grazing the headboard, his toes pointed at the foot of the bed. His torso pulls taut, showing the outline of his ribs, the narrow concave of his stomach. He seems unconcerned with his own
nudity, something Kip is not typically known for. His small cock lays nestled between his twined legs, bare except for a dusting of blonde hairs on his thighs. Pubic hair, as I've been told, is not acceptable for a domestic or pleasure asset, and Kip's has been gone for some time.

I settle beside him and ask, “Has your stomach settled?” as I gently push a few stray strands of blonde hair away from his face.

“I feel much better,” he admits, then bites his lip. His hand flutters to his face and he says, “If only...”

“Don't,” I admonish, taking his hand in my own. “All you can do is rest and heal. There's no need to worry about something you can't control.”

“How can I stop?” he asks me, an undertone of desperation in his voice. I have no answer, though, and so can make no response. Instead, I lean forward and kiss him gently on the forehead. He takes a sharp breath, but then his arms come around me and he leans into my touch. He tilts his head back expectantly, and I press a chaste kiss against his lips. It's not unexpected – we've been lovers in the past, when Kip spent months acting as my pleasure asset.

Then his hands come to my shoulders and he pulls me down, the kiss suddenly becoming more aggressive. Kip has always been wary of sexual contact from me, practically frightened of it. For him to be the aggressor...

I hear a startled intake of breath that doesn't come from either of us, and I glance up quickly. Zero wouldn't be surprised to find us like this, and the other two are unlikely to trespass into my rooms. That leaves Lee, standing awkwardly in the middle of the room, his mouth agape. Color rises to his cheeks and I see him working himself into a frothing rage, but I hold up a placating hand. He bites down on the anger. I raise an eyebrow in question, and he flicks his eyes toward the nightstand, where the medical wraps and gauze are still sitting. I can only surmise that he forgot them and returned at the worst possible time.

The entire exchange happens in only a few heartbeats, completely silent through cues and body-language. Kip is unaware of Lee's return, although he does sense my hesitancy.

“Master?” he asks, his voice soft and uncertain.

“What... is this?” I ask, trying to keep my voice low and gentle. Kip hunches his shoulders, taking my question for a rejection.

“Sorry,” he whispers. “I'm sorry...”

“Don't be sorry,” I tell him more firmly. “Just... explain.”

“I...” He hesitates and takes a shaky breath. “I just want to...” he trails again, unable to finish.

“You don't owe me anything,” I tell him carefully, afraid of where this line of thought might be leading. “I won't take your body as payment for my care.”

“No!” he denies, and makes a frustrated noise. “I just want to feel something,” he emphasizes, his tone plaintive. “I want to stop thinking about this!” He gestures to his face, to his still-covered eyes, the source of my worry and his stress. I hear his breath catch in a hiccupping sob, and I know I have to get that cut off before he ends up a weeping mess again. The last thing Kip needs is to succumb to more hysterics.

“Stop,” I soothe, cradling his face in my hands and kissing his mouth again. “Shh, calm down. I'll
give you what you want. I just had to make sure that you wanted it, that you weren't trying some misguided attempt to repay me.”

Kip shakes his head in silent denial, but the distress eases and he tilts his face to encourage another kiss. I oblige, still keeping it gentle and mild. When Kip opens his mouth to me, I allow the kiss to deepen, swiping my tongue along his bottom lip, tasting the chemical sweetness lingering on his palate from the drugs Lee has been giving him.

If Kip wants to vent his pain through pleasure, it's certainly a request I can fulfill.

I slide down Kip's body, leaving slow, lingering kisses as I go. From the corner of my eye, I see Lee step closer again, but he pauses when I gesture for him to stop. Lee might know my assets physically, but he's going to have to trust me to take care of them mentally. I look away from Kip and meet Lee's gaze. I expect to see anger, but his expression speaks more of alarm than rage. Brown eyes lock with my own and I refuse to waver, holding my resolve. I mouth, “Trust me,” at the Asian man, and am relieved to see him relax. He nods once and steps back, but makes no move to exit the room. He doesn't trust me enough to leave us unsupervised, then. I suppose it's a good thing that Kip can't see, or he'd likely be too embarrassed to continue.

“Master Zeke?” comes Kip's voice, soft and hesitant. There's an underlying note of uncertainty that lets me know he's worried I've changed my mind.

“Shift down for me,” I instruct, guiding him until he's laying flat on the bed. “Just relax.”

It hasn't escaped my notice that Kip is not aroused, nor am I naive enough to think that the drugs in his system will have no effect on his libido. Slowly, I slide my way down his body, laying kisses on porcelain skin as I pass. His legs splay open at my touch, eager despite the lack of response from the organ nestled between. I settle myself between his thighs, my face level with his pelvis.

His cock is small and just as pale as the rest of him, limp and dangling between his spread legs. Even when erect, Kip is not large, but it's strange to see his cock so flaccid despite all my attention. I have a moment of doubt where I wonder if attempting this and meeting with failure would be worse for Kip in the long run than not trying at all. Then I shake it off, because my sexual prowess is one of my highest skills, and also because the worst case scenario is that I stimulate him until he falls asleep. Given how tired he seems, I doubt it will be difficult to wait him out.

The point is to go slow, so I start out by running my hands along the insides of his thighs. His testicles are hairless and smooth, wrinkled skin partially obscured by his flaccid cock. I pull delicately at them, feeling the way they roll between my fingers. I lean in close and blow warm air over the tip of his shaft, encouraged when it jumps in response. I run the tip of my tongue over the sensitive head. Again, his cock bobs, and I suck the end of his shaft, feeling it swell slowly in my mouth. It takes a while to reach full hardness, but I am patient, rotating between sucking his cock and lathing his testicles with my tongue. Kip makes a groan of appreciation, his hands hovering at my shoulders. I run my tongue down the length of his erection, swirl it around the tip. Kip surges upward and I have to restrain him with a hand on his hip.

“Nnng!” he gasps. “Please, Master!”

“Just let it happen,” I remind him, feeling his legs tense around me. “Just relax.”

He's panting now, his body strung tight despite efforts to the contrary. I lift his legs over my shoulders, letting him use the leverage to guide me. His hands go to my hair, and I think for a moment that I probably shouldn't let my pleasure asset get used to this kind of control. But, then again, I suppose I haven't thought of Kip as a pleasure asset in a long time. It's a shame, all that work
we put into it, all the effort in training him, but he's proven that he'll never be able to adapt like Zero has. Pushing him any further would be foolish.

Kip is shaking with tension. His legs are wrapped around my shoulders, his back arched off the bed, and his body is strung like a bow. I slip an arm under his back, taking some of the strain off his shoulders. I pull him up and swallow his cock. My nose presses against his pelvis and I swallow, letting the muscles of my throat massage his straining erection.

“Yes, yes, please,” he begs breathlessly, and I can tell that he's getting close. I move my free hand to the base of his cock, giving him a firm pressure in counterpoint to my mouth.

He comes with a groan that almost sounds pained. Hot come fills my mouth, thin and with an odd chemical taste, probably from the meds Kip has been on. His body sags in my arms, falling like his strings have been cut. Tremors of pleasure run through him as I swallow his seed. He sighs and I pull away, looking at the limp body in my arms.

It strikes me with painful clarity how much I want to see him looking at me, silver eyes sated and sleepy. Other cues tell me he's satisfied – the color on his cheeks, the small smile playing around his lips. But something in me aches to see the crystal colors of his eyes, the hidden depth and intelligence there. For a moment, I feel like I could weep from the loss, wondering if it will ever be the way it was.

But he's alive. I didn't lose everything. I didn't lose him.

“Master?” he whispers, his voice subdued. “Do you want...?”

“Oh, no,” I respond quickly, trying to keep the humor out of my voice. The idea that he's even capable of reciprocating right now is almost laughable. “I'm fine. Perhaps another time.”

“Okay,” he says softly, and it sounds like he's half asleep already. Smiling, I shift his legs off of my shoulders, settle his limbs more comfortably and then cover him with a sheet. Only then does it dawn on me to look up, but Lee is already gone. I have no idea when he left, too caught up in bringing Kip pleasure to take notice. I can only speculate on how much he saw or when it became too much for him. The medical supplies still sit on the bedside table, abandoned.

“Master?” comes Kip's voice, pulling my attention back to him. I'm surprised to find him stirring, his hand reaching for me.

I lock our fingers and respond, “I'm here. What do you need?”

There's a beat of hesitancy, then, “Are you...” Another pause. “Would you stay with me?”

“Of course,” I reply, although I'd originally had the thought to go chase down Lee and clarify things. However, I can't imagine Lee leaving if he still thought I might be harming Kip, even inadvertently. So I have to assume that we're okay for the moment, and that it can wait until later.

I settle in with Kip, pulling his form tight against my side. I end up on the left side of the bed, Kip tucked against my right side, closest to the edge and the door. It doesn't seem worth the effort to adjust our positions, given that we're safe and I've just gotten him to settle. He drapes an arm over my chest, a leg over my hips. My cock is half-hard – I may have known that our earlier activities weren't leading to sex, but it's harder to convince my erection of that when I've got a cock in my mouth. Still, Kip either doesn't notice or doesn't react, curling close with a happy sigh. His skin is cool to the touch and I rub a hand over his arm, letting him absorb some of my warmth. His breathing steadies out quickly and I simply lie there, listening to him sleep.
I’m dozing by the time Zero enters, the noise from the door alerting me to his entrance. I shift and sit up, accidentally rousing Kip in the process. Zero is in the tank top and shorts that he usually wears to work out. He kicks his shoes off as he nears the bed, the quiet thump of them alerting Kip to another person in the room.

“What’s going on?” Kip asks blearily, trying to lever himself up on an elbow.

“It’s just me,” Zero responds, and pushes himself onto the bed without any hesitation. Kip’s face splits into a grin as Zero leans over him. Zero’s hands reach for Kip, but then hesitate without touching. I can’t blame him. Naked from the waist up, Kip’s skin is almost paper-white, looking just as fragile. Thankfully, Kip notices Zero’s hesitation and reaches a lethargic hand out to my fighter. It overcomes any anxiety on Zero’s part, and gentle, calloused hands find Kip’s shoulders, one roaming up to cup Kip’s face. They share a quick, chaste kiss, and Zero uses the hand on Kip’s cheek to guide him, understanding Kip’s current limitations. It makes me wonder why Kip would have come to me to satisfy his sexual needs, when he could have just as easily asked for me to get Zero. Surely he didn’t think I would deny the request? Or was it merely a spur of the moment impulse, fleeting if not satisfied immediately?

When they part, Zero leans across Kip to give me a quick, similar kiss on the lips. If Zero is aware of what the position he found us in implies, then he must not be bothered by the thought of our coupling. The kiss we share is just as warm and passionate as always. When Zero pulls back, I take note of the dampness of his skin, the heightened color in his face. Likely training and freshly showered, if my guess is correct.

“Lee said to warn you that he’s coming up,” Zero says as he sits back. “Something about making sure it was safe to come give Kip his medicine.”

I feel a hint of a blush steal across my cheeks. Lee seems to have the worst luck when it comes to stumbling into erotic situations. Or perhaps I’ve just become too accustomed to having sex wherever and whenever I want, without regard for others in the vicinity.

Zero leans against the pillows, his bare feet dangling off the side of the bed. Between us, Kip has already dozed off again, his chest rising and falling evenly in sleep. Zero watches him with the intensity of a wolf defending its lair. I take note that the expression barely changes when he looks at me, that the intensity does not fade even as his gaze meets mine.

“How is he?” Zero asks softly, keeping his voice low to make sure he doesn’t wake Kip.

“Much improved,” I reply at the same level, my hand brushing through the locks of the man in question almost of its own volition. “Although he still has a long way to go.”

“Lee said the same thing,” Zero responds. Then, “He seems... better. Happier?”

“I think he needed to get up and move around,” I admit. “Kip has never been sedentary. I think the forced stillness is doing him more harm than good at this point. We’ll have to make an effort to get him active again, at least as much as he’s able.”

Zero gives a short nod, like I’ve assigned him a mission to undertake. I let a smile play on my lips, knowing how determined Zero can be when he’s assigned a task, aware that I might have just sicced Zero on Kip.

Lee enters a few moments later, carrying a tray with a glass of water and a small cup of pills. He’s all business again, showing no signs of the awkwardness I feared might linger between us. I suppose I shouldn’t have worried. Lee has proven that he is nothing if not a complete professional. This isn’t
the first time he's witnessed an intimate moment between me and one of my assets, and he's never let it interfere with his work in the past.

“Sit him up,” Lee commands, pushing the bandages from earlier out of the way so that he can set his tray on the bedside table. I take note that there's more than just the pills on there as he says, “I'll need to check his vitals and he still needs to take his pills.”

Zero and I move together, but it takes some effort to get a groggy and lethargic Kip in a sitting position. His attempts to help make things more difficult, his limbs awkward and clumsy. He seems a bit muzzy, the expression on his face letting me know that he's starting to feel discomfort as the previous drugs wear off. Zero moves out of the way once Kip is settled, allowing Lee the position next to the bed. Despite his obvious discomfort, Kip's mouth turns down in a sullen frown as Lee tries to pass him his meds.

“I don't want them,” Kip complains. “They make me sleep.”

“They don't,” Lee counters. “There aren't any sedatives in these.”

“But they...”

“The painkiller allows you to rest,” Lee interjects. “That's why you feel so tired after you take it. Your body is telling you to sleep, and I'm just allowing it to run its natural course.”

“I don't need it,” Kip responds, belligerent. “I can handle pain.”

“Constant discomfort will have an adverse effect on your recovery,” Lee explains patiently. “I wouldn't give you anything if I didn't think you needed it.”

“But it...” Kip hesitates, ducking his head. “It's expensive and-”

“No,” I tell him firmly. “You don't get to worry about that. Your costs are my concern. You are my responsibility.” I hesitate, then finish with, “And I've been doing a terrible job of it if you think a thing like money would prevent me from taking care of you.”

“But I-...”

“Kip,” Zero cuts him off, “just take the damn pills. Your excuses are getting flimsier as you go.”

Kip blushes and frowns, but his fingers grasp the paper cup that Lee has been trying to put in his hand. He dumps the pills into his mouth without any trouble, but spills a bit of water down his chin when Lee hands him the glass to wash them down. Lee takes the glass back and returns it to the tray, picking up a small, handheld device from the same tray.

“I'm going to check your vitals now,” Lee warns before placing the monitor in Kip's ear to get a readout. Kip gives a long-suffering sigh, but doesn't protest again. The monitor beeps only a few seconds later, and Lee pulls it away. He must be satisfied with the results, because he puts it aside after only a glance. He picks up a stethoscope and listens to Kip's breathing, warning the blonde before he sets the metal disk against his chest. Lee seems good at that, always taking into account the fact that Kip can't see what he's doing. Likely one of the many skills he picked up in his medical experience.

“Last thing,” Lee warns once the stethoscope is put aside, then he peels a patch from the adhesive backing and secures it to the base of Kip's neck.

“Is that a pain-patch?” I wonder. “Is he in that much pain?”
“It’s not being used to manage his pain,” Lee responds. “We’re weaning him off of them so that his body doesn’t go into withdrawal while it’s dealing with the rest of his recovery.”

“Ah,” I respond, noting that it’s considerably smaller than the ones I’ve seen stocked in the medbay. I’m still not sure how I should feel about that entire situation, about Kip’s illicit drug use and Zero’s complicit behavior. Or about the fact that it all happened under my watch. I tuck those concerns into the back of my mind as issues that can be addressed once Kip is better.

That seems to be the last of what Lee needs to do. He returns his items – including the bandages this time – to the tray. Then he turns to me and says, “Can I speak with you privately for a moment?”

Feeling a stab of trepidation, I nod and step away from the bed. I move toward the door, only to realize a moment later that I’m still naked, and Lee has his eyes averted from my form. I really need to get better at remembering that not everyone has an interest in seeing me naked.

“Pants,” I tell him before moving into the walk-in closet and quickly dressing in slacks and a button-down shirt. When I return, Lee is waiting by the door, tray in hand. Kip and Zero are curled together in the bed, with Kip already seeming to be asleep. I precede Lee out of the room, and he closes the door behind us.

Alone in the hall, I’m ready for another one of Lee’s irritated lectures. What I get is a short bow and, “I apologize for earlier. I did not think you two would become... entangled so quickly. I was not aware that your relationship was... of that nature. I should have knocked before returning, and I should not have been so quick to jump to conclusions.”

“Kip is your patient,” I respond. “I don’t blame you for being concerned about his welfare. I was not expecting that reaction from him either. I can understand how it would seem... inadvisable, given the circumstance.”

He finds some humor in that, and quirks a grin as he says, “It has to be something in the water here. You all act like horny teenagers.”

That makes me laugh out loud, surprised and delighted.

“Perhaps you’ve just been too long without a lover?” I tease, but it’s the wrong thing to say. He looks away, and his smile fades into something more passive. I curse myself, wondering why I never manage to say the right thing to him.

“You surprise me,” he admits after a moment, his eyes still gazing at the wall.

“Oh?”

“When I first came here, I thought you were a monster,” he admits, glancing in my direction. “Then I found out... otherwise, and I still thought you would at least be a tyrant. I imagined something... militaristic. I thought your slaves might not be as abused as others, but certainly far from the healthy, well-tended men you’ve collected. More than simply surviving, they’ve recovered. Thrived even. Watching you with them... you’re basically the den-mother.”

“Excuse me?” I growl, offended.

“No,” he placates immediately. “I don’t mean... I don't mean in a derogatory or... gender specific way. I just mean you take care of them.”

I suppose I can’t really argue with that.
I... care about them,” I admit to him. “Very much. They are under my protection, and I will do whatever I can to see them stable. Even if I'm not very good at it. Even if I miss things,” I admit, thinking again of Kip. “Important things.”

There's another moment of hesitation before he continues, his words slow and forced, like he feels that it needs to be said but is not expecting a positive reaction. “You need to take better care of yourself. Their well-being and yours are inextricably intertwined. They will suffer if you are not more careful.”

“I know.”

“Zero called me when you returned yesterday. You took a foolish risk. It was only by luck that no harm came from it, either to you or to Zero, who was in your care.”

He means, of course, the illegal substances that I put into my body during the party. Illegal substances that I almost put into Zero's body, before finding at the last minute that I wasn't capable. It was a stupid move. Zero trusts me and had consented as much as he was able to given the circumstances. And I'm better able to protect him if I'm the sober one, instead of the other way around. It was a stupid, impulsive, reckless move.

And I'd do it again just the same.

“It will not always be possible for me to keep my assets or myself out of danger. Split second decisions must be made, and... Honestly, I'm doing the best I can.”

He nods once, accepting the truth in that.

“I should let you get back to your assets,” he tells me, letting the subject drop.

“Stay?” I ask on impulse. “You could sit with us. Talk. I'll ask Ruby to bring up tea.” Lee makes a distasteful face. “Something that resembles tea,” I amend, remembering Ruby's limited skills in the kitchen.

“Perhaps... another time,” Lee hedges. “My mind is troubled. I wish to meditate on these matters.”

“Troubled? Am I the cause?”

Lee's eyes narrow warningly and he says, “My thoughts are my own.” Then a pause and, “But you are the enigma that preys on my mind. I am still concerned that your mission might be a fool's errand, or a clever ploy. I am convinced now that you are earnest with you endeavors, although perhaps naive. I wish to think on this more and... observe. I don't understand you, and I don't like not understanding things.”

He turns on his heel then, taking his tray and heading for the exit.

I watch his retreating back, trying not to smile at him. Flowery words and diversions, but I've done enough social maneuvering to read the message underneath. Softly, knowing he's too far away to hear me, I mutter, “I think I'd like to get to know you better, too.”
Back on His Feet - Lee POV

Chapter Notes

It seems like I only get time to respond to reviews over the weekend - so if you've left a comment and I haven't responded, please be aware that I'm working on it. ;) And if I've somehow overlooked a comment that you'd really like a response to, please feel free to give me a nudge. I feel like I lose track of just about everything anymore. Lol!

I have to give all my appreciation to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

One of the downsides of being a physician is that people tend to take whatever you say as medical gospel, even when it's a suggestion or opinion. Things become distorted as the patient struggles to perform whatever task the doctor has set out for him. The patient subverts his own wants to follow the instructions, and given a lack of dissenting opinion the physician assumes his judgment was correct. Case in point is Kiplan, who has taken to proving how little he needs rest and assistance now that he's out from under my care.

“I'm fine. Zero, get off of me! I can walk on my own!”

“Wait, you'll-...”

“Ow!” he collides with the edge of the kitchen island, doubles over and clutches his stomach where it impacted the corner.

“See, I-...”

“Shut up!” Kip growls. “I'm still fine,” he says with emphasis, before forcing himself to straighten up. “I'm not going to get any better at this if I don't try.”

“The island is in front of you,” I guide from across the room. “There's a chair to your left. If you stretch out your arm, you'll be able to touch the back of it.”

He does, keeping one hand on the countertop to ground himself and reaching out trembling fingers until he touches the metal top of the high-backed chair. He pushes himself onto the chair, a bit awkwardly but without hitting himself on anything else. Then he slumps over and gives himself a moment to recover, the trip down here having been obviously taxing both mentally and physically.

I hadn't actually meant to check up on Kip this morning, although it's not an unwanted by-product of my trip. We're in the professional kitchen on the top floor. I came here under the guise of wanting company, but in truth I was hoping to make my own tea and breakfast, optimistically thinking I might be able to come up with something more palatable than Ruby's bland and burnt fare. Unfortunately, the cooking area is expansive, and I wasted twenty minutes trying to locate the tea.
before giving up when Ruby arrived. I suppose burnt toast and watery tea won't kill me, even if it is going on the second week that I'll be having them.

“Breakfast, then you can take your meds,” Zero reminds him. Kip makes a distasteful face.

“I've told you, I don't want them. I'm fine.”

“If you try foregoing them, you'll have a different opinion in a couple hours,” I cut in. “And I really don't want to repair any more damage in your skull, so I'd appreciate it if you just took them.”

A sullen sigh and then, “Okay,” from the blonde. I'm noticing a bit of a stubborn streak, but he's not stupid. He knows when to take good advice.

Kip shifts in his chair, trying to get settled in it, but his lack of vision is still throwing off his spatial awareness. He ends up tipping the chair to the side, taking a panicked gasp as it teeters unpredictably. Zero gives a low curse and forces the chair upright, then guides Kip back into the center of the seat. Kip leans his arms heavily on the counter in front of him, an unmovable surface, and takes a second to regain his balance. His breaths come in short gasps, and I can tell how much the sudden shift unnerved him. Getting used to the lack of sight is not easy or painless, despite his attempts to appear unaffected.

“I have to go wake Zeke and get your pills,” Zero says quietly. “Will you be okay here?”

“Fine,” Kip says shakily, then in a growl, “I'm fine!”

Zero makes a grunt of reply that seems like some kind of acknowledgment. He glances to me, and I see the question, “Will you watch him while I'm gone?” in his eyes. I nod once and repress the urge to roll my eyes. As though I would let my newly-blinded patient come to harm just because I'm not “on duty.”

I'm a doctor. I'm always on duty.

Zero leaves, making sure his footfalls are loud enough for Kip to hear his retreat, and then the door shuts firmly behind him. It takes a couple seconds for Kip to calm and straighten. He glances around the room out of habit, his muscle memory unaware that the motion is useless at this point.

“Oh, I'm here!” the young redhead calls, coming back in with his arms laden with boxes and items. He drops three eggs as he walks, curses quietly and dumps the armload onto the nearest counter. A box of sugar tumbles over, spilling fine white grains into the mess on the floor. He curses again, quickly rights the box, and then stoops to gather the mess into his bare fingers, eggs and shells dripping from his hands as he hurries to the nearest trash can.

“What just happened?” Kip snaps, his brow furrowed in confusion.
“Nothing!” Ruby protests. “I just...”

“You dropped the eggs,” Kip finishes. “Believe me, I know what a broken egg sounds like. Get a rag!” he demands. “Don't try to clean it up with your fingers.”

“Yeah, alright,” Ruby replies sullenly, but obeys anyway. The addition of the rag significantly expedites the cleanup process. “This sucks.”

“It's no big deal,” Kip comments mildly. “You wash the floors after breakfast anyway.”

A beat of silence.

Then, “You have been mopping the floors like I showed you, right?”

“I...” Ruby hedges. “They haven't been dirty!”

I wisely hold my tongue and don't comment on the truth of that. The area seemed suspiciously sticky as I wandered through in search of tea earlier this morning.

“Besides, I've been really busy! These are really hard recipes!”

I don't comment on that, either. It's probably true. If tea and toast are beyond his skill, anything else is likely a pipe dream.

“You can't cook in a dirty work space!” Kip snaps. “This is basic stuff! You can't just-” he cuts himself off, making a noise of irritation before visibly calming himself. Ruby stays still, his head down dejectedly, like if he doesn't move perhaps Kip will forget about him.

“I know this is hard,” Kip says at length. “You don't have a lot of interest in this subject, and I only managed to train you for a week before I took ill. However, you need to be managing the fundamentals at this point, and keeping your area clean is basic.”

“Yeah,” Ruby says, and there's a note of reluctant admission. “I guess.”

“Let's start from the top then. Did you prime the coffeemaker?”

“Um... no.”

“Turn it on and start the water heating. It will take a little time to warm.”

“Okay.”

Ruby turns on a rather large machine that I hadn't realized was for preparing coffee. It's an extravagant-looking item, all gleaming chrome with a black underlayer. Knobs and tubes come off of it at odd, almost haphazard angles. It looks more like modern art than a functional piece of equipment.

With the coffeemaker started, Ruby slices a loaf of bread that he pulled from the freezer. It looks homemade, and I have to wonder if Kip made it or if it was simply bought that way. The frozen bread gives Ruby some difficulty in cutting, leaving crumbs scattered across the table, but he doesn't give it time to thaw. Instead, he slaps a few pieces on a metal tray and takes them to one of the side counters. He puts the tray into a machine – not a standard toaster, it looks more like a miniature oven – and presses a button on the front. The machine lights up with a warm orange glow. Kip and I sit in companionable silence as Ruby cleans up the crumbs from the counter, spilling half of them on the floor as he wipes them up. In a few minutes, the timer dings and Ruby opens the door, but the frozen
bread obviously hasn't been toasted enough. Ruby closes the door again and presses the same button a second time.

Another couple minutes, and the timer dings again. Ruby takes the toast out, and it's obviously burnt.

Kip sniffs the air. I'm gaining an appreciation for his culinary skills, and an understanding that he used far more than his eyes to help him with his craft.

“You burned the toast,” he surmises. “Reduce the time and try again.”

“I don't know how.”

“What?”

“It's preset. I don't know how to change the timer. I've just been running it until it's done.”

“You've been feeding everyone burnt toast for a week?” Kip practically shouts.

“You don't have an actual toaster!” Ruby returns fire. “It's not my fault you've got all this weird shit!”

“I- I can't even...” Kip sighs and puts his head on the counter. “Why didn't you just change the timer?”

“I told you, I don't know how.”

“I showed you where I keep the manuals!”

“None of them are for a toaster!”

“It's a convection oven!” Kip yells, his voice partially muffled by the countertop.

“Oh,” from Ruby. Then, “Okay.”

Kip snorts, a sound somewhere between amusement and despair. I can't say I blame him. As a student, Ruby seems rather... lacking.

“It's fine,” Kip says, lifting his head from the counter. “There wasn't anyone here to train you. Just... try to let me know if there's anything you don't understand. I'll clarify as best I can.”

“Alright,” Ruby agrees, his tone bland. He puts two more slices of bread in the oven and closes the door, then goes to a drawer and rifles through it until he pulls out a booklet. In a couple of minutes, he appears to have the timer reset and the bread is warming in the oven.

“Tea?” I ask hopefully as Ruby puts the manual away. If the toast turns out successful, then maybe...

“If I hear the microwave open, I'm going to flip,” Kip warns immediately. “There is a teapot under the counter beneath the coffeemaker. The coffee maker will heat the water to the appropriate temperature. You will use the loose tea and steep it according to the directions on the box. Am I being clear enough?”

“Yeah yeah,” the teen grouses. “You know, they make tea bags for a reason.” But I see him reaching into the bottom cabinet anyway.
Kip ignores the complaint, instead asking, “What were you planning for dinner?” as Ruby fills the teapot and portions the tea leaves. He sets the pot on my table, but I don’t complain about the lack of service. I’m grateful enough to be getting a palatable breakfast, however reluctant the cook. I fetch myself a cup and some sugar as Ruby sets the timer.

“I don’t know,” Ruby responds. “Chicken, I guess. I used the last of the ground beef yesterday.” He glances at me and says, “Still grilled cheese for you?”

I nod in reply as I settle back into my seat. Ruby seems rather fond of hamburgers – we’ve had them four times since I’ve been here. I don’t have any interest in consuming meat-rich food, and my stomach wouldn’t have accepted such a heavy meal even if I had wanted it. To be honest, grilled cheese seems more in the range of his capabilities anyway.

“Out of ground beef?” Kip parrots, a puzzled look on his face. “But...” he trails, then lets the question go in favor of asking, “Did you put in an order for groceries?”

“No, I...”

His voice cuts off as Zero enters the room, closing the door behind him with an echoing click. Zero's face is carefully neutral as he glances at Ruby. I suppose Zero was expecting this, as Ruby spends a significant portion of his time in the kitchen, but it doesn't look like Ruby equated Kip's presence with Zero's return, and it seems to be a nasty shock for the teen. Ruby goes pale and takes a step back, putting the long counter where Kip is sitting between himself and Zero.

“What happened?” Kip questions. “Why has everyone gone so quiet?”

“It's me,” Zero says quietly, and takes slow, measured steps to reach Kip's side.

This isn't the first time Zero and Ruby have interacted since the incident. They've seen each other in passing, with Ruby dropping off my meals and Zero holding vigil by Kip's bed. But this is the first time they've had to meet head-on, and the tension simmering between them seems to have come to a boil. Maybe Ruby is realizing that Kip's awakening means Zero will no longer be tethered to the medbay, and thus will be more difficult to avoid. Or perhaps Zero is getting ready to face up to the guilt that lingers around him like a specter every time Ruby is in the room. Maybe they're both realizing that the holding pattern they've settled into isn't feasible long-term. It was simply a matter of time before it came to this.

The timer breaks the silence with a sharp ding that makes Ruby jump. I pour the tea before it can overbrew and turn bitter. Zero settles the pillbox he retrieved on the table, but otherwise makes no move. It's a long, white plastic case about as wide as my hand, with multiple rows of covered pockets. I've tried to keep Kip's regimen simple, but even with my efforts there are multiple chemicals that his body needs throughout the day to keep up the effectiveness of his treatment. I've managed to condense it into a morning, midday, and evening dosage, centered on meals to help Kip's recovering body digest the drugs.

The awkward stillness lingers. Kip's face is pinched in confusion, trying to listen for any clues as to the situation. I have to remind myself that he was unconscious when Zero tried to take his misplaced anger out on Ruby, and likely hasn't been updated since. Like me, he did not witness the event, although I witnessed the aftermath on Ruby's throat. Now only a few, fading marks mar the pale skin, and Kip is unable to see them.

“What's wrong?” Kip tries again. “Zero, what's going on?”

“I tried to kill Ruby,” Zero admits, his voice soft but firm, his tone neutral. Factual.
Kip gapes, his mouth opening and closing several times. His head swings in Zero's direction and his visceral need to see Zero's face, to read his emotions and intent, is evident although impossible.


“I blamed him for your condition. If he had been where he was supposed to be, you might not have hurt so badly.” I hold my tongue, although that is blatantly false. Kip's condition was the result of a long-term illness, not a single event. Ruby's presence likely wouldn't have made much of a different one way or another.

“That's bullshit,” Kip says, a concise summary of what I'd been thinking. “You knew I'd been sick before Ruby even got here. It had nothing to do with him.”

“But...”

“And who even asked you to do that?” Kip snaps, pushing past any protests Zero might have voiced. “What the hell is the matter with you? What gives you the right to go around trying to punish anyone?”

The expression that Kip aims in Zero's general direction is fierce despite the bandages covering Kip's eyes. Zero stares at his hands, still resting on the counter next to the pillbox, his shoulders slumped.

“I'm sorry,” Zero says softly.

“Don't tell me!” Kip snarls. “I'm not the one you hurt!”

There's a noise of acknowledgment from Zero, then he takes several slow steps until he's on Ruby's side of the counter. Ruby, for his part, does not give ground, but I notice that his body leans away from the clone as it fights an instinctual need to flee from an aggressor.

Face to face, Ruby and Zero are close in height, with Ruby likely to surpass Zero in the next few years. Zero has more muscle, though, and he holds himself with the casual tension of a trained fighter, always prepared for an attack. Ruby still has the awkward lankiness of a teenager, although I can imagine that it would give way to athletic grace with a bit of training. He'll always be lean, his narrow form not given to packing on muscles, but a body like his is built for speed rather than raw power.

Zero stops a polite distance from Ruby, several inches beyond arm's reach. I can see the tension in Ruby's shoulders, his back to me, as Zero pauses. Still, Zero stays relaxed, his posture non-threatening.

“Kip's right,” Zero says, his voice calm. “I should apologize. I lost control, and you suffered for it. I'm sorry.”

I had expected Ruby to relax at Zero's admission, but he tenses more, his hands clenching into fists at his side.

“You think that's it?” he snarls, his anger pure and deep in the way only untried young men can manage. “You think you can do whatever you fucking want? I'm not afraid of you!”

And then in a show of that latent speed I'd noticed earlier, his hand darts out and he grabs a knife from the rack on the wall. Quick, but not smart. He pulls out a chef's knife – a long, thick blade with a tapering curve, designed for slicing and chopping. Even sharpened to the fullest, it's a heavy blade and too thick to be maneuverable. It's an impractical choice, but it looks impressive at first glance.
Zero doesn't flinch away, even when Ruby holds the knife up to Zero's throat. I have no doubt that Zero could have prevented the move, could likely counter it even now, given Ruby's lack of skill, but Zero allows the threat. Zero's face shows no emotion, his eyes trained on Ruby's face, not the knife in his hands.

The only sound now is Ruby's heavy breathing. The only movement is Kip's head frantically moving around, like pointing his face in a different direction will give him any more information than holding still.

“Damn it!” Kip snarls. “What is going on?”

“Ruby's holding a knife to Zero's throat,” I respond calmly, then take a sip of my tea. It's excellent. Strong and perfectly brewed, with a lingering note of citrus. Nothing like the stale, pre-bagged tea I'd been drinking all week.

“Ruby!” Kip barks. “This is not how we solve problems!”

“It's how he solves problems!” Ruby yells in reply, glancing at Kip and then back to Zero. “Isn't it? You just kill them!”

“This isn't...” Kip tries again.

“Kip,” I cut in, my gentle tone getting his attention more effectively than a shout in the hostile room. “Let them work it out themselves.”

“But I...”

“It's okay,” Zero puts in, his voice also calm and steady. “I'm okay.”

“You don't think I'll do it?” Ruby yells, his voice on the edge of hysterical.

“I didn't say that,” Zero responds evenly, his attention fully reverting to Ruby.

“I'm not afraid of you!” Ruby shouts, but his fingers are shaking as he says it.

“Okay,” Zero responds evenly. He is still as a statue, and practically as unaffected as one.

“I could kill you!” Ruby snarls, leaning forward like he's leaning all of his weight against the knife, even as it hovers a finger's width from Zero's skin. “I could do it and there's no way you could stop me!”

Then Ruby's blade touches Zero's skin, the threat itself not enough for the reckless redhead. I see Zero tense. There's a difference between a threat and the feel of a knife against your skin. I feel Zero's tension bleeding into me, knowing that Ruby has inadvertently pushed this further than he was intending. If he breaks skin – even unintentionally – I'm not sure Zero will be able to control his instinctual, violent reaction.

And hitting the boy, while probably well-deserved at this point, won't do anything to help the underlying problem that's driving his action.

“It might be more effective if you used the other side of the knife,” I say calmly, taking a sip of tea.

“What?” Ruby snaps, his gaze flicking to me.

“The sharp edge is on the other side,” I lie. “You're threatening him with the blunt edge.”
Ruby's frown becomes frustrated and confused. In an unconscious motion, he pulls the knife back to peer at the edge, trying to verify my words. The slight opening is all Zero needs, and his hand strikes out and twists Ruby's wrist, causing the knife to fall out of Ruby's limp fingers. Ruby makes a noise of pain and Zero releases him, but not before kicking the knife under the counter and putting himself between Ruby and the rest of the weapons.

“You bastard!” Ruby snarls, rounding on me. “You lied to me!”

I nod my head in acknowledgment. I am not above using deceit when I feel that it is necessary to prevent harm.

“Do you really think killing him would do you any good?” I ask. “Did you take a moment to think of the repercussions if you injure him? Or what will happen if you somehow, miraculously land a killing blow?”

“I... That's not the point!”

“No. The point was to prove that you're not defenseless. Unfortunately, threatening a man who won't defend himself proves nothing. And accidentally injuring him through your lack of skill with a knife... well, that makes a lot of extra work for me. Can we agree that you've proven your point, and leave it at that?”

Ruby snarls and bares his teeth at me. His freckled face is red with anger, but he bites down on it, physically gritting his teeth in an attempt to rein his temper.

“For what it's worth,” Zero puts in, his voice low and calm, “I'm sorry I attacked you. I saw Kip in that state and I... I lost it. I needed someone to blame and you were...”

“Easy?” Ruby snarls, but there's an undercurrent of shame to it. It clicks into place, then, what this has all been about. Not so much Zero’s attack – although I'm sure that act exacerbated the situation – but Ruby's wounded pride and dwindling self-worth. I know that he was originally designated as a pleasure asset, and then Zero's attack labeled him as a weak target in his own mind. Added together with his current designation as a domestic asset and his constant struggles with even the most basic cooking tasks, and it's not hard to see how the aspects would combine into a teen feeling the need to act out and exert his own masculinity. Threatening the toughest male in the room is an act of teenage rebellion so typical that it's almost a stereotype.

“Not easy,” Zero contradicts. “Just easier to blame.”

“Don't fucking stand there and tell me that you didn't go after me because I was an easier damn target than Red!”

“Red was half dead already,” Zero responds, a hint of annoyance seeping into his tone. “If I'd wanted to kill him, I'd hardly have had to do much.”

“But I...”

“You were the easy one to blame,” Zero emphasizes, ignoring Ruby's attempted protest, “because you'd been with us already and I... I expected more from you. I expected you to protect Kip.”

And finally, I see Ruby's eyes well up with the first emotion that isn't anger.

“I didn't know!” he denies, his voice thick. “I didn't know anything would happen to him! I just...”

“It wasn't fair of me to blame you,” Zero responds. “I'm sorry.”
“I don’t blame you either,” comes Kip’s soft voice, causing both men to look to him. “Just so you know. It wouldn’t have made a difference one way or another and... Well, Zero’s told me that Master Zeke probably wouldn’t have brought back Red if you hadn’t stowed away, right? So I’m glad you went. I’m glad he’s here, and everything’s okay now.”

They’re all overlooking the fact that nothing is okay. That Kip is still blind, that they’re all still enslaved, that their very lives depend on mastering skills with an inadequate amount of time to train. Still, I can’t begrudge them a moment of optimism, not when they come so rare in this life.

They lapse into silence again, but this time it isn’t strained or awkward. Ruby stalks away from Zero, his movements jerky and his footfalls harder than they necessarily need to be. He leans on one of the counters, scrubbing his eyes as he regains his composure. Zero moves back to Kip’s side, speaking in low tones to the worried blonde. I enjoy my tea, wondering if every breakfast will come with a floorshow from now on, or if today was an anomaly.

Unfortunately, given this group of volatile personalities, I’m starting to suspect the former.

Red enters by the time Ruby has finally resumed cooking – if that’s what you can call his efforts – and Zero is seated beside Kip at the counter. Kip is giving orders like a marshaling general, but with his lack of sight and Ruby’s limited skills, his efforts seem to be mostly fruitless. Ruby somehow did not reset the toaster-oven correctly, and the next batch of toast comes out at the same barely-warmed state as the first pieces. He tries to cover it by running it again, somehow convinced that previous experience does not predict future performance. Another two pieces of blackened toast, another stern lecture from Kip, and finally the machine appears to be correctly reset.

Red is dressed in workout clothes, his dark skin still wet from a shower. Despite Zero's lack of interest, I know Red has been training hard to make up for his own inexperience, although I know his success has been limited due to his lack of guidance. Red hesitates in the doorway, his eyes glancing around the unusually crowded kitchen. He catches Ruby's gaze, who turns his head to meet eyes with him, and throws the redhead a questioning glance. Ruby shrugs, his expression sullen, and I can see wordless communication passing between them. Red casts his glance pointedly toward Zero, and by the tense set of Zero's shoulders I can assume that he's aware of the scrutiny. Ruby rolls his eyes and beckons with a nod for Red to come in. It seems to relieve some of the tension. Red enters casually, passing the rest of us as he seeks Ruby's side.

“How’s breakfast coming?” Red asks, giving Ruby a smile as he takes a step away from the shorter teen, then turns to lean his back against the counter. Ruby returns a sullen glare that only
makes Red laugh outright. "Why don't I take over the eggs?"

Ruby gives a small grunt of affirmation, and Red laughs again before heading toward the back of the room. There must be a walk-in refrigerator back there, because he returns with a dozen eggs and a paper-wrapped package. He snags the only remaining egg from the counter as he passes – Ruby broke three out of four on his way in – and sets the items on the counter next to the unoccupied stove-top.


“Scrambled for me,” Kip requests. I have to wonder if he's realized that scrambled eggs are probably the easiest kind to eat while he’s getting used to his lack of sight, or if it's simply a coincidence. “And bacon, if you don't mind.”

“Zero?” Red asks politely as he starts to crack eggs into a large bowl.


“Whatever,” Zero responds with a shrug. I see Red frown, but he doesn't contradict Zero, just adds more eggs to the bowl.

Zeke enters then, still dressed in blue, silken pajamas, his hair damp from the shower. I see the two youngest assets both tense, their eyes lowering to their tasks. Zeke doesn't appear to notice, going straight to Kip and startling him with a gentle caress to the shoulders.

“How are you feeling this morning?” Zeke asks, and I see Kip relax when he realizes who it is.

“Much better,” he tells Zeke. “I wanted to come up and see how Ruby was doing, see if I could help him at all.”

“Don't overtax yourself,” Zeke warns. “You've been ill for too long to risk your progress by pushing too hard.”

“Of course, sir,” Kip responds, and I just barely catch the hint of annoyance under the crisp, polite words. Even from his master, it seems that Kip does not like to be babied.

From the corner of my eye, I see Red nudge Ruby with his elbow until the redhead sighs and puts his knife aside. He turns to face Zeke.

“What would you like for breakfast, sir?” he asks with stilted politeness.

“What are you making?” Zeke asks, and I see Red turn red.

“I'm just helping out with the eggs,” Red jumps in. “I had a couple minutes, figured another pair of hands wouldn't hurt. Ruby did most of the work, I'm just doing the frying.”

Given that the rest of breakfast has consisted of tea and toast, I would think that frying constituted the majority of the actual work, but I keep my thoughts to myself.

“Oh, course,” Zeke responds politely, although I can tell he's not entirely convinced. “I'll have coffee and eggs over-easy, then. Two slices of bacon. Toast with butter and jam.”

“Sure thing,” Red says, and his nervousness makes the words come out overly enthusiastic. “Coming right up!”

Ruby just nods and turns away, the sullen glare back on his features.

Zeke settles beside Zero at the long counter, and coffee must be a staple of his diet because Ruby
puts a steaming cup immediately in front of him, along with a tray of additives. Zeke adds cream and sugar, giving the mug a leisurely stir.

“You want some eggs, Lee?” Red asks, pulling my attention away from Zeke. I've been hesitant to try my stomach on protein, but I have to admit I'm tempted. My strength has been returning, and with it my appetite. “Bacon?”

“Just eggs, please,” I request.

“You got it.”

“You sure you don't want something else?” Zeke asks, glancing at my tea and remaining toast. “I'm sure there's sausage or...”

“No, thank you,” I respond.

“Ham, maybe?” he continues, his eyes going to Kip as though the domestic asset can confirm or deny. I roll my eyes, unable to suppress my annoyance.

“I'm a vegetarian,” I inform him. “Eggs will be fine.”

“You...” he blinks in surprise. “Since when?”

“Since I was fourteen,” I reply flatly.

“No, I mean... I hadn't noticed.”

“Given my diet has mainly been tea and toast lately, I don't think it would have been obvious.”

“I... suppose.”

“It's not all that uncommon,” I defend, feeling myself bristle.

“It's really not,” Kip agrees. “Actually, most assets are used to having little or no animal protein in their diets. The ones coming from impoverished backgrounds have a particularly hard time digesting it at first, and some never adjust.”

“We didn't get it very often at the group home,” Red adds in. “It was mostly beans and soy-replacements, except for holidays.”

“I am aware that cost constraints push poverty-stricken individuals away from most animal proteins,” Zeke says, and this time it's his turn to sound defensive. “I simply hadn't realized that you were doing it voluntarily.”

“As a medical doctor,” I respond, “I can tell you that there's no harm in forgoing meat in favor of plant-proteins. It is actually better for most individuals.”

“Some owners are strictly vegetarian,” Kip adds in, “for medical or spiritual reasons.”

Zeke looks surprised, but he's not giving Kip the same skeptical expression that I was receiving.

“And which reason is yours?” Zeke asks me.

“That's personal,” I respond, then take a sip of tea to signal that the subject is closed. The younger assets tense, probably expecting a violent response. Zeke just nods his head in acknowledgment, then takes a sip of his coffee.
Then quickly spits the coffee back into the cup and sets it aside.

“Ruby,” Zeke says calmly as he wipes his mouth with a napkin. “I think you need to check the coffee-maker. The grounds seem to have slipped through the filter.”

“Shit,” Ruby curses, shoving himself away from the counter to storm over to the gleaming machine. He jerks the top open and yanks out the coffee filter.

“You probably just forgot to secure the filter,” Kip explains, and he's trying to keep his voice calm but I can hear the underlying annoyance. “You'll have to clean the ground out manually...”

“It worked just fine yesterday!”

“Did you put the securing handles back down after pulling the old filter out?”

“I... Yes? I don't know! I don't even know what you're talking about!”

“Ruby, seriously,” he snaps with a frustrated noise, moving to push himself away from the counter. “This is getting ridiculous. Just let me-...”

“No,” Zero says, slipping from his own chair and putting a booted foot behind Kip's, keeping the blonde from pushing away from the counter. “Not a chance.”

“I know this kitchen like the back of my hand!” Kip protests.

“Then it shouldn't be a problem to tell Ruby how it works,” Zero counters sternly. “If he's moved something around or if you misjudge the distance, you could seriously hurt yourself.”

“Fine,” Kip says, but it comes out as a resigned hiss.

“It's not a good idea for you to be around the cooking equipment with the meds your on anyway,” I warn. “If you were overcome with dizziness at the wrong time...”

“I just feel useless,” Kip cuts in sullenly.

“Only as useless as I am,” Zeke assures, ruffling Kip's hair playfully.

“That's different,” Kip replies, but he seems mollified.

“Perhaps we can be useless together. I was hoping you'd keep me company while I go through some tedious paperwork later.”

It's an obvious ploy to get Kip out of the kitchen and relaxing again, but as I am in favor of the outcome I refrain from comment. Kip nods, his smile a bit wan. I have the impression that he knows he's being manipulated, but he's allowing it given that it's the best option. The reality of him staying in the kitchen would only lead to a frustrating afternoon for both himself and Ruby, with no significant gains to Ruby's skills.

“Speaking of this afternoon,” I put in, jumping on the segue. “I was hoping to do your physical later today, Zero.”

“I'm fine,” he responds bluntly, his expression sour. I give him a challenging smirk.

“Then it should be no issue for you to come prove it.”

There's a moment where I think he might argue, but he glances at Zeke and something on his
master's expression must warn him that this is happening one way or another. He gives a resigned sigh and nods his head.

“T'd like to be present as well,” Zeke puts in. “Could it be scheduled for late afternoon? I'm preparing for a meeting this morning, which is scheduled for after lunch, and then I'll be free.”

I glance at Zero, who says, “It's fine by me. I was hoping to get in an early workout this morning.” He glances at Red and adds, “If you're there when I come down, we can see what you've managed so far.”

Red nods, his expression serious, but I can sense his relief. By all rights, his training should have started well before now, but Zero was too distracted to supervise.

“I will join the two of you,” I add in. “I would like to have space to meditate and practice some katas. My body has not been allowed to perform to its fullest in many months, and I would like to continue my recovery.”

Then Red is laying out plates of steaming eggs and bacon, various toasts and jams. Conversation dies off, and Ruby comes to join me to eat at the small table while Red takes the seat closest to us at the counter, on the other side of Kip.

Kip starts eating with gusto, not even waiting for everyone else to finish sitting down. He uses his spoon to gather up the eggs, some of them sliding over the raised edge of the plate, but overall being as tidy as can be expected. He hardly waits to chew before loading up another mouthful, and he must sense Zero and Zeke's surprised stares, because he suddenly pauses in his eating, his spoon hesitating halfway to his face.

“What?” he asks, his voice alarmed. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Zeke assures quickly. “We just... I guess we've never seen you eat like this.”

Kip drops his spoon immediately, his hand searching for his napkin and then wiping his mouth. A dark blush steals across his face, visible even below the bandages covering his eyes.

“No,” Zeke soothes immediately, his tone apologetic. “I didn't mean it like that. You just always seemed to pick at your food. I don't think I've ever seen you so interested in eating.”

“I'm starving,” Kip admits, his tone still a bit embarrassed. “I didn't realize it until I started, but...”

“Your appetite returning is a good sign,” I tell him, “although I would be a bit cautious with your stomach at first. Your meds could make you nauseated, although so far it doesn't look like you're susceptible to that side effect.”

A nod from Kip, and then he resumes his eating at a more reasonable pace. Zeke throws me a grateful smile, and I incline my head in acceptance. The others begin eating, and I tuck into my eggs to find that they're light and fluffy, expertly cooked. The taste and texture help with my own appetite, and I find that my stomach accepts the richer food without complaint. Like Kip, it seems that my own body is recovering and returning to normal.

As the meal continues, I feel a small smile playing on my lips. Maybe it's because I've finally got a breakfast that passes as edible, but I feel unaccountably optimistic about the future of our little group. Maybe we have a chance of pulling this off after all.
Zero's Exam - Lee POV

Chapter Notes

I've been a bit lax on responding to comments this week, and I apologize for that. I'm getting a lot of speculation about what's going to happen with Ruby and Red. Which is great! I love that everyone tries to figure our what's going to happen next. That being said, I don't want to jump ahead to confirm or deny anything. :) Half the fun is watching it play out, right?

I have to give all my appreciation to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

Zeke takes Kip with him back to the master suite, using a hand on his arm to guide the sight-impaired asset. I think Kip would have preferred to stay and supervise Ruby, but as he was already starting to nod off at the table he couldn't give much of an argument. With breakfast and his meds digesting, along with an aggravating morning of hearing Ruby demolish his kitchen, I am not surprised at Kip's drowsy and lethargic state.

Zero and Red leave together, with Red trailing the steel-eyed asset at a polite distance. There seems to be something resigned about Zero's movements, like he's the one who's about to be tested. Perhaps it will be a test of his patience and resolve, if nothing else.

I stay in the kitchen and clear the dishes from the tables, bringing them to Ruby at the sink. Ruby stares at the bubbling water as I slide up beside him, placing the dishes on the counter before turning to lean my back against the edge.

"Are you alright?" I ask him softly. He doesn't look at me, but shrugs a shoulder in response and buries his hands in the water. "That's not an answer."

He sighs in a frustrated, put-upon way and says, "What d' ya want me to say? That I'm fine? That it's all okay now?" He pulls his hands out of the water and leans his elbows on the counter, his hands dripping suds into the sink, his head hung so that I can't see his expression. "'S all fucked up."

"Yes," I agree quietly, "it is."

He turns and blinks at me, his expression confused.

"You... think this is fucked up too?"

"I would not put it so eloquently," I muse, giving him a small smirk. "But is it fair? Or just? No, of course not."

"You're the only one..." he says, then changes to, "Everyone else acts like I'm nuts. That I should just accept that this is my life now." His eyes flick to the door. "Our life. This is just how it is."
“How things are and how they should be are often two very different things,” I contend. “I don't know if anyone would claim that this life is ideal, but if you're speaking of Zero and Kip, you need to remember that they've lived this for a lot longer than you have. Zero was likely raised with this life in mind, if the stories of his past hold any merit. And Kip is trying to train you, so encouraging your rebelliousness would be counterproductive.”

“And Red?” he asks, his voice tight.

“Red was injured brutally before he came here,” I remind him softly, “and likely witnessed worse trauma than he received. I'm sure he would do anything to keep you from that kind of fate.”

Ruby makes a pained sound and balls his fists under the surface of the water.

“It's not going to work!” he snaps, and angrily pushes a curl away from his face. “We have to get out of here!”

“Calm down,” I tell him. “You're still learning and-...”

He turns a fierce glare on me, in no way mitigated by the wet strands of copper-colored hair plastered to his freckled skin. Green eyes flash with red-hot anger.

“Don't patronize me!” he snarls. “I know I'm doin' terrible! I know Red can't sleep at night because he's not doing well. You know he got knocked out by the shadow dummy? It doesn't even have an attack setting!”

I... did not know that.

“All you can do is give it your best effort.” I dare to put a hand on his wrist. “Everything else is beyond your control.”

He snarls and pulls away from my grasp, grabbing the stack of plates and slamming them into the sink. Water sloshes down the front of his clothes, and I step back to avoid the splash. Then the anger bleeds out of him, leaving the teen leaning on the edge of the sink for support, his head hung. He sighs and puts his hands back in the water, unmindful of the potentially broken glass.

“You'd think I'd be used to this by now,” he says, his voice barely above a whisper. “It's the same as when my mom died. I lost everything then, too. My mom, my home, my school, my friends. Ended up in a group home with nothing but my backpack and a change of clothes. It was like the old me had died.”

I give him a moment, his fingers swirling through bubbles in no particular pattern.

“When I found Red, I found something to cling to, you know? He'd already been there a couple years, he already knew how things worked. We found each other and... I don't know. I started rebuilding a life. A life together.”

He bites his lip.

“Then I lost him,” he says at a whisper. “I lost everything all over again.”

“And now you're afraid it will happen again.”

He makes a noise that is more pain than acknowledgment, and it's easy to read the terror in him, fueling his anger, his frustration.
“How do I just... accept this? That I won't have any say in my life anymore? That I won't ever be
safe again?”

“You accept it because you have no other choice. Because your chances of escape are minuscule,
and any attempt will get you killed.”

“But I...”

“The reality is that you have more to lose than anyone else here. You brought Red back,” I remind

“I can't just wait for them to separate us! I have to do something!” he shouts, forgetting the broken
glass under the surface and shoving his hands down until they connect. He flinches back hard
enough that I can tell he’s cut himself, but he doesn't pull his hands from the water. Won't show me
the injury, won't admit his mistake and ask for help.

“Push too hard,” I warn him solemnly, “and you might not be the one who suffers.”

Ringing silence. He refuses to look at me, instead training haunted eyes on the water. It's tinged
pink now, but the color tells me that he's not bleeding badly.

“Think about my words,” I tell him, “the next time you feel like attacking Zero. Think about them,
and remember that Red is just as afraid for you as you are for him.”

Then I take my exit, heading back down toward the medbay, feeling physically and emotionally
drained.

All that just from breakfast.

I allow myself a brief respite after breakfast – meaning I take a nap. It was a larger meal than I am
currently used to, and although my body is recovering well I don't want to risk overtaxing it. I choose
to lean against the headboard of my narrow cot, not comfortable with being totally reclined with a
full stomach. The padding under me is more comfortable by far than the bare floor I'd slept on for the
past several months while imprisoned with Ellaine. Still, it is not a true bed, and my back protests
enough to make my sleep fitful. I give up on the attempt in less than an hour.

“You're getting old and feeble,” I growl to myself as I push myself to my feet. The insult goes
unnoticed and unrepudiated in the empty room, and I feel more the fool for talking to myself.

I head to the gym on the upper floor, hoping I've given Zero enough time to start assessing Red's
skills. Although it might have been prudent to follow and supervise them, I'd chosen to err on the
side of giving them space to establish their own relationship. Ideally, my lack of interference will
allow them to get a feel for each other. Since his initial outburst against Ruby while under severe
mental strain, Zero has shown himself to be capable and level-headed, while Red has proven to be
likable and easy-going. Despite tensions between Zero and Ruby, I'm hoping the two fighters will be
able to form a working relationship.

Still, I feel a bit of anxiety when I enter the gym and Zero is standing at the side of the running
track, his hands on his hips and a scowl on his face. In his fingers, he holds a bloody towel. Red is
running on the track, though, so at least I can be assured that no permanent damage has been
inflicted.

Zero doesn't even glance at me as I approach. Instead, he watches Red as he says to me, “He's not
injured. He slammed his face into one of the guard posts.”
“Broken nose?” I ask, but he shakes his head.

“Just bloody. I didn’t even hit him. He did it to himself.”

I step beside Zero and pause to watch the dark-skinned slave run. There’s still a line of drying blood on his face and a large stain of it on his shirt. He’s running with everything he has, his chest heaving, his strong legs pumping. There’s no rhythm to it, no natural flow or grace. I’m aware immediately that it isn’t a sustainable speed, nor is it a particularly fast one. With all his bulk, he’s sacrificed speed for power, whereas a skilled fighter maintains a balance between the two.


“He’s got strength and resolve, but... that’s about it,” Zero admits, echoing my earlier thoughts. “Balance, speed, stamina. He’s only ever had to rely on pure muscle and...”

“And it’s not nearly enough now.”

“It would be easier to train him from nothing,” Zero continues, running a frustrated hand through his short hair. “Not only do I have to train new skills into him, but I have to deal with all the bad habits he’s picked up street-fighting. That flinch instinct is what got him injured.”

Having a good reaction speed is a benefit to a fighter, but not a reaction that is uncontrolled. Skilled fighters do not flinch when attacked. They see the attack coming and maneuver themselves to either accept the blow or counter it to the best efficiency, all in the amount of time it would take a normal person to flinch away. The ability to accept a blow and take an injury to better advance in the fight is crucial for a warrior.

“On top of that, he’s been going about his training in the wrong direction,” Zero complains, his tone low and frustrated. “He’s been focusing on lifting weights, which has only bulked up his muscles and pulled down his speed and endurance.”

I refrain from commenting on the fact that Zero should have been down here from the beginning, guiding and supervising his inexperienced charge. Then he wouldn’t have made such foolish mistakes in his training, which have put him further behind than he already is.

Instead, I ask, “And your training plan?”

He makes a noise of aggravated despair and says, “Run him until he gets faster? I don’t know. This was Zek-... Master’s idea. Maybe he should come train him.”

I smirk at the thought, but it rankles underneath. This high-handed attitude Zeke has with his assets isn’t going to help his situation, especially not when he’s so inexperienced an owner. Bad choices for trainees not only frustrate Zero and Kip, but take up time that they could be spending on their own training. And while the idea of learning through teaching has merit, it doesn’t make up for a pupil who is ill-equipped to study the subject.

“Don’t forget, I’ll need you in the medbay in a couple hours for your initial exam.” I eye his hip, although I can’t tell how bad the damage is with the cloth of his shorts covering it. His stance is good, weight evenly distributed on both legs, but that could be a testament to Zero’s endurance, not a hint of minimal impairment. My scans and visual survey will tell me more later, but I have little doubt that he will need at least a minimally invasive, reconstructive surgery. A combat asset can’t go into battle with such an obvious weakness. “Red will likely need a break by then anyway,” I caution, eyeing the dark-skinned fighter skeptically. Already, he’s showing signs of exertion. His coffee-colored skin
is covered in a fine sheen of sweat, and his chest heaves as he takes shallow, wheezing breaths through his mouth.

“Yeah, I know,” Zero responds, and jogs off to join the flagging man. I notice despairingly how little trouble Zero has catching up to and keeping pace with the darker man. Damn, but Red’s got such a long way to come in such a short amount of time.

It occurs to me that Zeke might not even need Red as a fighter. Depending on my own recovery, I might be a more suitable entrant for this event. However, I don’t know how I would feel about entering the combat division in the Competition. While Competition fighters are too valuable to kill, I have strong reservations about fighting men who are forced into conflict with me, and who might be punished or discarded after. But if the eventual result is those same men’s freedom, would it be immoral to refuse? And what happens to Red if I displace him? Could Zeke find another, possibly more suitable designation for the youth? Depending on Kip’s recovery, there could be a second opening for a domestic asset. But, then again, if Kip makes a full recovery, someone would still be displaced.

There are too many moving pieces to formulate a plausible decision, so I let the thought slip away. Kip’s recovery, my own recovery, and several months of training lie between us and the event. Things will shift as we go, and I will have to see how they settle at the end.

Zero and Red are running laps as I retreat, and I’m pleased at least that there appears to be no animosity between them, even though they are both facing an impossible task. I find a calm area of the room far away from the gym equipment and the fighting ring. It's on the side of the room that houses a giant block structure of unknown use, although I assume it must serve as some kind of multiple-terrain training area, given its location in the gym. Beyond the structure is a corner of the room covered in mats, likely a good place to practice holds and throws without risk of injury. I place myself in the center and sit with my legs folded under me. I will myself to forget the noises of Zero and Red training, forget the list of tasks I have for the rest of the day, forget even my situation in life and the precariousness of my current situation. I let it all fall away, focusing instead on the movement of my chest as I breathe and the sound of my own heartbeat.

I pull myself up from meditation well over an hour later, surprised that I was able to stay under so long given all the stresses of my current situation. My meditation leaves me feeling clean and refreshed, my mind sharp and agile. I think I’ll probably need it to deal with Zero, who strikes me as an ill-tempered patient.

I find Zero watching as Red traverses a climbing wall built into the block structure. There's a grim but determined expression on Zero’s face as he watches his charge. Red, shaking with exertion as he hoists himself up the wall, looks almost sick with desperation. I decide that they both probably need to take a break before one of them snaps.

“Zero,” I call, and then nod my head toward the exit when he looks my way. He gives a nod in return, and I see him wave Red over before I turn away. Zero will likely want to shower before he comes down to the medbay, which gives me time to take my own shower and get my equipment set up.

On the way out the door, I use the wall panel in the gym to intercom Zeke, but he doesn’t respond. I send him a message that we’ll be starting in an hour, wondering how his meeting is going. I make a detour on my way and stop in the master bedroom to check on Kip, but find him soundly asleep in the bed. Zeke is likely in his office on whatever call he had scheduled. I leave without waking Kip, and head back to the medbay to get prepared.

By the time Zero makes it down to the medbay, I’ve decided that we should start the exam
regardless of Zeke's presence. As he has not responded to my message, I have no idea how late he will be, and I refuse to delay any further.

Zero is dressed again in a black tank top, this time accompanied by blue jeans and the same black boots from earlier. He enters the room without hesitation, pausing to wait for instruction when the door closes behind him.

“I'll need you to undress so I can see the extent of the injury,” I inform him. “I have a gown if it would make you more comfortable, or...”

He's already out of the shirt and unlacing the boots. Another moment and he's naked, his clothes in a folded pile on the counter. I turn away from him and gesture to the gurney I've set up as an exam table. The additional furniture makes the room feel a bit crowded, but the hospital beds aren't conducive to an examination.

I don exam gloves, and when I turn back he's sitting on the gurney, his legs dangling over the edge. I get him to raise his arms, then put a wide, blue band around his chest. The band checks his heart-rate and breathing patterns, blood pressure and temperature. Measurements that once had to be checked individually and manually, now pooled together in a single piece of technology. I let it gather data as I swab his finger and take a blood sample. Zero doesn't flinch when I use the small box to prick him, but he does seem too tense overall. He doesn't relax when it's over, nor when I remove the strap from his torso.

“Are you alright?” I ask quietly.

He blinks at me, and I can see him coming back to awareness.

“Sorry,” he says stiltedly, and shifts away from me. “It's just... memories.”

Given what I've heard of the infamous “zeros,” it's likely that he had a traumatic childhood filled with constant medical procedures. I try to assess whether it would be better to encourage him to talk it out, or if I would simply be prompting more painful recollections. But I need to know if anything could trigger a violent reaction, so I decide to gently push for more information.

“I've heard rumors...” I trail, unwilling to repeat shallow gossip. “I could do certain parts of the exam in another room, if you'd be more comfortable.”

“No,” he replies. “It's not the room.” He gestures around, at the tan-colored cabinets and cream-colored, linoleum floors. “There's color in here. Signs of people. Beds. Blankets. Clothing. In there, it was only steel and gray. Like a cage.” He pauses again, his eyes drifting around, reorienting himself. Then his gaze settles on the box, which I've placed on a rolling table. He shudders and turns his eyes away, and I can almost see him shutting out the memory. I move the equipment out of his line of sight.

“Do you have anything else that might trigger a painful memory?” I ask as I close the box in a drawer, making a mental note to put it in its proper place once Zero is gone.

“No, I...” Zero hesitates, his tone confused. “I don't think so. I've never... It just... It felt the same and...”

“Traumatic events can cause problems even years later. You don't need to explain yourself,” I assure him. “Just let me know if something upsets you, and we'll try to work around it.”

There's a pink tinge to his cheeks, and I think he might actually be blushing. The best thing I can do for that condition is to ignore it, so I ask him to lie back. I move my hands to his abdomen, but he
flinches when I touch him. A second attempt receives the same results, so I remove my hands and step back to give him space.

“Sorry,” he says gruffly. “I won't... I didn't mean to pull away.”

“You've got nothing to apologize for,” I respond. “Just help me understand what's causing the reaction. Tell me what I can do to alleviate your discomfort.”

He stares at me for a moment, his expression clouded and confused. It feels like he's not seeing me; or rather, he's seeing me overlaid with a hundred other specters of his past. It's not the first time I've been on the receiving end of such a stare, nor is it the first time my attempts at assistance have been rebuffed because of the shadow of another who was trying to harm. Still, it's never pleasant to be overshadowed by a memory.

“Can you...” he trails, then his expression shutters and he turns his face away. “Never mind.”

“No,” I demand sternly. “Tell me what you were going to say.”

“It's nothing.”

“It's not nothing,” I counter. “Something I did obviously made you react. Whatever it is, I will adapt as best I can to avoid repeating it. So what is it?”

“It's the gloves,” he admits. His words tumbling out, like he has no power to stop them. “The scent is...”

Ah. I should have known. Olfactory memory is easily stimulated and triggers a powerful response. The scent of latex is unique, unlikely to get diluted by repeated exposure.

“Can you...” He hesitates again. “Are the gloves necessary?”

I glance at my hands. Are the gloves strictly necessary in this instance? No. Zero is uninjured and non-infectious, so they're merely a precaution and a courtesy. However, the gloves give me a barrier of professionalism that I'm loathe to lose, especially given the murky personal relationships I've been developing lately. But if the decision is between my comfort and my patient's, my duty will always trump my personal preferences.

I strip away the gloves and toss them into a waste basket. I take a moment to wash my hands for good measure, knowing that the scent can linger. Then I return to his side, pulling a rolling chair with me so that I can sit instead of looming over him. My skin smells pleasantly of lemons, and I can see Zero relax with the changes. I press my fingers to his abdomen, and this time he doesn't recoil from the touch.

A physical exam might seem unnecessary when there are instruments to virtually look inside a patient, but I still prefer it. Partially because it's quicker and less invasive – equipment for a scan takes a long time to get in place, and each piece gives only a partial picture, making it easy to miss something. During a manual exam, I can rely on my own knowledge as well as my patient's reactions, which the machinery is oblivious to. I find that, in general, the person occupying the body still has a better grasp of its functions and limitations than even the most advanced medical instruments.

I start with a basic check of his organs, pressing firmly against his lower abdomen and pelvis. I'm not expecting to find any abnormalities, but I want to be thorough just in case. I doubt Zero has received adequate medical care in the past, given the state of his hip. It's strange to feel his warm skin against my own, to be able to feel the tremors of his muscles against my fingertips. Still, his breathing
stays even and his body relaxed, so I count my effort as worthwhile.

Zero's torso is riddled with scars, from small, white lines to jagged tears, all speaking to me of a lifetime hard-lived as a fighter. I've seen worse, of course. Being trained for combat myself, I can see the places where wounds could have gone deeper or landed in a worse position. I attribute the lack to Zero's skill. Despite being taken by surprise in our first match, I am aware that Zero is an excellent fighter with years of experience to add to his physical prowess, which has likely been genetically modified. Zero's skills and resilience are probably the only reasons he's still alive.

I try to keep any eye on Zero's face while I perform my exam, but I'm aware that his expression might be misleading given his high pain tolerance. It's an issue that I discovered early on when treating combat assets, although I later developed a knack for detecting more subtle signs of pain. Still, looking at Zero's face now, I'm made aware once again of how clean it is of scars, how his hands have nothing but calluses and his lower arms are free of scars as well. I don't believe that it's simple luck. Given that Zero was not one of my patients at the BloodSports Arena, I have to assume that he was used as a bodyguard or enforcer for an owner, or possibly both. To keep him from standing out too much, the scars on his face and hands would have been removed using epidermal regeneration, a technique that repairs only the outer layer of the skin, making the scars invisible but leaving the damage beneath. There are other methods of healing scar-tissue, but they are lengthy and costly, so I doubt Zero would have received them. I make a note to check him for covered scars, as the dense tissue can interfere with my instruments, making some procedures ineffectual.

It's an issue that I'll deal with later. At the moment, I'm satisfied that Zero has no current or untreated internal damage. He still seems relaxed, watching me casually from under half-lidded eyes, so I decide we can continue without a break. I ask him to turn on his side so that I can check on his hip; the focus of today's exam. He turns toward me, given that I'm on the right side of the gurney, and I notice as he shifts that his cock is growing erect, lying half-hard in a patch of dark curls between his thighs. Being a professional, I avert my eyes and ignore it, knowing that it is likely an involuntary reaction to being touched, a side-effect of my gloveless hands, although obviously preferable to the first. The stimulation from his exercise could also be a contributing factor, given the endorphins surging through his veins. It's understandable that he is unable to control himself, and I don't want to make him feel awkward by suggesting he cover or suppress it.

I put my attention on Zero's hip, firmly ignoring the erection pointing in my direction. In a moment, I have put it from my mind entirely, focusing on the jagged scars on Zero's side, trying to imagine the severity of the damage that could put such a pattern under his skin. It's not the first time I've seen the whirl of jagged scars that decorate his left side – my thoughts slip briefly back to seeing Zero and Zeke mid-coitus in the shower some time ago – but it's the first time I've gotten a chance to examine them.

The broken glass scars are a tell-tale sign of impact from a pulse gun, as nothing else creates marks quite like it. Unlike projectile weapons of the past, a pulse is essentially a blunt-force impact. It uses a supercharged wave of air to create a narrow impact zone which can then be aimed at an intended target. It alleviates the concern of explosive decompression, as it is unlikely to pierce the hull of a craft or satellite, but it can still do considerable damage to a victim. In Zero's case, where the blast was likely full intensity and close-range, he's lucky to have survived, especially given that I can see no signs of treatment.

Up close, I can see that the actual point of impact is on the back of his hip, meaning he was either fleeing or retreating from his attacker, and they hit him from the side as he went. Jagged scars lead out from that center point of contact, like someone breaking a mirror with a stone. The untouched center isn't much larger than my thumb, with the damage leading out at a circumference roughly the length of my hand. It would have torn tissue in the medius and maximus glutes, as well as the fasciae
latae and femoris muscles. Essentially, he would have received subdermal fissures from his lower back to his upper thigh, and wrapping around the front almost to his pelvis. These fissures would have caused him to hemorrhage under the skin, leading to potentially life-threatening blood clots as his body tried to control the bleeding.

In additional to the torn muscles and broken blood vessels, the bone directly underneath the impact site would have been shattered. I circle my fingers around the impact site, reluctant to press against it for fear of causing damage. I'll need to scan it, but the hit appears to have struck the ilium, the rounded bone just under the curve of the hip. While there's no particularly good place on the body to receive such a hit, striking the iliac crest minimized any damage to organs or the moving joints of the body. In that respect, Zero was lucky, although I have a hard time describing receiving a full-force impact from a pulse gun as such.

I take a pen from the drawer and use it to mark out some of the worst scarring. Most of Zero's pain is likely caused by bone shards that were never removed and fractures that never fully healed. This, at least, is something I can do for Zero, offering him the help that he should have received within minutes of receiving such a wound, not years after its healed. But this is all I'm able to offer, so I set the pen aside and stare down at the network of scars I've now outlined.

From an aesthetic standpoint, the scars are almost beautiful. More so, I suppose, because I understand the trauma that caused them, the resilience and strength needed to recover from them. I find myself brushing my fingers over the warm skin in a way that has no purpose in my exam, a simple caress meant only to appreciate the strength it took to survive such a wound. In my culture, where strength is valued above all else, ritual scarification is still used to test the mettle of young warriors. It makes me wonder, idly, what my younger self and Zero's would have thought of each other.

Then I shake myself and pull my hand away, cursing my own witless folly. Idle foolishness has no place during an examination, and it must be my continued weak constitution that led to such thoughts.

“You can get up,” I tell him, and turn away as he moves. There's a tablet in the medbay and I've availed myself of it on multiple occasions, so I use it to mark down some notes on Zero's prognosis. I would like to think that, having so few patients, I would have no trouble memorizing their conditions. However, experience has taught me that my life is subject to abrupt changes, and I don't want to risk losing any valuable data.

I hear Zero getting to his feet and moving to my side. I can tell that he's looking over my shoulder at the notes, but I make no move to shield it. Not that anything I put down is private, but it's not likely he'd understand the medical jargon anyway. A moment later I feel his gaze shift, and I glance over to see him looking at me instead.

“Am I going to live?” he asks, and there's a teasing tone to it that is unexpected from the solemn fighter.

“I don't think that was ever in question.” A pause, and then, “Well, not recently.”

“Can you fix it?” he prompts, and makes no move to step away despite being nude and within arm's reach. Modesty isn't something often pushed on combat assets, and while this fact is not new to me, rarely has one pushed the bounds of politeness by invading my space like this.

“I can't make it what it once was,” I warn, wanting to set a realistic expectation of the procedure, “but I think I can improve the strength and range of motion while alleviating some of the discomfort.”
“Good,” he says, and then moves into my space, bracketing me against the counter with his feet on either side of mine, his front flush against my back. The tablet falls from my fingers with a clatter, my hands bracing against the counter as he jostles me. The arousal that I’d noticed earlier presses against the cleft of my rear, and despite being fully clothed I feel vulnerable. I have not recovered from my time with Ellaine, and Zero is wise to how quick I can be. If he tries something with me in this position, I won’t be able to maneuver enough to protect myself.

“Step back!” I snarl in a low voice, trying to keep my heart-rate under control. Panicking will do me no good in this situation. If I can keep my head, maybe I can talk some sense into him.

Surprisingly, Zero obeys, retreating just enough to let me turn around, but not enough that I can slip by him. The position I find myself in is not significantly better than having my back to Zero. Where before I could feel his erection pressing against me, now I can see it hovering between us, the tip brushing against the front of my black scrub pants. I press against the counter, putting as much space as possibly between Zero’s cock and my pelvis. Zero’s face is inscrutable, his expression relaxed. Where I had expected to see malice, his metallic eyes are as placid as water.

“What is this?” I growl, the counter biting into my back as I force myself to stay still. I have the feeling that any evasion on my part would trigger an aggressive reaction from Zero, and I’d find myself in a similar position on the floor. A scenario that I’d like to avoid at all costs, if possible.

Zero shrugs, and I have to bite down on a snarl. I remind myself that I’m likely to lose in a physical altercation, and that antagonizing him should be avoided in this instance. He shifts closer, his cock rubbing against my own, with only a thin layer of fabric creating a barrier. I shut my eyes and hiss a breath out through my teeth, trying to will myself calm. I open my eyes, meeting his steely gaze with my own.

“Is this...” I lick my lips, feeling a responsive stirring in my own body despite the adrenaline coursing through my veins. Possibly because of it. “Is this some kind of payment?”

“Ch,” Zero scoffs, “For what?”

“For helping you?” I ask, feeling myself scowl. “For helping Kip?”

“I’m not going to pay you with my body for doing your job,” he responds derisively.

“Then why...?”

“Maybe I just like the way you look,” he replies.

“Maybe,” I counter, “Zeke never taught you self-control along with all those sexual skills.”

“Maybe that too,” he acknowledges.

He leans forward, and his lips touch mine in the barest hint of what could be called a kiss. I’m stunned into immobility. He smirks as he pulls away, his breath warm against my face. His hand runs down my side, his fingers grazing over the fabric of my scrub top from my shoulder down to my hip. Teasing digits finger the hem of my top, dipping underneath to stroke along the skin of my side. I shiver, the heat of his touch igniting something primal in me. Something that wants to react. Something that wants to shove him down and tear my own clothing off, to have as much of that burning skin as possible against mine.

His fingers dip under the hem of my scrub pants, and I hit my breaking point. My hand darts out
and catches his wrist in a grinding hold.

“Take your hand off of me before I break your wrist,” I warn.

He quirks an amused smile and says, “Aren't you my doctor?”

“I will break it in a place that is easy to set,” I inform him, “but I will break it.”

He makes a sound of amusement but releases me, backing away a couple steps. I don’t let myself think about the way his warmth lingers on my skin, or the fact that it's been too long since anyone has touched me intending anything but harm. Zero would harm me too, just not in the physical sense.

“So that's a no, then?”

“It is definitely a no,” I clarify. Then after a moment of thought, “No, thank you.”

He snorts and hops onto the counter, dangling his legs over the edge. I feel a surge of irritation at having his bare ass on my work area, but given the circumstances I choose to let it go. I give myself a moment to take some calming breaths, wondering if the threat is really gone or if Zero is merely biding his time.

“What,” I growl, trying to keep my voice calm but hearing the unsteady shake, “was that about?”

“You've been getting close to Zeke,” Zero responds, his voice unhesitating. I frown, trying to understand the connection between his answer and my question.

“Are you jealous? Is that what this is about? Because...”

“No,” he cuts me off. “It's not like that. I'm not trying to break you two apart. It's good that he has someone... someone he can confide in.” He stares at his hands, his eyes going distant. “It's been brought to my attention,” he says, his voice hollow, “that my judgment cannot be trusted when it comes to those I care about. Until I can... fix that,” he says, as though the words themselves are a struggle, “I don't think it's safe for him to lean on me. Not like he needs.” Then he turns a steely stare on me and says, “But I won't be left behind, either.”

“Your plan is to use me as a bridge to Zeke?” I ask. “Because you're incapable of talking about your feelings with him like an adult?”

“This was going to happen anyway,” he responds. “You're a fighter, like me. Zeke is known for taming and fucking fighters. You think it won't happen to you too?”

It's like ice water in my veins, sending a chill through me.

“He's said that he won't,” I respond, but even as I say it, I wonder if it's really true. He's promised not to subjugate or abuse me, but what if he asks for my compliance? Can I deny him in the scenario Zero has outlined? At the cost of our lives, can I hold on to my principles, my purity? Or will circumstance force me into sexual servitude, my body at the mercy of any who would have me? All for a chance at freedom?

“Hey,” Zero says, and I'm pulled from my thoughts to find that his expression has turned concerned. “It's not like that. It's... It's good.”

“I'm sure,” I respond, my voice dripping with sarcasm as my stomach roils.

“Don't,” Zero snaps. “I didn't know you'd react like this, or I would have waited for Zeke. I
thought you'd be used to...”

“Rape?” I ask, righteous anger sparking in my chest.

He rolls his eyes. Responds with, “Used to doing what's necessary to survive. Next you'll be telling me this is wrong. That we shouldn't be enslaved.”

“We shouldn't be!” I echo angrily. “We deserve-...”

“Deserve has nothing to do with it!” he cuts me off angrily. “This is the reality! You've been here long enough to know that it isn't going to change!”

He's right. Regardless of what we deserve, this is the reality we live in. Zeke could easily overpower me and take what he wants. Our only hope for safety is the freedom promised by Zeke's mission, which is looking less and less likely to succeed. Am I being stubborn? Naive? Maybe. What else do I have, if not my honor?

“Enough,” I growl, and take a calming breath. I move away. “Unless you're planning to refuse my treatment, we need to continue the exam. I have one final test to run, and then you can get the hell out of my medbay.”

I doubt these new concerns will follow him out, but I push the thoughts aside for now. Zero hops down from the counter and resumes his position on the gurney. I gesture, and he goes back onto his side. I grab an instrument from the cabinet and roll my chair to his side. His eyes train on my face, and I find myself with the uncomfortable impulse step back. I push down on my emotions, unwilling to let Zero see me off-balance.

“This light will reveal any scars that have been covered. Given that so many are visible, I doubt that any have been erased near the procedure site, but it's still better to check.” I pause, and then, “If I feel your fingers on me-...”

“You'll break them,” Zero responds, unconcerned. My first impulse tells me that he's being overconfident about his skills, but that doesn't seem like Zero's typical behavior. More likely, he has no intention of pushing me any further, now that he's hit my breaking point. Still, I feel like I need to start taking my training more seriously. I don't like feeling helpless, and the reminder of my frailty rankles.

“Alright, flip around,” I tell him. “I need a better vantage.” It's only partially true. The other half is needing the mental distance that having him facing away from me creates. Zero grunts and turns, inverting the position of his head and his feet, now staring at the wall and putting his back to me.

With Zero settled, I cue the lights off and turn on the hand-held light. The room is bathed in blue light. White lines appear on Zero's face, mostly on his eyebrows and lips. Places a fist or blunt instrument would be aimed for. More white lines appear on his hands and wrists. I shine the light over his hip, looking for any signs of hidden wounds or incisions. A few new lines are revealed, longer and darker than the scars that remain on his torso. Perhaps too conspicuous, attracting too much unwanted attention? Only a few dip close enough to his hip to be of concern.

I'm almost finished when I hear the door slide open and a sliver of light falls into the darkened room. I glance up only long enough to see Zeke slip into the room, then turn my attention back to Zero. The door closes, and the room again is lit only by the dim emergency lights and the fluorescence reflecting from Zero's skin.

“What's going on?” Zeke asks, and I can hear his footsteps padding closer.
“I have to survey Zero's body for scar-tissue,” I respond. “If you'd been here on time, you'd know that.”

“I know,” Zeke replies. “I'm sorry. I got held up. Can you fill me in?”

“Once we're finished.” I move the light across Zero's body, outlining the darkest, most troubling scars with marker. I'll need to take a picture of them when the lights are back on, so that I can plan which areas to avoid during the procedure.

“What is all this?” Zeke asks, and I can just make out his silhouette in the dim light.

“Damn it,” I growl, turning on him with the light still in my hand. “I told you, it reveals hidden scars so that I can...”

My voice trails, the snarky explanation all but forgotten.

Zeke's face is illuminated by the dim glow that I've turned on him, his skin washed almost ghostly blue in the artificial light. Jagged, luminous white lines stand out on his right cheek, almost spectral in the darkness. Running right under his eye, they span from just beside his nose to the highest point of his cheekbone, stopping just before the curve of his face would hide them from view. I stare at the lines, not fully comprehending the purposeful arrangement of them, the matching thickness and symmetry, until finally the design coalesces in my brain.

And then the stark lines on Zeke's face take the form of letters, and the letters combine into a word.

WHORE

Almost the instant the meaning hits me, Zeke has an epiphany of his own. His hand comes to his cheek, blocking the letters from my view. I cannot tell in the dim light if his face grows paler, but his expression takes on a horrified aspect and he falls back a step from me. I aim the light at the floor, although I am not sure Zeke has yet connected the light with its purpose, or if my expression betrayed my understanding. Still, I am afraid to uncover any other startling secrets from the man who claims to be our rescuer. What other secrets hide in his past?

What do I really know about this person?

“What's happening?” Zero asks, pushing himself up on one hand so he can glance over his shoulder at us.

“Nothing,” I put in quickly. And then, because Zero isn't stupid, I add, “Zeke startled me, and I almost dropped the light.”

That seems to be enough for Zero, because he settles back onto the gurney. In truth, our interaction likely took only a few seconds, although it felt far longer than that.

I put the light back on Zero's hip. I've finished mapping the scar tissue hidden from view, but I need a moment to compose myself. How many surprises will I face today? Already off-balance from Zero's earlier actions, it takes me a moment to recover from the shock of seeing such intentionally brutal hidden scars on Zeke's face. If I aimed the light at him again, would I find more?

“Stay like that,” I tell Zero, putting the blue light aside and cuing the overhead lights. I grab my tablet from the counter and snap several pictures of Zero's hip from different angles. I'll need the images to help me map out the proper insertion points for the procedure, allowing me to avoid the worst of the scar tissue. “You can get dressed, then we'll discuss your treatment.”
“I'm fine,” Zero says, “you can go ahead.”

“Put your damn clothes on!” I snap, and move to put the light back in storage. Zeke raises an eyebrow at my outburst as I pass, but doesn't comment. By the time I turn back around, Zero is back in his shirt and pants, sitting with his legs hung over the side of the gurney. Zeke is standing near the door, his arms crossed over his chest and his face a neutral mask. I pull my rolling chair closer to Zero and grab the tablet again.

“Given what I've found today, I think I can help alleviate some of the residual pain and weakness in your left hip, caused by untreated damage from a pulse blast.”

“You can reinforce the bone where it broke?” Zeke asks.

“Broken bones don't necessarily heal weaker than they were before,” I clarify. “The issue here isn't the actual trauma, it's the extensiveness of the injury and the lack of post-trauma care. You have places where the bones didn't knit back together correctly, and areas where there are still fragments of bone under the skin. The procedure I'm suggesting would use microsurgery to remove the bone fragments, dull any sharp protrusions, and fill any remaining gaps with bio-glue. It's a minor surgery, low risk, and minimally invasive. I would recommend performing it as soon as possible. I already have all the tools needed on-site.”

“Recovery time?” Zero asks pragmatically.

“A week of full rest,” I respond, “and three weeks of limited mobility.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“I can't lose that kind of training time.”

“You can't compete without the procedure. Ergo, your training time is wasted.”

“I agree with him,” Zeke adds gently. “If you want to compete in the combat category, then this surgery is non-optional.”

Zero mulls that over for a moment. Finally, he asks, “When is Kip scheduled to have his blindfold off?” and it's such an abrupt change of topic that it leaves me blinking in surprise. It takes me several seconds before I can come up with answer.

“The end of this week,” I respond eventually. “By then, we'll know one way or the other about his sight.”

“I'll make a decision after that,” Zero replies, and stands like the conversation is closed.

“You shouldn't delay the procedure because of Kip's condition,” I argue. “Kip is doing well and...”

“We don't need to have two assets compromised at the same time,” Zero counters. “This gives me time to start Red's training before I'm sidelined. And I don't want Kip to be worried about me while he's got his own issues to deal with.”

“I suppose that's fair,” I agree reluctantly. “Just be aware that delaying the surgery also pushes back your recovery. After the procedure, you'll need to relearn how your limb functions with new adjustments. It will take time.”
Zero gives me a curt nod, our conversation closed.

“I'm assuming I have no say in this?” Zeke puts in, but his tone has a note of wry amusement.

“Did you have something to add?” I ask.

“I suppose not,” Zeke says with a shrug. “I know he's in good hands with you. If you could keep me apprised of the situation, I would appreciate it.”

Then he follows Zero out the door, leaving me alone in the medbay. I vacate the chair for the bed that I usually occupy, sitting heavily on the edge and staring at the cream-colored tiles.

And not for the first time, I have to ask myself, “What have I gotten myself into?”
Drinks Part 1 - Zeke POV

Chapter Notes

We are very quickly catching up to what I have pre-written. 😮 I need to get moving! But I'm so glad that this section seems to be going over pretty well, and Lee doesn't seem TOO annoying. ;) And even when he is, it's kind of fun. I appreciate all the reactions I'm getting, and I'm trying to work with and adapt to the feedback I'm getting. You all make this fic so much better! I can't thank you enough.

*Almost forgot - due to the nature of what they're talking about, I've added "Mentions of Underage" in the tags, mostly for the next chapter. It will be in memories, not anything super-graphic, but I wanted to tag just in case someone is completely adverse to seeing that in a fic at all. Just a heads-up!

Also have to give my gratitude to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

Zero and I rouse Kip for dinner after Zero's consultation with Lee. Kip practically interrogates Zero, which thankfully dominates most of the conversation. Ruby and Red are both subdued, which I expected from my exhausted new combat asset, but Ruby's subdued attitude since this morning is a bit of a mystery to me. I chalk it up to more odd behavior from the willful teen. Lee skips dinner with the rest of us, choosing instead to keep his own company. I should be thankful for the reprieve, but I find myself annoyed that I haven't been able to settle things between us. Given Lee's tenacity, I doubt that he'll simply overlook what he saw during Zero's exam.

After dinner, I leave Ruby and Red to clean up the kitchen. Ruby more than Red, given that the combat asset is barely on his feet after a day under Zero's tutelage. Meanwhile, Zero and Kip head to the Master's suite, with Zero helping Kip through the still-arduous nightly routine. Necessities like showering and brushing his teeth are still a challenge for Kip, who is recovering steadily but still sleeps more than not. I plan to join them eventually, but for the moment I feel the need to avail myself of what little privacy the ship still has to offer.

I have one last conference before I'm done for the night, this one short although not painless. My fund manager lets me know that if I continue to increase my expenditures at the current rate, then I won't be able to maintain my lifestyle by the end of the year. Forget about the money to enter the Competition, I won't be able to afford fuel for my ship. And while I understand that things will be settled in one way or another by the end of the year, he is more concerned with the long-term impact on my accounts, and likely his employment. I assure him that I understand, primarily because my fiscal manager for the company has been telling me much the same thing.

When the meeting is over, I find that I can't bring myself to face anyone yet. Exhausted from a full day of people being disappointed by my behavior and puzzled by my lack of explanations, I'm achy and have a pounding headache. My face burns along my right cheekbone, and I don't dare let myself
think about that too hard, afraid that it will open the gate for other forgotten, phantom pains. After I've worked so hard to put them from my mind.

I end up in the playroom because Zero and Kip are in the Master suite, and the rest of the ship is full of communal spaces or disused areas. The idea of returning to my office is too morose even for this mood, especially with how badly my meetings went. If I go to my office, I'll have to think about is what my next steps are and how I'm possibly going to pull this off. All thoughts that I'm working to put out of my mind.

There are a couple of leather couches occupying the rear corner in the playroom, with a low table situated between them. Sturdy and wide, I suppose it could be used as a platform for a lap dance or some other erotic function, but for the moment it merely holds my glass as I toss myself down on the couch, not even bothering to take my shoes off before I put my feet on the cushions. I keep a stocked bar on the other side of the room, and I have a feeling that my first glass will not be my last tonight. I let my head fall back against the cool, black leather and try to push a disgruntled accountant's voice from my mind.

It feels like only seconds have passed when I hear the door open. I glance up to see Lee step in. He quietly lets the door shut behind him, his eyes glancing uncertainly around the dim room. The settle on my lighted corner and I see his shoulders square in resolve.

Great. A man on a mission. I can feel my headache intensifying already.

I have to force myself to stay reclined as he approaches the couch, stopping an arm's length from where I'm sitting. I lock my eyes on the ceiling, hoping that if I wait long enough he'll simply retreat and leave me in peace. We stay like that for several moments, waging a silent battle of wills. Unwilling to heap any more problems on a day already stacked with them, I refuse to acknowledge him. Just as stubbornly, he waits me out, leading me to believe I'm correct to assume that he wants more than a quick chat.

Eventually, I sigh and say, “We can't do this some other time, can we?”

“I'm afraid not,” he responds. I glance over to see him pointedly eyeing my almost-empty glass. “I think, perhaps, you could use the distraction.”

“Then take a seat,” I bid him, “and ask away.”

“You know what I want to know about,” he responds as he settles on the adjacent couch.

“You shouldn't have seen that.”

“But I did.”

“It's nothing.”

“It didn't look like nothing,” he replies, unwilling to be put off by my casual tone. “And I'd hazard a guess that it isn't the only one.”

A burning, phantom pain makes itself known across my pelvis, and another on the inside of my thigh. My cheek stings, but I refuse to touch it.

“That kind of thing happens,” I hedge. “I don't see why it surprises you.”

“How could your employer put you in such a situation?” he asks. And I blink for a moment, startled by where he's laying the blame. “How could they allow you to become compromised in such
“Missions go wrong all the time. You can't plan for every possibility,” I argue.

“Not every possibility, but enough support to keep you from that.”

“I was younger then,” I counter. “Less cautious.” This conversation is getting tedious already. “Really, I don't see how it's any of your business.”

“Someone cut WHORE into your face!” he snarls, his patience breaking as well. “I think I have a right to be concerned!”


“I would expect injuries,” he responds icily. “Cuts, gashes, even a partial hit from a pulse gun would create the type of marks I'd expect. That scar was sadistic and cruel. So what the hell happened?”

“It's none of your business,” I reply and get to my feet, turning my back on him. Shadows of old memories dance along my consciousness, and my cheek stings like it hasn't in years. I resist the urge to touch my face, to remind myself that there's no evidence left of the lettering across my cheekbone.

I hear Lee shift, but he only settles in, tucking his feet up so that he's kneeling on the cushion. He makes no move to rise, and I resist an exasperated sigh. Will he never be dissuaded?

“I want to offer you an exchange,” he tells me. I find myself turning back to him, intrigued.

“Oh?”

“I am aware that I'm asking a lot. Bringing up history is never easy, and you seem particularly reluctant. So for each of my questions you answer, I will answer one of yours.”

For a moment, I consider shrugging and telling him that I have no interest in his background. But then... that isn't true. Despite his unsociable demeanor, I find myself fascinated by the temperamental doctor. Not just that, but I can't help wondering if having open dialogue between us might be a good idea. What would it be like to converse with someone who has all the information, not just partial truths and cover stories? Someone who, if not without motive, at least has a relatively benign ones? And I doubt Lee would press so hard to know my motives if his welfare and mine weren't so tightly linked.

Beyond that, there's one question still burning in the back of my mind. A question that I've shoved down repeatedly, that now rises to the tip of my tongue.

“Why did you wake up for me?” I ask.

“What?” he asks, tilting his head in confusion.

“When I got you from Elaine, you were in that- that... I don't know. Self-induced coma? Trance?”

“It's a meditative technique,” he clarifies, but there's a twist to his mouth like he's tasted something bitter.

“Whatever it was, she spent months trying to get a reaction, and I managed to pull you out of it in only a couple of hours. Then when you did wake up, and you immediately started hurling accusations at me.”
“I didn't think anyone could have that much dumb luck,” he admits, smirking now. “After getting to know you, I can see the error in my judgment.”

Instead of taking offense, I push forward with my questions. “What made you wake for me instead of her? Was it a choice or coincidence? Or something else?”

He doesn't answer straight away. Instead, he takes a moment to gaze at his hands. Then he sighs and says, “Straight for the heart of it?” He meets my gaze before asking, “So you agree to my terms? A question for a question?”

“I do,” I reply, without giving myself time to consider if this is actually a good idea.

“Then pour me a glass of whatever you're drinking. I can't do this sober.”

The request makes me chuckle, and I get to my feet. I walk to the cabinet on the other side of the room, taking my glass with me.

“Wine?” I ask, surveying the various bottles on the well-stocked shelf.

“Please.”

I set aside my tumbler and pull down two long-stemmed wine glasses. On impulse, I grab one of the bottles I've received today, the ones that I plan to take to Peterson’s party as a gift. The export fee has been almost as much as the bottles were worth. If I keep giving away such expensive gifts, I’ll never manage the funds for the Competition. But with the Department refusing to smuggle them off-world for me and with Dillon attending Peterson’s party, I didn’t feel like I had much of a choice. If only the Department would give me access to my planetary assets…

I shove the frustrating thought away, knowing that I’ll have to take it up with Mari at a later time. Almost angrily, I uncork the bottle in my hands, deciding that my finances are already shot to the point that drinking an expensive wine won't make a difference. The dark, red liquid streams into the cup, splashing against the clear glass before settling to the bottom of the goblet. I fill the second cup and then return to my seat, handing one of the glasses to Lee.

“I doubt you've tasted anything like this,” I offer, and watch as he swirls the liquid in his glass for a moment and sniffs it delicately before taking a cautious sip.

His face goes through an unexpected series of expressions. First a frown of confusion, then a contemplative expression, then a grimace and an expression of silent revulsion before he swallows hard.

“Earth wine?” he guesses, his mouth still drawn in disgust.

“This is the most expensive type of wine in the universe,” I defend. “Why do you look like I've just served you live frogs?”

“Just because it's expensive doesn't make it good,” Lee argues, setting the glass on the table. “Frogs are an apt comparison. It has a lingering aftertaste of swamp water. You've no control over the composition of the soil or the minerals in the water when farming on a planet. Not to mention, half of earth is contaminated with pollutants, which then get distributed in trace amounts to anything that grows there.”

“You're a wine snob,” I accuse, my voice a little dismayed at this new revelation.

A smirk plays around his lips and he says, “Having good taste does not make me a snob.”
I chuckle and pour his glass into my own, taking a long sip as it ends up full almost to the brim. The taste is strong and sweet, black cherry with a woody, oak-like aftertaste. Earth wines are unpredictable, given the atmospheric instability, but the subtle hints and flavors are what make the wines so popular when the vintage is good. More often than not, conditions are challenging for agriculture, given pollution levels and nuclear contamination on the troubled planet. Even more of a challenge is keeping those conditions from affecting the finicky flavor of high-class wines.

“This is a Chateau Price Cabernet Sauvignon, aged 87 years. It was a particularly good harvest, with eastward winds keeping any contamination from the industrial district from reaching the crops.”

“In an ecological bubble like the Earth, there's no way to eliminate cross-contamination. Any issues on any part of the planet inevitable affect the rest of it. The taste from nuclear fallout could last hundreds of years.”

“The nuclear contaminants were all cleaned up generations ago.”

“Spill a bag of rice into a pond, and you'll never retrieve every grain.”

I nod in acknowledgment of his point. In truth, radiation levels in many parts of the exposed countries have only been reduced to acceptable levels, not entirely cleared. I take another sip, and have to admit that under the bold cherry flavor and the subtler tastes of blueberry, anise, and oak, there is a hint of rain just before the harvest, throwing off the acidic balance of the drink.

Subtle undertones and trace tastes are what make Earth-wine so popular when all the elements harmonize. These pieces can also be a detriment to an overly sophisticated palate, especially one raised on the flawless balance in space-wine. However, where space-wine might not have to deal with the chaotic environmental concerns of Earth, it can never have the personality or sophistication of Earth-wine. The elements that make planet-made wine so difficult are also the ones that make it so coveted.

“Thankfully,” I inform Lee, “I doubt Peterson will have your discerning tastes. I'm sure I could serve him a bottle of grape juice and he'd be pleased, as long as it came from Earth. And despite your critique, this actually is considered a good vintage.”

He nods in return and responds, “I've been told that I have a finicky palate when it comes to fruit-based wines.”

“I won't contradict that,” I tease. “Would you prefer something else?”

“I've got very little experience with vodka. I can't imagine I could tell the difference between good quality and poor.”

I take Lee's glass back to the liquor cabinet and swap it for a tumbler. There's an ice chest underneath, and I put a few cubes in the glass. The rest of the fridge has become fairly barren since Kip took ill and stopped restocking it. I had to specifically ask Ruby to clean it out yesterday, when I stumbled on the browning vegetables. Still, there's some mint in the freezer, along with bottled lime juice and sweet syrup. I muddle the mint leaves in the room-temperature vodka – fresh mint would be better, but I'm not willing to walk down to the main kitchen – then add the lime juice and syrup. I shake the mixture, then pour through a strainer and over the ice. I garnish it with a mint leaf and set it, with some flourish, in front of Lee.

Lee quirks an eyebrow, and I shrug in reply.

“Mixing drinks is pretty much an essential skill in the crowds I tend to socialize with.”
“Unlike learning to pilot a ship or budget funds,” he responds. Then he takes a sip of the drink and gives an approving nod before setting it aside.

“So,” I ask after a moment of swirling the liquid in my own glass. “About my question?”

He gives a soft sigh and shifts again, pulling one leg up to his chest. He’s still in the black scrubs that he customarily wears – I’m starting to think that they’re the only clothes he has – with long, black cotton pants and a long-sleeved, button-down top. They resemble a martial arts uniform a bit more than a traditional set of scrubs, although the deep pockets tell me that they are, in fact, a medical uniform. He wears white socks and black, slipper-style shoes, all very indicative of an Asian heritage.

As if on cue, he says, “You must be aware that I grew up on a fairly secluded satellite.”

“I assumed,” I respond, because it was my first guess. Outside of clones, such strongly Asian features aren’t often seen. A by-product of the Asian populations aggressively integrating and intermarrying with other ethnicities – much more strongly than other racial groups – is that Asian features are both more common and less prominent throughout the earth-sphere, except for a few secluded satellites where outsiders are discouraged or even banned entirely.

“I grew up on Satellite 8,” he explains, and I am only vaguely aware of the implications. I know that Satellite 8 is one of the first to be launched, and it came from a united group of nations on the Asian content, although the exact country is unknown to me, as the wars and space-colonization reformatted many of the planetary boundaries. Once in space, that particular satellite cut off virtually all contact, so little else is known about it.

“You have to understand where I came from to understand what I was doing and why I awoke for you.”

He pauses then, and takes a long sip from his drink. I can tell that it’s a cover for collecting his thoughts, though, and also a bit a liquid courage. The glass is almost empty by the time he finishes.

“Another?”

“Please,” he says without looking in my direction. I take his glass and remake the drink. When I finish, I grab a pair of shot glasses and a bottle of whiskey without letting myself think about it too much. I set Lee's drink in front of him and pour us each a shot, sitting back down before raising the glass expectantly.

“Really?” Lee asks, but there's a rueful smile on his face. “Shots?”

“You said you couldn’t be sober,” I argue.

“Mm. I suppose I did.”

The scholar hesitates only a moment before lifting his cup, tapping the glass against mine, and throwing back the shot. I do the same, feeling the invigorating heat of the drink as it burns down my throat and settles hotly in my stomach.

“You have to understand,” Lee says as he puts the shot glass aside, his words flowing much more freely already, “that there are parts of my culture that I’m very proud of.”

“Okay,” I respond, having very little to go on so far.

“We are a learned, industrious people. Satellite 8 is the oldest habitable satellite in the solar system.
Years of constant maintenance and upkeep have allowed us to keep our home safe and stable, where others have collapsed or been abandoned in favor of newer locations.”

The deconstruction and reclamation of satellites isn’t an unusual thing. After a few disasters in the start of space-colonization due to unsafe living conditions, many of the earliest satellites were completely deconstructed, their populations moved onto newer satellites and the original satellite stripped to a shell and completely rebuilt, or dismantled for parts. Satellite 12 was also one of the oldest inhabited locations, which was why few questioned when tragedy struck.

“But?” I ask, referring back to the inference that there’s an aspect of his home that he’s less proud of.

“But their views are rigidly traditional, and the class structure is little better than modern slavery, without the benefit of being illegal. The aristocracy lives a lavish lifestyle, while the peasantry hasn’t seen an improvement in living conditions in the last thousand years, despite the move off-world. The lower-classes are purposefully kept poor and uneducated to keep them from demanding equality with their upper-class peers. The landowners exploit the lack of options to leave, charging outrageous prices for living spaces and paying low wages in the industrial sector, creating a circle of wealth.”

“Wealth disparity is something that most satellites deal with,” I argue. “And Earth has some of the worst poverty conditions in the solar system.”

“But there’s the chance of escape,” Lee argues. “Populations shift toward places with more opportunity and better living conditions. Where I come from, you’re confined to the area you were born in, with little opportunity to move anywhere, let alone upwards mobility.”

“Were you born in the lower classes?” I ask, and it must be the liquor that has loosened my tongue, because I realize a moment later that it could be an offensive question.

Lee only shakes his head, though, and responds, “My house was not the wealthiest, but powerful in their own right. Politically, we held much sway and controlled fairly large portions of the industrial and agricultural sector. Despite being well off, we were not generous with the people who were our responsibility. Our workers took long shifts and lived in poor conditions, although not the worst. Nor did they suffer the abuses some of the other houses subjected their help to.”

“Could have done better, could have been worse?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“I assume from your tone that you disapproved?” I ask.

“Of course!” Lee snaps. “People still die of cancer there. Children die of diseases that became treatable centuries ago. Modern plagues sweep through the crowded conditions wiping out whole families. And all so that the higher classes can keep one-upping each other with extravagance.”

His hands are clenched into fists in his lap, and I can tell that he could easily slip into a tangent about the shortcomings of the aristocracy on his native satellite, but I don’t want to get too far off-topic. I pour us another pair of shots.

“You were trying to tell me about your meditation,” I remind him as I hand over his glass. He unclenches his fist and takes the glass without hesitation, throwing it back before making an appreciative face at the burn.

“You need to understand that all of the wealth is hoarded by the upper classes,” he says, his voice a bit husky from the alcohol. I can't help but stare at his face as I sip my own shot, liking the way the
drink burns through me. I haven't seen Lee so animated before, except when his ire is aimed at me. I have to admit that he's attractive like this, his delicate features focused so intently on his memories. Dark, sultry eyes lit with passion. Would he look the same, I wonder, in the heat of sex? Would his expression be just as keen and perceptive? What would he be like as a bed-partner, with all that intelligence and fervor?

Then I shake the notion away. This isn't the time for such thoughts, both in the immediacy and the foreseeable future. When I rescue him from a life of slavery, then I can wax poetic about his enthusiasm.

"Knowledge is considered wealth," he explains, oblivious to my train of thought, "so it is hoarded. It isn't enough to simply have riches, you must also have a sound body and a quick intellect. We studied martial arts and literature, science and philosophy, biology and religion. Class rankings were a public mark of honor, so we began learning well before we entered the school system."

He hesitates then, a frown stealing over his face. He holds his shot glass out to me, and I obligingly refill it, then my own to keep pace with him. His mixed drink is forgotten, while my glass of wine is empty. I consider refilling it, but I'm already starting to feel the effects of the wine and the shots. And the bourbon I'd been drinking before he came in, almost forgot that. I can only hope I'll be sober enough to remember the end of Lee's explanation, which seems like it might take a while.

"I'm making it sound better than it was," he says after he downs his shot. "Is?" he asks, and I can tell that he's starting to feel the effects of the alcohol, too. "Is," he decides. "They're still there, as far as I know, still repeating the same cycles. The same mistakes."

He makes a frustrated sound and downs another shot before continuing.

"You have to understand how severe and competitive it is. Even before children can walk, they begin to train. By the time they reach school age, they are already well-read and trained in a variety of sports. Once the children enter school, they are ranked against one another, and the rankings are a public mark of honor or shame for the family. The competition is severe. Many children and teens can't survive the strain."

"Suicide?" I find myself asking.

"Not by name," Lee says. "That would be an unacceptable show of weakness and instability for the child's household. But the children of the noble classes are taught to swim in the agricultural reservoirs almost since birth. If an older child or teen accidentally drowns, it is common practice not to check for narcotic substances unless foul play is suspected. So it's an open secret, in a way. If a child does poorly on a test, a common insult is to say, 'I hope you're a strong swimmer.' A bit of a backward way of saying, 'I hope you don't succeed when you try to drown yourself.'"

"Cruel."

"Yes, although when you're raised in such a culture, you don't recognize it as such. But I'm off-topic again." He takes his mixed drink in hand and leans back in his seat, swirling the liquid idly. "Where was I?"

"Childhood?" I supply.

"Right. I mentioned that it's a strict, traditionalist culture, yes? Women do not own land or hold public office. Most upper-class women do not work. The duty of a woman is to maintain the household and raise the children. However, because of the competitive nature of the society, children are expected to be well-educated before they ever reach school. Thus mothers are expected to be
excellent teachers, well-read and wise so that they can pass that knowledge down to their offspring. Female children are held to the same rigid standards as boys until they reach a marriageable age, when it becomes unseemly for them to compete against potential husbands.”

“Sounds... fun.”

“It could be,” he says, and his eyes are distant. “Humans under great stress tend to wring the joy out of even the smallest sources. I liked to take my books out and sit near the grain fields during the growing season. Watch the butterflies that we used for pollination. My mother would give me fruits and nuts to eat, and would send me a little bowl of sugar-water to attract the butterflies. Sometimes I would see the peasant children chasing the butterflies. They would never catch them, of course, because the butterflies were too important to the agricultural process to risk damaging any, but the children would chase after them anyway. I was, of course, too well-bred and sophisticated to participate.”

“Of course,” I respond, because I know how that feels. To know that you are part of something valuable and coveted, but to want to trade it all for a moment of unsullied happiness. We had servants at the Price manor, too. Perhaps not ones held in the rigid bondage Lee has described, but enough that I was not allowed to join in their games or mimic their dress. And the children in my own social class tended to mimic their parents in being humorless, shallow, and vain. I'd struggled to befriend them, never truly feeling like I fit in. Never feeling like I wanted to.

“When you want to compliment a smart man in my culture, you say, 'He has a wise mother.' Women were prized for their ability to raise strong, intelligent sons. Even in this climate, though, my mother was extraordinary. A martial arts master, fluent in five languages, studied in the fields of nucleo-fission and bioengineering. And yet she dedicated the vast majority of her time to educating me and my three brothers.”

“Brothers?”

“Yes – I was the youngest of four. But we weren't close. My next oldest brother was seven years my senior. My eldest brother was an adult when I was born.”

“Ah.”

“She was a brilliant teacher, and she kindled a love of learning in me that has followed me for the rest of my life.”

“She sounds wonderful,” I acknowledge, and Lee dips his head at the compliment, too lost in memories to respond. I try to recall memories of my own mother – soft blue eyes and golden hair. She was beautiful. Vain and vapid, in every way the opposite of Lee's mother.

“My culture believes that knowledge is more than science and mathematics,” Lee acknowledges, his eyes still distant. “We are a spiritual people, and philosophy is just as important to us as factual knowledge. It is thought that only through meditation can one become truly enlightened, so children are taught meditation at an early age. As soon as a child can crawl, they meditate with their mothers as part of the daily routine. In the noble houses, a child must learn to achieve such a deep state of meditation that they are no longer aware of their surroundings. So deep that if their mother pricks them with a pin, they will not feel it.”

Damn, that sounds just... wholesome and horrifying in the same breath.

“So that's where you learned the technique?” I find myself asking, trying to imagine Lee as a child, learning to meditate at his mother's knee. Trying to imagine that fierce scowl on a five-year-
old. Finding that it causes me less trouble than I expect, and grinning at the image.

“The principles of it. I would not have been able to distance myself from such abuse when I was young, but the foundation of the practice was achieved when I was just a child. Over the years, I have practiced and perfected the art, slipping deeper and deeper into my mind until I am able to completely tune out the needs of my body.”

“And waking up?” I question. “How is that achieved?”

“I could have awakened any time I chose,” he clarifies. “I was distanced from my body, but I was not unaware of the time passing, nor the traumas I was subjected to. But as to how you were able to force me awake, I regret to inform you that it really was just luck.”

“Luck?”

“When putting children into a meditative state, there's always a chance that they won't be aware of the passing of time or that they won't be able to hear a verbal prompt to wake,” Lee explains. “So mothers in my culture condition children using a method of touch to rouse them. Always the same gesture repeated with a command to wake. Only the mother knows what the gesture is, as meditation is considered a private time between a mother and her child. For me, it was the touch of a hand on my forehead, then slowly brushing down to my chin. That's how my mother woke me, and I was as helpless to disobey the command at your hand as I would have been at hers.”

I'm too shocked to respond, thinking of the casual gesture I'd used on him, brushing the hair from his face and trailing my fingers down to his chin. It had been a thoughtless gesture, almost instinctual. Yet it saved Lee, and by extension Kip.

“No one else had touched you like that?” I ask. Admittedly, Ellaine does not seem like the affectionate type, but there must have been hands all over Lee. Moving him, feeding him. “It seems like a fairly common gesture.”

“It was...” Lee says, his voice subdued, “oddly similar to the one my mother used. Two fingers only. Gentle at my forehead and them becoming more firm as the fingers slid down my face.” He hesitates again, then admits, “I was very close to the end of my endurance when you found me. It is possible that I hallucinated the touch, overlapping a memory with what was happening in reality.”

“And that's why you assumed...”

“I was not thinking clearly,” Lee reiterates with a frown. “The only person who had known about the trigger was my mother, and she died when I was young. The secret went to the grave with her.”

“I'm sorry,” I tell him, taken aback by the pain in his voice. “I know what it's like to lose your parents young. I'm sorry for your loss.”

He nods in acknowledgment and says, “An entire satellite of people, and she was the only one I ever felt close to. When she was gone, nothing could replace her.”

I think about my own childhood. I had been a teen when my parents had died, and my relationship with my parents shared little in common with Lee's relationship to his mother. Entire months went by when I forgot my parents were gone, so little changed was my life after. Only during the holidays did it truly stand out, and at school functions. But those events had been few and far between, and I'd learned to cover the aching loneliness they inspired with a charming smile and a witty tongue.

Heir to the Price family name can't be seen wallowing in self-pity. Was it the same for Lee? Or, with his brothers and his father still living, was his situation different from my own? But if she was
the only one he ever felt close to...

“Is that why you left?” I wonder. “Is that how you were captured by...”

“No,” he cuts me off. “I've answered your question and several more that were unasked. Now it's time for one of my own.”

“Ah,” I reply. “Of course. Ask then.”
Drinks Part 2 - Zeke POV

Chapter Notes

You know that feeling, where your mom had The Plague(aka miserable head-cold) last week, and now you're eyeballing yourself because you're awfully sniffly and you keep sneezing, but you also don't have time to be sick because you have a babyshower this weekend and you promised to make potato salad for 100 people?

Yeah, it's lining up to be that kind of weekend for me. Lol.

*Once again, we have now tagged the fic for MENTIONS OF UNDERAGE. You have been warned.

Also have to give my gratitude to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

Lee hesitates, staring contemplatively at his empty glass, swirling the ice chips and the remnants of mint leaves. I give him time, wondering how strongly he's feeling the effects of his drink. He's still recovering from prolonged trauma, still recovering his strength and endurance. Perhaps we've overdone it.

“Why are you here?” he asks me finally, his brow creased in confusion. “Not in a metaphysical or literal sense. Why,” he gestures vaguely to the room, “all of this? Why do this to yourself when you so obviously hate it?”

I can't answer immediately, shocked by the question, troubled by the answer that springs to my lips. Is it the drink that makes me want to unburden myself to him? Or is it this unfamiliar impulse to share, to exchange information. It's always been an interrogation in the past, and any exchange on my part is comprised partially or wholly of lies and half-truths. And now Lee is asking me for... something entirely different.

“I thought...” I try, gesturing to my face.

“Too easy,” he responds, and there's a smirk playing on his lips. “Something happened, and while I'm sure there's an interesting story behind it, that event is not worth the entire childhood I've just laid bare for you.” There it is again, the idea of an exchange. A brilliant tactic? Or simply something people do when they get close to each other? Either way, it's certainly effective. “Besides,” he continues, “that's not the root of the problem.” He pauses, turning his gaze back to his glass again. He frowns and doesn't look at me when he says, “The problem is that I don't get you. I don't understand you; your motives, your experience, even your damn plan doesn't make any sense.” His eyes lock on mine, his piercing gaze pinning me to my seat. “I am rarely confused by something. I don't like it.”
“I don’t see what the problem is,” I respond keeping my voice casual by force of will. I drag my gaze away from his, turning it on the empty wine glass in my lap. Thinking that I really need to refill it, as my mouth has suddenly gone dry. “I'm a spy. It's not an easy job.”

“It's more than that,” he says, jumping on my answer. “Something is eating away at you from the inside – even Zero can see it.”

“Zero?” I ask, blinking stupidly. “Has he said something?”

Lee shakes his head.

“Not in so many words. Only that he's...” Lee searches for words, “…pleased that you've found someone to confide in.” A pause, then: “He hit on me.”

“Did he?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

“You don't need to sound so surprised.” His tone implies offense and I have to run the exchange back through my mind to figure out the cause. When I do, it surprises a laugh out of me. I must be feeling the drink, too, to be so careless with my words.

“No, not because it's you,” I clarify. “I just didn't think Zero would take that kind of initiative.”

“You need to teach him that not everything can be solved with sex.” Lee gives me another look, probing and calculating. “Or is that an idea that you've encouraged in him?”

“I didn't set him on you, if that's what you're implying.”

“No,” he responds with a tired sigh. “I'm starting to realize that Zero is both methodical and impulsive. It isn't beyond the realm of possibility that he would have initiated that interaction on his own.”

“He trusts his instincts,” I add, “but he thinks things through as well.”

“Only he doesn't have much experience in this area, so his decision-making is unreliable.”

“I'll speak with him,” I offer.

“No,” he replies, waving the gesture off, “don't. I just wanted to make you aware. I'd prefer to keep your influence minimal in my relationship with him.”

“Understood,” I respond. Then I hesitate before adding, “You will let me know if he becomes too aggressive, won't you?”

“I'll consult you if I think he's a threat to others,” he concedes. “With Zero’s background, it isn't fair to judge his hostility on a standard scale. The important takeaway from this scenario is that when I made it clear to Zero that he had overstepped and his advances were not welcome, he backed off. I had no need to escalate the confrontation to dissuade him, nor did he require physical violence to be convinced.”

I read the subtext and ask, “But a physical confrontation was possible, wasn't it?”

He shrugs.

“Zero is a fighter. The possibility of physical confrontation will always be present when we interact.”
"But..."

"We're not adversaries," Lee cuts me off, "but I am competition."

"I don't want..."

"Zeke," he interrupts again, "we're not talking about Zero. I was simply pointing out that this is wearing on you, and I'm not the only one who's noticed. You're stalling."

It's true, of course. Anything to get us away from the original question. I don't want to think about my past, and even less do I want to share it with Lee. But my stubborn medic will not be dissuaded, and now my only choices are to give him the entire story and bear whatever repercussions come of it, or to deny his request and shatter the fledgling friendship we've begun to form.

Do I need to hide my past more than I need his support? If I reveal my history, will I still have it? Or will it turn him against me just as surely as reneging on our agreement would?

I stand and pace away from him. My balance is a bit off, but not enough that I stumble. The room is large, most of it cast in shadow. If I look, I can just make out the manacles that I used to suspend Zero, the corner that I restrained Kip in when I first introduced him to pleasure through pain. A table along the far wall holds a row of implements that I've used on Zero, all clean and gleaming leather, stringently sanitized and oiled by my own hands.

"I don't hate... all of it," I tell him in a stilted whisper, the cadence of my words uneven to my own ears. I put my hand on one of the crops and feel the smooth leather under my fingers. I lift the slim utensil and feel myself settle, feel the anxiety ease just a bit. I hold it not like a weapon, but like an admission. Like a confession. I let him see it in my hand, meet his gaze as I hold it, and find that his face is placid. No judgment, no acceptance. Simply waiting to see what I do with it.

"This part can be cathartic," I explain, feeling more sure of my words. "You've seen with Zero..."

"I think we can both admit that Zero is far from typical, and that not all of his reactions are healthy," Lee interrupts.

"Perhaps," I respond. "Maybe we're all just as fucked up as he is, we just hide it better."

"Philosophy?" he asks with an amused smile.

"Reality," I banter back, my gaze returning to the tools on display before me.

"Liquor makes you maudlin."

"Life makes me maudlin."

I hear Lee get to his feet and approach me. He brushes against my arm before he stops, but he doesn't reach out to me, doesn't try to lead me away. He simply stands there, waiting for me to continue.

"If I tell you my past, it could affect the way you see me. It could..."

"I've seen the way you are with your assets," he cuts in, his voice soft and gentle, like he's trying not to spook me. "Whatever is in your past doesn't detract from the person you are now."

"No?" I respond. "Even if I've killed people? Thousands of people?"

He frowns, his expression more confused than condemning.
“How...?”

“I'm responsible for the destruction of Satellite 12.”

He flinches like he's been shocked, but doesn't retreat from me.

“By the ancients,” he curses. “I thought...”

“The official cause was an accidental explosion in the primary life support system. The truth is that it was intentional.”

My body is shaking, and I have to lean against the table of implements to keep my balance. The crop is still clutched in my hand, my fingers white-knuckled around its hilt.

“You...”

“I funded the man responsible,” I tell him, because little separates me from the blame of the incident, but it was never my intention to harm anyone nor my hand that placed the explosives. “I was naive, but that’s no excuse. My decisions cost thousands of people their lives.”

“You couldn't have been very old at the time. It was over ten years ago, wasn't it? I was already a captive at Bloodsports, but I remember hearing some of the trainers talking about it.”

“I was nineteen. I'd been with... with him for just over a year.”

“With him?”

“We were lovers.”

“You were hardly more than a child.” Confusion on his face again, replacing the surprise. “Was he?”

“A teenager? No. He was in his early forties. Or maybe he wasn't. Turns out, most of what he told me about his background was lies.”

“I think,” he says gently, pulling one of my shaking hands away from the table, “that perhaps we should sit down, and you should start at the beginning.”

I can only nod and force my other hand to uncurl from around the crop. It drops back to the table with a soft clatter, and then Lee leads me back to the set of couches we'd been occupying. I expect him to start interrogating me as soon as I drop to my seat, but instead he disappears from view. I hear him at the mini-bar, and he returns a few moments later with two glasses of ice and two bottles of water.

“I think we could both use this,” he says ruefully, then pours the water into the glasses and hands one to me. I sip carefully, letting the cool liquid clear my spinning head. But I don’t think it's the alcohol that's causing my reaction, and I find myself barely calmed by the brief respite.

“Can you start at the beginning?” Lee asks me once he's set his own water aside.

“The beginning of my story isn't much different than yours,” I tell him, because this part is easy. “I was a child of wealth and privilege. I was born on earth as the only heir to the Price family. My parents were part of the new-age nobility, with my father owning a significant portion of land and my mother having ties to several seats on the Global Council. I was an only child from a long line of only children on my father’s side.”
“I've heard that planetary families tend to be small,” Lee comments softly, “because of past experiences with overpopulation.”

“Having more than two children is considered gauche and classless. It keeps the estate from being split into smaller and smaller pieces.”

“Some of the more recent wars were fought over inheritance, weren't they?”

I nod in confirmation. “There are usually other reasons as well, but even in the democratic nations, families that hold land have vastly more influence over politics than an average citizen. The electoral process is basically more of a formality in the grand scope of things.”

“Ah. Were your parents involved in politics?”

“Not more than any other family. My father ran a business, and I suppose there was some elbow-rubbing to keep that going, but nothing particularly ambitious.”

“It sounds like you're describing someone from a textbook,” he comments quietly. “Were you not... close?”

“Not every culture expects parents to give their offspring the foundations of an education,” I respond, and I don't realize how bitter I sound until I say it. I give a sigh, lean my head back and close my eyes. “My parents were fine, but no, we were never close. It was generally expected that upper-class children would be rarely seen and never heard. I spent a lot of my childhood with a series of nannies and nursemaids, before being sent to boarding school at the earliest opportunity.”

I pause, and can't help but get pulled into memory myself. It doesn't take a therapist to guess that a lack of early attachments caused many of the problems I've had forming interpersonal bonds over the years. The fact that this mission and these men under my care are probably the closest thing I've ever had to a family is both terrifying and pathetic. No wonder I'm doing such a bad job at it.

“My father looked a lot like me,” I tell him, trying to pull up my most recent memories of them. Christmas, maybe? Or was there a later holiday that they'd brought me home for? “I get my blue eyes from him, my hair from my mother. My father was charismatic with average looks, my mother was a bit more demure but a stunning beauty none the less. The servants would often say that I was the best of both my parents.”

I pause again as I try to remember. It seems too far away, the images faded and muddled with time.

“My father was always moving,” I continue. “I remember always having to run to keep up with him. My mother was more settled. I suppose it wasn't seemly for a woman to run. Still, she never quite seemed to know what to do with me in the few times we were together. I remember, her hands used to flit about me like pale little birds, arranging my clothes and my hair. A child of the Price line always needed to look his best, that was the most important thing.”

I take another drink of water, and Lee sits patiently through it.

“They died in a launch failure when I was fifteen.”

“Foul play?” Lee questions immediately, because it's almost unheard of for a well-maintained shuttle to malfunction.

“Not unless you count trying to pilot with a blood alcohol level above point-two-five as an assassination,” I reply with a bitter chuckle. “I've been told that my father was brash and reckless
even at the best of times. He decided to take his personal shuttle out without clearing it for launch or registering a flight-plan. Hit a sub-atmosphere surveillance drone. Didn't even make it high enough to burn up in the atmosphere. That's how we know he was shit-faced while piloting."

Lee doesn't seem to know what to say to that. After a moment, he comes up with, “Unnecessary tragedies often hurt deeper than unavoidable ones.”

I shrug and say, “You know, the strangest thing was how little my life changed after it happened. Everyone made a big deal out of it, but there would be entire weeks where I forgot it even happened. Forgot I was an orphan. Isn't that weird?”

“Young parents didn't foster a strong attachment with you, it's natural that you didn't feel a severe loss when it was severed,” he says rationally.

“I suppose,” I reply, but it still seems strange. They brought me into the world. Shouldn't I have felt something at their untimely exit?

“Who took over your guardianship after their deaths?” Lee asks.

“My father's parents were gone before I was born, and my mother was a second-born child. Her brother, obviously, was not keen on taking in a child who might have a legal claim to fight him for an inheritance one day. My grandparents on my mother's side simply weren't interested in a lengthy custody battle against my father’s executors, who would likely take exception to anyone else having influence over me. In the end, I believe I was technically an emancipated minor, with my guardianship being awarded to the board of directors for my father's company. Because of my sudden wealth, no one wanted to put me into the potentially manipulative hands of a single individual. Instead, I was allowed to remain at a prestigious boarding school most of the time, and when I was at home I had a score of servants and several low-level executives from my father's company watching me.”

“Watching your accounts, you mean,” Lee says with a narrow-eyed glare. “I can't imagine any of them actually believed that replacing family ties with employees would be in your best interest. It seems like they were more focused on making you malleable to their desires.”

“Well, they succeeded, at any rate.” I sigh and lean back into my seat. “My efforts recently to increase dividends and raise profits have been my only attempts at influencing my father's business since... ever.”

“You let them push you away from your own business?”

“It was never my business,” I respond with a shrug. “It wasn't even my father's business, really. The company has been running for more than ten generations, and it's only a branch of several other business ventures that the Price line has funded and now receives an income from. It's the most lucrative venture by far, but certainly not the only one. Besides, the executives made sure I was still present at major company events. Eventually, I got tired of being their mascot.”

He's nodding sagely, like it all makes sense. I should be irritated that he thinks I'm so easy to read, but instead I find that his understanding is a relief. It makes me feel a bit better that he thinks my actions were normal, maybe even reasonable, given the circumstances.

“Is that why you fell for him? An act of rebellion?” he asks me.

“Maybe in part. The age difference alone would have been enough to raise eyebrows. Another part was just idle curiosity. Reckless and stupid in the worst situation.”
“How did you meet?”

“Oh, I'd known him for years. Saw him with my father occasionally, talking about business ventures. We met again at a fundraising gala – the low-level executives who held my guardianship liked to take me to parties that they couldn't get into without me. The parties were really too mature for my tastes, but I'd been trained since I was little on how to behave like a gentleman even when I was bored to tears. As the Price heir, I was told I had an obligation to continue my parents' social ventures, but really I just went because I didn't have anything better to do.”

I pause a moment and try to picture the scene that had seemed so ordinary at the time, but had truly been a nexus point in my life. The huge, Gothic chateau perched on a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean. The blood-red roses climbing up the side of the white building. The throng of well-dressed men and women. The classical musicians playing softly in the background. The taste of champagne, still new and unfamiliar at the time.

“It was the type of party where rich people get together and pretend to be bored while actually being keenly interested in outdoing each other. All very dull, very formal. I was a curiosity – the last of the Price line. A beautiful orphan with a tragic backstory. But the novelty was fleeting, and as usual I found myself being ignored in the later hours of the evening. The adults were focused on flirting and scheming. These types of parties were known for the amount of hook-ups that happened, and it wasn't considered successful unless at least one major scandal occurred.”

I try to remember the night as clearly as I can. It's been so long since I've allowed myself to think about it. Longer still since I could picture it in my mind without recriminations, without wondering how I could have been so young and stupid.

“When he found me, I was sulking on the patio and nursing a pilfered bottle of champagne.” I let myself have a rueful smile over it; an immature, token gesture of rebellion. “It was late, and the guests were starting to … mingle, I suppose. Most of them were drunk, and several were in the active stages of sex without having thought to move into one of the many guest-rooms made available to us.”

Lee makes a noise of disgust and I chuckle in agreement.

“Some of them were well old enough to be my grandparents,” I tell him with a shudder of distaste, “so I thought the prudent option would be to make myself scarce.”

I try to remember the chilly evening, at the tail end of summer. The way the half-moon hung in the sky, illuminating the roses with soft, silver light. It had been a clear evening, but the patio lights made it difficult to see the stars. Only the moon was really visible, almost obnoxiously bright, casting odd shadows over the dim landscape. In the distance, I could see the ocean, pitch-black in the darkness except for the long, pale reflection of the moon on the water's surface.

“I can offer a myriad of excuses,” I tell him, “but in all honesty I was just happy to be noticed. Happy to meet someone who wasn't fawning all over my name or my looks. Someone who spoke to me like an adult, who didn't talk over or around me.”

I try to see myself as I actually was, without poisoning the memory with knowledge of what would come. Young enough to be on the cusp of manhood but not completely through it. Still pale and golden, with a body that hadn't fully matured yet and confidence to match. Excitable, and just a bit tipsy. A fruit ripe for the picking, and with no one guarding the orchard.

“He was mature and confident. Handsome in a subtle way. I think that's what attracted the younger me, that he wasn't flashy or formal. There was a casual air to him, a rakish smile. He
appealed to something rebellious in me, the part that had never been nurtured in my environment. We
must have talked for an hour before he suggested we find a room, and I... I was all for it.”

I feel myself blushing as I remember my excitement and my first stumbling, coltish attempts at
seduction. A kiss that was too rushed and messy. Hands under my clothes, and my own uncertain
ones holding onto his coat. I remember how frustrated I'd been with the amount of clothing we’d
been wearing and thinking that everyone was here for sex anyway. Why did we even bother?
Clumsy, half-drunk attempts to undo buttons and zippers. Stumbling as my feet tangled in discarded
clothing before finally making it to the bed. Then hot skin and a surging, almost violent wave of
pleasure. Teasing fingers stretching a young and pliant body. The hard, hot length of him pushing
into me, my body yielding to accommodate. A surge of triumph as we slotted together, when my
peers had told me how difficult it would be to accomplish on the first try. Then the feel of him
pulsing within me, rocking against my body like the pull of the tides. Surging up until I almost
passed out from the intensity of the climax.

“Your first time?” Lee asks, and I nod in response.

“In the morning, he kissed me goodbye and then left without giving me his contact information. I
was too embarrassed to chase after him, wondering if I hadn't been good enough or if I'd done
something to chase him off. I didn't mention it to my handler either. I doubt he would have been
pleased.”

“Sex is nothing to be ashamed of,” Lee responds gently “Even casual sex between consenting
adults should not be condemned, although it is not without its risks.”

“As I've learned,” I admit ruefully, leaning my head back against the couch. “Besides, I was only
sixteen.”

I hear him still abruptly, and an unexpected tension fills the air. I glance over to find that his face
has gone carefully blank.

“What?”

I hesitate, staring at him blankly.

“They took a child to a sex-party?” he asks, affronted. I roll my eyes on behalf of my teenage self.

“I wasn't that young,” I respond, “and I wasn't sheltered even before my parents' deaths. These
kinds of events were common, although usually I would have been sent home earlier in the night.”

“I thought you said you were nineteen when you got with...” he trails off and makes an agitated
gesture.

“The first time was a hook-up,” I explain. “We didn't see each other again afterwards.”

“A hook-up with a man more than twice you age?” he asks, and I shrug defensively.

“It happened more than you'd think in my social circle. A lot of my friends were dating older men
or women. It wasn't a big deal.”

“Commonality and morality are not the same thing!” he growls.

“I don't see what the big deal is,” I snap back. “It was only three years before we got together. It's
not that big of a difference.”
“The younger the age, the bigger the difference is,” he responds. “Younger children grow at an accelerated rate.”

“But it...”

“Zeke,” he cuts me off, and has to take a minute to rub a frustrated hand over his eyes. “By the ancients, look at it from an outside perspective. Try to imagine it wasn’t you. Distance yourself from the event. Imagine it was Ruby in the same situation, only a few years younger.”

I frown. I don't particularly want to think about this, but he's got me pinned under that intelligent, intense gaze again, and I'm helpless not to try. I put Ruby in my place, innocent and awkward and just a bit angry. Were we really so alike? Then I overlay the image with years of training is social etiquette and gentlemanly behavior, because the current Ruby would never be able to blend in at an event like that one. And there he is, redheaded instead of blonde, but the same in a lot of respects. Young and naive, a little bit tipsy. A little bit lonely. And then...

“I can admit,” I respond, cutting off that chain of thought before it gets any further, “that as an adult it seems like a horrific situation. But at the time, it seemed normal enough. Besides, it was just the one night. He didn't contact me again for several years. I was actually nineteen when we started... dating.”

“That monster,” Lee growls, in no way appeased by my admission. “He... imprinted on you when you were at your most vulnerable, and then circled back when he knew he could get you away from supervision.”

“I don't think it was like that...”

“You wouldn't, as you're the dumb kid he took advantage of!”

“I know this looks bad,” I interject, finding myself in the bizarre position of defending the man who turned out to be a murderer and a psychopath, “but I don't want to give you the wrong idea about our... tryst. He was very gentle with me. I... enjoyed it.”

And there's the crux of the problem, isn't it? A moment of pleasure, and I forget everything else. I hand over the keys to the kingdom. I abdicate responsibility. And people die.

“Of course you did,” Lee responds, and his voice is still tight with aggravation, but not the recriminations that I expect to hear. “That's how he planned it. Do you understand the impact of early sexual experiences on your overall mental health? He skewed your desires by giving you a single night of sexual pleasure and then leaving, thereby solidifying an image of him without the balance of reality. By allowing your imagination to run wild for the next few years, he successfully nurtured and cultivated an obsession in your teenage psyche!”

...Did he? Is that what happened? But...

“It's still my fault. I should have been more suspicious. I should have kept closer track of what he was doing.”

A long pause, then, “I can't remove your guilt for you. I can only point out extenuating circumstances. In the end, you could have done something different that would have changed the outcome. But then, a hundred other people could have changed the circumstances for you, and none of them did.”

That... throws my world out of alignment, and I have to take a moment to let it shift and settle. It had never really occurred to me that someone should have been looking out for my best interests,
although in retrospect I suppose it seems obvious. People, in my younger experience, only ever worked to further their own goals. My parents wanted an heir. My handlers wanted a pawn. Even my friends and teachers only seemed interested in the status they would gain by being close to me. It never dawned on me that it should be any different.

“That’s why I do this,” I tell him, and I try to put more conviction than I feel into my voice. “If I can change another person's circumstances for the better, maybe that can make up for the tragedy I didn't prevent.”

Lee nods, a gesture that speaks to me of both acceptance and approval. Then says, “If you're going to help anyone, you need to start with yourself. This is eating away at you from the inside. Forgive your younger self and move on.”

“Sage advice, but not easy to follow.”

He inclines his head again, acknowledging that as well.

“Why nineteen?” he wonders, almost more to himself than me. “A man like that, he would have been back as soon as possible. So why wait the extra year, when the consent age on-planet is usually eighteen?”

“I graduated at nineteen,” I offer. “He came back the month after. Could that have something to do with it?”

“Perhaps. Was your inheritance tied to you finishing school?”

“I... maybe? I don't really know. Everything was always just paid for, so I never really questioned who was technically paying for it. It was all my money, after all.”

“Is it common to finish school at nineteen?”

“Not really. The year after my parents died, everyone was very accommodating. So accommodating, in fact, that no one really called me to task for not doing my work or scoring well on tests. I stopped putting any effort into my school work, only to find out at the end of the year that I'd done so poorly that I wouldn't be able to graduate with my peers. Even with the extra work I did to catch up, I had to stay behind another year.”

“Which would have isolated you from your peer group,” Lee says, rubbing at his forehead. “What a bunch of sycophantic assholes.”

“I believe that they thought they were doing me a favor.”

“More the fool, then. What happened after the attack?” he continues, and I can almost see that incredible intellect working all the angles, trying to see the whole scope of my life. “How did you come to work for the Department?”

I sigh and lay my head back against the couch, staring at the dim outline of the ceiling. The spinning feeling of too much alcohol is gone, but it's left me drained and lethargic in its wake. It feels like we've been talking forever.

“We were in the sector when Satellite 12 stopped functioning. He'd left me on the main craft while he took the jump-ship and went to a business meeting. When the news reports about the malfunction started coming in, I thought he might be caught in it, but he messaged to say that he wasn't hurt and I should leave the area immediately. I just... couldn't. I could see the satellite from the ship, could see the moment the systems went out. The whole thing went black and still. And I just... sat there.”
“There wasn't anything you could do,” he tells me gently. “A standard craft isn’t equipped for rescue. You wouldn't even have been able to dock.”

“I know,” I respond. “But still, it was like I had to watch them all die. Had to imagine what it was like at the end. I'm told it would have only taken minutes, that oxygen deprivation would have overcome them fairly quickly.” I shake myself from the memory of soundless screams and choking gasps. “Soon after, emergency vehicles started showing up. I got caught up in it, couldn't leave. He didn't come back. Hours went by, no messages. Wouldn't answer my calls. I got... I don't know. I knew he wasn't injured, knew he wasn't doing rescue. It didn't seem right. I checked my bank accounts, found every card I'd had on me drained. I panicked, thinking it couldn't have been a coincidence. The police confirmed it when I came forward, but by then he was long gone. They charged me as an accessory.”

“That doesn't seem very likely to stick.”

“I... didn't fight the charge. You have to understand, I just felt so...”

“...Irrational? Depressed? Naive? Heart-sick?”

“...guilty, that I didn't even try to fight it.”

“And then?”

“Then they put me on a kind of work-release, probationary period. I went into basic training and then became an agent. Worked my way up. Now I'm here.”

He gives me a look like he's doubting my intelligence. Again.

“Honestly, does that even make any sense inside your head? Truly? No one does that. You don't take a convict and make them an officer. They've already demonstrated a questionable moral compass, there's no way that an operation like the Department would take the risk of poisoning their ranks like that. Either they had some other motivation for keeping you close, or they knew you were just a pawn.”

I think about that very deeply for a split second.

Then I pour myself another shot.

“Don't you think you've had enough?” Lee asks dubiously.

“Not even close,” I respond, and down the shot, barely pausing to feel the burn of it before pouring myself a second.

“Ancestors,” Lee curses. “You're going to poison yourself.” He climbs to his feet and crosses the short distance to my couch, dodging around the low table between us. He grabs the bottle from me, but I've already put down the second shot before he can get it away from me. The scuffle unbalances him and he falls onto the couch beside me, seeming a bit perplexed at the stumble.

“You're drunk, too,” I point out helpfully. He shoots me a glare.

“I am not drunk,” he snaps. “I am... slightly inebriated.”

He puts the bottle on the table out of my reach, but remains on the couch beside me. Most likely, he's too tipsy to chance the move back to the other couch. He leans back against the arm, giving me space, but it's still a snug fit. His knee brushes against mine. Neither of us pull back.
“What... did you do for the Department?” he asks hesitantly.

“It was all undercover work. I had an obvious talent for attracting the right kind of attention for my various covers, plus I played the stupid-rich-boy like I was born for it.” I laugh probably too loudly at my own joke. “I took a lot of the jobs that no one else wanted – jobs that might involve taking drugs or having sex to make it look convincing. It was easier to get lost in playing a part than it was to face up to how stupid I'd been and how much damage I'd done.”

“And now?” he asks, giving me a contemplative look. “Is this just another part?”

I chuckle again and say, “If there is a real me, this is as close as I've gotten in years.”

He makes a noise of acknowledgment and we fall silent again. I'm starting to feel the effects of those last two shots. Starting to think that maybe he made a good decision by taking the bottle away.

“Tell me about the scar on your face,” he asks.

“Tell me about your brothers,” I return, because we've moved out of the scope of his question and, honestly, I'm just done hearing myself talk. He laughs and nods, acquiescing to my demand. In the volley of honesty we've been playing, it's his turn to bare his soul.
Thank you for all your well-wishes and thoughts. The potato salad went great (although we did NOT get 100 people, I don't care what my mother-in-law says) and I am starting to feel better, although there are so many sick people around me that I feel like I just get rid of one bug and I start coming down with another. (My husband was violently ill a couple days ago, so we'll see if that's on the horizon for me. Yay.) I appreciate all the thoughts and comments about my health. I'm still kicking so far!

Also have to give my gratitude to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

He pauses a moment, and I have to wonder if he's thinking about his brothers. Pleasant memories? But then, I would have expected him to mention them earlier if they'd been an intricate part of his upbringing, like his mother was.

"There's not a lot to tell," he begins. "We were never close. They were older than I was, and I looked up to them in a distant way. My father used to compare me to them when he was trying to encourage me. Even at a young age, I was something of a prodigy, far ahead of my classmates in almost every class."

"Almost?"

"I..." he blushes, gives me a chagrined smile. "I've no talent at all for music. Can't manage the rhythm or something."

"Ah," I respond, then offer, "I can play piano."

"Naturally," he says, like I'm some kind of stereotype. Then I think about it harder and... Yes, I suppose I am.

"Despite being so far ahead of my classmates, I could never do better than my brothers. If I came home with a good score, then my brothers had gotten a higher one. If I came home with a trophy, then my brothers had gotten it at a younger age. If I won a competition, then my brothers had faced tougher opponents. It drove me crazy!" he growls. "I threw myself into my studies, trying to be better than them at something. At anything!"

He cuts himself off and looks away from me, takes a pause while his temper cools, then continues.

"It wasn't until my father passed away that I actually talked to any of my brothers in depth. My father had apparently kept them away so that I could focus on my studies. As a fourth son, I was expected to go into teaching, as my older brothers went into business and politics, respectively. My
eldest brother, of course, would take over our estate, while my other brothers managed the finances and political venues. I was expected to bring status to the family by teaching at a university. Apparently, my father thought this should be the most important aspect of my life, and he lied to fuel the growing obsession inside me. An off-handed comment from one of my brothers made me look into their school records. I found that they were all passable students, but none was even close to my level.”

His tone is bitter, his fingers clenched and biting into the fabric of his pants. His face is pulled in distaste. A life that was perhaps not squandered, but certainly not enjoyed.

He casts me a glance that is suddenly more sad than angry and says, “Any child can be misled by the adults in their life. We’re trained to trust our authority figures, even if life later teaches us that this is a foolish impulse.”

It’s a jarring comparison, and I turn my face away from him.

“Do you think it would have been different if your mother were still alive?” I find myself asking.

“Yes. She would never have allowed that; she didn't like deception on principle. And she never would have let me become so obsessed with my studies that I failed in every social aspect of my life. She believed in balance in all things. But she was gone, and I tried to fill the ache of losing her by honoring the love of knowledge that she built in me. My frenetic efforts, though, probably failed in that respect as well.” He pauses, then says, “Things would have been different in a lot of ways, if she'd lived. Her death is what made me go into the medical field. I realized just how far behind our medical technology had fallen, which made me push to be allowed off-Satellite for training, something that was rarely granted.”

“Did it help?” I wonder, thinking of my own circumstances. “To get away from all the memories?”

“Not as much as you'd think,” he responds. But then, I already knew that. “And, honestly, it created all sorts of new problems when I returned. You can't run forever. When I returned home from touring the nearby satellites and training in their medical facilities, the way my own people treated our lower classes stood out in abject relief. Not just the poverty – income disparity was as much a problem in other places as in my home. But the lack of possible mobility, the lack of education and medical care, were far below anywhere else. It was something that came to the forefront of my mind as I completed my physician training, which included a long period of charity work before I could be trusted with upper-class patients. Our most destitute relied solely on the generosity of others, with no social safety net if their benefactor family chose to be less than charitable and no option to seek out help from other families.”

“No one else would help them?” I wonder.

“It was taboo even to ask,” he responds. “In our strict culture of honor, it would have been an embarrassment to the host family. You have to understand that one family line would own vast portions of the property, control all labor in the section, and set the price for housing. Such an insult would likely get the peasant family cast out, and no other family would be willing to risk the insult of taking them in.”

“So they would have had no recourse to stop any abuse their host family inflicted on them,” I surmise. “And that kind of power...”

“...Leads to profound abuses more often than not,” Lee finishes with a confirming nod. “I lobbied for change,” he continues. His voice is serious, but I can hear a hint of remembered pride and
excitement in it. “Although I was not the head of our household, my lineage allowed me to present grievances before the general council, the legislative board for our satellite. I pressed the concerns of the lower classes, demanding oversight. I wanted set standards for health, safety, and education. I wanted provisions to let them purchase the property they'd lived on for generations from the families who had oppressed them for just as long. I wanted to offer more than just a bandage to the problems of poverty and oppression. I wanted to lance the wound and drain the infected corruption from our society.”

He blushes then, pink blooming across his cheeks as he gives me a self-deprecating smile.

“It... did not make me very popular. I was young and full of fire. I had no etiquette, no restraint. I'm afraid that I probably did my cause more harm than good. I made a lot of enemies, including having several bitter disagreements with my brothers. I was twenty-five, doing some charity work for another household, when I was knocked unconscious and taken by the Leash. Even I wasn't all that surprised. With everything I was stirring up, I thought I'd just be assassinated.”

“You think your brothers sold you?” I ask. He shrugs.

“I doubt I'll ever find out. There was a list of people who wanted me out of the way, including competing political interests and rival physicians. By that age, I was the youngest head surgeon in my satellite's history and I was in line to take a coveted position at a prestigious university. I thought by practicing medicine part of the time and teaching the other, I could keep my skills sharp while also instilling my values into the next generation of physicians. It seemed to me that the best way to spread my beliefs was to instill compassion and understanding into the malleable minds of middle- and upper-class students.”

“Ah,” I respond, because plans to incite the younger generation to rebel against the status-quo would probably be an assassination-worthy offense in such a strict culture. Still... “A harsh punishment for a man trying to improve conditions for the poor.”

He acknowledges the point with a nod. “You have to understand that in my culture, our social hierarchy and our traditions and our religion – they're all rolled up into one strict structure of social etiquette. We're taught that you cannot be equal to your betters, and that trying is an offense to the honor of your host family. Lower-class citizens are little better than property, and in some cases are treated and traded as such. I was trying to change that, trying to push a view of equality that could have, in all honesty, threatened the stability of the entire satellite. If the lower classes rebelled, it would have meant civil war. I thought I could make changes gradually, could force the upper classes to give enough concessions to appease the lower without bloodshed. Looking back, I'm not so sure I could have controlled the anger I was fueling, not if it truly caught flame.”

He glances at me, and I can see the weariness in his gaze. I let my hand reach his, let my warm fingers settle over his cool ones. His gaze flicks to my hand, but he doesn't pull away.

“That's really all there is to tell,” he continues. “I was sold into BloodSports and spent five years under the grueling conditions there, before being sold to Ellaine and spending almost ten years there. And now you.”

He makes a sweeping, somewhat uneven gesture with his free hand toward my reclined form.

“And now me,” I acknowledge, thinking that he's at least as drunk as I am – relaxed and a bit tipsy, without actually being sloppy. I sigh and let my head fall back against the couch. I feel calm enough to drift to sleep. Still, something Lee said stirs around in my head, and I spend several seconds trying to pin it down before it clicks.
“You're older than me!” I accuse. It surprises a laugh out of him.

“Yes, I had realized that,” he responds. “Especially when you told me you were nineteen at the time of Satellite 12’s collapse, while I was already twenty-nine. At that point, I started to suspect.”

“I just... I didn't realize...” It's probably in his description on my Key, too, but I'd been too preoccupied to take more than a passing glance at it.

“It's not important,” he says. “Besides, you were about to tell me the story behind those scars.”

I groan, wondering if I can pretend to be too drunk and get away with putting this off for another day. No, I wouldn't do that. Lee held up his side of the bargain, sating my curiosity beyond the original terms of the bargain.

But I'm not Lee, and I can't bring myself to just pour the story out like liquor from a bottle. Instead, I find myself asking, “What was your first time like?”

“It's your turn,” he reminds me. Then, “It was not... after I was captured. I have not been harmed sexually. As a medical asset, I was too valuable to my owners, and too strong for any assets to attempt anything.”

“So it was... with a lover?”

He glares at me, speaking slowly like I'm dragging the words from him.

“It was... in a way. I think I mentioned that my home was strict and traditional. Love between the same sex was not allowed, and I am unattracted to the female form.”

“I... I'm sorry, I didn't realize...”

“It was not as bad for me as it was for others,” he cuts me off. “I was too busy for romantic entanglements, and I dreaded social ventures. The few times I did seek out a lover, it was for a few minutes of passion stolen under the cover of darkness and the veil of anonymity. Beyond the dishonor, men could be jailed or even killed if they were found to seek pleasure in another male. Thankfully, I rarely required such trysts.”

In my head, I substitute “required” for “was desperate enough to seek out” and I think I probably have a better picture of the situation.

“Do you think...”

“That my brothers knew? They likely suspected, but I was too careful to be caught. However, my refusal to settle down with a wife – one of the women selected by my elder brothers specifically to tame my reckless idealism – was probably a large factor in pushing them to remove me. Or, if not them, then it made me any easy target for other factions.”

I nod, and give myself a moment of quiet contemplation. Lee has already answered two questions in exchange for this one, even when it's obvious that I'm stalling. Still, it's hard to bring myself to contemplate my past, and these scars represent some of the worst memories in a rather unpleasant arsenal.

“You already know about my first lover,” I tell him, trying to ease myself into the story. “We spent almost a full year together, between the time I graduated and the destruction of 12. I was young, and in what I considered to be my first serious relationship.” My only serious relationship, I remind myself. “I was... libidinous. Young and full of raw, unchanneled sexual passion. We... He,” I
correct, trying to remember that it was his idea, and I went along with it because I was curious and bored and young and naive and a host of other reasons that probably meant I wasn't mature enough to be in that kind of relationship. Not that my younger self could have been convinced of that. Self-aware was not a word I would use to describe my younger self. “He directed that energy toward erotic sexual play.”

“He trained you in...” he gestures to the room, “this?”

“In submission,” I correct. “And exclusively in submission, where consensual partners usually dabble in both. At the time, I didn't think anything of it, but now...” Just another red flag in a long line of them that I'd ignored. “I don't know. It all seemed so... risqué at the time. It's just hard to acknowledge that I was ever that stupid.”

“Error is the best teacher,” Lee comments. “It's an old proverb on my home satellite.”

“You'd think that, but I feel like I keep making the same mistakes.”

“No,” he counters with a hint of a smile. “You make new ones. We all do.”

“I suppose.”

“Were your scars from... a mistake?”

“You could say that,” I respond, closing my eyes as I dredge up memories long buried. “It was one of the earlier ops in my career. An off-planet drug ring filtering product down to Earth, and their leader had a taste for planet-born, submissive twinks. It was easy to blend in with the local teens. At the time, I was still at that hard to pin down age, where I looked anywhere from sixteen to twenty-two. I was already familiar with teenagers who had too much money and too little supervision, so I was able to integrate with the group under the guise of wanting a fix. At first, I offered to pay for it. Then later, I claimed problems at home and said that I'd been kicked out and cut off. The leader offered to keep me on, in exchange for my body.”

“And he... carved up your face?”

“Not right away,” I admit. “These scars-... Well, I suppose it's pretty easy to tell that they weren't consensual. The only thing keeping the teenagers with the dealer was their addiction, so he had to be careful how far he pushed them. He needed them scared enough to respect him, but addicted enough to keep coming back. The sadism was more intense than I had anticipated, given my gentle introduction to the subject, but it never quite went that far.”

“Until it did.”

“These scars weren't about pleasure – mine or his,” I respond, and it's only by force of will that I keep my hand from reaching for my cheek. The first of three scars inflicted on me. “They were a warning.”

“Oh?”

“There was a power-struggle happening within the group. I thought I could use it to my advantage. The second-in-command liked to imagine himself the boss. Things started to escalate between them. In-fighting in the group. A couple members of the muscle died. It was getting dangerous, but I didn't want to leave empty-handed.”

“You were trying to find out where the drugs were coming from?”
“Mostly how they were getting through the atmosphere. We were pretty sure it was a hidden compartment on a standard transport vessel, but we needed to know which one. We already knew that the teenagers were just distribution. If I couldn't get information on the drop-site, then the whole mission would be a bust.”

“Was it really that important to you?” he asks, and the question takes me surprise. I stare at him until he says, “It's not like it was a life or death situation. Those kids were doing it voluntarily. No one forced them to take the drugs. It's not like... this.”

“It wasn't...” I huff out a breath, thankful that the alcohol is dulling these memories and making it easier to speak about them. It's a new experience for me, and I can't decide if it's something pleasant or unpleasant. Maybe just... necessary, given my current mental state. “I don't want to seem indifferent to the treatment of the teenagers. Overall, they seemed like good kids with too little supervision and no one to run to when things got dangerous. All the money and freedom of an adult, but the wisdom of a child. I could see a lot of myself in them.” I pause then, considering. Then, “But you're right, they made their own decisions. I pushed so hard to complete the mission because I wanted to prove myself, to prove that I was more than an idiot and a screw-up.”

“And?”

“And I pushed so hard that I did something idiotic and screwed it up.”

Lee chuckles, then says quickly, “I mean no offense. It's just, isn't that the way it always is with youth? So much exuberance that you trip over your own feet?”

I feel myself sharing his smile, bitter though it is.

“What did you do?” he asks. The smile slips from my face as more hazy, unpleasant memories bubble to the surface.

“I offered myself to the rival. Told him that I thought he would win and I wanted to be on the right side when the cards settled. I proved my loyalty by letting him fuck me.”

The particular encounter had been brutal, although not because of erotic play. The man had simply been large, in every sense of the word, and strong. Almost violently opposed to any kind of self-restraint. And I had still been inexperienced at sex. His thrusts had caused me to scream, had left me torn and aching. But I hadn't tried to stop him, and that seemed to win some measure of respect from him.

“He gave you the information you were after?” Lee asks.

“Yes. At the time, I didn't realize how amateur the group was. I doubt they'd been operating more than a year, and probably wouldn't have managed more than six months more.”

“So what went wrong?”

“I couldn't extract myself from the situation quickly enough.” Caught in a rush of power, the rival had been practically insatiable, demanding a constant stream of sex. At some points, I'd thought his ardor would kill me before anything else. “The leader came back and caught us in a compromising position. Taken by surprise, the second-in-command and his smaller faction were killed immediately. I was kept alive as a warning to the other teens about what happens if you try to double-cross the leader.”

I try not to remember the feel of the knife separating my skin, or the sound of my own terrified screams. The taste of blood in my mouth as it streamed across my face, or the slippery, sticky feel of
it between my thighs. *WHORE* on my cheek, *SLUT* on my lower back, *TRAITOR* on my inner thigh. But Lee had only seen the gashes on my face, and even at the expense of total honesty I can't bring myself to detail them. For a period after they'd been covered over, I tried to convince myself that it was all an elaborate nightmare, a hallucination brought on by the drugs I'd been injecting as part of my cover.

But even I'm not that good at lying to myself.

“How did you escape?” Lee asks eventually, his soft voice pulling me away from the memories. I glance at him, and I can tell from his eyes that he knows there's more to the story, but he doesn't press. I suppose it shouldn't surprise me that someone so familiar with torture himself would understand that not everything gets better when you talk it out. He shifts unobtrusively until his leg presses against the length of my thigh, and that does help a bit.

“I didn't manage to escape. After a couple weeks, a rival gang took out the boss and his crew. Like I said, it was actually a fairly amateur operation. As far as I could tell at the time – feverish from untreated injuries and suffering from withdrawal – the rival group wanted the territory for planet-made drugs, pushing the competitive import narcotics out. With no need for the level of secrecy of the former gang, the new regime released the teenagers with some samples and contact information for a new dealer. I got packed in with the teenagers, who dumped me anonymously at a hospital. By that time, I was partially delirious from infection and dehydration. It took me a few days to get lucid enough to contact my handler at the Department. By the time they came to collect me, the whole operation was stripped. They had to start the entire project over again, and I had several months before I was healed enough for field work. It's one of the worst failures on my record, to be honest.”

“How long were you undercover?” Lee asks, his voice quiet.

“About three months in total submersion. I'd been observing them for almost a month before that, setting up my cover and establishing myself.”

“And how long were you held against your will?”

“Probably... A week and a half. Maybe nine days. I had to take small amounts of the drugs to maintain my cover, and the withdrawal symptoms made it difficult to track time.”

“How old were you?” he questions. I shift uncomfortably, feeling uncertain in the face of his mounting interrogation.

“Twenty-one, I believe. It was just after I finished the Department's mandatory training.”

“Your first mission,” he says, but it's not a question and he doesn't wait for confirmation. “Afterwards, how long did you stay in the hospital?”

“Uh... A week or so. None of the wounds were life-threatening, once the infection was taken care of. The scar erasure was taken care of as an outpatient procedure.”

“Where did you live after the hospital released you? Did someone stay with you?”

“I rented an apartment near the local branch of the Department. I paid a nurse to stop in daily, but I wasn't an invalid,” I defend. “I managed on my own.”

“Did they at least offer counseling services?”

“Of course,” I respond, confused. “They mandated two meetings with a Department psychologist before I could be cleared for active duty.”
“And that was it? No continued psychological counseling? No monitoring of your mental state?”

“There was no need. I was fine. All wounds superficial, and with no lasting psychological trauma.”

“I very much doubt that,” Lee counters. “And the medical professional who cleared you for duty after only two sessions should be disbarred.

“You're overreacting. I was fine. I was back taking missions within six months, and the next one was fully successful.”

“Ancestors,” he mutters, and I'm starting to understand it as some kind of cultural curse-word. He's giving me a baffled look. “They can't have treated the other agents in this manner. They wouldn't have had any agents left, not to mention the legal repercussions.”

“I... can't say that I know. I wasn't close with the other agents. I didn't act as a typical, nine-to-five agent. I worked exclusively in infiltration and intelligence-gathering, when I was needed. I wasn't part of day-to-day operations. I didn't punch a clock, as they say.”

“Didn't... Then how would they know how much to pay you?”

“I worked on commission – a lump sum based on the expected difficulty and duration of the mission.”

“On commission? ” he echoes. His expression is past baffled now, somewhere between horrified and flabbergasted. “Even you can't think that's standard procedure.”

“It's not like I needed the money,” I respond, exasperated. “I just needed to be on the books in case I got caught up in a separate investigation or bust. It happened occasionally, because my disguise and my cover were so complete.”

He makes a scoffing sound, and his tone is acerbic when he says, “They hollowed out everything underneath. Of course the disguise was fool-proof. There wasn't anything else to find.”

I want to tell him that he's being over-dramatic. I want to say that he's wrong and I was fine. I want to argue that it was all necessary and worth it in the long run.

But somehow none of the words will come to my lips, and we lapse into a melancholy silence. I think about having another drink, wonder if I'm too tipsy already. My head feels clear enough, but my body is leaden and lethargic. I have the unpleasant feeling that I would find myself dizzy if I tried to stand, so I remain seated. I turn my attention to Lee, whose expression is distant and calculating, like he's putting the pieces together on an intricate puzzle. His eyes are so focused and intent, shining with intelligence. For a moment, I wonder what he's thinking about, but then I realize his thoughts are probably about me, so I don't ask.

“This is why you're so good with your assets,” Lee says eventually, like he's solved a great riddle. “You understand their side. You can do more than empathize.”

“I suppose,” I agree half-heartedly.

“It's why you understand Zero so well, because you've been in his position.”

That's probably true as well, but only to a certain extent. Zero is very different from me, with his own set of skills and distinct personality. Even going through the same trials, we would have been affected differently, would have needed different things. As it stands, I'm not always sure that my
methods are the best for him in the long run. The thought that my efforts might do long-term psychological damage sometimes keeps me up at night.

“How did you learn dominance?” Lee asks, not waiting for an answer to his previous comment. “You said you started being trained as a submissive, and then your first mission also had you acting in a subservient role. But I've seen you with Zero and...” he hesitates, and I see a blush steal across his face. It takes me a moment to remember all the compromising positions he's caught me in with my fighting clone. “You're obviously very skilled at the opposite side as well.”

I shrug, not as a brush-off, but because there's not much to tell.

“How does anyone learn anything? I practiced. I'd been on the submissive side of it often enough, so it wasn't a foreign concept to me. As I continued to mature, I grew into a body-type that is more typical of a dominant than a submissive. It's expected that the dominant will be taller and more muscular than the submissive, although this is more often true in expectation than practice. If I wasn't acceptable to my target as a submissive, then I could still get close as a rival dominant. It opened me up for a wider range of personas, so the Department encouraged me to practice when I wasn't on missions.”

“Practice?”

“Yes. Short-term play, always consensual. There are clubs where you can turn up and request a partner for the night, and the club will match your list of interests with another participant's. The anonymity is part of the thrill.”

“And your... instruments?”

“You mean the crop and the whip? I did get some formal training in those through the Department. We have a team of weapon's experts – one of them was familiar with the implements and showed me the basics. I found the practice... soothing, I guess. I trained a lot in it. Also, I...”

“What?”

“I am aware of how much damage these weapons can inflict in unskilled hands. The point is to create a certain level of pain without causing any lasting damage. I needed to be precise with these instruments, to know exactly how much damage I would inflict and where every strike would land.”

“And you practiced until you were certain of that. Until you could trust your own skills in those situations,” he finishes.

Silence again. He seems contemplative, I'm just not sure what to say. It dawns on me that I should probably go to bed. I'm sure I've got a lot of things to do tomorrow, although at this moment I can't remember what they are.

Instead, I find myself saying, “I've never told anyone this much before.”

He gives a dry, derisive snort and says, “Who would you tell? It's not like you were allowed to get close to anyone.”

“I could have found someone,” I argue, mostly because I'm feeling contrite. “I didn't want to.”

“The need to talk to someone has been building inside you for so long that you're lucky your head didn't explode. No one took the time to listen.”

“I could have talked to anyone,” I remind him with a roll of my eyes. “It's not like I was a
prisoner.” Not really – more of a parolee, at first. Then an agent, like any other. “I chose not to.”

“And that says a lot about your mental health the last few years. If they had any interest in your well-being, they never would have put you in the field in that state.”

“I attended the mandatory counseling sessions.”

“A pitiful attempt to cover their asses, most likely,” Lee grouses.

“They couldn't force me to talk about my feelings,” I tell him, although I'm not sure how accurate that is.

“That might be true,” he acknowledges, and there's a contemplating tone to his voice again. I find myself under his scrutinizing stare, uncomfortable with the almost physical feeling of him looking at me and learning, like he can grasp the entirety of me inside and out. I've spent so long subverting my own personality under my acquired personas that I'm almost afraid of what he'll reveal. “You could have gone to Zero, I'm sure he's practically begged you to take him into your confidence.”

“Well... Yes, there's that.”

“But you wouldn't, because you've been trained to hide those parts of yourself. And because you've already set up a dynamic where you protect him, so showing weakness would have been counter to your instincts.”

Am I so transparent? A couple drinks and an evening of conversation, and suddenly I'm a case study in human relations? I hadn't even realized I'd been doing half these things. Or had I? Which parts of my personality are persona and which parts are real? What aspects have I learned, and which have been here all along? Is it even possible to tell anymore?

“You need someone who will push back,” he continues, and it sounds like he's making realizations of his own. “Someone who won't accept the relationship solely on your terms.”

“Someone like you?” I ask, scornfully as I raise an irritated, mocking eyebrow.

“Perhaps,” he says fiercely. “I am not the kind of man who turns away from the difficult path.”

Despite my jab, there's no hint of anger in his voice. Only... like a challenge accepted.

“What are you talking about?”

Instead of answering, he turns his head to the side and looks at me, appraising.

“You don't approach anyone because you don't think you're worthy. You can't see your own value through your guilt,” he explains. “And no one else approaches you because the only see the surface, the unreachable, flawless Adonis too proud to dally with mere mortals.”

I feel my face heat, pull away angrily and get to my feet. My head spins, but I have to put some space between us.

“It isn't like that!” I snap. “I'm not...”

“You're not,” he agrees, cutting off my protest, “but it takes a lot to see that. Your insecurities make you project an image of perfection.”

“I... I'm not...”
“Perfection is cold and untouchable. It's a shield you use to protect yourself. I know,” he emphasizes, “because I've done it before. I've used my professional persona to keep others away. I've been lonely even at the center of a crowd. When you get used to shutting people out, it can be the most difficult thing to let them in.”

“How did you learn?” I hear my own voice asking, like it's another person saying it.

“My students,” he responds readily. “When I was with Ellaine, I worked with each student for a couple years. I got to know them – I had to get to know them, because I had to know how far I could push them without breaking. There wasn't any option but to let them in, to get attached. It had to be sincere, or it never would have worked. And every time I failed one of them, there was pain like when my mother had died, only fresh and raw, with no time to grieve. And eventually, I couldn't do it anymore.”

We've already spoken about the student who died under Lee's tutelage, causing Lee's withdrawal, causing him to doubt any good he might be doing as a teacher under Ellaine's control. I hadn't realized, though, that he felt more than moral responsibility toward his students. He'd formed an emotional connection with them, and he'd suffered when he failed them.

I let myself sit back down beside him, more of a controlled fall than anything.

“I don't know if I can do that,” I admit to him.

He doesn't move closer, but I feel his hand reach out and touch my wrist. His fingers are warm, his hand steady. His touch steals my focus for a moment, and when he says, “You've already started,” I have to think back to my comment before I can acknowledge his point.

“But don't you think...” I hesitate, sighing. “My work has been my life.”

“No, your work distracted you from having a life.”

“I was overwhelmed with guilt and betrayal, and my work gave me focus. I couldn't have managed without it.”

“You didn't manage because of it,” he counters, his fingers encircling my wrist like a gauntlet. “You repressed your guilt until it became a part of your personality. You dodged any aspect of coming to terms with what happened. You became the man who throws himself on the grenade, not because he cares about anyone else, but because he doesn't care about himself.”

“No, I...”

“You can't do that anymore,” he continues, pushing through my protests. “You have to see that things are different now.”

“How?” I snarl. “It's the same as always! The mission before anything else!”

“Is it?” he questions, his voice calm even in the face of my anger. “Was saving Kip the best thing for the mission? Was buying me? Or keeping Ruby?” When I don't answer, he continues with, “You're changing already. Your priorities are shifting. The mission is important, but it's being balanced by your relationship with your assets. You have to value your own life at least as much as theirs, because the two are inextricably twined for the time being.”

It takes the anger out of me, even though I'd known all this already. I find myself sagging against the couch again. My leg brushes against Lee's and I wonder idly when we'd gotten so close. When had he gotten so far under my defenses that I don't even take note of where he is? Is it just the drink?
Or am I losing my edge?

“I don't know what I'm doing here,” I admit, surprised to realize how true it is. I feel like I'm outmatched and outmaneuvered at every turn, with no support and no backup. Adrift. Am I really making a difference? Or am I fighting a pull that's too strong?

“Don't let me make you doubt yourself.” Lee says, seeing my hesitation.

“No,” I respond. “You've got a valid point. I've lost focus.”

“You've changed focus,” he emphasizes, shifting so that we're face-to-face. “You had to. You never would have gained your assets' trust if you hadn't been genuine. Your priorities have changed, but the end-goal is the same.”

“What if I can't do it?” I whisper. “What if I fail?”

“Then you'll still have given them something they've never had before,” he responds, his voice full of conviction. “You're giving them peace and safety, if only for a fleeting moment. You're caring for men who've never known such treatment their entire lives. You're taking a band of misfits and making them a cohesive unit. A family.” He hesitates, then at a whisper says, “And I want to be a part of it. Even if it costs me everything.” He looks at me, dark eyes fierce. “Even if it breaks my heart.”

He kisses me then, slow and gentle. It starts as a brush of the lips – butterfly wings against my face. I'm too surprised to move, and he starts to pull away. Instinctively, I chase after him, returning a more forceful kiss. The taste of mint and alcohol invades my mouth, covers the inherent taste of his lips. Still, his mouth is hot against my own. My hands find his shoulders, grip for balance. His fingers lace in my hair, shifting through the golden strands. I find my heart beating oddly fast as I shift closer, leaning into him. His hands slip to the hem of my shirt, his fingers delving under the fabric to brush my overheated skin.

Then I hear the door open.

Zero's voice says, “I found them. They're in here.”

Lee jerks away from me just as I hear the sound of footsteps entering the room. He shifts until there's space between us, and by the time Zero and Red approach, we're sitting on opposite ends of the couch. Like nothing even happened.

So... what the hell does that mean?
When it happens, I can't tell if I should be immensely grateful or irrationally angry. It seems like the moment our lips touch, a psychic alert goes out to Zero and he is summoned to Zeke's side like a familiar. The uncanny timing puts me in the mindset of witchcraft, although a more rational part of my brain points out that he was probably searching for a while before he found us.

I'm not in a particularly rational mood.

Still, looking at Zeke as I put space between us, I can't help but think it's probably a good thing we were interrupted. From the startled, confused look on his face, I can guess that he's still feeling the effects of his drinks more than I'd been hoping. Given his sexual history and the traumas that we've discussed tonight, it would be reckless and immoral to continue while he's in such a compromised state, although I doubt he'd agree with that assessment. It seems that Zeke's opinion of himself is dangerously skewed after a lifetime of ignoring his own needs. The complacency of the Department on Zeke's mental and emotional care – or lack thereof – hasn't helped either, and explains a lot of the distance he's kept between himself and his assets. Honestly, the only surprising thing in this situation is that Zeke was able to reach out at all, given his history of lacking or abusive interpersonal relationships. The connection he managed to form with Zero and Kip is almost miraculous.

My attention is pulled from my thoughts as Zero crosses the darkened room to our dimly lit corner. Red follows close at his heels, casting nervous glances at the shadowed equipment. I can't say I blame him.

“What are you two doing in here?” Zero asks, his expression unreadable as he pauses in front of the couch that we're occupying. Only the low end-table separates him from me and his master, a paltry barrier. Still, he doesn't try to get any closer.

“Talking,” Zeke responds.

“Yeah?” Zero asks, his tone skeptical as he lifts one of the bottle from the table and tilts it to look at the label. The whiskey Zeke had earlier, perhaps? I can't remember. “Looks like more drinking than talking,” Zero points out.
“There may have been a bit of both,” Zeke responds with a haughty air, but it’s ruined when he sways a bit as he says it. He’s obviously drunk, more obvious now that I’ve got Zero and Red as a sober comparison.

“You ready to go to bed?” Zero asks, setting the bottle aside.

“I suppose I should,” Zeke says, this time trying for imperious. It’s no more convincing than the last time, and even less so as he tries to get to his feet and stumbles. Zero moves quickly around the end table to reach his side, guiding him around the low-set obstacle before handing him almost physically over to Red.

“I’ll get Lee,” Zero says, and gestures toward the door. “You take Master Zeke up to his room. Have Ruby help him and Kip get ready for bed.”

“I’m fine!” Zeke protests, pulling away angrily. Zero and Red both reach for him as Zeke stumbles, tripping on the end-table that Zero so skillfully navigated him around. He ends up knocking the bottle to the floor and sitting heavily on the sturdy furniture.

“Okay,” he says after a moment of staring confusedly at his own feet. “Perhaps I could use a hand.”

Zero snorts and gestures for Red to help him. Zeke accepts the hand that Red nervously offers and lets the dark-skinned asset help him up. He stumbles as he finds his feet, leaning heavily on the muscular fighter. Red seems a little alarmed by this development, and it takes me a moment to remember that Red is Zeke’s newest asset. Where Kip and Zero are comfortable with Zeke and Ruby is openly hostile, Red is still uncertain about his place in the household. He also doesn’t seem very familiar with his new master’s temperament, if his nervousness is anything to go by.

Zero waits as the two make their exit across the dim room, staring expectantly at me when the two are gone.

“I don’t need your help,” I let him know.

“Okay,” Zero replies.

“I can manage perfectly fine on my own.”

This time he doesn’t respond verbally, just makes a noise of acknowledgment.

“I’m just saying, you can go with your master. You don’t have to wait on me. I’m fine.”

“Then why haven’t you gotten up yet?” Zero queries, his tone even. I blink, and realize that I don’t have an answer for that. I push myself abruptly to my feet.

And the world tilts so suddenly that I find myself listing to the side dangerously, and Zero has to grab my arm to keep me from falling over.

“I’m fine!” I snap in protest, but even I can see that Zero is supporting most of my weight.

“Humor me,” Zero responds dryly, putting my arm over his shoulder and giving me something steady to hang on to.

“If I must,” I grumble. Zero doesn’t reply, letting me have my pride. I lean heavily on him as we walk from the room. I have to concentrate on my steps as we go, just keeping upright is taking my full focus. I hadn’t felt so inebriated while sitting. It could be that the movement made me feel the
effects of the alcohol more starkly, or it could be that I'm still absorbing the ingested alcohol into my system. I have to hope that it's the former, but it feels more likely that it's the latter.

We take the elevator down to the bottom level. Zero helps me through the cargo bay toward the medbay, but when I look up I'm in an unfamiliar room.

“Where have you brought me?” I growl as Zero closes the door behind us.

“Captain's quarters,” he says. “I stayed here with Zeke when he first got me.”

“This is not the medbay,” I point out reasonably.

“Come on,” he says, taking my arm and pulling me toward the door at the back of the room. The opposite direction from the exit, where I think we should be headed. “You need a shower.”

“There's a shower in the medbay,” I point out.

“It's a tiny shower,” Zero responds. “And you're not sleeping in a cot again.”

“But it's...”

“Besides, Kip hasn't realized that you've been sleeping in the medbay. He'd be pissed if he found out.”

I don't know what that has to do with anything.

“I would really prefer...”

“Stop arguing,” Zero cuts me off. “I'm not taking you and you're too drunk to find your own way.”

And... I don't think that's accurate.

But I'm not confident enough to try.

The bathroom that we enter into is standard, if a bit large. Nothing like the lavish rooms on the upper floor, but certainly more spacious than the medbay's tiny, toilet and single stall shower facilities. Zero has the water turned on by the time I've finished looking around and is watching me expectantly again.

“Get out,” I demand.

“Walk over here,” he counters.

I make a scoffing sound and step in his direction. The word tilts for a second and I'm pretty sure I wobble to the side, but I stay on my feet.

He raises an eyebrow and says, “Shower. I'm going to get your things from the medbay.”

“I'm not staying here!” I shout at him, but he's already gone. I don't try to follow, instead putting all my efforts into getting out of my scrubs, which seem to be somehow plastered to my skin. I'm ready to give up by the time I manage to stumble out of my pants, and it's probably only the sound of the running water that keeps me on task. I finally manage to get undressed and into the shower, using the bar on the inner wall to steady myself. There's a floor-length sliding door on the outside, so I don't stumble as I get in, but I do accidentally slide the glass shut with more force than necessary. The stall is significantly larger than the one in the medbay, rectangular in shape where the previous
one was a square just large enough for a single body. I move myself into the spray and revel in the feel of the warm cascade. The scent of liquor fades and is replaced by the clean smell of soap lingering in the shower. The taste of Zeke's lips begins to fade from my mouth, and I lick my lips and try to commit the taste to memory.

I'm so distracted that I don't realize Zero has returned until he steps into the shower behind me. I whirl on him, but my feet tangle and I have to clutch the bar to keep from falling. He stares at me as I force myself back upright, making no move as I struggle. He's clothed only in a pair of red boxer shorts, and other than his alarming state of undress he seems perfectly relaxed. I raise my fists defensively, trying to understand what he's playing at, while ignoring the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. We both know I'm practically helpless at this point.

“Stop it,” Zero snaps, batting my hands away. “Even I'm not that much of a dick.”

He grabs my arm and turns me back toward the spray. I cast a wet glance at him, blinking the spray from my eyes, and growl, “If you try anything...”

“I won't,” he responds firmly, cutting me off. “Even if I were after you, I wouldn't want you sloppy drunk.”

I frown, because I may be drunk but I am certainly not sloppy.

Then his hands are in my hair, and my protest dies on my lips. I can't remember the last time someone washed my hair for me. His fingers are surprisingly sure and gentle as they tangle in my shoulder-length locks, and I have to wonder if this is something that he does for Zeke regularly. He must have grabbed the shampoo bottle at some point, because I feel the stands become slick and silken as he massages his way across my scalp. I hear myself make a noise of appreciation before I can manage to get it stopped. Behind me, I hear Zero chuckle and I cast him a the best glare I can manage.

“I can do this myself, you know,” I tell him, and he chuckles again.

“You'd fall down if you had to do anything requiring both hands,” he points out, and it's only after he casts a glance at my side that I realize I've still got a firm grip on the safety bar.

“I...”

“It's fine,” he cuts me off. “Rinse your hair.”

I can't find a reason to protest, so I duck my head back under the spray. I look back again when all the suds seem to be gone, and Zero has the glass door open at the back of the shower.

“Can you manage on you own, or do I need to help you get out?” he asks. I shoot him another glare, and very carefully step past him to exit the shower. His arms as still covered in suds, and he steps around me to get under the spray just as I step out onto the tiled floor.

I catch sight of myself in the bathroom mirror and have to pause. I know what I look like – it's not like I don't have a mirror in the medbay – but the full-length vision I catch here is more arresting than the small reflection I've seen since arriving. Instead of just my face, I can see how bony my shoulders look, how frail and skeletal my arms seem. I've put some weight back on since coming to stay with Zeke, but it's still far from the body I used to have. The few muscles that survived the prolonged deprivation of calories and nutrients are corded and hard, almost too stark under my skin. There's no suppleness to my body anymore, no excess tissue to pad the area between muscle and bone. If I have any hope of catching Zeke's attention, I'll have to renew my training efforts.
Zero appears behind me in the mirror, his features echoing the body that I remember having once. If not for those metallic eyes, he might look like a younger version of myself. We're nearly the same height, both with dark hair, although his is buzzed short over his head, while mine hangs in straight lines down to my shoulders. Zero's features hint of an Asian heritage – slanted eyes, olive skin, a petite build – although not as strongly as my features do. His body is strong and lean, still with the resilience of youth. His chest looks almost sculpted, with ideal proportions at his shoulders and pecs running down the length of his torso into carved abdominal muscles, a six-pack that disappears behind the waistband of his now-drenched underwear. I cover my own manhood with my hands, suddenly feeling embarrassed as I pull my eyes away from him.

I wonder, can I compete against someone so similar, with so many advantages already? Beyond being younger, Zero has already established a relationship with Zeke, where I am looking to carve a place for myself among four other men in his life. And while Zero seems to be easy-going and malleable, my own temperament is much more rigid and inflexible.

But then I remember haunted blue eyes meeting my own, fearless and uncertain in turn. I remember the history that Zeke laid bare for me earlier, the way he put himself down and ignored his own needs at every stage. And while I know that Zero would support Zeke, but I don't know that Zero is capable of standing up to him when the one he's hurting is himself.

I... think I could be that person.

I'd like to try, at least.

I turn to Zero, who's dripping on the floor as he watches me. I try to stand tall and unwavering as I meet his gaze, although I can't quite bring myself to pull my hand away from covering my privates, now that I've realized my own state of nudity.

“I should let you know,” I try to tell him firmly, “that I want him.”

Zero's expression does not change. Instead, he turns and takes a towel off of a shelf along the wall and tosses it at me. I grab it awkwardly and quickly wrap it around my waist.

“Did you hear me?” I ask, even as I glance up to find that Zero is removing his sodden boxers and grabbing his own towel, completely unconcerned about being nude in front of me.

“Yes,” he responds, “but I can't take you seriously with your hand over your cock like that.” I blush in embarrassment, clutching the towel tighter around my hips. Zero dries off without making any effort to remain decent, and I find myself averting my eyes. I return my eyes to him only when I hear the sound of him securing the towel around his own waist. Unrepentant metallic eyes find mine, and he asks, “What were you saying?”

“I want you to know,” I repeat, “that I want him.”

“What are you talking about? Want who? For what?”

“Zeke. I want to make you aware of my intentions.”

There's the hint of a grin on his face before he schools his features back into something more serious.

“You're drunk.”

“No!” I protest. He gives me a skeptical look. “Well, maybe. But I know what I'm talking about.”
“And that is?”

“I want Zeke. Not as...” I make a vague gesture in his direction. “Not like you have him.”

Zero is giving me a curious, amused look.

“Are you asking if you can submit to my master? Or... court my boyfriend?”

“I don't know. Both?”

“Okay.”

“Just... okay?”

“Are you trying to push me out?” he questions. “Are you trying to taking my space from me?”

“No!” I snarl fiercely, bringing both my hands up for a moment, before I realize that it leaves me with nothing holding up my towel. I quickly drop my hands again, but try to keep my expression intense and sincere. I don't want what Zero and Zeke have, and I don't want to interfere with the deep bond they've obviously forged in the previous months. I don't want to take his. I want to build my own.

“Then okay,” he answers easily. “You have my permission. Or blessing. Or whatever you were looking for.”

“It's... That's it?”

“Unless you want something in writing,” he says, and there's a smirk on his face that tells me he's mocking me. I glare at him, opening my mouth to issue a scathing retort when he cuts me off with an abrupt command of, “Sit.”

I blink at him, unable to process the command. He knocks into me with his hip, and I fall back until I land on the close-lidded toilet. By the time I recover enough to send an angry glare his way, he's already dropping a second towel over my head and rubbing brusquely at my hair. I pull away angrily and he lets me go, making an amused snort as he backs off. The towel falls off my shoulders and slips to the floor, but I don't make an attempt to retrieve it. When Zero returns with a comb, I don't even have the energy to fight him. I just turn around and face the back of the toilet, letting Zero do what he will with my hair.

Zero... is surprisingly gentle with the comb. It makes me wonder again if he's had practice with Zeke's hair. Seems likely, given their intimate nature. It sends a rush of jealousy and longing through me, even as I enjoy the benefit of Zero's practice.

“How did you know to comb it?” I wonder, letting my eyes slide shut.

“Zeke's is always a mess when he doesn't brush it before he sleeps,” Zero explains. “Long hair seems like a pain in the ass.”

“It's traditional where I come from,” I tell him, letting my eyes fall closed, his touches oddly soothing. “You're right, though, it is more maintenance. Something of a liability in a fight. But I don't think I'd feel like myself without it. It's thinner than it was,” I admit. “A body under duress will sap nutrients from wherever it can. I'm lucky it was only my hair, not my teeth. I should probably just cut it and let it grow back healthy.”

Zero shrugs and says, “It isn't that bad. It's already looking better than it did when you first came
here. You looked insane.”

When I'd just woken from my trance, hair matted and tangled from Ellaine's callous treatment. My body at the edge of its endurance, just barely able to stand. And still I was determined to eliminate the man who I thought would use my skills for his own perverse and sadistic pleasures. A man who turned out to have truly noble intentions, who likely saved both my life and his blonde clone's at the same time.

A man who I'm now contemplating courting, despite all the plots and perils surrounding him.

“I probably was, to some extent.” Then, more to myself than him, “Maybe I still am.”

We lapse into silence for a couple minutes. After the shower, I'm starting to feel less drunk and more... just exhausted. Physically and emotionally both. Starting to think that the alcohol was a less than genius idea. But then, I'd known that from the start. Had been aware when Zeke offered it that I would regret the decision later, although perhaps not the extent to which I'd regret it. And while I don't regret any of the things I exposed under the influence, I'm not sure I could have spoken so freely without the relaxing effects of the alcohol. I'm sure that Zeke wouldn't have been so forthcoming if he hadn't been inebriated.

At some point, it starts to seem less like Zero is untangling my hair and more like he's just running a comb through it. It feels nice, though, so I don't protest.

Eventually, Zero says, “Zeke... trusts you.”

“I'd like to think so,” I answer, knowing that Zeke has shown a lot a faith in me but also aware that circumstances forced much of that trust prematurely. We haven't known each other that long.

“It seems like he's taking you into his confidence.”

The statement makes me turn to face him as I realize what we're actually talking about. He lets me turn, his metallic eyes searching mine when I face him.

“Do you want to know?” I ask.

There's a moment of uncharacteristic hesitation from Zero, and uncertainty that I rarely see in him. Then, “You tell me. Do I need to know?”

“Do you trust him?”

“Yes,” he answers unhesitatingly.

“Then you don't need to know. You're safer not knowing.”

“Okay,” he accepts, and somehow I'm not surprised. Zero is trained to take orders without question. I can only assume that it's the emotional attachment he's formed with Zeke and Kip prompting the current line of inquisition.

Zero turns from me to put the comb on the counter by the sink, and I'm given a full view of his back. Strong shoulders dotted with pale scars melding into the smooth expanse of his back and the multitude of scars there. Mostly small gashes from blades and shrapnel. The shattered-glass lines on his hip are hidden by the towel except for the very tips of the top lines. He turns toward the door leading back into the sleeping area, and I get to watch the play of muscles along his back as he turns, the way the skin stretches taut along his abdomen, displaying the rigid lines beneath.
This is Zeke's current lover. Strong, deadly, intelligent.

Beautiful.

“Tomorrow,” I tell him, “I'm going to start practicing martial arts again. You and I will spar.”

“Not tomorrow,” Zero responds, pausing to glance over his shoulder at me. “You'll be hung over.”

“I'm just tired,” I assure him. “In the morning, I'll be fine. We'll spar tomorrow.”

“I'll be impressed if you can even make it to the upper level tomorrow,” he says, that smirk playing on his lips again. He resumes his movement into the other room, and I'm forced to follow him if I want to continue our conversation. I get to my feet and manage the first couple steps alright, but find myself staggering the rest of the way to the doorway, where I have to stop and lean heavily against the frame.

Zero looks back at the doorway, the smirk on his face widening.

“You don't do drunk so well, do you?”

“It has been literal years since I've been inebriated,” I growl. “I'm out of practice!”

“Come on,” he says and puts my arm around his shoulders. “Before you fall down.”

“I'm just dizzy. If you give me a moment, I can manage on my own.”

“Uh-huh,” he replies, and immediately pulls me in the direction of the bed. I let him, because I'm not confident that a couple seconds would help my condition.

We make it to the bed without delay now that I have him to lean on. It shouldn't seem like such a triumph, but I'm starting to feel exhausted along with woozy and dizzy. If I don't watch myself, I'm going to start slurring my words. I had thought all the alcohol had already been absorbed into my body, but I seem to keep getting hit with waves of instability. My body continues to reach sluggishly. My mind gets caught on wayward thoughts, my focus completely lost. And my words suddenly have no barrier between my brain and my lips, because I'm fairly sure that I'll regret half the things I've told Zero. I should probably just go to sleep before I humiliate myself any further.

But Zero is still standing over me, his expression contemplative as he watches me. It makes me feel uneasy, to the point where I bark, “What?” with probably more volume than necessary.

“You're really serious about Zeke, aren't you?” he asks. “It's not just the liquor talking.”

I meet his eyes and try to make my expression fierce, hoping that the liquor isn't exposing all the uncertainty and self-doubt that I'm feeling. I'm not uncertain about trying to court Zeke – I've made my decision, and I'll undertake this effort with the same dedication I bring to every aspect of my life. But whether he'll accept me as a suitor? Or if this is a good idea at all given the unstable situation and dangerous backdrop? That has yet to be seen.

“My students used to call me the dragon,” I confide quietly, “because I was cold and easy to anger, difficult to calm once my ire had been earned. But I'm like a dragon in another way. When I find something of value – some lost treasure that others have overlooked - I covet it.”

I have to trust that he understands the metaphor. That he grasps “something” actually being a “someone.” I don't know that I can bring myself to state it more clearly.
“It won't be easy,” he warns, and I scoff in response.

“I don't want it to be. I don't think I'd trust it if it were.” Then I'm quiet for a moment, before admitting, “I'm not even sure it's possible. That I'm not setting another unachievable goal for myself. I don't even know if he likes me...”

“He likes you,” Zero cuts in. “He wouldn't have allowed you so close if he didn't. And he doesn't see you as an asset or a subordinate. I think that's important in creating a relationship with him.”

It takes me a moment to realize what he's saying, and I feel a sudden stab of guilt when it does. Damn, the drinking is making me careless.

“Zero, I'm sorry. I...”

“Don't be,” he cuts in again. “I don't know if I am. There was a time when I thought I wanted the same thing you do, but I'm not sure anymore.” His eyes are distant and contemplative. I can almost see his thoughts, see the way he's rehashing his relationship with Zeke. From what I've gathered, Zeke was Zero's first lover. He was the first person to care about the soldier, the first person to offer him stability and comfort. For someone who had never known love, it would be difficult to differentiate between gratitude and attachment versus romantic love. Perhaps Zero is starting to wonder which one he's feeling for Zeke?

Then his eyes clear and I can tell he's seeing me again as he says, “You don't have to fear that I'll get in the way. I think his partnership with you is good for him. I'd like to see what you can manage.”

“Manage?”

“Well,” he drawls slowly, his eyes flicking to my waist. “Zeke is a sexual creature, and you've yet to stop clutching your towel.”

I scowl at him and force my fingers to release the towel that I've been holding closed. Not like it can fall anyway, now that I'm sitting. Still, I can see his implication and... yes, that might be a problem.

At the same time, I feel an odd sense of excitement in the pit of my stomach. It's a strange mix of horrified and interested, and I'm not quite sober enough to sort it all out. Suffice to say that years of practice in hiding my sexuality behind a mask of indifference and chastity has not managed to entirely eradicate the impulse. Some part of me wants to hide from the yearning that Zeke evokes in me, and another part is finished with being repressed and ignored. It's difficult to tell which part will win out.

Hoping that my internal struggle hasn't been evident on my face, I tell Zero, “There will have to be... adjustments made. I can... learn to adapt.”

He smirks and asks, “Can a dragon change his scales?” before turning away from me and heading to the intercom system. I'm lucky he does, because I'm sure my face flames to a dragon-red, and he'd only be more amused if he saw it.

I hear him speaking in low tones through the intercom system, but I don't manage to follow what he's saying. By the time he comes back, I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed and a lot exhausted, and I'm just ready to go to sleep. He isn't finished with me yet, though, and he tosses a piece of black cloth at me, causing me to almost slip from the bed as I struggle to catch it.

“Pants,” he explains. “Think you can manage them?”
I glare at him, but manage to slip the cloth pants on while still sitting and without letting the towel slip. Decency restored, I push the wet towel onto the floor. Zero is in the bathroom by that point, and I watch him return with a glass of water and a bottle of mild pain relievers. He sets it on the end table on my side just as the cabin door opens. Kip steps in, and I see Red hovering in the hall behind him. Zero meets Kip at the door and takes his arm, says something to Red that makes the larger fighter nod and step back into the hallway. The door closes, and Zero leads Kip into the room, settling him at the foot of the bed on the opposite side from me. The blonde clone is dressed in light blue sleeping clothes, long pants and a button-down top. There are slippers on his feet.

“How's Zeke?” Zero asks, perching himself on the edge of a narrow side-table. Kip is facing in his direction, but his gaze is directed somewhere to the right of Zero's shoulder. Kip's eyes are covered in crisp, white bandages. His hair appears still damp and somewhat tousled. I have to wonder why Zero would have called Kip down here, when he's so obviously ready to go to bed.

“He's asleep already,” Kip responds dryly. “You know how Master reacts to alcohol.”

“Mm.”

“Speaking of reacting,” Kip says, his face turning absently in a habitual gesture of looking around. “How's Lee? I heard he was with Master Zeke.”

“I'm fine,” I let him know.

“He's pretty tipsy,” Zero says, ignoring my words. “Not sure if he's drunker than he seems, or if the alcohol is just having a strong effect on his balance. He seems pretty lucid, though.”

“Better than Master Zeke, then. I wish you luck with him, he's probably going to be sick at some point.”

Zero grunts in response to that, then asks, “Do you have your pager?”

Kip pulls the little box out of the pocket in his pajama top. It's not truly a pager, it's a medical alarm hooked up to the ship's intercom system. They come standard in most medbays, and I'd given it to Kip in case of an emergency when he'd first left my care. Usually, it would be set to send an alarm to whichever room I'm in, but I'm aware that Zero has reprogrammed it to also send an alarm wherever he is as well.

Which is about the time that I realize that Zero is planning on leaving Kip here. That Kip is not only ready for bed, he's in bed.

“I don't need someone with me overnight like a child!” I snarl, and both of them turn to look at me, although Kip only manages to look in my direction.

“Lee...” Zero starts, but Kip cuts him off.

“No, you're right. I'm sorry,” Kip says, and ducks his head. I can just see him bite his lip before saying, “I can sleep somewhere else. It's just... You've done so much for me, and company is really all I have to offer in return. But if my presence upsets you, I certainly wouldn't want...”

“I didn't say that!” I interject, realizing the offensive implications. “I just don't need anyone to watch me. I wouldn't want to put you out...”

“Oh no!” Kip interrupts this time, his voice a little lighter than before. “Master Zeke will probably be up and down a lot tonight, and I'll only be in the way. Plus, I sleep better with another person, so I was hoping you wouldn't mind?”
“No, of course not,” I reply. “There's plenty of room.”

“Wonderful!” he says, and the I can tell that he's beaming even though his eyes are still covered. “I'm so glad you don't mind.”

Zero makes an amused noise, but he's moving to Kip's side and I can't see his face. Zero helps Kip move to the head of the bed and slide in. I feel a bit out of place watching them, so I slide myself under the covers and put my back to them as Zero tucks Kip in. The bed is soft and comfortable, nothing like the functional pallets in the medbay. I find myself feeling utterly exhausted, practically burrowing into the abundant pillows and covers.

“Manipulative imp,” I hear Zero whisper to Kip, followed by a soft chuckle from from the blonde. “Call if you need anything, or if he starts to get sick. I can send Red down to sit with him if...”

“Zero,” Kip cuts him off, “we'll be fine. He's not that drunk. But I think you're right, I don't think it's a good idea for him to be alone right now.”

And it's at that point that I have the inkling that I might have been misled about the situation, but it just seems like too much effort to get offended about it.

I hear the sound of a kiss, but it's oddly quiet. My mind supplies me with the image of Zero kissing Kip's forehead, and I realize that I've seen Zero do that before, while Kip was convalescing in the medbay. Then there's the sound of footsteps heading toward the door as Zero leaves, turning off the lights as he goes.

Leaving Kip and I alone in the dark, under the covers, and in bed together. I realize that I should feel awkward. I haven't slept in a bed with another person since my childhood, and even then it was rare. I'm only half dressed, and in pants that are oversized and I strongly suspect belong to Zero. The bed is large, but Kip isn't making any attempts to keep distance between us, fully occupying his side of the bed. I keep losing track of my limbs, thinking that they're still only to find that they've gravitated toward the dividing line between us. I should be upset about it. Instead, it just feels... nice not to be alone.

Laying down... doesn't seem to be helping my concentration. While I had felt almost clear-headed in the shower, I'm suddenly beginning to feel woozy again. The world rocks and sways, like a ship on the water. Exhaustion settles over me heavily, or I think I'd try to sit up.

“How are you feeling?” Kip asks softly, and the words sound so much like the same question I've asked him a dozen times in the past week. It gives me a sudden, surreal feeling of reversal. But it isn't reversed – Kip is still blind, still under my care. He's still my patient, curled so close that I can feel the heat of his body radiating under the blankets.

“This is very unprofessional,” I let him know, trying to make him understand what an obvious violation of morality this is through my grave and serious tone.

“It's fine,” he responds with a yawn.

“No... it's not professional. I'm a professional.”

“Not right now, you're not. Right now, you're drunk.”

That's... true.

“...I am also drunk. I am a drunk professional.”
He laughs at me.

“Go to sleep. Tomorrow morning, you can be a hung-over professional.”

“...I don't want that.”

“Then drink the water Zero left on the night stand.”

“...Okay.”

The water is tepid but refreshing. It settles heavily in my stomach. I realize despondently that I probably am going to be hung over in the morning, and that I'm significantly more drunk than I had thought. I take two of the pain relievers as a preventative measure and make myself drink the rest of the water. It makes me feel uncomfortably bloated, but I'm aware that dehydration will only exacerbate me symptoms.

Then I let myself fall back onto the mattress, groaning at the way it conforms to my body. Nothing like the thin layer of padding on the beds in the medbay. I rub my face against the pillow, the smooth fabric sliding against my cheek.

Kip chuckles and says, “I pretty much did the same thing after I started sleeping with Master Zeke again.”

“This bed is delightful,” I let him know.

“Especially compared to those narrow cots,” he says, which strikes me as odd for a reason I can't seem to pin down. Then it comes into focus when he says, “Zero thinks I don't know that you've been sleeping in the medbay.”

“Oh.” I'd thought that, too.

“I can understand why,” he tells me, not sounding angry like Zero had predicted. “You're new here, and you didn't trust Zeke at first.”

“Yes.”

“So you wanted to give yourself space. You wanted to be in a place that you were familiar with while you got your bearings.”

“Yes.”

“And I was sick at first anyway, so I needed the constant attention.”

“Yes.”

“But now you've gotten to know Master Zeke better, and you're getting stronger. You're not so uncertain anymore.”

“Yes.”

“So you're moving into the captain's quarters now. You'll have a real bed and an actual room, instead of just a cot. You'll have a space that's your own and still be far enough away to maintain your distance if you need it.”

“Ye-... Uhh...”
He chuckles and says, “Think about it. When you get up tomorrow, you'll realize that I'm right. It's
time for you to sacrifice some distance for comfort and closeness. You can't maintain these barriers
you've set up and still integrate with us. I think you've had enough time being alone.”

We fall silent in the darkness and I contemplate his words as best I can. It all sounds so logical
right now, but then... how much can I trust myself at the moment? Even I'm aware that my judgment
has been compromised.

“Zero's always trying to protect me,” Kip says quietly after some time has passed. “Trying to
shelter me. I want to prove to him that I don't need protected, but...” he trails, and I feel him making a
gesture more than see it in the dim light. I surmise that he's gesturing toward his eyes. “There's not
much I can do like this.”

We’ll know soon if it's a condition that's permanent or not, when I take the final bandages off and
learn how extensive the damage is. If the nerves are still functioning, I can help him recover a
measure of his sight, although it's unlikely that it can be restored to what it was before. If the nerves
have been too badly damaged, then there's nothing I can do. The operation to replace the optical
nerve with a mechanical or cloned one would be too stressful for Kip's weakened body, and would
likely put him right back at the start of this cycle, if it didn't kill him outright.

“Zero... cares for you,” I find myself saying.

“I know,” Kip says, and there's a sigh in his voice. “He's always trying to protect me. He
worries... about everything. Has he asked you about Zeke?”

“About...?” I hedge.

“About what he's doing here. What's going on with him.”

“Yes.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That's he's safer not knowing,” I respond honestly.

“Zeke doesn't fit in, does he?” Kip asks, and I'm grateful that he's not pressing me for more
information. “Whatever he's doing here, I don't know that he can be convincing as an owner for
long.”

And that's... a troubling thought. Especially from Kip, who has so much more interaction with
owners than I do.

“I suppose you're right.”

“Zero says he's been opening up to you,” Kip comments. “I'm glad. He needs someone to confide
in. And Zero... I don't think he can handle that yet. He's still too new to all of this.”

It's an echo of my earlier thoughts. Still, I have to wonder, “Aren't you and Zero... together?”

There's a hesitation from Kip, and he stills like I've surprised him. Still, when his words come,
they're calm and even, if a bit subdued.

“It's... complicated between me and Zero. We've been through a lot together. I think it's all tangled
up inside him, and I don't think he's ready to sort it all out.” He pauses, then says, “But then, this
probably isn't something we should discuss while you're drunk. You should just try to get some
I open my mouth to protest, but the words die on my tongue. He's right. I wouldn't want to give him bad advice because my judgment is compromised, nor would I want to wake up tomorrow and not remember what he's imparted to me. If I want to be an actual help to him, I need to wait until I've recovered.

Turning onto my side, I put Kip at my back as I decide to heed his advice and attempt to sleep. He sighs and I feel him shift closer, and the he curls up on his side so that he's in the same position I am, his chest just barely brushing against my back. His body keeps just a hand's width of space between us, enough for decency but certainly less than the large bed would have allowed us. He settles his head onto my pillow and stills behind me.

I... don't protest. I know I could and he'd move away from me. Kip doesn't seem like the kind to force his touches on another or to push someone who's already at a disadvantage. Instead, I find myself relaxing and listening to his soft breathing against my back. Feeling his warm body brush against mine when I shift position. Knowing that we'll probably drift together in our sleep, unable to resist the pull of another's warmth.

And I let myself fall into a deep and dreamless sleep.
I'll be at Tekkoshocon in Pittsburgh this weekend. Anyone else attending? If you're not on the same continent, I can totally understand why you might not make it. ;) But everyone else should stop by.

All my gratitude to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

Dawn breaks with a washing sense of horror and dread. My body rebels against the treatment it has been put through. My stomach churns, my head pounds, and my limbs ache down to the marrow of my bones. Logic rears its head and points out with detailed medical precision what a bad idea it was to become inebriated while my body is still recovering from recent trauma.

Logic, I scoff to myself. Where the hell were you last night?

Curl on my side, my skin feeling clammy, I give a low groan against the onset of nausea when I even think about sitting up. There's a chuckle at my back, and I'm suddenly aware of the warm body that I can feel just behind me, lying parallel to my own. I bolt upright, scrabbling for memories to explain this. The sudden movement pushes my already-uneasy stomach over the edge, and I make a choking noise as I struggle not to vomit.

Then hands are turning me toward the edge of the bed – a direction I was already inclined to move in – and Kip is saying, “Trash bin is on the floor beside the end table.”

I tumble off the bed in a sprawl of limbs, grabbing the circular bin just in time to spew watery bile into its contents. That takes the majority of my focus for several minutes as my body continues to heave and retch. Eventually, I hear him slide off the bed, and soft, uncertain footsteps walk around the outer edge of the room to the bathroom. I hear the water running, and he comes to my side with a cup of water. I take it with shaking fingers and rinse my mouth out, then try a sip to settle my angry stomach. I'm grateful to find that the water is tepid, not a cold shock to my system that would likely have me sick again.

Kip settles on the floor with me at a careful distance. He pulls one leg up to his chest, his other folded neatly beneath him.

“Zero is on his way,” he tells me softly, his voice carefully low enough to keep from aggravating my pounding headache. “Master Zeke isn't as sick as you are. He's already in the shower, so Zero should be here any minute.”

Ancestors... Zeke.
What have I done?

I'm hit with another wave of nausea, although this time the source isn't my aggrieved stomach. Memories circle my brain like pecking birds. I'd exposed things last night that I'd never told another living soul, and I have no doubt that Zeke did as well. Secrets and shame, lies and deceptions all laid bare. And culminating in that kiss...

What was I thinking?

The onslaught of emotion is more than my body can handle in its current state, and I find myself heaving again, although there's nothing left in my stomach except a small amount of water, which quickly finds its way into the waste bin. Trying to calm my reaction takes my focus again, and I forget about my actions last night in favor of the problem at hand.

Zero arrives, his soft footsteps finding their way unhurriedly to where I am on the ground. I cast him a baleful glance as he chuckles at my state. He moves to Kip's side and helps the blonde off of the floor and back to the bed before squatting at my side and giving me a calculating look.

“What do you need?” he asks, and it's an offer I'd been hoping he would provide.

“There are nausea tablets in the medbay's pharmaceutical cabinet,” I respond. “The key code is 0404.”

There's a strange pause, and I force myself not to tell him to hurry up. Something passes between Zero and Kip, but I'm unable to decipher it while I try not to gag again.

Then Kip says, “You keep it locked?”

“Of course I keep it locked,” I snap. “What kind of idiot doesn't lock away their dangerous and highly addictive chemicals?”

Another beat of silence, and then I remember that there hadn't been a lock on the cabinet when I got here. That I'd been able to access the medications easily, and that I'd set the keycode myself.

Then the moment is over and Zero stands and walks toward the door, his pace so normal that it seems to be mocking me. He leaves Kip and I alone in the room, and I listen to Kip shifting while I stay miserably still on the floor. Any movement seems to set off my nausea, so I try to avoid anything other than breathing.

But the silence gives me no respite from my thoughts, and I find myself reliving blurry memories of last night again. Unanswered questions bubble to the surface of my mind. Have I messed it all up? Have I destroyed any chances I have of forming something with Zeke because I was too brash and too reckless last night? Do I even want it, if I haven't? Can I handle being in love with a man so immersed in the lives of others? Someone who must live in falsehood and lies for the majority of the time? Another relationship that would have to be a secret, or perpetrated under the guise of something else? Can I live with that?

Zero returns, and I take the tablets from him gratefully. I manage to peel one from its backing with shaking fingers, holding my breath as it dissolves on my tongue. There's an artificial sweetness to it, covering the bitter taste of chemicals. It fizzes in my mouth and slides down my throat in a froth, but calms my stomach almost immediately. By the time the second tablet has dissolved, I'm recovered enough to get off the floor and shakily push myself back onto the bed.

“Thank you,” I say softly. “Both of you,” I add, turning my gaze on Kip, who stayed with me through the night to make sure I would be alright. At the time, it had seemed like unnecessary
worrying. Now it seems... prudent.

“Can you make it back to the bed?” Kip asks, then waits as I shakily make my way there. Once I'm settled, Kip turns to Zero. “Did Ruby get up when he was supposed to?”

Zero starts to nod, then catches himself and says, “Yes. He and Red started their training a couple hours ago.”

“I suppose I should get down there and see what he's wrecked,” Kip says, and then sighs heavily. “Although I don't even know why I bother. Like this,” he gestures to his face, “I can hardly manage to keep him from hurting himself, let alone learning anything.”

Zero nods in understanding, then says, “Red is at least trying, but he's too slow. I've got him running laps for half the day now, but nothing helps. He's built like a tank, and he moves like one. He's got no hope against faster, more agile competitors.”

“But... shouldn't his build help with strength and endurance?” Kip asks.

“Doesn't matter how strong you are if you can't land a punch,” Zero counters. “And his endurance will only go so far if he's got no chance at blocking. It's...” Zero trails, then gives a frustrated sigh of his own. “Hoping someone with no training and no instincts for fighting will be able to compete in the first year is...”

“...almost as unfair as expecting a novice in the kitchen to become a chef in only a few months?” Kip finishes, his voice wry.

“I suppose,” Zero says carefully, and there's a hint in his voice that he doesn't agree. I sense that there's something deeper in the conversation than face-value. That perhaps the fighter is struggling to understand that cooking is more than merely combinations and temperatures – that cooking at a chef's level is both a skill and an art. I haven't experienced Kip's culinary skills, but I have can only assume that he's at least at a moderate level if he's training Ruby.

Kip lets the slight go – if it even is a slight, I could be reading too much into the situation – and turns to me. “You seem a little better,” he comments.

“I think the worst of the nausea has passed,” I tell him. Although my stomach still burns and roils uneasily, I no longer feel the need to heave, which was the worst of my previous grievances. The headache and general malaise linger, but they are tolerable without the involuntary retching.

“Do you think it would help to shower?”

“Probably,” I respond, feeling unsanitary from my earlier bout of vomiting.

“I should go,” Zero puts in. “Red is waiting for me.” Then the smirk comes back to his features and he glances at me. Says, “Unless you'll need my help again?”

If I'd thought I'd been blushing earlier, it has nothing on now. I feel my face flame as snippets of last night flit through my mind. Memories of Zero nearly naked, and myself fully so. Of being off-balance in the shower, leaning against the wall and tripping repeatedly. Of covering my... pride from Zero's eyes.

Not that I have much pride left, at this point.

Zero turns with a chuckle and leaves before I have time to make more than a choked noise of shame. Not that I have any idea what to say to that.
“Don't let him get to you,” Kip says. “He's been developing a sense of humor. Or so he thinks.”

“I... can tell.”

He takes pity on me then and changes the topic. “Do you want to come to the kitchen with me? Maybe get some tea? I'll make sure Ruby does it right.”

“That would probably be wise,” I respond, “but I don't want to hold you up.”

“No worries,” and his tone this time is a bit self-deprecating. “It's not like I'll get there much faster on my own.”

I'm ashamed to say that it takes me a moment to realize what he's talking about. That walking on his own, sightless, will take just as long as waiting for me and then going up together.

“Zero should have walked you up!” I realize, feeling offended for him. “Wait a moment, I'll go get-...”

“Please don't,” Kip says, cutting me off. The mirth is suddenly gone from his tone, his expression serious. “I'm sorry, I shouldn't have joked like that. I've asked Zero to stop coddling me. We'll know soon if this...” he makes a gesture toward his eyes, but he arrests the movement midway and puts his hand back on his lap. He takes a breath and repeats, “We'll know soon if I'm permanently blind. If I am, and if Master Zeke is willing to keep me, then I need to get used to this as my life. I need to stop relying on people so much and learn to work with what I have left.”

“I...” I hesitate, unusually tongue-tied in my current state. “I'm sorry I...”

“No!” he interrupts again, and the sudden rise in his volume does nothing for my pounding head. “Don't you dare apologize to me! You saved my life! You have no idea how grateful I am for all you've done to save me. You and Zero and Master, you've all done so much and I... I'm just sorry that I can't use the skills I have to repay your kindness.”

“You've already recovered remarkably,” I tell him. “I don't think anyone can expect any more than you've already shown.”

“Maybe,” he says, but he doesn't sound convinced. “It's just... I feel so much better! No headaches, no nausea, no exhaustion, no...”

“Depression?” I ask quietly, knowing from a clinical standpoint that it's a common side-effect of long-term illnesses, and from Kip's current attitude I can guess that it might have affected him as well.

“I just felt bad all the time,” Kip tells me. “Can you call it depression when you're sad in an overwhelmingly unpleasant situation? But even when I came here, there were times when I just couldn't stop feeling overwhelmed and hopeless. I haven't felt that once since I woke up. So, I guess what I really want to say is thank you. You saved my life.”

“It was my pleasure,” I respond.

“Now, go shower. You smell like a bar floor.”

It wins a chuckle from me, and I move to obey. I see Kip get to his feet as I leave, and he carefully moves his fingers across the drawers that are built into the walls. It reminds me that Kip is familiar with this room, at least enough to know where things are still stored. I remember Zero telling me that Zeke used to sleep here, and then I have to force myself to stop thinking entirely as I get into the
shower. Being reminded of Zeke is enough to make me feel nauseous again, for entirely psychological reasons.

In another hour, I find myself in the kitchen on the top floor, once again seated at the side table. I'm dressed in Zero's loose-fitting clothes and sipping delicately at a cup of green tea and nibbling on dry toast. My stomach has settled considerably, although my head is still throbbing and the bright lights of the kitchen aren't helping. Kip is perched at the counter, trying direct Ruby through making breakfast and prepping dinner at the same time. It is... frustrating for both of them.

“I don't understand why I can't just do one thing at a time!” Ruby snarls.

“You'll never get it all done in time if you can't multitask,” Kip explains, obviously trying for patience but I can hear the frayed nerves in his voice. His blonde hair hangs messily over the bandages covering his eyes, and he stares in the direction that he thinks Ruby is in – actually staring at the space in front of the redhead. Kip's hands twitch on the countertop, and he's leaned forward like he might leap over it. He'd obviously prefer to take a hands-on approach to teaching Ruby, and having to sit on the sidelines is driving him mad.

“I'll never get anythin' finished if I have to start it over and over!”

The meal in question being scrambled eggs, now scorched beyond hope of salvaging, while Ruby was occupied slicing strawberries.

“You just can't stand there and watch the food cook. You need to learn to move away and circle back. It's a skill that—...”

“If it's so damn easy, then you do it!” Ruby snarls, and slams the burnt pan of eggs into the sink. He leans against the counter, and the room falls silent. Kip doesn't say anything, but I can tell that he's hurt and angry. He sits back in his seat, his hands falling into his lap.

“I'm sorry,” Ruby says quietly. “I didn't mean... I'm just not very good at this. I didn't mean to take it out on you.”

“I know,” Kip says softly. “Maybe I'm pushing you too hard.”

Ruby snorts angrily and says, “Is it any harder than you'd push another student? You said this isn't the first time you'd trained other chefs. You think your last owner would have kept around a slave who did this badly?”

Kip doesn't say anything. The silence itself is telling.

“Thought so,” Ruby responds, his voice flat. “And how long will Zeke keep me around if I can't hack it?”

Ruby turns to face Kip, the redhead staring intently at the blonde. There must have been enough noise that Kip could hear Ruby move and assume his gaze, because the blonde clone straightens and turns his face in Ruby's direction.

“Should I even bother?” Ruby asks. “Should I keep struggling with this, or should I try to focus on... on something else?”

Escape goes unspoken, but we all know it's what he's referring to.

Kip lets out a sigh before I can interject and says, “We've been over this. There is nothing else.”
“Yeah, but...”

“No!” Kip says, and slams his hand on the table. “There is nothing else! I won't help you commit suicide! You will never be free!”

It's on the tip of my tongue to interject. Would a little bit of hope motivate Ruby to continue trying? To give this a more sincere effort? But Ruby is young and reckless. He cannot be trusted with something as important as this, where so many lives hang in the balance. And Kip... Kip is dealing with enough already, without adding any more stress to him.

Ruby must be expecting the response, because he sighs and drops his head. It feels like Red must be influencing him, too, because he shoves himself away from the corner and storms into the storage at the back of the room to cool off.

“Should we...?” I ask.

“Let him go,” Kip says. Then after a moment of thought, “He doesn't have anything else on the burners, does he?”

I do a quick check, but the burners all appear to be off. I shake my head before realizing the foolishness of that gesture and saying, “No, it doesn't appear so.”

“Good.”

There's a pause while I try to formulate my question. Finally, I just ask, “Is he really doing so poorly?”

Kip gives a half-hearted laugh and says, “He's honestly terrible. It's like he's never been in a kitchen in his life. I'm having to take extra time to teach him the basics, while also walking him through more advanced recipes. We just don't have time to start him slow. In another kitchen, maybe I could put him on peeling potatoes for the first couple months, gradually shift him toward prepping or cleaning duties. He'd never be trained as a chef based on his lack of interest alone. But now...”

“Now you've only got him, and you're at a disadvantage with teaching, and Zeke is hoping this boy will be ready to compete this year.”

“Yes,” Kip says softly.

“And you... don't think that will happen?”

Kip sighs, deep and slow.

“I can't give up hope,” he says eventually, “but it's not looking good.”

“There’s a difference between optimism and stubbornness,” I reply. “Perhaps we should consider addressing this with Zeke? Maybe a different discipline would suit them each better?”

Kip frowns and is silent for a long moment.

“It isn’t like I’ve overlooked that,” he says, his tone grave. “But it isn’t so simple. Red would look odd as a domestic, given his size and bulk. And Ruby... I have no idea what happens to him. If...” he hesitates, one hand making an aborted move toward his eyes. “If we need to train two domestics, then my efforts aren’t wasted.” Meaning, if his vision doesn’t return and he is unable to compete. “If not...” he hesitates again, biting his lip. “Then I don’t know. He seems ill-suited for practically everything. The wrong temperament for domestic or scholar, unwilling to try pleasure, and it’s hard
to tell if we even need another combat asset.” If I choose to fight, then we don’t need to train another. Since I’ve got a much better chance of winning than a newly-trained asset, it’s something that I need to strongly consider. “He might do well in covert, but we’ve got no one to train him. At this point…” he trails off, and I leave the words unspoken.

We both know the only option left if Zeke can’t find a use for him.

Either he occupies the spare slot in Zeke’s team roster, or Zeke sells him outright. Likely losing Red, too, as I doubt the pair will be separated.

Damn, it’s a tricky situation. And we won’t know more until Kip’s eyes heal.

Ruby returns then, murmurs a small apology to Kip, and goes back to slicing strawberries. I can see Kip take a calming breath, can almost physically watch as he forces his mood to shift, forces his anger and frustration down and focuses on Ruby.

“Okay,” he says, his voice brightening. “Let me explain what we’re doing with the strawberries. I thought it would be fun to show you how to do a dessert that's pretty simple but more unique than what I've been having you do already.”

Ruby makes a scoffing sound at the word, “fun,” but otherwise doesn't look away from his slicing. Kip refuses to be deterred, ignoring the sound.

“We'll be making a hot and cold ice cream dessert. We're going to make the sponge cake recipe that I taught you and cut it into circles. We'll do a layer of the cake, then a layer of strawberry ice cream, then another layer of cake, then the hot ice cream, then a final layer of cake. We'll assemble it in a tubular mold, so that when you pull the mold away, you should have five crisp, beautiful layers inside. Then we'll pipe the top with some whipped cream and add some strawberries cut into rose shapes for garnish. Doesn't that sound nice?”

Ruby's expression shows that his opinion differs from Kip's, but he keeps silent.

“Once you've got the strawberries on the stove to reduce for the cold ice cream, I'll show you how to make the hot ice cream. We'll need to prep it now because it takes several hours to set.”

“Okay,” Ruby says, and he sweeps his hand over the table to gather the rest of the cut strawberries into a sauce pan. He then adds sugar and sets it on a burner.

“So,” Kip says, leaning on the counter again, his hands moving with flourish as he speaks, “The hot ice cream is going to be a mix of yogurt and cream cheese – 230 grams cream cheese to 300 grams yogurt and 25 milliliters of vanilla extract. Once you've mixed those well, set them aside.”

Ruby does as instructed without much hesitation. I notice him pushing a couple strands of curly crimson hair from his face, and wonder if Kip would have him pull his hair back if he could see it. I'm almost surprised that Ruby isn't in more than the apron. Kip strikes me as the kind of professional who would prefer a full uniform, including headwear.

“Now,” Kip says when Ruby clicks off the mixer and sets it aside. “The yellow container from the dry storage? The one that says Methyl Cellulose?”

“Yeah,” Ruby responds, giving the container a dubious look. “I got it.”

“Excellent! Now, you'll need to combine 150 milliliters of water with 40 grams of sugar and bring them to a boil. Once it's boiling, remove from the heat and add 12 grams of the Methyl Cellulose powder. You'll want to stir it until it starts to gel before you add the cream cheese mixture.”
“What the hell even is methel-... melthl-...”

“Methylcellulose? It's a hydrocolloid – or a gelling agent. It has thermo-reversible properties, so it will stay solid when it's hot and melt when it starts to cool.”

“That sounds like bullshit.”

“It's a chemical reaction. The hydrogen atoms in the sugar molecules swap for a methoxy group. It's the same basic compound that gives plants their structure. It's not magic, it's-...”

“Chemistry,” I finish, giving Kip an appraising once-over. That was significantly more scientific an explanation than I had expected.

“I was going to say molecular gastronomy,” Kip finishes, “but it's essentially the same thing.”

“Interesting. This is something you learned in your training?”

“Mm. Well, some of it. Molecular gastronomy is a fad that comes and goes, always popping up every few years. The basic principles are good to know, though. I was always fascinated with it.”

“And you've got all this committed to memory? All the measurements?”

“Well,” Kip says with a little grin, “I certainly hope so. We'll know pretty soon if I've forgotten anything.”

“That's impressive.”

“You think?” he asks, and there's a note of genuine surprise to his voice that lets me know he's not being demure – he really hadn't thought anything of it. “This is one of the first molecular recipes that I learned. I've used it so many times and in so many variations that I didn't think much about committing it to memory. The variations are endless – I've done a bacon/maple dessert, a mint sorbet with a hot lime cream. The real skill starts when you get to more inventive presentations and garnishes, but... Well, we're still a ways away from there.”

“It's just stupid,” Ruby complains sullenly as he stirs the water and sugar on the stove. “Why would you put all that effort into making ice cream hot?”

“Because cooking isn't just supposed to be about food,” Kip answers. “It should be an art form. And sometimes, it should be about inverting people's expectations. It can be fun and exciting if you just give it a chance!”

“Yeah,” Ruby says, and lifts his whisk so that a slow trail of sugar drips back into the pot. “This is just thrilling.”

Kip clenches his hands into fists, his jaw clenched tight. I can almost hear the frustrated noise that he's holding back, but he manages not to comment. Ruby turns the burner off and removes the pot, dumping the thickened liquid into the bowl with the cream cheese mixture and stirring the contents. After several seconds of stirring, he says, “It's not thickening, and it's still pretty hot.”

“That's fine,” Kip says, his voice devoid of the earlier enthusiasm. “It needs to go into the fridge to chill for a few hours. The reaction doesn't happen immediately, it needs time.” Then a moment late, like an afterthought, “Your strawberries need to be stirred.”

“Shit!” Ruby curses, rushing back to the stove, where he's already forgotten about the strawberries that he's reducing for ice cream. He stirs them frantically for a moment, then must come to the
Silence settles over the kitchen, and it's just starting to get awkward when Zero and Red arrive. I take a glance at the tall asset – his color is up, but he doesn't have the haggard appearance that I've seen him with when Zero is pushing his endurance. I have to assume that they've only warmed up, not started any serious training for the day.

Which brings me around to wondering what time it is. I haven't seen Zeke yet, and I have to wonder if my lingering exhaustion is from overindulging in drink or if I simply woke up too early. Although I suppose that would simply be another aspect of drinking last night, as being sick necessitated my waking.

“What are you three up to?” Red asks, smiling broadly and without reservation. Soulful brown eyes and a cheeky grin, even I can admit that he's handsome. His dark, coffee-colored skin has a healthy sheen to it. His hair is black, showing in a thin layer on his head – likely it was shaved during his time at the Arena. He's of moderate height, taller than Kip but not as tall as Zeke. Unlike Ruby, who seems to be at the tail end of his growing years, Red looks to be fully developed. He has broad, heavy shoulders wrapped in thick muscles. With a more serious expression on his face, he would cut an imposing figure. Unfortunately, Zero has revealed that the imposing figure is just that – essentially an illusion that has kept Red from needing to develop his fighting skills past the most basic stage.

I watch the dullness fade from Ruby's expression as his eyes settle on the dark-skinned fighter. Some of the tension leaves the redhead's shoulders. He doesn't quite smile, but the sullenness fades as he gazes upon his chosen partner.

The two are a study in contradictions. Ruby is light skinned, with freckles dotting his face. His frame is tall and lithe, promising more height yet to come. His face is narrow, his features sharp, green eyes bold and piercing. His hair hangs in messy curls around his face, a deep copper color. In a classic sense of beauty, his looks are stunning. The bright color of his hair contrasts elegantly with his creamy complexion, and his freckles add personality to feature that would be otherwise too plain. His eyes are the most arresting, a deep emerald green that sparks with life.

Ruby – a classic beauty with a temperament unsuited to pleasure or domestic duties. And Red – handsome in a way that holds no attraction for the men who have subjugated him, and as unsuited to his designated skill as Ruby is for his.

I wonder, do two such people have any hope here, where fitting in and going unnoticed are key to survival?

My thoughts are interrupted as the tension suddenly returns to Ruby, his face taking on an expression of shock and dismay.

“Shit!” Ruby curses, and drops the spoon he'd been stirring with. “I forgot to put on more eggs!”

“Don't bother,” Zero says before Ruby can step away from his workspace. “We're not here for breakfast.”

This seems to be as much of a surprise to Red as to Ruby, who both cast each other a puzzled look. Zero ignores them and heads to the back, disappearing into the dry storage. He returns a moment later, carrying several packets and cans. He dumps his burden onto the central counter, where Kip is sitting, and then tosses one of the metallic packages to Red, who manages to catch it with only a couple fumbled grasps.

“Nutrient bar,” Zero explains, then tosses the can a bit more gently. Red manages to catch it one-
handed, pulling it in against his chest to get a better grip. “And a protein shake. Breakfast.”

Red casts the two items a baleful look, and I can't really blame him. Especially in a kitchen that smells mouth-wateringly of strawberries and vanilla, the meager fare seems almost cruel.

“Dinner will be normal,” Zero says, relenting a bit on the newly-turned fighter. “But we need to trim down if we're going to be in fighting shape.”

It's immediately evident which of them needs to trim, as Zero's form is already lean and quick. It's Red who needs to lose bulk and gain tone, and from his expression he knows that as well. He unwraps the plastic with a resigned sigh, and takes a bite of the grayish tan bar within. He grimaces at the flavor, chews slowly, and visibly forces himself to swallow. He sets it aside quickly and opens the protein drink to wash it down with.

Ruby, watching curiously, approaches and picks up the bar, taking a quick nibble. He makes a face and shrugs, then takes another bite, chewing thoughtfully.

“I don't know,” he says around a mouthful. “It's not that bad. I kind of like it.”

Even Zero seems a little surprised by that reaction, and there's a moment of silence in the room.

Kip says, “You have got to be kidding me,” in a tone of voice that is completely done trying. He sighs, and more to himself than the room at large, says, “No wonder you're having so many problems with this.”

Ruby gives a shrug and stuffs the rest of the bar into his mouth.

“It's better than putting all this effort into something you're just gonna eat,” he comments around chewing.

“What are you two making?” Red asks, and seems genuinely interested.

“I don't know,” Ruby grouses. “Hot ice cream or something?”

“Yeah? Like, fried or…”

“It's a thermo-reversible chemical reaction,” Kip puts in, his tone a bit affronted. “We're making a cream that solidifies when it's hot.”

“That sounds awesome!” Red comments, then to Ruby, “How are you not into this? That's fascinating!”

“It's okay, I guess,” Ruby responds.

“How does it wo…”

“We need to get back,” Zero cuts in, tossing him another bar. “So finish your breakfast. I'm sure Ruby has training to do as well.”

“Right,” Red replies, his excitement immediately dimmed. “Of course.”

He stuffs the second bar into his mouth and chugs the protein drink, then tosses the remnants into the trash before preceding Zero to the door. Before they can leave, though, Kip calls out to Zero.

“Would you mind,” he asks, “escorting Lee back downstairs? He seems pretty tired. I'd send Ruby, but Master Zeke is on his way up and he needs to get the coffee started.”
It's in me to protest that I'm fine – despite the fact that I am feeling weary and exhausted – but the combination of offered a rest and of Zeke's impending arrival are too much to let me decline. Instead, I offer only, “I can find my way back on my own.” It keeps me from scrambling to my feet and bolting to the door.

After last night, I'm not ready for face Zeke yet. I'm still trying to process everything, trying to decide how best to proceed. I'm afraid that by seeing him now I'll just make a bigger mess of everything.

“I'll take you,” Zero responds. “Red has to run a few laps before we can start, so I have time.”

Red groans theatrically, but doesn't offer another protest. I take a last sip of my tea and hurry to my feet, my body feeling leaden as I try to move it. Perhaps a respite isn't such a bad idea, as I'm not certain I could have prevented myself from falling asleep at the table.

As promised, Zero lets Red off on the middle floor with strict instructions on the length and speed of his laps. Red looks reluctant but determined, and I can only assume that he's taking his lessons much more seriously than Ruby. As the elevator doors close, I say as much to Zero.

“Not that it's doing him any good,” Zero responds flatly. “He's not going to be ready for this Competition. There's a good chance he couldn't manage if we waited until the next.”

“Have you mentioned this to Zeke?” I wonder, and Zero glances at me. His jaw tightens.

“No.”

“Ah,” I respond. It seems that Zero doesn't want to see the dark-skinned youth turned away either. Or perhaps he simply doesn't want to put Zeke in the position of deciding the younger man's fate.

Either way, it seems like he and Kip and both just prolonging the inevitable. At some point, Zeke will realize Red and Ruby are not going to be ready this year, and he'll have to make decisions from there. I don't envy the choices he has to make.

Thoughts of Zeke bring my mind back to last night, and I find myself blushing.

“Zero,” I try calmly. “I want to apologize for my behavior last night. I was... not in my right mind.”

“You mean you were entirely smashed?” he asks, his lips twitching into a half-smile. “I hadn't noticed.”

“I...” And then I hesitate, our proximity bringing back a whole slew of memories that I hadn't processed earlier. “Ancestors,” I curse, my face flaming even as I try to piece together the snippets of memory. “Did I really... offer to fight you? For... or in some way connected to Zeke?”

The smirk plays itself out to a full grin on his face and he says, “Not exactly, but close enough.”

“You can't apologize enough for my beh-...”

“You should do it.”

“What?” I ask, blinking at him dumbly.

“You should fight me. Not over Zeke, but you should spar with me.” He gives me an appraising glance. “You're definitely recovering. I would like to see how you fare in a fight.” Then he's
I find myself smirking back at the challenge, my competitive nature stirring after long disuse. It's been ages since I've fought anyone on my level. It will be interesting to see if Zero can adapt to my fighting style.

“We shall see,” I promise him, inclining my head in acquiescence.

He nods back, and the elevator is settling on the bottom floor when he says, “You’re good for Zeke. He needs the support.”

It's a comment that leaves me startled, and I can only reply again, “What?”

Zero looks confused, the smile fading from his face. “You seemed pretty convinced last night that you wanted to pursue Zeke. Are you telling me that's not the case?”

“Zero... I was drunk last night.”

His expression changes into a frown, and he turns toward me, his body blocking the exit as the doors slide open.

“I didn’t think you’d be fickle when you sobered up,” he says, and the aggressiveness of his tone surprises me.

“It’s not fickleness,” I defend. “This is a complicated situation and I...”

“Are you or are you not pursuing a relationship with Zeke? It's not that hard of a question.”

“I don't...” I stammer, and it's the same question I've been avoiding in my mind all morning. And I can only give him the same answer I've been giving myself. “I don't know.”

Zero's frown intensifies into a full glare. “What do you mean, you don't know?”

“I mean exactly what I said,” I snap in the face of his anger. “I don't know. I won't make a rash judgment on-...”

“Are you just playing with him? Is this some kind of game?”

“No! I-...”

“You've gotten closer to him than any of us!” he cuts me off again, and takes a threatening step in my direction. “Do not throw that all away because you're too much of a coward to admit you like him.”

The insult kindles something inside me, settles the parts that were uncertain and afraid. I pull myself up to my full height and take a step in Zero's direction. My body is telling me that it is weakened and ill, that a fight now against Zero would end disastrously for us, but I ignore it. Almost nose-to-nose with him, I focus my own glare on those dark, steely eyes.

“I am no coward,” I growl at him. “I do have an interest in Zeke. I intend to pursue him. Whether it's a good idea, whether he will accept me, whether the affair will end in tragedy, those are things that I do not yet know. But... If he will have me, I would try.”

“Good,” Zero says, and steps aside, unblocking the exit. I'm surprised enough that it takes me a moment to step out of the structure. I have to force my mind to shift from aggressive back into passive, as my blood is still pounding in my veins.
And throbbing in my temples.

“Hey,” Zero calls from the lift, causing me to turn back. “He wouldn't have let you get this close if he didn't like you. He needs somebody to support him, or he's going to crack under the pressure of this life.”

And unspoken: If it can't be me, then it should be you.

I nod in acknowledgment, understanding that this is a passing of the torch. Not that Zero will forgo his feelings, not that the relationship I'm trying to work my way into isn't a tangled nest of sexual desires mixed with genuine feelings and abundant deceptions. Just that Zero will not stand in my way, should I want to try.

And do I want to try? It's a thought that has been nagging at me subconsciously, while I've been afraid to face it head on. I suppose I should thank Zero for his aggressive tactics, because they forced me to acknowledge feelings that I would have otherwise avoided for days.

So... I like Zeke.

After one drunken conversation, like a smitten teenager.

Could I be falling in love with him? He certainly has enough noble attributes. Enough... primal attraction. But can anything be made of it? Can I give my heart... and my body to someone so prone to deception, so intricately immersed in a life of falsehood? Can this effort result in anything but tragedy for me? For both of us?

I sigh and rub my pounding temples, slowly making my way back to the Captain's quarters and the over-large, soft bed there.

And I decide that I should probably sleep on it.
Zero is right, I can't manage to make it to the gym that day. I spend most of the afternoon and the rest of the evening as a miserable, exhausted lump. I remain in the captain's quarters – the bedroom that Zero brought me to the night before. I don't let myself think about it too much, unwilling to admit that I'm enjoying the safety and comfort that being a part of this group brings. It's difficult to accept that my resolve to stay aloof and apart is crumbling, and harder still to realize that my conviction was likely misplaced all along.

By the next morning, I feel like myself again. I join everyone for breakfast and manage to interact a bit – certainly better than the surly ball of misery that I'd been the previous day. I'm a bit lethargic, but I swap my usual tea for orange juice, hoping the extra vitamins will help. I've been pushing myself to drink extra water as well, knowing that I'm at least partially dehydrated.

Breakfast is a subdued affair, and nothing happens more exciting than Ruby dropping a plate of toast all over the floor. Kip sighs but doesn't comment. Zeke doesn't make an appearance, and I'm not sure if I should be relieved or irritated. As embarrassed as I am about the evening we spent together, I still feel like there is a lot unresolved between us. I don't like to leave things half-finished.

I join Red and Zero in the gym after breakfast, giving my food time to settle as I meditate. Zero and Red run laps through most of it, then practice some warm-up exercises while I perform my katas on the matted area in the back. By the time the two are ready to actually spar, I'm warmed up and ready as well.

“Wait,” I call as Zero climbs onto the platform that functions as a fighting arena. It's bigger than a typical boxing ring, about twice the size, and only a single step above the ground. The floor is not suspended like in wrestling or boxing, but more of a thick, dense padding. There is a single string of padded rope running around the edge of the square space, likely to keep anyone from stepping off the side. Padded posts support the rope at each corner of the platform.

Zero pauses just inside the partition, while Red stops before climbing up.

“If you're willing, I would like to spar with you.”

“Sure,” Zero says in an overly casual manner, leaning his weight against one of the posts in the corner of the ring. “I could use a warm-up.”
“Warm-up?” I question with a glare, then pull myself back. I'm not about to get into a pissing contest with Zero. That's not what this is about. “I need to assess your skill before I repair your hip, so I can track your progress once the procedure is complete.”

Zero smirks.

“If that's the excuse you want to go with,” he comments mockingly.

“Excuse?” I growl, then once again grapple with my irritation. “We shall see,” I tell him gravely, once I've gotten my temper under control.

He falls back into a fighting stance, still smirking. I vault into the ring, but don't immediately fall into fighting position. First, I remove the long-sleeved top of the medical uniform that I've taken to wearing, leaving me only in the black pants and white undershirt. My shoes are already gone from my earlier practice, and I notice Zero taking a moment to remove his own sneakers.

“Rules?” I question, because it has been many years since I've actually sparred, despite keeping up with my solo training.

He tosses me a pair of padded gloves – slim, with holes at the tops of the fingers for grappling, but a layer of padding for the knuckles. It's a safety precaution that I haven't used before – in my homeland, it would have been seen as a sign of weakness, although in truth it is only practicality. As a person who can name every bone and ligament in the hand, I am acutely aware of how easy it is to break or damage this area in a fight, even accidentally. I put the gloves on, watching as Zero dons and secures his own.

“We'll do mixed martial arts style, since that seems to be what you're familiar with,” Zero says. “No knock-outs. Choke-outs and submission holds only. No permanent damage. You can tap out or submit at any time.”

“Understood,” I respond, and fall into the half-crouched stance that I prefer. Zero raises his fists, falling into a more vertical stance than my own. Then we square off.

I have to give Zero credit. He gives no outward sign of a pending attack. No tensing muscles, no shifting focus. His body goes from perfectly still to a flurry of movement in the blink of an eye. He almost catches me on his first strike – and given his strength, I have no doubt he would have pinned me were he able to grab me. Somehow, I manage to move at the last second, ducking first under a swing, then pulling away when the move changes and tries to grip my shoulder. A moment later, I have to leap over a kick that threatens to take my feet out from under me. I fall back several paces, but Zero doesn't immediately follow me. Instead, he turns and grounds himself, allowing me time for my own attack.

I aim high, going for a kick to the head that would knock him down, although wouldn't hit hard enough to render him unconscious. As expected, Zero blocks instead of dodging. He's too used to relying on his strength, needing to keep his body grounded to give him leverage. There's no way to block my kick without leaving his side open. I pull my foot away from his block, spin, and then use the momentum to aim a kick to his ribs. It knocks him back several steps, dropping him to his knees. I follow the attack with an immediate second kick, this one aimed again at his head, but he learns quickly. This time he dodges, slipping under the kick, then launching himself at me.

His raw strength surprises me, even though I was expecting it. His arms are like steel bars, and pushing against them does nothing. We grapple, both of us using our legs to vie for better leverage. Zero's hold isn't a particularly good one – he's got his arms around my torso, but he risks losing his grip on me if he shifts for better placement. Meanwhile, both my arms are free, which gives me the
advantage. I let him maneuver until he's at my back and on top of me, giving him the optimum position to pin me. Then I twist and buck, throwing him over my head and dislodging his grip. To his credit, he realizes what's happening while I'm throwing him, releasing his grip and turning so that he lands on his knees. I push myself into a fighting crouch, and we square off for a second time.

And then:

“I yield.”

Zero blinks at me, confused.

“What?” he asks, and I snort as I push myself to my feet.

“I yield,” I tell him. “The match is over. You are the victor.”

He stands, scowling.

“What is this?” he growls. “What was the point of that?”

“I told you,” I respond, feeling myself grow annoyed, “that I wanted to assess your skills. This wasn't about seeing who's the better fighter. I'm not recovered enough to compete against you.” I cast him an appraising glance, then say, “Not yet.”

He snorts, and the tension falls from his posture. If anything, he looks... disappointed. I have to wonder how long it's been since he fought an opponent anywhere near his skill level.

“So what's your assessment?” he asks, removing the gloves.

“You already know,” I respond. “Or you wouldn't consent to the procedure and the recovery time required.”

“Tell me anyway,” he demands, and I feel a spike of irritation at the tone. Still, I would never withhold information from a patient.

“Obviously, you've learned to rely on your legs only to ground you,” I tell him as I remove my own gloves. “You avoid kicks instinctively, making them only when they're the best or only option. It seems likely that the damage to your left leg makes it painful to kick with your right, putting all your weight on the damaged hip. So you exclusively kick with your left leg, but your range of motion is limited. At a guess, I'd say you can manage to kick at hip height, but that's the best you can manage. The limitation has gotten you into the habit of being too rigid of a fighter, always looking to stay grounded. You've sacrificed flexibility for stability, and it's a trait that could easily be taken advantage of in a fight.”

He nods once, a sour look on his face. I wonder if he'd been hoping it wasn't so obvious, or perhaps he's having trouble acknowledging it himself?

“Will this operation return my range of motion?” he asks.

“It's a procedure,” I correct him, handing the gloves back. “I won't be cutting you open, although there will be insertion sites where I remove the bone fragments and inject the fusing agent. Your hip hurts because using that leg shifts the fragments and stresses the untreated cracks and fissures from the original damage. Once I repair the damage, you will be able to use the leg without causing yourself harm. However, I must warn that these ingrained tendencies will be difficult to overcome. Your body has been taught through years of experience that using your leg causes pain and damage. It is a slow process to unlearn those kinds of lessons.”
He stares contemplatively at the gloves I've handed him for a moment, then flicks his gaze back to me. His expression speaks of uncertainty, although I'm at a loss for what might be causing the emotion.

“That... dance you do every morning,” he says, and I cringe at the description even though I can tell that it wasn't meant offensively. “It has a lot of emphasis on leg movements. Would you teach it to me?”

“If you're interested,” I respond. “Although it isn't necessary. I can help you regain use of that leg without teaching you my culture's techniques.”

“No,” he says, the uncertainty gone from his features, “I would prefer to learn what you're doing.”

“I must admit that I'm surprised at the request. It will take time away from your own training, and you've already got a strong basis of fighting knowledge. It will be a long time before you are proficient in my style of fighting. If that's what you're hoping for...”

He cuts in with, “You held your own against me, even though you're scrawny and half-starved.” Again, I try not to take offense. I am regaining mass quickly, although I am still not nearly at Zero's level. “That shows merit in your style that I can't ignore. If you're willing to train me, I'm willing to learn.”

“I am very advanced in my style of fighting. We will be lucky to get you to proficient before the Competition.”

“Even basic knowledge would help me understand what to expect and how to counter.”

“True.” A pause, then, “Speaking of teaching.”

I nod at Red.

“Yeah,” he says, and there's a heavy sigh mixed into the response. “I should get started. The only real challenge I've faced lately is how to keep this guy from accidentally hurting himself when we spar.”

“He can't be that bad,” I argue, but Zero only gives me a flat look.

“Stay and watch if you don't believe me,” he invites. “At least you'll get a good laugh out of it.”

I make a noncommittal noise and climb from the ring. Zero gestures for Red, who jumps up and climbs into the ring, obviously eager to get started.

I catch a look at his face as we pass and have to reconsider my description. His expression isn't eager, it's more... anxious. Fearful, perhaps. There's an underlying determination that seems to be spurring him to action, but the expression itself seems almost... resigned.

I pause outside the ring to watch. Zero tosses Red the extra gloves and dons his own. Red puts his on and then falls into a fighting stance that imitates Zero's – only Red's feet are spaced too far apart, his fists held too high and close to his face. I can tell from the displeased expression on Zero's face that he notices, but he doesn't correct the darker fighter. That lesson will likely come after the sparring, when Zero goes over the aspects that Red needs to correct.

When the attack comes, it's obvious that Zero is slowing down his movements and broadcasting what he's about to do. Red tenses, and Zero aims a flurry of soft jabs at him. As a trained fighter, the issue is immediately clear to me. If Zero was rigid during our fight, then Red is a brick wall. No
movement at all other than to block with his arms, not even leaning to absorb the momentum and deflect the blow. It clearly frustrates Zero, who sends a harder jab at Red, knocking him back several paces.

“Come at me,” Zero instructs, falling into his fighting stance once again.

Red shakes off Zero's blows, then launches himself at the more experienced fighter.

It's... The attack might as well have a blinking red sign and an arrow. Neon lights proclaiming, “My punch will land here.” Red stares at the place he's intending to hit – Zero's face from the look of it – then brings his arm around in a too-wide arc to build up momentum. He throws his full weight behind the punch, and I can only assume that he's relying totally on his power, because he certainly isn't using speed or stealth.

The punch, of course, never makes impact. Zero drops to his knees, dodging the fist at the last possible second by going under it. Red was obviously expecting Zero to block, not dodge, and the darker fighter is overbalanced by his own momentum as the fist goes flying past Zero's head. Instead of using that momentum to carry him into his next move, Red loses control, his feet tangling under him. He takes several stumbling steps as he tries to regain his balance, but only manages to move the fall several paces further from the center of the ring. Zero must realize what's happening as Red tumbles past his shoulder. He makes an aborted move to grab the taller fighter, but there's really nothing Zero can do at this stage.

Red goes sprawling. He tries to catch himself with this hands, but he's too close to the corner of the ring. His head collides with the corner post as he falls totally flat. I vault into the ring, and Zero gets to his feet. We both kneel beside him at about the same time, but he's already rolling himself onto his back. He sits up, leaning against the corner post, and rubs at his head.

“Are you alright?” I ask, glancing at his eyes. His pupils look okay, so I judge that the fall probably looked worse than it was.

“I'm fine,” he says. “Shit, did you see that? That was...” He chuckles. “That was fucking ridiculous!” He breaks into full throated laughter, covering his face with his hands. Zero and I share a perplexed look. Maybe he hit his head harder than I thought?

But when he pulls his hands away, there are tears tracking down his cheeks. The laughter, suddenly, sounds a lot like half-suppressed sobs.

“Don't you get it?” he asks at our puzzled looks. “He's not gonna need me! He's got the two of you.”

Ah.

Zeke has two fighters already, both of them cross-trained. Apparently, Zero has explained that Zeke will only need two fighters on the team. Now that I'm recovering and have decided to help, Red's training is pointless unless Zeke wants to sell him, which I doubt he's considering. More likely, it seems like an oversight. I could refuse to fight, of course, but that's pointless as well. Red will never be ready in time for this year's Competition, and I have decided to help Zeke in his efforts to win the Competition and complete his mission. Therefore, I will agree to be his second combat asset and his first scholarly.

“A designation swap, perhaps?” I suggest. “You might be more suited to work as a domestic.”

It's hard to miss his natural aptitude, but Red only looks more stricken.
“No!” he cries. “I can't displace Ruby! He'll put him back into pleasure! He's already tried once!”

The “he” in question being Zeke and his initial efforts to turn Ruby into a pleasure asset.

“Zeke might still need two domestic assets,” I point out reasonably.

“Only if Kip's sight doesn't return,” he responds.

“Yes.”

“And what do you think the chances are of him being permanently blind?”

“I...” I hesitate for a moment, not wanting to commit to the odds, then answer with, “I think his outlook is very promising, but there's no way to know until the bandages come off.”

“You think his sight will return though,” he presses.

“Yes. To some extent,” I clarify. “Although his vision will likely never be what it once was.”

Zero casts me a glance at that, but I don't meet his eyes. I don't want to line him up for disappointment if Kip's condition is worse than I expect.

“Kip would compete blind if Zeke would let him,” Red argues morosely. “And that would leave pleasure open, right?”

“Technically,” Zero interjects, “Kip is trained in pleasure.”

This in no way reassures Red. He puts his hands on his head – a gesture that speaks of gripping hair that is no longer there, likely removed during his time at the Arena. His eyes stare at the matted floor, terrified.

“He's going to sell us,” he whispers, his voice panicked. “Ruby is right, we've got to-...”

“Enough,” I snap. “That's enough. This is all conjecture. You don't know anything yet. We don't even know if Kip will be able to resume his duties. You're getting worked up over nothing.”

“Go,” Zero says, using his foot to tap Red's leg. “Five laps. Then we'll work on your footwork again.”

Red nods forlornly and pushes himself to his feet, then staggers out of the ring. He pauses to put his shoes on before starting to jog. Even his steps seem undisciplined, now that I've seen him fight. I dust off my knees and push myself to my feet, watching him run.

“Do you think he's right?” I ask, keeping my voice low. “Do you think Zeke will sell them?”

“I should probably be asking you that,” Zero says, stepping beside me. It's true, I suppose I have been closer to Zeke lately than Zero has. But still... “No,” Zero continues. “I don't think Zeke will sell either of them. Even if he should.”

They're both too new. And a designation shift now puts them even further behind. These efforts are pointless, a waste of time and resources that we've got precious little of. And yet...

“Why haven't you mentioned this to Zeke?” I ask. “Red's never going to make a combat asset, Competition or otherwise.”

“You think Red's the only one who realized that there's nowhere else to put them?” he asks, his
voice flat. “Or are you volunteering to train one of them in scholarly?”

“I... Surely they could both be trained as domestics?” Because neither of them seem to have the aptitude or temperament for scholarly, and I’d rather not volunteer myself for that particular headache.

“If Kip regains his sight, then we don't need Ruby in domestics. Ruby would be displaced if we switch Red, and I don't know what else Zeke would do with Ruby other than train him for pleasure. The kid isn't built for fighting any more than Red is. He's got speed, but he won't be able to gain enough strength and stamina by the Competition to actually have a chance. And he'll never gain enough skill to surpass us in time.”

“We don't have anyone to train him in covert, which he might have a better chance in.” I follow his trail of logic, looking at all the options. “If he can't manage domestics, he won't have the patience for scholarly, which is similar in training to what Kip's doing.” Zero raises an eyebrow at that, and I speculate that he doesn't really understand how difficult Kip's designation is in higher skill levels. “And if Kip recovers, then Zeke already has two assets trained in pleasure.”

“No,” Zero responds. “Kip didn't... take to the designation. I don't think Zeke is planning to compete him in pleasure. Actually, he's shown some interest in a different pleasure asset.”

“I see,” I respond, because this is the first time I'm hearing of this. It would be a good idea to have a classically trained pleasure asset on his roster, since Zero's training was so unorthodox. Going abruptly from combat to pleasure, I feel like there are probably a lot of aspects of the latter discipline that Zero is missing. Still...

“That fills up his roster,” I realize. “Without anyone to enter in the covert division.”

“Yes,” Zero says. “And if Kip doesn't recover, that leaves us with getting Red and Ruby trained and cross-trained on a Competition level if we want to have a chance at winning.”

“That's... impossible. There's nowhere near enough time.”

Zero shrugs, unconcerned. He grabs his shoes from the floor beside the mat and slips them back on, taking a moment to tighten the laces before turning back to me.

“I've seen impossible things with Zeke,” he says, then glances at Red as the darker fighter makes his first complete circle. “I'm not giving up.”

“Being reasonable is not the same thing as giving up,” I argue, but Zero doesn't respond. “Zeke's going to realize all of this eventually.”

“I know,” Zero says. “If he doesn't, I'm planning on bringing it to his attention once we know about Kip's sight. But for now...” he hesitates, his gaze following Red as he puffs his way around the track. “We're just giving them a moment to settle. They've had a lot of upheaval, and they're just starting to find their balance.”

The words sound strange from Zero, and it takes a moment to click that he's repeating it from someone else.

“This is Kip's decision, isn't it?” I ask. “It's obvious that Ruby is a lost cause in the kitchen. He's just keeping up appearances to give them a reprieve.”

Zero's smirk all but confirms it.
“I can't speak for him,” Zero says, “but it seems like something he would do.”

“He really is a bleeding heart, isn't he?” I wonder.

“Too kind for his own good,” Zero agrees.

“You know this is just going to put them both further behind, don't you?”

“A couple weeks won't make a difference,” he responds in a more serious tone. “And I've only decided that Red is untrainable in the last couple days. Prior to that, I thought it might be possible, although difficult.”

“From what I've seen, I agree with you. There's just no point in training him any further.”

There's a moment of strained silence, and I glance over to see Zero frowning.

“What?”

“It... wasn't all wasted,” Zero argues. “He'll never be a combat asset, but trying to train him was... challenging. He doesn't move like a typical fighter, and I wasn't joking about spending half my energy on keeping either of us from getting hurt. It was interesting to watch him and realize how standard my attacks are, how predictable.”

“Teaching is an excellent way to keep your fundamentals sharp,” I point out, “but you can't let it get in the way of advancing your skill. Fighting him can only improve you so far.”

“I know,” he replies. “It can't continue like this for long.”

I nod, and Zero moves to intercept Red, apparently finished with our conversation. I watch as the two fall into step next to each other. One fighter, and one young man caught up in the dangerous games of powerful men. Both of them trying to wring just a few more seconds out of the stability they've been given.

With Kip's bandages coming off tomorrow, that time is quickly running out.
I wake when Zero climbs out of bed, and I blink blearily at the space he occupied. Kip, in the center between us, stirs and starts to sit up as Zero disappears into the bathroom. I groan and wrap my arms around Kip's slim form, pulling him closer in the gigantic bed that we've been occupying since I took up residence in the master suite.

"Ten more minutes," I complain against his shoulder. He chuckles as I pull him against my chest, pushing me away playfully.

"I have to supervise Ruby," he protests, still laughing.

"Ruby will be fine," I assure him. "The ship has a state-of-the-art fire prevention system. Let him try his best."

This surprises a bark of laughter out of him, and he says, "Don't tempt fate like that! It's a good thing I can't see what he's doing, or I'd probably have a heart attack!"

I laugh, but the reminder of his sight sobers us both.

Today, the bandages come off.

He quiets and settles against me, twining his legs with mine. His feet brush my ankles, his head tucks neatly under my chin. A strand of my hair falls over his shoulder and flutters against his neck. It contrasts with his own hair – still blonde, but of a much lighter shade than my own golden-blonde hue. I kiss his temple, feeling those pale strands against my lips. Feeling the brush of soft cotton against my skin.

"You think..." he asks softly, his fingers gesturing to the messy, sleep-mussed bandages.

"Shhh," I soothe, and pull his fingers away. "It doesn't matter. You're safe either way."

He chuckles, and it's an anguished, bitter noise.

"I know," he says. "This is the best I've felt in years. I'm happy. I'm healthy. I'm surrounded by people I care about. People who care about me." His fingers trace patterns in the comforter, finding
the elaborate stitching and then following the intricate design. “I feel like an ingrate, asking for more. But I…”

He hesitates, and I have to prompt, “Go on,” to get him to continue. He lets out a frustrated sigh.

“I miss... seeing things,” he admits, his voice low and reluctant. “You never got to see me at my best, but I used to love to play with colors and shapes in my cooking. I could do things with pulled sugar...” he trails, and I can almost see the memory playing out in his mind, can see the moment it turns bitter as he realizes he may never manage it again.

“Kip...” I try to soothe, but he cuts me off.

“I just feel so much better!” he exclaims, pushing himself up on one arm, his other hand gesticulating excitedly. “I feel like I could do anything! I want to show you my skills, my talents. I was really good at what I did! And I...” his voice fades away, his free hand coming up to cover his eyes. “I don't know if I can do any of that... like this.”

“You aren't...” I start, but the words won't come. What would it be like, to face a world of darkness? To have spent your life creating art, and to suddenly be unable to see it? Blindness is such an uncommon affliction in our society, advancements in medical technology allowing for the replacement of almost every part of the eye. But with Kip's frail health, such a procedure would kill him – Lee has assured me as much. All my money and power, and yet this one thing is beyond what I can offer him. What can I say to him? How do I make him feel less helpless, when I'm feeling it myself?

But Kip has never let overwhelming situations hold him down before. He managed to flourish, even while his body was turning against him. He dragged Zero into a friendship, practically against the darker clone's wishes. He carved out a place for himself here despite his illness and my naivety. And then he took over Ruby's lessons with a stern but caring hand, even without his sight.

Can he do it again? Can he keep going if all hope of sight is gone? Can he survive in the darkness, when the landscape we're surrounded by is so treacherous?

The only thing I'm certain of: He'll have my unwavering support and protection while he tries.

“Listen to me,” I tell him firmly, pushing myself into a sitting position and watching his face turn toward my voice. “I have watched you overcome everything thrown at you. I have watched you struggle, and fall, and pick yourself up again. Even if your sight is totally gone, I know you will overcome it. You can't sit idly by. You're incapable.”

A brief pause, while my words sink in. A melancholy smile plays over his lips; part pride, part resignation.

“I know,” Kip says, his voice thick. “But I don't want to.”

I chuckle around the rock settling my own throat and say, “I don't blame you for that.”

I let myself relax and settle back to the bed, pulling Kip into my arms. He comes willingly, draping himself over the length of my body, but he doesn't settle against me. His body rubs along the length of mine, unwilling to still. There's a need in his movements that I can't ignore, a desperation born of fear. It seems like it's becoming a habit for him, to use sex to refocus his attention. I don't think he's aware he's even doing it.

“Please,” he says breathlessly, and this sequence is becoming so routine that the request is almost expected. “I don't want to think about it anymore. Please.”
My hands are on him then, peeling away his night clothes, finding his half-hard cock and stroking it to full excitement. My own cock stirs at seeing him like this, wanton and pliant beneath me. His creamy skin has lost its pale, sickly pallor. His narrow body has finally started putting on weight, moving away from thin and frail toward slender and healthy. His slim hips buck against my hand, his legs thrown wide and his feet braced against the bed to give him leverage. Even like this, he still naturally seeks some control.

My cock is aching, and I shove my silk pajama pants down to expose it, letting my free hand slide across my heated skin. My other hand works Kip's smaller cock, eliciting gasps and groans from the blonde. It isn't enough, though, just to be laying beside him. In another minute, I find myself releasing Kip's cock and my own to shove out of my clothes. Fully nude, I push myself up to my knees, shifting until I'm kneeling over top of Kip's still form.


“I won't go too far,” I assure him, leaning over him so that my cock slides against his own. I cup my hand around the two of them, allowing them just enough friction to slide against each other. I am content with this, knowing Kip has only partially overcome his reluctance about bottoming, and I'm mindful of his unease about submitting. Now is not the time to work on those particular hang-ups. It's an all but foregone conclusion that he won't be serving as my pleasure asset again.

“Feels so good,” he whines, thrusting his cock into my hand.

The door to the bathroom opens, and Kip is the first to notice. With his lack of sight, he's more attuned to sound, and I feel him tensing beneath me before I've connected the sound of the door closing with the returning occupant of the room.

“Zero?” Kip questions softly.

“It's me,” he confirms. I take in his casual approach; the towel slung around his hips, dark hair dripping onto the plush carpet surrounding the bed. Even in the dim light of the room, it's easy to see the changes in his body, the way his muscles have become etched and sharp, dulled only by the skin covering them. Silk over steel. Any trace of softness is gone, and even that was probably gained only from the convalescence he experienced under my care. Given free reign of his own discipline, he's quickly honing himself into a deadly weapon.

Damn, he is sexy, though. The sharp angles look good on him, and his quickly-growing hair gives him a roguish appearance that softens a bit of the severity. So does the smirk that plays on his lips more often than not lately.

“Come join us?” I ask as Zero approaches the bed, wondering if I can tempt the fighter away from his schedule.

He scoffs and says, “Some of us have work to do.” He kisses Kip on the temple, despite the bandages there, then leans in to share a deeper kiss with me.

“I've just started being a kept pet,” Kip responds playfully, “and I'm going to enjoy it.”

“You'll be bored in an hour,” Zero replies. “If it takes that long.”

“Mm,” I counter, rocking my hips and making Kip gasp. “Perhaps a bit longer than an hour.”

Zero chuckles but doesn't change his mind, slipping away from the bed with a small smile playing across his lips. I had worried, for a time, that Zero would become proprietary of Kip after how he
reacted to Kip's brush with death. However, Zero hasn't shown any jealous tendencies short of being slightly more demonstrative with the pale clone, and even then he does not protest Kip's intimacy with others.

No, that's not right. He does not protest Kip's intimacy with me. There is no other who holds sway on Kip's affection; only Zero and myself. Is it that Zero is simply content to see Kip happy and healthy, with no emotional ownership attached? Or is it that we both belong to my dark-eyed fighter, with Kip and I standing equally as his lovers in his perception?

And now that Lee has become part of the equation, how will things balance out?

“Master,” Kip complains from beneath me, bucking his hips with impatience.

“Sorry,” I respond, and nuzzle against his neck in apology, leaving a trail of kisses along his shoulder. “Got lost in my thoughts for a moment.”

I roll my hips against his, reaching between us to cup his cock against mine. He gasps, thrusting into my hand. His hips rock against me desperately, and I know he won't last long. I toy with the idea of dragging this out, longing for a more intense sexual encounter, but I suppress the urge. This is about Kip's needs more than my own, and dragging it out would have no benefit to him. And I don't want him exhausted for his exam, which is only a few hours away.

Soon Kip is arching beneath me, his body pulled tight with pleasure. He orgasms with a strangled scream, biting his lip to keep from making any more noise. I don't have time to correct the behavior before he sags against the bed, panting for air. He's flushed, and there's a fine sheen of sweat on his face, but he recovers quickly and turns toward me as I move to lie beside him. He curls toward me as I stroke my own, still-straining erection. His hand covers mine, still too timid to take over the task, but brushing his fingers along my skin as I stroke myself to completion.

Still, it leaves me only half satisfied. I caress my fading erection, milking it until it's almost painfully over-sensitized. I'd prefer to go another round – this time maybe slow and smoldering, or maybe hard and fast against a wall – but Kip is already pulling away.

“Okay,” Kip says with a grin, raising his semen-covered hand to show me. “Now I really do have to get up.”

I chuckle because it's the appropriate response, unwilling to let him hear me sigh. My frustration is two-fold – not only am I sexually unsatisfied, but my next task is to look over my company's bankrolls, an effort I'm fairly certain is pointless. The money simply isn't there, and there's no way for me to increase my income sufficiently in the amount of time I have before the Competition. All my efforts so far have likely been for nothing, and it's a maddening thought when I remember how much I've failed my assets because my attention was focused on the wrong goal. To have to start all over again in another money-gaining venture...

I help Kip to his feet, but he pulls away from me once he's standing, determined to find his own way to the bathroom. He's been demanding things like that lately. He claims he needs to be ready in case his current state becomes his permanent one, but I think it's also because he so fiercely dislikes being a burden. It's one of the reasons I'm so confident that permanent blindness, while tragic, would
not destroy him. The coddling that Zero and I have been indulging in must be maddening to him, but it's a temptation that's hard to resist when he's struggling so hard.

I trail him into the bathroom, letting him find his own way. He stumbles once over the threshold of the door, but it's hardly more than a misstep. Even now, he's making remarkable progress. He cues the shower by voice and steps into the spray, his night clothes forgotten in a tangled heap on the bed. Likewise naked, I step in behind him, crossing the almost room-sized shower to join him. The walls are still wet from Zero's shower, still smelling faintly of his preferred soap. I have a moment wishing he'd stayed a little longer with us. Who knows what today will bring? But then Kip is handing me a bottle of shampoo and I let the stray thought go. It's not like Kip and I can procrastinate much longer. We've all got obligations now.

I help Kip wash, although I think he allows it more because he likes the feel of my hands running over his skin than because he needs it. He's used to showering without sight by now, and he's careful to keep his eyes closed after the sodden bandages are removed so that I can wash his hair. He keeps them closed as he exits the shower, even though we both know it probably doesn't make a difference at this point. A few hours won't make an impact on his recovery, but I don't blame him for refusing to face it yet. If it turns out that his sight hasn't returned... If nothing else, I'd like him to be braced for the realization, and surrounded by Zero and myself.

Kip exits the shower first and dries off before I finish my own washing. We go about our usual morning routine in a companionable silence, but there's still an underlying air of tension that probably won't abate all day. We both dress, with Kip still in soft, casual clothes and me in my business attire. Eventually, Kip settles on a long bench alone the wall and I get out fresh bandages, the last part of our routine before we get dressed.

“You know,” he says as I wrap the bandages over his still-damp hair, “this is the last time you'll have to do this for me.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Lee said I won't need them after today. They won't be of any use... either way.”

“Ah.” I hadn't really thought of that. “I suppose it will be nice to have them off.”

“I don't know,” he says thoughtfully. “I might... I mean, if my sight hasn't returned, I might want to wear something over my eyes. It was kind of a good reminder, you know? I could feel that my eyes were covered, so I didn't try to see.” He quirks a sad smile and says, “Had a couple times where I forgot and reached to pull them off, though.”

I don't have a response to that, and with his bandages secured I settle behind him and wrap my arms around him. He leans back into my embrace, his back against my chest, and turns his head to let his forehead press against my shoulder. I can feel the tension in him, feel the swirl of fear and anticipation, and I try to shore him up as best I can.

Eventually, he pulls away. He gives a self-deprecating laugh and says, “All this fuss, and we don't even know the outcome yet. You'd think I'd wait to get upset until we know.”

“Sometimes not knowing is worse,” I respond. “Afraid to hope, unable to plan.”

He starts in surprise, his face turning in the direction of my voice.

“Yeah,” he says softly. “It's just like that.”
I kiss him gently, just a brush of my lips against his. It shouldn't feel so intimate, given what we did less than an hour ago, but somehow it does. The soft quiver of his lips against mine, still damp in the humid air. The way his breath startles in the barest noise of surprise. The way he leans his forehead against my cheek, soft cotton and stray hairs brushing against my face.

Then he pulls away and gets to his feet.

“I better not let Ruby test the fire prevention system for too long,” he tries to joke, but it comes out strained. I search for words, but find nothing. After a moment of awkward silence, he continues in a more subdued tone. “For what it's worth, I wouldn't blame you if you... if you didn't want to keep a crippled slave.”

“I wouldn't-...”

“I know,” he cuts me off, even raising a hand to halt my denials. “You've proven that you aren't going to hurt me... no matter what. But I wish...” he hesitates a long moment, then sighs heavily. “If I could have been useful to any owner, I wish it had been you.”

He's treading along the fine line of things we haven't discussed, things I hadn't wanted to bring up while he was recovering. But with him broaching the topic, I find it's too difficult to ignore.

“Kip,” I call softly, halting him as he turns toward the door. His face turns toward me, and I'd give anything to see his eyes. To have them uncovered, if nothing else, so he can't hide behind this as well as everything else.

“Yes, master?” he responds, and it's the same formal tone he always has when he's uncertain of me. The formal tone that he used almost constantly in his first few weeks with me, and has only recently started to let go of. Why does it sting so much, even though I'm already used to it?

“Don't do this again,” I warn him. He stills, and I realize it's the first time I've made him face what brought us to this point. “I know you were sick for a long time. I know you used pain meds to cover up how sick you were, and I know Zero helped you.”

“It was all me,” he corrects immediately. He steps toward me, holding his hands out in a placating manner. “Zero didn't do anything. I stole all the drugs on my own. I begged him not to tell you. It was me, I-...”

“Zero is not going to be punished,” I assure him, knowing how quickly Kip can get worked up when Zero's safety is at stake. I take his hands in mine and pull him closer to where I'm still sitting on the bench. He doesn't resist my pull, but neither does he relax enough to sit beside me. “Not by me, anyway. He's punished himself for your condition enough already.”

“It wasn't his fault,” he defends more sternly.

“It was... and it wasn't,” I allow. “The illness was no one's fault, I think we can both admit that. But covering for you was his fault, and it only gave you time to get sicker.”

“I asked him to,” Kip reminds, a stubborn set to his jaw.

“I know you did,” I acknowledge. “And that was your fault, along with hiding this from me. And working yourself too hard. And taking pain meds recklessly to keep yourself going.”

He frowns and stiffens. Pulls away from me and says, “It wasn't reckless.”

“What?” I ask, unsure of his meaning.
“If I'd taken the pain meds recklessly, I'd be dead,” he defends. “I was careful. I read the labels and calculated the dosages. I took the smallest amount of the patches that I could and interspersed it with headache tablets to double the effectiveness. I watched what I was eating to minimize nausea. I was careful.”

“All because you didn't trust me,” I realize with a sickening feeling. It's one thing for Kip to have hidden his illness from me, it's another to know that he carefully planned and calculated how to best keep me in the dark.

“No,” Kip says quietly, and I see him chewing on his lower lip as he mulls over his answer. He finally lets me pull him back down to the bench. “It wasn't only because I didn't trust you. I also... I didn't think there was anything you could do. I never thought...” he trails, and his voice is suddenly thick. “This is impossible. This whole thing. No one sells such an experienced scholar, not even a broken one. I don't understand...”

It echoes doubts that I've been having myself with worrying accuracy. What price will Ellaine exact for her favor to me? What would prompt her to offer such a valuable asset in exchange? Even a broken asset. What, exactly, does she expect to get in return?

“But you did it,” he continues. “You saved me.”

“I'd have done it sooner if you'd trusted me,” I tell him, trying to shake the uneasy feeling. “Maybe we could have avoided some of this... unpleasantness.”

The loss of his sight. The long recovery period. Zero's psychotic break. How much of that could have been avoided if he'd trusted me?

Or if I'd been watching my assets more closely?

“I'm sorry,” he tells me. He lays his head on my shoulder, like this whole conversation is exhausting him. “I never dreamed it could turn out this way. I thought... Well, I thought I knew how it ended. It's not like I haven't seen it play out before.”

Can I really blame him for expecting what experience has taught him is true? He's seen owners let sick assets die before. He's probably seen them killed, or sold to someone likely to expedite the process. Knowing only the lie about me, how would he ever think any different? How can I expect any of them to trust me, when I imitate something that is inherently untrustworthy?

“I should have been watching you,” I chastise myself, unable to halt the bitter words from spilling across my lips. “I should have known something was wrong.”

“Now you sound like me,” he says, his tone bemused.

“Is that bad?” I wonder.

“Only if you work yourself to death,” he says, the amusement fading from his voice. “You can't be everywhere. You can't save everyone, no matter how hard you try.”

If he notices the shiver that goes through me at his words, he doesn't comment. I can only hope that he's wrong.

“Well, I'm going to give it my best shot,” I joke, but it sounds forced even to myself.

Kip doesn't laugh. Instead, he says softly, “I believe you.”
There's a moment where we sit quietly. Kip is still on my lap, his slim body fitting neatly against mine. I can feel his soft breath against my shoulder and the touch of soft bandages against my skin, reminding me of how much we have at stake today. We both need a moment to process the conversation.

Then Kip pulls away, and it's finally time to separate. I walk behind him to the door, not allowing myself to guide him but unable to give him more distance. I'm sure he can feel how close I am, but he doesn't say anything. In the hallway, we split ways. Kip is headed for the main kitchen, and I'm headed for the elevator. He casts a smile in my direction as he leaves – it's aimed more at the wall than me, considering he can't see where I am, but I appreciate the effort.

The door to the kitchen opens as Kip approaches, and I can already hear metal clanging and the suspicious scent of burnt plastic. Kip enters with an exasperated, “What did you do ?!” and I have to give a chuckle. If anything can take Kip's mind off of this afternoon, it's Ruby's serious lack of cooking skills.

Ruby's worrying lack of cooking skills.

Two hours later, I find myself in my office, six holographic screens of charts pulled up around me. My funds manager, a slim, well-dressed man in an old-fashioned suit, is on the screen in front of me. It's only when I realize that I haven't heard a single word he's said in the past ten minutes that I sigh and start closing the screens.

“Mister Price?” he questions when he sees me packing away my files.

“Let's cut to the chase,” I tell him bluntly. “Everything we're doing today – all these charts, all these business propositions, all these dividends and percentages. It's just a way for you to get around telling me that no, I'm not going to be able to pull such a substantial amount of money out of my business without selling it completely. Am I correct?”

“Uh... Yes, sir.”

“And I can't outright sell the company without approval from the board, which they're not going to do. Correct?”

“I... I can't really speak for the board....”

“Nor can I sell my shares in the company without first offering to sell them to the existing board members. Who will take all the time in the world for review, because they don't have the funds to buy me out either, but they certainly don't want to see someone else taking majority stock in the company. Do you see where I'm going with this?”

“I'm not sure...”

“I'm fucked. And because there is no way around this, I'm not going to waste any more time trying to bleed a damn stone. Believe it or not, I've got more important things to do.”

I wave my hand angrily through the screens, forcing them to close. I shove my tablet and send it skidding across the desk and to the floor just to have something tangible to vent my anger on. My funds manager blinks at me, his expression concerned. I push away from my desk and lean back in the chair, taking a moment just to stare at the ceiling above me.

“Sir?” he calls to me hesitantly. I rub my eyes before casting a glance back at the screen, trying to cool my temper.
“Yes?”

“For what it's worth, I... I think you're making the right decision. I don't know what you're trying to gain these funds for...” He frowns, a look more of uncertainty than disapproval. “Speculation is that you've got a project in space that you want to fund. There's a lot of talk that you might be shifting your assets off-planet. It has made many people... concerned.”

The idea of a land-holder on Earth giving up their property, especially an old family line like mine, would be concerning to all of the surrounding families. Letting someone else purchase my property would be tricky. I doubt the Department would even let me try. Very likely, it could result in war, with the surrounding landholders becoming concerned about another family expanding their power. If anyone would even take my land. The families surrounding me have been at peace for years. I don't know if they'd be willing to risk that.

“Thank you for your advice,” I tell him curtly, pushing myself out of the chair and leaning over the screen. “You have been very helpful. Please inform the board that, for now, I will be making no changes. I have decided to fund my project in other ways, and it should have no effect on the business.”

The man – I can't even remember his name at this point, just one more in a long line of drones I've had to deal with – beams like I've given him good news and nods curtly. I cut the connection before he can ask any more questions, or before that pleased smile can get on my nerves.

Admitting that I'm not going to get the funds for the Competition through my own resources is by no means good news. At least, not for me and my mission.
I have enjoyed every comment this week, but I simply have not had time to respond. Given that I've only got a few more chapters written (:O) this might continue to be a trend. If you REALLY want a reply, just put a Hit Me Back! at the end of your comment, and I will make SURE to give you a response as soon as possible.

I am working my hardest so that we make it to the end before I run out of material! I think we're looking at maybe ten more chapters or so. (Which doesn't sound like a lot, until I realize that it's 70-100 pages, and I usually exceed my estimates anyway. Lol.)

Thank you all for the comments and kudos. I really do appreciate all of them. You rock!

All my gratitude to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

With a little time left to spare, I head down to the gym. I don't have enough time for a workout – although I'd desperately like one, to work off some of this tension – but I know Zero and Lee are both in gym. It's close enough to the planned time that meeting up with them seems to be the most logical step.

I find Zero and Red first, both in the fighting ring toward the front of the gym. Zero is in a gray tank-top and black shorts. Red has on a similar outfit, but with a blue top. The two are both wearing gloves to protect their hands and knuckles – not the puffy, boxing-style gloves, but slimmer versions designed for the mixed-martial arts that Zero prefers.

Red is noticeably out of breath already, sweat soaking the back of his shirt. Zero moves effortlessly, shifting around the ring with the grace of a cat. Red seems to be on the offensive, with Zero backing away from the larger asset with casual, unhurried movements. I step further into the room, letting the door slide shut behind me, and move unobtrusively along the wall until I have a decent vantage point. Then I lean back and watch.

The two circle a few more times, and it's easy to see that Zero is allowing Red to get closer until the larger asset is within arm's length. Red throws a punch, and Zero slides under it. Red throws another, following Zero as he gives ground. Again, Zero easily ducks the punch, making no move to retaliate. A third punch, and Zero ducks under it again, this time allowing Red's momentum to carry him closer. As the fist flies over his head, Zero darts out his foot and pulls Red's legs out from under him. The bulkier fighter lands on his back with a thud of impact, rolling to his side with a groan.

“Watch your feet,” Zero says as the dark fighter gets up again. There's a look of determination on Red's face that seems at odds with the defeated slump of his shoulders.
“Keep going,” Zero says, darting in and shoving his shoulder against the dark-skinned asset, sending him sprawling backwards. “Or are you giving up already?” he taunts.

It earns a growl from the larger asset and he launches himself at Zero, throwing several punches that Zero twists away from, blocking the few that might have landed. He throws a kick at Red’s midsection, but the taller asset blocks it. Red throws another punch, but it's obvious that he's tiring. His movements are too slow, and Zero easily dodges under it and pulls Red's feet out from under him again.

“Better,” Zero says as Red lays flat on his back, blinking at the ceiling and panting.

I feel my heart sink.

If this is better, how bad was he to begin with?

“Your footwork is improving,” Zero continues, “but you need to quit broadcasting your moves.”

“I need to quit everything,” Red says, sitting up and jerking his gloves off in frustration. “And start doing everything else. And be smaller. And stronger. And faster. And... better!”

Zero, who has retrieved a pair of water-bottles from the side of the ring, doesn't contradict him. Just says, “You're getting there,” in an even tone and hands him a bottle.

Red scoffs and takes a drink from his water-bottle.

Then notices me.

“Sir – Master Zeke!” he says, jumping to his feet. “I... Can I...”

“Almost time?” Zero questions, physically moving in front of Red to interrupt him. They both climb out of the ring, Zero standing casually in front of me, Red seeming tense and anxious behind him.

“Yes,” I respond, unsure of what to say to the other fighter. “I thought I would go with you and Lee to retrieve Kip. Where is Lee?”

Zero gestures to the back of the room, where Lee seems to be practicing a complicated series of martial arts moves on the matted area. His black scrubs once again remind me of a martial arts uniform, and they seem well-adapted to his practice. I wonder what has prompted the sudden change in behavior, as previously he had been reluctant to leave his domain in the medbay for much of anything. Could our recent conversation have been the cause? I suppose I'll have to address that evening with him at some point – he seems to be avoiding me since then.

I take a moment to watch him. His movements are fluid and precise, obviously the result of years of dedicated practice and training. Still, there is something wild to his movements, something that speaks of power just barely contained. Something, perhaps, that has been caged too long, and can find an outlet only through this. Something primal and passionate and fierce.

Something beautiful.

He takes notice of the attention, eventually. Glances up and sees us, as Zero and Red have joined me at this point, watching his routine. I expect him to be self-conscious, but he simply drops from his stance and approaches calmly. Perhaps he is used to his practice attracting attention.

“I thought I would meet up with you,” I explain. “It's almost time for Kip's appointment, I
believe.”

He nods, but then says, “If you two could bring him down, I would like to change into fresh clothes before I treat him.”

A valid request, I wonder, or simply avoiding me again? But I nod regardless.

“You can take a break,” Zero says, turning his attention to Red. “Keep Ruby out of trouble while we're gone.”

“But... Shouldn't I keep practicing?” he asks, his eyes darting between Zero and myself.

“You'll strain something if you keep up this pace,” Zero says. “I knew this was going to happen, that's why I pushed you so hard. Now hit the showers.”

“Yes, sir,” Red responds, but he doesn't look pleased with the orders. Still, he turns away and heads toward the gym's showers without protest, his shoulders slumped and his pace slow.

“Should you shower too?” I find myself wondering, but Zero only scoffs.

“Like I broke a sweat from that,” he says, and a glance at him proves that it's true. Lee looks more worn out than Zero, and he was practicing on his own.

I withhold a sigh and decide... not to come to any decisions yet. But I'll have to address this issue soon. Apparently, my two newest assets are ill-suited to their roles. I wonder if there's anything I can do to help them better adjust. And if not... what then? A swap? After they've already lost so much time in training due to Kip and Zero being unable to train? Could I afford to have one or both of them unable to compete? Especially if Kip...

I suppose there's no point thinking about it until I know Kip's prognosis.

Zero and I walk to get Kip silently, but I can sense the strain coming from Zero. He is understandably worried about the blonde, and I search for words to comfort him as we approach the kitchen.

“He's going to be okay,” I say softly, and even as the words leave my mouth I can feel that they aren't quite right.

Zero sighs and says, “I know.”

“Even if his sight doesn't return, he'll be safe and healthy.”

“I know that, too.”

“Then why...?” I ask, giving a vague gesture toward his tense form.

“I just...” he says, and cuts off with a frustrated noise. “It just doesn't seem fair. I wish I could make it better for him.”

Ah.

“Me too,” I admit, and have to chuckle at his surprised look. “I'm not allowed to have limitations?”

“No... It just seems like you can do anything you want.”

“That is so far from the truth,” I tell him softly, feeling my humor fade. “There is so much that I
I cut myself off as we arrive at the door, aware that I'm edging too close to the reality of this situation. That the cracks in my mask are showing, and now isn't the time to burden Zero with that knowledge.

“You wish?” he presses, pausing outside the door.

“I just wish I could make him better,” I admit.

Then the door is sliding open and Kip is stepping out. I can see Ruby behind him, covered in flour and kneading dough.

“I heard your voices,” Kip says as he steps into the hallway. “Is it... Is it time?”

“It is,” I tell him, and take his arm to lead him down to the medbay. Zero moves to his other side, his shoulder brushing against Kip's. Together, we head downstairs.

In the medbay, Zero and I still can't shed the instinct to protectively bracket Kip, so we stand on either side of the gurney that he's settled on. Zero moves like a caged animal with barely contained tension. Kip almost vibrates in his seat with nervousness. I try to remain still, but find myself feeling like a statue, unable to move lest I pick up Zero's pacing. Lee, in contrast to the rest of us, remains calm and professional. I can almost see him making a conscious effort not to let our emotions affect his demeanor.

“It's pretty simple,” Lee explains. “We'll test each eye individually. I'm going to remove the bandages and tape one eye shut, then lower the lights. Then you can open your eye and test your sight. We'll give it several minutes for you to adjust, so don't get upset if you can't see anything at first. Don't strain yourself. Just relax and let your eye do the work.”

He then proceeds through the steps as he outlined them to Kip – first cutting away the bandages, then taping a gauze patch over Kip's right eye, and finally lowering the lights.

Then, “Okay, you can open your eye now.”

In the dim lighting, I can see Kip blink and cast his gaze slowly around the room. His demeanor stays the same, still tense and expectant. Several seconds pass, and the excitement slowly fades from Kip's posture.

“Nothing?” Lee asks.

“Nothing,” Kip confirms, his tone disappointed.

“Give it a few more minutes,” Lee advises, but he doesn't sound optimistic about it.

Time moves slowly after that, almost torturous. At some point, Zero laces his fingers with Kip's, but I only notice after the fact. I'm too focused on Kip's expression, on spotting any signal of a change.

Sadly, no change comes.

“Still nothing?” Lee asks when the time has run out.

Kip shakes his head sadly, his grip on Zero's hand going white-knuckled.

“Okay,” Lee responds evenly and raises the lights. He shines a light in Kip's eye and watches the
reaction. He doesn't seem pleased with the results, but he doesn't comment on them. He notes something on the tablet, then switches the patch to Kip's left eye and lowers the light again.

“Go ahead,” he instructs, and we all wait with bated breath as Kip blinks his right eye open.

The change is almost immediate. Kip gasps and then laughs, making a choking sound as the excitement overwhelms him.

“It's- I can...” he stutters excitedly. “I mean, it's blurry, but...”

“We can work with that,” Lee assures him. “I'm going to raise the lights.”

Lee turns the lights up slowly, using the screen on the wall to control the dimmer. It takes several minutes for him to reach full lighting, with Kip blinking owlishly at the change. Then there are tests, of course, with Lee visually examining Kip's eye first, and then using several different instruments to check for reactions.

“I have to admit that optometry is not my specialty,” Lee says when he's finished typing the results into his tablet. “However, my research indicates that your case is fairly straightforward. As the swelling continues to abate, the optic nerve should recover and your vision will improve somewhat in your right eye. There are also a few treatments that we can use to improve your vision without invasive surgery. Your left eye, however...”

“It's okay,” Kip cuts him off quickly, unable to stop smiling even during Lee's clinical diagnosis. “This is a lot more than I've been working with lately.” He holds a hand up in front of his face, moves it closer and then further away. “I just wish...”

“We can work on range and clarity after you've had more time to recover,” Lee says. “For the time being, let's just get a baseline for your vision.”

He grabs a black pen from the drawer and holds it up in front of Kip's face.

“Tell me when this becomes clear,” Lee instructs, slowly moving the pen closer to Kip's face.

When the pen is barely a hand's with from Kip's nose, he says, “There. It's still a bit hazy, but I can see that it's a pen. I can see your fingers holding it, and then it gets fuzzy as I look down your arm.”

“That's fine,” Lee says. “Stay focused on the pen. Now, as I move it away, stop me when it becomes too blurry to identify.”

Lee moves his arm slowly in the reverse, but doesn't make it far before Kip is calling stop again. If Kip reached out his arm, he could probably still touch then pen. I try not to feel discouraged at the fact that Kip's sight is limited at this point to arm's length. I remind myself that it's far better than nothing.

Kip is still smiling, and somehow that makes it all okay.

“All things considered, your outlook is promising. With time and an alteration to your medications, I think we could see a good bit of your sight return, although I can't promise you full vision. Without the option of a synthetic eye, you will not regain sight on your left side, and you will likely remain near-sighted on your right side. The important thing, for now, is not to strain or stress yourself. Rest is key. I'd like you to go lie down after this. Perhaps listen to some music.”

Kip makes a noise of irritation and says, “I've wasted so much time already. I was really hoping I
could go check on Ruby. See how much damage he's done to my kitchen.”

“Nope,” Zero says before Lee can react. Zero wraps an arm around Kip's shoulders and pulls the smaller blonde close. He leans his cheek against Kip's hair and says gently, “I'll tie you up before I let you into that mess today.”

“Eh... But...” Kip protests.

“Come on,” Zero says, pulling Kip to his feet. He keeps an arm wrapped around the smaller clone, and Kip leans into him. “We'll go to the garden and sit under the trees. I'll ask Red to get us something edible from the kitchen.”

I watch them shuffle out, Kip seeming more unbalanced now, with his half-sight, than he had earlier with no sight at all. Another adjustment for my resilient slave. Still...

“That's worrying,” I comment softly to myself.

“What is?” Lee asks.

“That Zero would rather rely on Red for their food than Ruby, who I'm having trained as a domestic.”

There's silence from across the room, stark and obvious.

“I've fucked up their designations, haven't I?”

Lee's silence is as a reply, and I sigh and drop into the rolling chair, rubbing my forehead.

“Why hasn't anyone mentioned it?”

“It's only been a couple weeks,” Lee points out. “I don't know that Kip has given up hope on Ruby yet.”

“And Zero?”

“Zero will fulfill whatever task you set for him, not matter how difficult.”

“I've set an impossible task,” I realize. “Getting himself ready to compete while training an unsuited beginner. It's impossible.”

“Perhaps.”

“So why hasn't he...”

Why didn't he tell me? Talk to me? Surely our lines of communication aren't so poor that he thought he could not bring this to me? Especially when the solution is so easy. Red, obviously, is more skilled as a domestic than he is as a combat, and certainly more skilled than Ruby.

“The question you're asking isn't as simple as you think,” Lee points out, perching himself on the gurney he used to examine Kip. “Prior to now, it was uncertain if you'd need one or two domestic assets.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

Now it's his turn to frown, like I'm being particularly dense.
“Kip will likely recover enough to compete, leaving you in need of only one more domestic. If Red becomes a domestic, it leaves Ruby without a designation.”

That gives me pause. I frown, starting to see all the moving pieces in this picture.

“I'm... not sure I want Kip to compete. With his medical problems, I'm not sure the strain would be a good idea for him.”

“He's stronger than you think,” Lee says. “Although you’re right to be concerned about his continued health. We might have to see how far he recovers. But I don't think you should count him out entirely. However much he teaches to his students, they will still only have a fraction of the knowledge and experience that he brings. If you're hoping to have a few assets score very well in the Competition, then he's your best shot.”

It's a valid point, as that's exactly what I'm hoping to do.

“What... would you advise?” I wonder.

He sighs then, but I can see him giving it serious consideration.

“Bringing in two novice assets was a risky move, although I've been told that circumstances all but forced you into it.” I nod and allow him to continue. “I think my advice would be to hold off on any judgments for a couple more days. I know it seems contrary, since we're so pressed for time and we've already wasted some of it training them for unsuitable designations. However, Ruby and Red haven't been here much longer than I have. They're both still adjusting, and we've yet to see how Kip will fair. Another few days, a week at the longest. Then I think you should talk to Kip and Zero. It was, perhaps, not a wise decision to assign them both trainees without getting their input on the matter.”

I nod, accepting the mild criticism. I feel a washing sense of relief at his advice. Yes, I made a wrong decision, but not an irreparable one.

“Thank you,” I respond, pushing myself to my feet. “As always, you council is invaluable. I will heed your advice.”

He frowns as I start to turn toward the door. I had assumed the conversation was over.

“Wait a moment?” he asks, and I turn back to find him standing as well. “I wanted to speak with you,” he says, his voice hesitant, “about the other night.”

“The night we both got drunk and things got out of hand?”

“Yes.”

“Don't worry,” I tell him, smiling and making a dismissive gesture with my hand. “It's forgotten.”

“No,” he corrects firmly. “It isn't. I'm not asking you to forget it.”

Now I frown, confused.

“Then what are you asking for?”

“I want you to be aware of my intentions,” he says, and his voice is solemn but there's a gentleness in his expression that makes it... somehow less serious. “I want to let you know that what I said that night was not only the ramblings of a man too drunk to know better.” A smile plays on his lips,
sheepish and charming. “You opened up to me and revealed someone that I... I would very much like to know better.”

“Oh,” I respond.

He frowns.

“You don't sound pleased.”

“No, it's not.... There's just not a lot left to uncover.”

“I very much doubt that,” he says, expression... concerned. “You past does not define you, although it did help me understand you better.”

I'm silent for a couple beats too long, standing awkwardly. Finally, I just come out and say it.

“Is this... Do you want to have sex with me?”

I can tell as soon as the words are out of my mouth that it's the wrong thing to say. Lee blushes and turns away. He paces to the counter and leans against it, seems to take a couple calming breaths.

“This is probably silly,” he admits. “I'm not naive to the situation we're in, nor the level of danger present. It was foolish to think...”

I step toward him until we're side-by-side again, leaving him enough space to retreat if he chooses to do so. I don't reach for him, unwilling to crowd him when he seems so anxious, but I do lay my hand on the counter just inches from his elbow.

“I'm not rejecting your advances,” I tell him. “I just... don't know what your angle is.”

“Angle?” he asks, confused.

“I don't understand what you want from me.” I try again.

“Want from... is that what you think a relationship is?”

My response would be, “What else is it?” so I say nothing.

“It is,” he continues, like an epiphany. “It's all you've ever known. Even Zero and Kip look to you for safety, for comfort.”

“I can't offer you... exclusivity,” I tell him, wondering if maybe that's where this is going. “If that's what you're asking for.”

“Monogamy? No,” he says, and seems to relax a bit. “Maybe once... But we're far past that now. That was a child's dream, and this is reality.”

“Then what...” I wonder, but stop myself before I can repeat the same question again.

“Perhaps I'm the one who wants to offer something. Perhaps I want to be the one giving.”

“Giving what?” I wonder, still feeling... oddly uncertain about this whole conversation. It's so odd to speak of relationships, when I'm so used to simply acting upon desire. Having it spelled out seems almost clinical, yet somehow charming.

“My strength, if you'll have it. Whatever piece of me you'll take. Lean on me in some places, and I
“A partnership?” I wonder, thinking that it sounds like a more apt description than a relationship, which always seems to be two people jockeying for a position of power. At least, in my experience.

“In a way,” he says, not sounding entirely pleased. “If that's how you need to see it.”

“What changes?” I wonder. “What's different?”

“Nothing. Everything. Doesn't intention matter?”

“What intention?”

“To... get closer to you. To be...” he hesitates, then makes a frustrated sound. “Terminology loses all meaning in a place like this. I simply want to be... more. More than coworkers. More than... this.”

“What's wrong with what we are already?”

“It isn't enough,” he responds simply. “Not if I can have more. Not if you'll allow it. I find myself uncharacteristically greedy when you're around.”

“Must be all those years as a schoolmarm. Sexual deprivation.”

A smile plays on his lips, and he says, “I don't think it's that simple.”

His hand reaches out, hesitantly and with glacial slowness. I watch as the fingers brush my wrist. Just the touch of his skin against mine. Nothing else, but it seems like a declaration.

“If you don't want this,” he says, “now is the time to tell me.”

“I'm not complaining.”

“Do better,” he commands. “Silence will not be taken as agreement.”

“I... Yes. You have my permission to... to court me. Or whatever this is.”

What could be the harm in... in seeing where this goes?

His fingers move down my wrist until his hand is laying over mine. Such a small gesture, but it pulls all of my attention. Perhaps because Lee is usually so stand-offish? I rake my brain for other times we've touched, and come up with only a scant few.

Then he laces our fingers, and the scope of my perception narrows to the press of his skin against mine, the warmth there. The strength. I glance into his eyes and find an intensity that startles me. What would it be like to tie myself to such a passionate creature? To match his strength and wit with my own?

Desire flares in me, and I find myself leaning toward him. I wonder what he'll taste like. Will he let me finish our previously interrupted kiss? Will he let me take it further, perhaps? Tempt him into my bed?

But as I shift closer to kiss him... he abruptly pulls back.

“I should check on Kip,” Lee says. “Make sure he isn't trying to strain himself.”

Kip is with Zero, who's more likely to sit on him than let him start any work. But I see it for the
excuse that it is, and let him back away.

“You probably have meetings as well,” he points out. I nod, although I’ve been finding myself less and less motivated to attend them now that I’ve given up on getting funds from my company. The prospect of having him in my bed certainly would have been enough to make me skip.

“I... should go,” he says again, still standing awkwardly. I take pity and allow him his escape, wondering if the situation was simply too overwhelming, or if it was something I did.

“Of course,” I respond. “I have things I should be attending to as well.”

His expression goes quickly to relief before he can cover it with something more neutral. I decide that it was probably wise not to press him further, and make a note that I’ll have to remember that for future... interactions. For... whatever this is.

He precedes me out the door, losing a bit of the awkwardness from earlier. I trail him, still feeling the warmth of his skin against my hand.

Whatever this is, it's going to be... interesting.
Meeting with Mari - Lee POV

Chapter Notes

I can still make it to work on time! If I leave... ten minutes ago. 😅 LOL!

All my gratitude to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

The next time Zeke meets with his handler from the Department, I coerce him into letting me sit in. I feel a bit guilty about it, after I've glared and argued until he allows it, but protectiveness wins out over guilt. I don't trust these people – not with the mission's security or my own – and I've found that Zeke's biggest lapses in judgment seem to surround the very people who sent him. If I have any hope of finding out what's going on, I need to intervene in his correspondence with the organization that sent him.

The meeting, predictably, takes place in Zeke's office. He settles in the large chair behind the desk, and I pull over the smaller chair from along the wall. It echoes the last time I was in here, when I still distrusted Zeke, still looked at him as a potential threat and possible villain. It's hard to remember and think of how far we've come. How quickly things have been changing. I know that my personality is rigid, hardened into something inflexible by years of cruelty and sorrow. I strive to be adaptable, but such abrupt changes in my life make me anxious. I question my own judgments. The smallest interactions with others are picked apart, my conversations with Zeke rehashed a hundred times. As steady and reliable as I am in my field of practice, I feel equally unsure and uncertain in my interpersonal relationships. For all my skill as a surgeon, I have very little practice at being a companion.

Even less at being a lover.

I shake those thoughts from my head as Zeke pulls up the holographic screens on his desk. Although the exterior looks antique, the internal mechanisms prove to be thoroughly modern. Zeke pulls up a large screen in the center and leaves it blank, then several others around him displaying text. I gesture and pull one closer, skimming the contents to find that they are Zeke's finances and transactions. Glancing at the others, they seem to be deposits and projected revenues.

Zeke seems content to wait in silence for the call to come through, so I take the opportunity to look through his files, wishing I'd had the time or forethought to do it earlier. I dislike feeling unprepared, although the data I'm finding is fairly straightforward. Zeke had accumulated a large amount of wealth in his youth by leaving the revenue from his company basically untouched. This, along with his planetary ties, was enough to gain Zeke membership in the Leash. His savings bought him his ship and his first asset, plus covered the costs of food and travel. But it has dwindled since then, with expenditures far outstretching revenue. At his current level of income, he might be able to maintain his lifestyle, but would not be able to raise the capital needed to enter the Competition. He has a number circled in red at the bottom of his finances. It's an exorbitant sum of money, and I take a
guess that it's the cost of entering his team in the Competition. I run a quick calculation and project that it would take Zeke five years to save that amount of capital at his current income level, assuming that he makes no major purchases in that time.

Damn.

Five years.

He'll never manage for that long. He's cracking under the pressure as it is.

A woman's face appears on the screen, interrupting my train of thought. She's middle-aged, her dark hair likely dyed to cover any hints of gray starting to show. She's in a crisp suit, more suited to an office worker than military personnel. I have to assume, from what I know of the situation, that she's undercover as well, acting as a liaison with Zeke's company and his interests on Earth. I remember her from our brief earlier meeting, when Zeke was desperate to convince me to save Kip's life. I have to assume that they would give him a novice handler, or perhaps someone already tasked with several other cases. But Mari holds herself with an air of calmness and strength that speaks of experience. Given her age, I would expect her to be fully or partially retired from this kind of service – but then, I don't know much about her. Perhaps this is her equivalent of retired.

“Mari,” Zeke greets, “You're looking well.”

“Zeke,” Mari responds, her eyes drifting to me. Her expression not altogether pleased. “This is... unexpected.”

“I wanted Lee to be able to sit-in and consult on my progress,” Zeke explains.

“Regulations make it clear that...”

I cut in with, “I doubt you have anything in your regulations about this specific situation.” I give her a cold smile. “Given that your organization has left him virtually alone and without any kind of resources, it's only natural that he find support where he can.”

Her eyes narrow, but she says, “I suppose,” in a voice that matches my smile.

There's a moment of silence as we size each other up. Zeke, being merely a bystander at this point, breaks the tension.

“Alright, enough,” Zeke says. “I didn't bring you two here to argue.”

“To the point then,” Mari says, shifting her sharp attention to Zeke. “What did you call this meeting for?”

“I need to discuss the funding for this mission. The revenue from my business isn't going to cover these costs, and we've almost exhausted my savings already.”

I glance over the screen with Zeke's personal funds. “Exhausted” is probably a bit of a stretch. If his expenditures were simply on maintaining this lifestyle, he could probably manage on his current income level. There is revenue coming in from his business and other personal holdings, it's simply not accruing fast enough. Zeke has already made several large purchases, including this ship and his first asset, as well as likely converting some of his funds into Leash currency.

“What are you asking from me?” Mari questions, and despite my reservations I have to admire her
to-the-point attitude.

“I have assets on Earth that would be significantly more valuable off-planet. If the Department could overlook the export cost, I could liquidate them into the necessary funds.”

Taxes on Earth exports are abnormally high, regardless of the area of origin. From my understanding, it's one of the ways the Council uses to keep much of the wealth controlled by the planet, keeping the price of Earth-made goods artificially high and putting funds back into their government system. Most of the budget for the Department likely comes from this revenue source. My home satellite, as an isolated nation, hadn't had much demand for Earth-made goods, although even we recognized the value of planetary heirlooms. Among the Leash, however, there was always talk of smuggling operations to and from the central planet.

“We've already discussed this,” Mari responds. “The Department doesn't want to tip its hand through direct involvement in your mission.”

“I'm not asking for their involvement. Actually, I'm asking for the exact opposite. Let me smuggle the goods off-world. I know Peterson would be willing to finance the operation if I can get him a steady supply of liquor for his club. It's...”

“The Department maintains nearly impenetrable defenses around the planet,” Mari cuts him off. “It's going to look suspicious if a two-bit crook suddenly manages to break through. Not to mention the damage it will do the Department's image. We'll suddenly have every cocky asshole in the universe trying our defenses.”

“I think 'impenetrable' is a bit of a stretch,” Zeke responds coldly. “Half of my missions have been investigating smugglers who made it through one blind spot or another.”

“We're talking about high-value, high-profile goods here. Goods that can be traced back to your winery and your personal collection. You think you can keep that totally secret? You think no one will question it if a large quantity of your wines suddenly become available in space?”

“I'm not selling to the general public...”

“You don't have control over distribution,” she cuts in. “Not once you hand it off to another seller. We can't just overlook such a high profile smuggling operation. It makes the Department look like it's incompetent or playing favorites. Or both.”

I wonder if both are accurate, but keep the thought to myself.

“Besides,” Mari continues, “most of the smuggling operations you've been involved in cracking have been imports, not exports. You know getting goods onto the planet is a lot different than getting them off.”

“But we can use the same channels,” Zeke argues, jumping at the opening. “No one thinks they'll be able to get on-world and then back off again, since it's twice the risk. But if I tell Peterson that I have smuggling channels on my property, then...”

“I already asked,” Mari snaps. “The commander refused. If you try a smuggling operation, she'll seize your goods and hit you with a fine.”

“So what now?” Zeke growls, and I can feel him tensing with anger beside me. “Why even send me out here if she didn't care enough to offer me any kind of support?”

“I don't know!” Mari growls back, her fists clenched in fury on the desk on her side of the screen,
half a galaxy away. I’m surprised by the depth of her anger and frustration. Could I have misjudged her? If Zeke is a pawn in this, could she be as well? A double blind perhaps? “We’ve had words about this, the Commander and I. But she won't budge.”

“That doesn't help me very damn much! She's setting me up for failure. Does she want to see the mission burn?”

I’ve looked over Zeke's financial charts. Not in as much detail as I would have liked, but certainly enough to have a grasp of the situation. From what I can see, Zeke's position should not surprise anyone. Yes, Zeke managed to make a couple changes that increased his revenue flow, but not nearly enough to cover this mission. There was never a way for him to fund it short of selling his company or properties, both of which could have upset the markets planetside.

So this... was never going to happen.

And the Department knew that.

“Zeke,” I call quietly, and am relieved to see that my words break through his fury despite the soft tone. “Your commander hasn't abandoned you. She wouldn't give you Mari for support if she had.”

He and Mari both stare at me in surprise. I suppose it is a bit shocking, as I had initially come in here under the assumption that the Department was either useless or corrupt, or possibly both. I still haven't made up my mind about the latter.

“If she's not setting me up for failure,” Zeke says, his words slow and carefully controlled, “then what do you think she's doing?”

“Don't you see?” I wonder, and then it dawns on me. “No, you're both too invested in this to step back and look at it logically.”

Now they both look annoyed.

“What I mean is,” I continue, “these numbers were never going to add up. The money isn't there. She won't offer you an option to get the money on your own. So she's pushing you to get the funds from inside the Leash. That's what she wants your next step to be. It's why she's cut off any other options.”

There's a moment of silence from the pair.

Zeke makes a frustrated sound and shoves himself back in his chair, but I can see some of his agitation fading. Had it been covering fear? Had he been afraid that he'd truly been abandoned, and of what that would mean for the rest of us?

“It's not like I haven't contemplated that option,” he says, his voice still crisp and angry. “But why tell me to use my own money? Why send me to that source first?”

“It had to look real,” I respond, taking a guess at the setup now that I have all the facts. “She needs you to be believable. Your public persona has been a virtual blank for the past ten years while you did missions for her, correct? Some questionable disappearances, but no connections to corruption, no lewd acts in your background to explain your sudden interest in acquiring a slave. And to suddenly be desperate for money, when you’re sitting on a virtual fortune planetside? That would be too suspicious. She needed you to show honest efforts and actual desperation as you failed to get the funds for the Competition.”

“You think they're watching my actions that closely? Even my business?”
I roll my eyes. Sometimes, he can be a bit naive.

“I think they’re watching from the inside,” I respond. “You think they don’t have spies in your company? Ties to members of the board?” I glance at Mari. “Do you think they haven’t infiltrated the company?” I wonder.

“I...” she hesitates, seeming surprised that I would pull her back into the discussion. “No. I think you’re probably right. Not all the members of the board have stellar backgrounds. And businessmen... talk.”

Zeke looks uncomfortable with this admission. Having been absent from the company for the last ten years or so, I’m not really sure what he expected. That it would simply continue running like a machine, without any moral or ethical maintenance? Or perhaps it was such an abstract concept to him that facing the reality of it is unpleasant.

Thoughts for another time. Assuming we survive.

I nod at the screen with the tally of his accounts, gesturing to the total sum of his savings.

“You aren’t in desperate straits yet,” I continue, turning my attention back to Zeke, “but you’re close enough that you could play up the need to recoup your investments in your assets. So far, you’ve only spent money on these endeavors, without regaining any. And one thing that seems true of wealthy people everywhere is that they prefer to make money than to spend it.”

There’s silence for a moment, and I can tell that Zeke is still processing my explanation. I can almost see him running through the logic, trying to find any flaws. He must not uncover any, because he sighs and runs a hand over his face.

“This isn’t a situation that I wanted to put myself in,” he admits. “Having no collateral to bring to the table, I have to get someone to back me on the value of my wit and charm alone. While I am both witty and charming,” he quips sourly, “this puts me in a disadvantaged position with the rest of the group.”

It’s not much of a stretch to describe the other owners as lions. Big cats in a group, fighting for position in the hierarchy but always moving as a unit. Putting Zeke in this position takes away his claws. Makes him the prey instead of part of the pride.

“Do you think any of them will do it?” I wonder. Because of my isolation – first with Ellaine, and now here – the only information I have about Zeke’s interactions with the other owns comes from him. And he has said little about his place in the dynamics of the group.

“Peterson won’t,” he responds immediately. “He’s looking for an advantage himself. Leonid is running a business as well, so I doubt he’d be willing to loan out such a substantial amount of funds. Vikram hasn’t taken to me particularly well, I doubt asking for money will change that. And I already owe Ellaine a favor for giving me you, so I’m hesitant to be any deeper indebted to her.”

“What favor?” I ask, alarmed.

“Unknown,” Zeke says with a frustrated shrug. “It all happened... very quickly.”

“Damn conniving woman,” I growl.

“So the options I’m left with,” he continues, “are Reynard, Dillon, and Carter. I think, out of the three, Dillon is my best bet.”
That makes me hesitate.

“Why him?”

Zeke won't look at me as he says, “He's... already shown some... interest.”

I feel a chill run down my spine.

“Zeke...”

“I know,” he cuts me off. “I know he's dangerous.”

I've only seen him a handful of times at the Arena, while I was working as the lead medic. If there was an ounce of mercy in the man, I never saw a hint of it. Blood thirsty and ruthless, he's the last person I'd want Zeke getting close to.

“What about the other two?”

“Reynard is the Dealer for pleasure assets. I think he probably has the funds, but I'd have to leave an organ as collateral. And not an optional one.”

“And Carter?”

“He's... an unknown. He's a Champion and he's old-money, so I think he could probably fund me. He certainly doesn't seem to be running a business here. That being said, I don't know what he wants from me. Not knowing his motives makes me a bit leery of doing business with him, but... he might be a safer option than Dillon.”

“So you'll need to start aggressively courting these options,” I tell him, feeling my expression reflect my distaste. The idea of him “courting” these bastards in any sense of the word makes my stomach churn.

“Yes,” he says with a frustrated noise. “Something that I would have been doing all along, if I'd known that my company wasn't going to get me the funds.”

He shoots an accusing glare at Mari, who meets the glare with a neutral expression.

“My orders were to have you pursue your company and your own finances as the first source of revenue.”

“But you knew...”

“Enough,” I cut him off. “Laying blame is a waste of time. Regardless of the motive, you did need to pursue your company as the first focus of revenue. Things would have played out the same.”

Although Zeke might not be at the fraying edges of his endurance if he'd known it was all a farce. How much extra stress are they piling on him, hoping to show cracks to the very men we're trying to defeat? How much more can they heap on before he crumbles?

“Do you have anything to contribute?” I ask of Mari, wondering if she's willing or able to share any information with us. Not that her words won't be taken as possible misdirection or outright lies, but even in deception she might give us something useful. She is, currently, the only connection between Zeke and the organization backing him. And a tenuous link at that. She's a valuable source of information about the mission's progress.

If she isn't actively misleading us.
“I...” she hesitates, seems surprised that I would call her out directly. “It certainly seems that your conclusions are valid.”

“Meaning you haven't been told any more than we have,” I surmise, suppressing the urge to roll my eyes. Great. So even our liaison is being kept in the dark.

“I...”

“It isn't unusual,” Zeke cuts in softly, “for agents in the field to be kept on a need to know basis. It's how I usually function.”

“That doesn't make it right,” Mari snaps, surprisingly echoing my own thoughts. “There's a difference between need-to-know and a virtual blackout. I knew she'd do this to you, but I didn't think she'd pull this shit on me.”

Now it's Zeke's turn to frown.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean,” she says, and then cuts herself off with a sigh. When her voice comes again, the tone is more gentle. “I mean that she never treats you like the other agents. There are things that you do that no one else would be permitted to.”

“Like what?”

“Like the back-to-back missions.”

“I ask for those.”

“And you get them. Any other agent would get denied and sent to psych for evaluation – as per our policy. But you wouldn't know that, would you? Because policy never applies to you.”

“I...”

“You're not even classified as an agent, you know that? You're considered a 'contracted independent.' Whatever that means.”

From what I've heard of Zeke's past, I can only assume that “work-release agent” or “prison escape clause” didn't look good on the books.

“I'm different from a standard agent,” Zeke says, sidestepping the issue. “I have different skills and a different background. You must have known that when she assigned you to my mission.”

“I requested to be here,” Mari says. “I had hoped... You're a good agent, but there are too many secrets around you. Too much that just doesn't make sense. I had hoped that I could wade through some of the mess and figure it out, but I've just gotten caught up in all the deception. I don't even...”

“Don't even what?” Zeke presses.

“I don't even know what we're doing out here,” Mari snaps. Then, in a softer voice, “What is the Commander thinking? Why would she send you so far out?”

“This is an issue that needs dealt with,” Zeke argues, frowning in confusion.

“But it's not our problem!” Mari growls. “Our focus has always been on protecting Earth and its interests.”
“Then,” I cut in, “logic would dictate that something about this mission is threatening the safety and stability of the planet.”

Mari glances at me, her expression uncertain.

“The Department monitors the development of weapons on all of the satellites, does it not?” I question. “Even my home, as isolated as we were, submitted annual reports through the planetary liaison office. It's part of the original agreement from when the satellites launched.”

“It's not just threats, though,” Zeke argues. “The Department monitors public health crises as well. It sends aid in an emergency. They handled the clean-up from Satellite 12.”

“Satellite 12 could be construed as a threat to planetary safety,” I argue. “The collapse of an entire satellite would be reason for concern throughout the planetary sphere.”

“But what kind of a threat could a slave ring pose to the safety of a planet?” Mari asks.

“Power,” I respond. “Look how much clout they have already. How they've gained inter-satellite cooperation from several prominent political figures. Ellaine is forming an alliance with Arcrest, correct?” I ask, remembering mentions of plans from my former owner.

“She's married him,” Zeke clarifies.

“Even better,” I respond dryly. “So they're obviously amassing power between the satellites. Could it be enough to threaten the Earth's control?”

“I... Maybe?” Mari says. “Earth has always stayed mostly out of off-planet politics, but if this group is gaining enough leverage to unite the satellites...”

“Isn't that a lovely idea?” I quip, feeling disgusted. “The entire orbital finally uniting to support slavery and debauchery.”

“More likely caught in the choke-hold of corruption and greed,” Zeke counters. “You can't ignore that this small percentage of people seems to control all the power and wealth.”

“Isn't that always the case?” I ask bitterly.

Damn. Once again, the strong taking advantage of the weak. The righteous overwhelmed by the corrupt. Is this simply the natural state of things? Am I fighting a battle that can never be won?

Soft fingers touch the back of my hand, and I jump. I glance up to find Zeke looking at me with concern.

“We'll stop them,” he assures me, his voice too soft for Mari to hear. “I promise, we'll put an end to all of this.”

I nod, knowing that his words are empty promises, but taking comfort from them nonetheless. He has no more control over this situation than I do, and yet I find myself somehow reassured. If nothing else, it helps to know that someone is fighting beside me this time.

I look away from them both, taking a moment to calm myself. When I turn back, Zeke has once again given his attention to Mari. I wonder, does she see how much he struggles under this burden? Does she understand that they are asking the impossible of him, and yet they act like it's nothing? Do they even know what he's like?
Given what I know of his history, I have to assume that they probably don't.

“What of the technology?” I hear Zeke ask. “Surely the ability to control men in this way is something that would be concerning for the Department?”

“Technology like this has been around for years,” I cut in. “Doctors can manipulate nerves in a variety of different ways, mostly to prevent pain signals from being transmitted, but in theory it would work the same way in reverse. It's the same for cutting off neural pathways, which would prevent sight or limit control over the larynx, preventing speech. The only thing new about this technology is its capacity to hide and leave no traces. We don't know how it's implemented, controlled, or how it can be removed.”

“If it's used only on the slaves, then it must take some effort to install. Not something that could be slipped into a drink or passed through the skin.”

“If it's only used on the slaves,” I counter. “There's no way to know for sure. If it's being used as leverage on someone, they wouldn't be able to disclose it. It could be in anyone.”

“Any man,” Zeke puts in. “We've only seen male slaves.”

“I don't know of any medical reason that it would only be effective on males. Gender doesn't have much effect on the nerves themselves. Perhaps if the effect is chemical instead of electrical... No, that doesn't make any sense.”

“Could there be a non-medical reason for the restriction to male slaves?” Mari asks. “Unwanted pregnancies, perhaps?”

“Modern birth control is very effective. That being said, there's always a risk that biology will override technology. It's a possibility, although it strikes me as thin.”

“All we have at this point is baseless conjecture and gut instinct,” Zeke grouses. “I was hoping to have something more substantial by this point, but no one seems to know anything.”

“That's why it's so important for you to get into the inner circle,” Mari says. “They're the only ones who know anything.”


Mari is too professional to be openly hostile back, but she shoots Zeke a cold glare. Best to get this argument under control before we lose the minuscule support that we've been provided.

“I think that's enough for today,” I intercede. “This conjecture is getting us nowhere. Zeke will contact you again when he makes further progress.”

Mari gives a sharp nod. Then she cuts the connection without another word, and her screen goes black.

Zeke and I sit in silence for several moments.

Finally, he sighs and says, “That... could have gone better.”

“I don't know,” I respond. “It went better than I expected.” I try for a teasing smile as I say, “At least now we know that you aren't just a simpleton. You are, as I suspected, being actively misled about what's happening in your organization.”
“Well, I'm glad to hear that I've restored your faith in my mental capabilities,” he says dryly, but I can see a smile trying to fight its way through his frustration.

“I wouldn't go that far,” I quip, earning a chuckle that fades into another sigh. I haven't had much practice with bolstering anyone's morale – it seems that I could use more practice.

“I feel like I'm swimming against the current,” he says, and I'm reminded again of just how tired he looks. “What am I supposed to do? The harder I try, the less I feel like I'm making any progress.”

“Sometimes,” I tell him, my voice losing its attempt at humor, “when the current is too strong, it is best to stop swimming and float. Eventually, you will be pushed into shallow water, and you can walk along the edge.”

“A good metaphor,” he says, “but it doesn't really apply here.”

“You don't think so?”

“Would you have me drown?”

“Were you even listening?” I snap, losing patience. “Did I not say to float?”

“And what does floating mean in this instance?” he returns, frustration making his temper short.

“It means,” I clarify, forcing myself to calm, “that you need to stop struggling against the role you're in. You said that you've already started making plans to try to get your funds from inside the Leash, correct? If it hadn't been for the Department telling you to get the funds from your company, you'd have already given up on that idea and saved yourself half the time.” Not to mention all the stress and struggle. “You need to let go of their expectations and trust yourself.”

“Easier said than done,” he growls, shoving himself to his feet and pacing away from me. I give him a moment before following. We stand shoulder to shoulder, close without touching. I wait him out silently, giving him time to gather himself.

“Don't you see?” he asks softly. “I doubt myself at every turn. I'm so afraid of turning into a monster, that I can hardly bring myself to pretend.”

Of course I see it. His own impulses war with the character that he has to become, and the places that they mesh seem to frighten him more than anything. He avoids situations where he might have to act the part – his avoidance of Ruby and the subsequent willfulness of the teen are symptoms of the larger issue. I know the history between the two. I am aware that Zeke tried to push Ruby into being a pleasure asset, but then could not bring himself to force the teen. How many other issues has he not forced? How many other times has he avoided the required path for the one that does the least damage to his soul?

And how long before his avoidance tactics simply aren't enough?

“If you become the monster,” I tell him somberly, “then I will stop you.”

“What if you can't?” he asks. “It's not just me who's getting hurt this time.”

And that's the crux of the problem, in the end. He's never had a partner before, never had a team in any meaningful sense. Now that the stakes are higher than just his own demise, he's petrified.

“You will not harm them more than you have to,” I assure him. “I don't think you're capable, even if you tried.”
“The psychological damage alone-...”

“Is far less than they would face if they remained as assets in another owner's care,” I cut him off.

He's quiet in response. I frown, the whole conversation beginning to strike me as odd.

“What's prompting this?” I wonder. “What has you so on edge?”

He gives a tense sigh and runs his fingers through his bangs, then rubs roughly against his eyes. Finally, he admits, “It's going to get worse from here. Getting the funds from the other owners... I can't remain aloof like I have so far. I don't... I don't know if I can keep Zero safe.”

Silence falls again. There is nothing to say. I know that Zeke will try his hardest to keep Zero from danger, but there is no guarantee that he will be successful. Even protecting Zero will become dangerous as he delves deeper into the Leash, struggling to prove that they can trust him while also trying to maintain his own humanity. If Zero is damaged as a byproduct, I don't know what it will do to Zeke. His psyche is already damaged, warped by years alone just as much as the current situation. What will it mean for the mission if he crumbles?

What will it mean for the men who care about him?

“I'm here with you,” I tell him gently, allowing myself to drift closer until our shoulders are brushing. I can feel the warmth of his skin through the long-sleeve top that he's wearing. “That's all I have to offer.”

“Perhaps that is enough,” he says, his fingers drifting to touch the back of my hand.

I can only hope that it is.


Unexpected Interactions - Zeke POV

Chapter Notes

How is it Friday again?

How??!!

All my gratitude to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

“Zeke,” Ellaine's voice says from the full-size hologram hovering above my coffee table. “So nice of you to finally return my message.”

“My apologies,” I respond. “But you know, it's really your fault that I've been so busy. Getting your scholar to cooperate has been almost more than my skills can manage.”

I'm in my bedroom, lounging on the sofa. I'm dressed casually in tailored jeans and button-down top, with the sleeves rolled up to my elbows. I have both my arms draped over the back of couch, trying for a posture of nonchalance. There's a tumbler of brown liquid held loosely in my left hand, but it's black tea and honey instead of liquor. I need it as camouflage only at this point, and I can't afford to have my wits dampened by alcohol.

“I hear he's awake,” she says, and that info could have only come from Carter. I let him know during my last trip to Red Seven that my scholar had awoken, being well aware that the knowledge would likely spread.

“He is.”

“Care to share how you managed that?”

“Mmm,” I reply, giving her a sly grin and using the fingers of my free hand to tap against my lips. “Trade secret.”

“I'm sure,” she says, a smirk playing on her lips. “Still giving you trouble, though? If he's got you so tied up that you can't even find time to call me.”

“Yes,” I say with an exaggerated sigh. “That one is certainly stubborn!” Then I shift position, leaning forward in my seat. “But I'm assuming that you didn't just call to talk about my asset troubles.”

“True. Although we're running close to too short on time.”

“For what?” I wonder, genuinely intrigued.
“Well...” she hesitates. “I was thinking I could call in that favor you owe me.”

“Oh?” I respond, feeling myself tense. She laughs.

“Don't look so concerned!” she says, still smiling. “I'm not asking for your blood.”

Well, that's good... I guess.

“Then what are you asking of me?” I wonder. “You're all but killing me with suspense.”

“Do you remember my friend Maggie?” she asks.

“Miss Empire?” I ask, recalling the vivacious blonde that's likely to be hard to forget. Magdelena Empire, the woman who designed some rather stunning outfits for me several weeks ago. The costumes she made for Zero and Kip to debut at Dillon's party were rather spectacular and cost me no small sum of cash, but seemed to be well worth the price.

Ellaine nods in confirmation and continues with, “She hosts a dinner for important members of the Leash every year. I'd like you to come as my guest.”

“That... doesn't sound like much of a favor,” I reply, immediately suspicious of such a golden opportunity being offered to me so easily.

“Well,” she hedges, and I can see the sly smile creeping back into her expression. “My husband will be there. I have to admit that the more I'm around him, the more... abrasive I find him.” Given Ellaine's cool demeanor and Dillon's bold attitude, I can see how the two of them might mix like oil and water. “I was hoping that you could sit between us. Give my husband... something else to focus on.”

Act as a sexual distraction, I surmise. I'm not particularly fond of putting this persona in the position of eye-candy, but it's too good of an opportunity to pass up. I've been looking for a way to get Dillon's interest, perhaps speak to him privately about funding my entrance into the Competition. For things to fall into place this easily...

“There is one more thing,” she adds, almost as an afterthought. “This is for owners only. No one will be bringing their assets, so you'll need to leave your pet zero at home.”

I hear alarms going off in the back of my mind, but I manage to keep my expression from wavering.

“Of course,” I respond easily. “Any particular reason that assets are banned from this gathering?”

She shrugs daintily, tilting her chin just slightly as she does so. Her posture and expression remain relaxed, giving me no hint of deceit.

“The focus of this even is to mingle with other owners,” she explains. “Assets tend to act as a distraction. Maggie usually works with Carme for this event, so there will be plenty of support for cooking and cleanup. Just bring yourself and that charming personality.”

“After the week I've had, leaving the assets at home might be a relief!” I tease, keeping in tune with the lie that training Lee has been occupying all my time lately.

She chuckles obligingly, then says, “Attire is semi-formal. I'll be wearing royal blue. The coordinates have been sent to your key, and I'll expect you in the area at one. I'll pick you up.”
“Shouldn't that be the other way around?” I ask, feeling a spike of anxiety at being stranded as well as alone.

“Don't be silly!” she denies. “You're my guest. It's my responsibility to make sure you get home safely.”

“If you insist.”

“I'll see you tomorrow, then?”

“I wouldn't miss it.”

“Don't disappoint me!” she chides with a smile, then disconnects the line.

I sit back in my seat with a sigh, taking a swig of my drink before remembering that it is not, in fact, alcohol. I rub at my eyes with my free hand, feeling the tension building in my shoulders.

Damn that woman. What is she planning? She's entirely too cunning for my good.

I give another sigh and glance at my Key, the palm-sized device that keeps me securely connected to the Leash. I've managed to repair a lot of damage this morning – damage that I created in the first place by being too focused on my funds and my company. Now that I've given up on that venture, I've had to play catch-up with my social connections and repair the damage that my negligence caused to my reputation. I ran close to offending several owners, most importantly being Ellaine, who is definitely a key player in this ring.

I'm going to have to tread carefully for a while. Be more responsive and attend more events. I've been too distant lately, and I know it's been noticed.

Another sigh, and I roll the cool glass in my hand across my forehead, trying to decide if I should make some more calls or let it rest for today. Too abrupt of a change would likely look suspicious as well. Still, maybe I should at least send a private thank you to Magdelene or double check when I'll be dropping off a case of wine to James...

The sound of the door opening across the room pulls me from my thoughts. I look up expecting to see Kip or Zero slipping in – perhaps looking for a shower or a change of clothes – but instead I see my dark-skinned asset peering nervously into the room. There's a moment where my mind blanks, supplying me only with “Ruby's boyfriend.” It's startling to realize that I've had so little interaction with him that I've practically forgotten his name.

And... Shit. Right. I still have to sort the two of them out, as I have messed up their categories rather spectacularly. I'm supposed to be meeting with my more experienced assets this afternoon to decide what I can do with my newest pair.


“No,” he assures hurriedly, closing the door softly behind himself. “I just... Um... I wanted to see if we could talk?”

“I just... Um... I wanted to see if we could talk?”

“Of course,” I respond, but feeling a small spike of anxiety. If he wants answers about what will happen to himself and Ruby... I simply don't know.

He makes his way slowly across the room, his posture low and nervous. His movements speak of wanting to slink back to the door, and it seems a little odd on his large form. Still, I have to wonder what I've done to inspire this kind of nervousness in him. Or perhaps some leftover trauma from his
brief stay in the Arena? Again, I'm struck by how little I know about him.

He stops in front of me, and there's an awkward moment where neither of us seem to know what to do. My instinct is to offer him a seat beside me, but my current status as his owner makes that taboo. Meanwhile, he glances from me to the floor, as if wondering if he should kneel or simply stand and wait for my bidding. I don't like the feeling of him looming over me, but the option of having him at my feet isn't much more appealing. Instead, I break the odd tension between us by standing and moving to the table along the side wall. I pour myself another drink from the crystal decanter of tea that Kip made earlier, and take a long sip before turning back to my newest asset.

“So what did you want to talk about?” I ask, leaning against the table behind me and swirling the contents of my glass. The liquid is dark and the taste is sweet with just a hint of citrus underneath. If Kip didn't brew it himself, he must have monitored Ruby very closely. It's definitely of a much higher standard than the fare I've been having lately.

Red dares a glance up at me, then back down at his feet. I hear him make a soft sigh, then he takes a breath and seems to resolve himself. He steps closer and gives me a sidelong glance, trying to a self-deprecating smile.

“You've probably heard that Ruby and I aren't doing that well at our tasks,” he says. “Kip and Zero have been nice about it,” one more than the other, I'd assume, “but there's no way around it. I just...” he hesitates, seeming uncertain. “I just don't want you to think we're dead weight. We're both good workers. You can put us to use somewhere else. Ruby's smart and quick, but he's a bit ornery.” The smile becomes a bit wider, a bit more conciliatory. “He doesn't have a disposition like I do. Doesn't have the same skills.”

Hmm.

“And what skills are you offering?” I wonder.

“Whatever...” he hesitates, a soft tremor in his voice belying the smile that's plastered on his face. “Whatever skills you'd be willing to use.”

I pause for several seconds, trying to decide how best to handle this situation and swirling the contents of my glass idly. He must decide that I'm doubting his offer, because he continues with more urgency than before.

“I...” he starts, falters, and then says, “I've seen Zero. I get... what you're looking for.”

Of course. Because Red would have no way to know that those scars were present before Zero ever came to me, and doubt he's dared to ask Zero about them.

“I saw...” he continues, his voice gaining a bit more surety. “The other night, I saw your... your stuff.”

Right. During his unexpected adventure into my playroom while Lee and I were drinking. I can just picture how it would have looked from his perspective. Dim lights casting the room into shadow, with several looming, vicious-looking shapes. Manacles on the back wall and the ceiling. A table of crops and weapons full displayed, gleaming from the overhead lighting. He wouldn't have understood that the gleam means they've been sterilized and carefully polished, clean and malleable so that the damage they cause is carefully controlled. He wouldn't have noticed the padding beneath the manacles on the wall or the soft cloth lining the inside, keeping the metal from digging into skin. It's much easier to see the monster in this scenario. I shouldn't be upset. That's what I intended.
“Sir?” he calls, and it jars me from my thoughts.

“What are you asking me, exactly?” I respond.

“I...” he hesitates again, then seems to settle into himself. There's a change that reminds me a bit of when I need to take on a persona. I can see him pushing down his fear and nervousness. His posture straightens. He leans closer to me, and it serves to accentuate the size difference between us. One arm braces against the wall beside us and he mimics my stance. The other hand brushes ever so subtly against my hip.

“Put me to use,” he says, and the voice is soft and just a bit raspy. He licks his lips, pink tongue darting across dark skin. If I wanted, I could lean forward and kiss him.

He... is not without appeal. A large body, broad and heavy, but muscular and chiseled, more so now that Zero has been pushing him. His face is youthful and handsome, with a strong jaw and warm, brown eyes. His skin is dark, almost coffee-colored, but smooth and unblemished save for a few stray cuts on his hands and arms. I size him up as a pleasure asset, wondering if that's the solution to my problems. Could that be how he fits into my team?

His expression is a bit worrisome. He's trying for confident and eager, but it's an easy mask to see through. His grin is a bit too strained, his eyes a bit too wide. His fingers tremble slightly on my hips, and if I laid my hand on his throat, I'm sure I'd feel his pulse hammering beneath my fingers. He's terrified. Too much experience with situations like this, or not enough? It's hard to tell. His size would make it easier to avoid such a situation, but his youth spent in a boys home would make it harder. Does he know what he's offering? Is this fear born of nerves or experience?

Still, he paints a tempting picture, all strength and youth. Could I train the fear out of him, teach him to enjoy what he can and control everything else? My mind supplies an image of him beneath me, and then an even more alluring picture with those roles reversed. Would I be doing the right thing this time? Is morality really so subjective? In teaching him, do I save the pair? In rejecting him, would I condemn at least one of them? Because I might be able to shift Red into domestics, but what of Ruby? If Lee will fight for me, where does that leave him? And can I afford to keep an asset as dead-weight, when Kip's health is so precarious and my own position is so dire?

But then, I also can't afford to waste time training another slave ill-suited for their designation. And there is so much to learn in the pleasure category, where the asset is almost constantly on display for other owners. It's a big risk. If I fail, I run the risk that Red's inexperience will embarrass me or endanger Zero.

And all that fear...

“Why are you here?” I wonder. “Why did seeing my toys the other evening spur you to this?”

“Did ya think I'd be scared?” he asks, and tries for a cheeky grin.

“If you were smart,” wants to come out of my mouth, but I manage to hold it back. I'd hoped he might have a latent interest in submission, but... I suppose that was too much to ask for.

“Ruby's a good kid,” he continues before I can decide on an appropriate response, “but he's a bit hard to deal with.”

I'm still trying to puzzle out the connection between Ruby being difficult and Red's presence here when Red sinks to his knees, never breaking eye contact. A smile plays on his lips, but with the same nervousness from earlier lingering in his expression.
“I'm a lot easier to deal with,” he assures me, his hands coming to rest lightly on my hips, his face now level with my groin.

Ah. So that's what this is about.

“Are you offering yourself in his stead?” I ask, just to be sure. Somehow, he's gotten it into his head that one of them will end up here, and he wants to be sure that it is himself and not his lover.

Noble. And... annoying.

“Have you seen him?” he asks. “Scrawny guy like that? He can't take what a guy like you puts out.” He gives me a grin, and I can see that he's trying for lascivious, but it lacks confidence and falls a bit short. “I can take it.”

So that's a yes, then. A direct trade – his body for Ruby's safety. Even forgetting that I already own his body and could take whatever liberties I want without offering anything in return, it's still a meager offer. He's obviously nervous and uncertain, not to mention untrained in this skill. I've little interest in putting out the effort to train another pleasure slave, especially when only one of my three previous attempts met with any kind of success.

So how to dissuade him from trying this again, but without breaking my cover as his owner?

“Do you really think you can handle this?” I ask him, and now I'm leaning forward, crowding into his space, towering over his kneeling form. He flinches back when I place a hand on his cheek, lazily drawing it down to his shoulder, and... Ah. Yes. There's the rabbit-fast heartbeat I was anticipating.

“I c'n take anything you want to give me,” he replies suggestively, the grin stretching his lips looking faker than ever.

I raise an eyebrow, questioning that. My hand moves back to his face, taking a bruising hold on his chin and forcing his head up until he's looking directly at me. I feel his body flinch, but he doesn't break my hold.

“You think you can handle what Zero can?” I ask him. We both know that he can't.

“I... I c'n learn,” he says, quick breaths coming in tiny gasps around his words. “I'll do whatever ya-...”

I shove him back, hard enough to make him sprawl. He catches himself on the edge of the couch, his arm coming up defensively to block any blows that follow.

“Get out,” I order. “I have no use for a panicked whore.”

“But...” he tries to get himself under control, leveraging himself to his feet. “Please, I...”

“Enough! I've made my decision,” I snap. Then, in a softer tone, I try to reassure him, “I'm sure I can find something to do with Ruby.”

It takes me a moment to realize how ill-conceived that phrasing is, considering that Red is actively trying to prevent me from “doing something” with Ruby.

“You can't!” he gasps, stumbling toward me. His hand goes to my shoulder, and I'm struck once again between the difference in size between us. Were it not for the control that I hold over him, his size in this situation might be concerning. Knowing that I could drop him with a few words eliminates the intimidation factor. Or perhaps it was never there at all. For all his inherent power, he
moves like someone uncertain in his own body. Even I'm noticing, in this brief interaction, that intimidation doesn't seem to come naturally to him.

“Please,” he begs, and his grip on my shoulder becomes painful, although I'm not sure he means it to be. “I'll do anything. Anything!”

I grab his wrist and twist, forcing him to crash to his knees. Leaning over him, I snarl, “You need to calm down!” as he gasps in pain.

As if on cue, I see the bedroom door open. Ruby's face appears, and it takes him barely an instant to take in the scene in front of him. Red and I freeze, and apparently we're both surprised by his entrance. Given Red's tense shock, I can only assume that he didn't tell his lover of his plans. I watch as Ruby's expression goes from concerned to enraged in the space of a heartbeat.

Of course he leaps to conclusions. I can't even blame him, given our history.

“You fucking bastard!” he screams, before charging across the room at us.

I release Red and take a step back, falling into a defensive stance. Red, freed from my grip, grabs his lover around the waist as he passes, tackling the smaller redhead to the floor and unsuccessfully trying to pin the struggling teen.

“Lemme go! I'll fucking murder him!” Ruby shouts, struggling in the larger youth's grip.

“Stop! Ruby, stop!” Red tries. “Love, please! I started it!”

That does seem to get through, and Ruby pauses in his struggling to give Red a betrayed look.

“You... what?” he asks. “Why would you...” and then he starts to realize the situation, an expression of horror suddenly creeping over his expression.

“You bastard!” Ruby hisses, giving Red a hard shove that pushes the older teen off of him. “You son of a bitch!” he snarls again. “What were you thinking? You think I'd just go along with this? You think I'd just let them beat and fuck you to death?”

“I just...” Red tries, obviously surprised by the intensity of Ruby's anger. “I just wanted to keep you safe.”

“Who the fuck asked you to!” Ruby snarls, glaring daggers at the dark-skinned fighter. At this point, I am completely forgotten by the arguing pair. I glance at the door, wondering if I can make it past the two without being noticed. But... no, probably not.

“You think I don't wanna keep you safe, too?” Ruby asks, his voice losing a small portion of its heat, only to be replaced with hurt. “You think I wouldn't do the same thing if it would keep you safe?”

“Ruby...”

“No!” Ruby snaps, his eyes sparking with anger again. “Fuck you! Stay the hell away from me if you're going to get yourself killed because of me! Just... Just fuck off!”

And then the red-head bolts back out the door, leaving the both of us in stunned silence.

“Well...” I drawl eventually, “that could have gone better.”

Red chokes on a surprised laugh, then buries his head in his hands. His shoulders are shaking,
although more, it seems, from nerves than sobs. His expression, when he looks up at me, is broken but devoid of tears.

"I fucked it all up," he says morosely. "I just keep trying to make things better, and it just keeps getting worse."

There's quiet for a moment, but eventually I admit that I'm going to have to intercede. There's no way to continue avoiding my responsibility with these two. It seems like their problems are simply going to snowball until they collide with my own.

Weighing my options, I go to the wall panel and intercom Zero. His face appears on the screen a moment later. He's dressed in his workout gear, a light sheen of sweat on his face.

"Ruby's having a tantrum," I inform him. "Can you make sure he doesn't do anything stupid?"

He glances away from me a moment, and I can tell that he's using the wall panel to identify Ruby's location.

"He's in the bay," he says a moment later. "I'll intercept. Did you want me to engage him, or..."

"Just contain," I instruct. "Do not engage," I order, remembering the last physical confrontation that Zero had with Ruby. "I'm on my way."

A sharp nod from Zero, and then the screen goes black.

I repress a sigh, wishing someone else could intervene with the volatile teen. But... no. This is my mess. I'm the one who put Ruby in this state. The one who should have checked on him, should have made sure he was adapting. Should have created a bond of at least respect, if not trust.

This is my mess.

"Go back to your quarters," I command, turning to Red. "Have a shower and calm down."

"Please," he says, still kneeling. His words are plaintive, his expression... broken. "Please, it's not Ruby's fault. Punish me, if you've gotta punish somebody. He was just..."

"I'm not going to punish him," I interrupt calmly, "but I do need to speak with him."

Red doesn't look like he fully believes me. Hope wars with wariness in his eyes. Still, he doesn't have an option other than obedience. He knows that I could force him. We both know it. So he rises slowly to his feet and slinks out of the room, looking both chastened and beaten at the same time.

Well... that was easy enough.

...Perhaps too easy.

I intercom the medbay, and a moment later Lee's face appears on the screen.

"There's been an incident with Ruby. Can you keep an eye on Red?"

"Is anyone injured?" he asks.

"No, it's more of a tantrum. Lover's spat, maybe." I don't have much interest in rehashing the whole situation at the moment. "Can you sit with Red."

"Of course," he responds, and is shifting away even as he disconnects the line.
I trust Lee's capabilities. He'll be able to calm Red down and keep him from more trouble.

Now for the other one.

“Where is he?” I ask when I enter the bay, finding Zero leaning against the wall by the entrance.

“In the jump-ship,” he says, nodding to indicate the smaller craft.

“Can he get it started?” I wonder.

“Even if he could, he can't get it out of here. It's magnetically locked to the floor to keep it from shifting if we have an impact.”

“And communication?”

“I've blocked all outside channels. Even if he can get it started – which I doubt – he can't call anyone or make a run for it.” A moment of hesitation, then, “Did you want me to bring him out?”

“Hmm,” I contemplate, but it seems likely that the path only leads to an unconscious red-head. “Do you have surveillance inside the craft?”

“Affirmative.”

“Then monitor us. Intervene only in the case of a physical altercation.”

“Acknowledged.”

Zero doesn't look pleased as I move toward the craft, but he doesn't try to stop me either. I realize as I come around to the back of the ship that Ruby apparently wasn't trying to hide his location – he left the rear hatch open and the ramp down. I climb the ramp into the back of the ship carefully, aware that he could be planning to attack me again. But nothing happens as I slip inside the cargo area of the small craft. The inside is dim and quiet as I slip past the main seating area and into the cockpit of the ship.

Ruby is curled on the floor behind the pilot seat, his knees pulled up to his chest and his forehead resting on them. He glances up as he hears my approach and his face is awash with tears. He glares at me anyway.

“Get out!” he snarls, his eyes shooting daggers at me. I wait him out, unmoving, to see what the rage is covering. It takes a few moments, but he can't hold onto the anger. His facade cracks, and his eyes fill with tears again. He buries his face in his knees, curls his arms protectively around himself, and sobs.

Ah. Well. That's not much better.

I move to the co-pilot's seat and kneel on the floor behind it, mimicking Ruby's position. He watches me, one eye peeking above the circle of his arms, a wary expression on his face. Again, I wait him out in silence.

After a long pause, he asks, “What do you even want?” But the tone has a plaintive sound to it, unlike the aggression of his previous comment.

“I wanted to make sure that you're okay,” I tell him, keeping my tone calm, my posture relaxed.

He makes a noise like a laugh, but there's a hysterical edge to it and it ends in another wet, deep sob.
“I'm not,” he says, his voice ragged from crying. “I'm not anything like okay.”

“I know,” I reply softly, voice still calm, a counterpoint to Ruby's overwrought emotions. “I wanted to come anyway.”

“Really?” Ruby snarls, and the anger is back like flipping a switch. “Like your presence is gonna make anything better.”

“Can't make things much worse,” I quip, trying to see if nonchalance will lighten the mood. The neutral tone doesn't seem to be working.

“Like hell,” Ruby shoots back. “Get out!”

“It's my ship, you know.”

“Well you fucking kidnapped me!” Ruby shouts. “So I'm your goddamn problem now, asshole!”

Yes, I am quite aware of that.

“You are,” I acknowledge. “And I don't think I've been doing a very good job of looking out for you.”

“I don't want you to look out for me! I just...” his voice cracks on another sob. “I just want to go...”

“Go where?” I wonder. A deeper sob answers me and he buries his face in his knees. That's when I realize why he's behind the seat, not in it. Not trying to call for help. Not trying to fly the ship. There never was an end to his sentence.

He doesn't have anywhere else to go.

“I just want to keep Red safe,” he says as the sobs die away to hiccups. His voice sounds exhausted, and his expression is hollow and tired. “Maybe I should just sleep with you,” he says. “Everyone else seems to think it's the answer to all their problems.”

And isn't that a bleak summary of my life?

“No,” I reply. “Thank you, but... Well, we tried that already. Experiment failed.”

He snorts bitterly, casting me a suspicious glare.

“You're fucked up, you know that?”

I do.

“If sex is out, and cooking is apparently out, then what is it you want to do?” I ask him.

“I don't know,” he sighs, looking away from me. His expression is bleak and he stares straight ahead, his voice tired and frustrated. “That's what has Red so worried – he doesn't think you'll have anywhere to put me.” He doesn't glance at me, doesn't phrase it like a question. If he's scared about the possibility as well, then he refuses to show it to me. “I just... I dunno.” Another pause, then more softly, “I want to be strong. Like Lee and... you know.”

Like Zero, I assume, although I'm sure he can't admit to admiring the man who tried to kill him only a couple weeks ago. I wonder what that's doing to his psyche, to resent and fear and admire a man in equal parts. To be trapped within the same situation, day in and day out, constantly reminded
of his own inadequacies.

Perhaps it's a wonder that Ruby hasn't snapped before now.

“I don't know if I need another fighter,” I tell him gently.

“You don't need another fucking whore, either!” he snarls back. I let him, knowing that there's a lot of fear and hurt under all that anger, and he calms on his own in a few moments.

“I don't wanna be sent away,” he admits softly, back to staring blankly ahead. “I don't want to be separated from Red again.”

I repress the urge to tell him it's not very likely anyway. I have a strong suspicion that Red would become uncontrollable if I removed Ruby from the household.

“I don't know what I can offer that you haven't already got,” he whispers, “but whatever it is... just... just fucking take it, okay?”

“Okay,” I respond, my voice soft. I don't know what it is yet, but... okay. I'll figure something out for him. I'll make it happen.

I won't sell him.

Several minutes of silence lapse. Ruby looks tired, and I think he might actually have fallen asleep on the cockpit floor if I let him.

“You should forgive Red,” I tell him, and it startles him enough to look at me.

“The hell!” he snaps. “He fucking-...”

“Tried to save you,” I cut him off. “Even if he shouldn't have. Even if you didn't ask or want him to do it, he did it to try to protect you. You shouldn't stay mad at him over it.”

He glares at me for several seconds, then sighs and drops his knees, putting his legs flat on the floor. He tilts his head back and stares at the ceiling.

“This whole thing is ridiculous,” he complains. “You know that, don't you? I'm sitting here taking relationship advice from the guy who tried to rape me. How is this even my life?”

I look away so that he doesn't see me flinch. “Rapist” isn't something I ever thought I'd add to my resume. Put it on the long list of things I didn't think I'd be asked to do in the name of salvation and redemption.

I'm trying to think of a response when I hear footsteps coming up the rear hatch. I think for a moment that it might be Zero, but the shadowed figure that peers up at us is much too large for that.

“Go,” I tell Ruby softly. “No one knows how much time you two have left together.” He glances at me, and I don't think he means for me to see the fear written on his face, but the scowl doesn't hide it as well as it once did. “Don't let your pride squander it.”

He shoots me a glare that screams, “Don't tell me what to do!” But he climbs to his feet anyway. I hear Ruby's footsteps moving toward the back of the craft, then Red's heavier ones coming up the ramp. There's the sound of brushing fabric. Ruby hisses, “You stupid fucker,” as I get to my feet, and I move into the rear of the craft just in time to see them kiss. They're holding each other, and Red's arms twitch like he wants to pick the redhead up and hide him away. If only it were an option,
I suppose.

“You can return to your rooms,” I tell them when they break for air. “I'll have someone let you know what my decision is later.”

Red seems like he'd prefer to try and convince me of their value again, but he's too shaken up to disobey an order. Ruby shoots me a glare, then follows along because it's what he wants to do anyway.

“I'm still mad at you,” I hear Ruby grouse as they exit the ship.

“I know,” Red responds, his taller form practically hovering over Ruby's. “I'm not sorry. I'd do it again, if I thought it'd do any good.”

“You fuckin' stupid-...”

“Shhh,” Red cuts him off. “Please? Don't yell at me right now. I don't...” His voice cracks, and he takes a moment before he can continue. “I don't know what's gonna happen to us.”

“You still think they're getting rid of one of us?”

“I dunno,” he replies, and pulls Ruby tighter against his side. “I... just don't know.”

Lee is waiting by the hatch as I trail them out, a tense set to his shoulders that tells me he's not happy about something.

“I know,” I sigh, pausing in front of him and running my hand through my hair. “I should have been more on top of this. Add it to the list of things I've messed up lately.”

He shakes his head, his expression still pensive.

“It's not that,” he tells me. “I...”

He hesitates uncharacteristically, and it makes me frown in worry as well.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Red... asked me for something... 'just in case,'” he says, and I can tell he's quoting the other fighter.

“In case... what?”

“In case...” he sighs, then explains, “In case you planned to sell one of them. I think he planned to... to force your decision about which one would stay.”

At my puzzled silence, he sighs.

“Red asked me for poison,” Lee says. “I think he planned to kill himself if you were going to sell Ruby. I convinced him to wait for your decision by promising that I would assist if you did decide to sell one of them. But...” he hesitates again, casting a worried glance toward where the two have disappeared. “I wouldn't delay long. I have concerns that he might take the task into his own hands.”

“Damn it!” I curse, running a shaky hand through my hair. If I hadn't sent Lee to wait with Red, would it have been too late to save him? Would he have attempted something... ill-advised?

Will he still?
“Should I be worried that he might...”

“No,” Lee cuts me off as he watches Ruby and Red disappear into the main part of the ship. “I don’t think he’ll try anything now. Ruby won’t let him, for one. And he seems a lot less... overwrought, now that Ruby is okay.” He hesitates for a moment, then asks, “How did you manage to work that miracle?”

“For once,” I respond, a sad smile twisting my lips, “I actually listened more than I spoke. It looks like that’s what Ruby really needed right now – to feel like someone was actually listening to him.”

“Mm,” Lee responds, and gives me a nod of approval.

I shouldn’t feel so reassured after a single nod. It’s ridiculous. I’m reading too much into it.

“Can you call for Zero and Kip?” I ask. “Maybe I can repeat the magic.”

“How so?” he asks, glancing at the teasing smile on my face.

“I’m going to let them tell me what to do with Ruby and Red.” A small pause as I consider, then, “And themselves, as well.”

The second nod of approval is stronger than the first.

It has the same ridiculous effect.
Hello everyone! As you probably know, I've been running short on chapters to post lately. Fortunately, I've had to take some paid-time-off this week. (If you're not familiar with the American system, it's pretty much a benefits free-for-all. So the company I currently work for has a "use it or lose it" policy on days off, so I have to use up a week by July 1st or it's just gone.) So I'm hoping to make some good progress toward getting to the end of this section! (This running-out-of-chapters thing happens to me in literally every section, no matter how many times I tell myself that I'm going to write enough in THIS hiatus so that the audience doesn't catch up. So I'm not panicking this time.)

So that's my plans for this week! :) Wish me luck!

We meet in the smaller kitchen on the bottom deck. It's cozy and quiet, a space that's familiar to all of us from the time when I only occupied the bottom floor, before I had fully adjusted to my role as owner. Lee is comfortable here, too, as it is close enough to the medbay that he's familiar with it.

The four of us settle around the small table. Kip has provided steaming mugs of coffee and tea, a plate of delicate-looking biscuits in the middle of the table. I don't know how he managed all of it in the spare few minutes before we all collected here. If anyone can manage magic, it's him.

“I think we all have an idea of why we're here,” I tell the surrounding three. “Or more specifically, why we're here while Red and Ruby are not.”

Kip looks down at the table top, his visible eye flashing with guilt. The other is covered by a piece of blue cloth that circles his head – more of a choice than a medical necessity, I'd assume. Zero doesn't look away, but his shoulders tense. Lee nods gravely.

“It's come to my attention that they have not been doing very well in their disciplines. Or,” I correct myself, “they're not doing very well in the disciplines that I've assigned them. I wanted to speak with all of you because it's obvious that I don't have the experience necessary to make these decisions. If possible, I'd like to correct the situation.”

Another silence.

Then Kip says hesitantly, “What if it's not possible to correct the situation?”

I sigh and run a hand over my eyes. I'd been hoping that this conversation wouldn't take that turn so early on. I'd been hoping – really hoping – that Kip and Zero might have some answers for me.

But they look just as grave and worried as I feel.

“Then we will adjust from there. I don't know what will happen. It is important that we enter the Competition and win this year,” I tell them, “but... I won't sell them.”

The tension... eases. It's hard to describe, but suddenly the room is more relaxed. Zero and Kip glance at each other. Zero gives a nod to Kip, who then turns back to me.
“Red is more suited to domestics than Ruby,” he says, “but not... well-suited. There is a certain... look that domestics are expected to have.”

As he says it, I realize that I've seen some muscular pleasure assets, but never a muscular domestic. They've all been slight and delicate, mostly light-skinned as well.

“Does it matter if I'm unconventional?” I ask. “What does it harm?”

“Maybe nothing,” he admits. “Especially if you just want to keep him in the kitchen and out of sight. But if you put him on display, he could elicit the wrong kind of attention.”

“What about the Competition?” I ask. “What if that's the main goal.”

He frowns and takes a moment to consider his response.

“In the Competition, his looks will be a liability,” he admits. “It's hard to tell how much. This isn't like the combat category, where there's a distinct winner or loser. There are a variety of tasks that we're expected to perform, but cooking is the skill that's emphasized most. From what I've heard about the Competition when I was in training, the judges don't have to justify their scoring. If larger and darker assets consistently score lower than their opponents, then small, light-skinned assets become the norm. It's one of the reasons Carmé chose me.”

Damn. I wasn't aware of that. I wonder... is there any way to work around it?

“Could we make it a statement?” I ask. “Like with Zero?”

“It's a big risk,” Kip responds. “With Zero... his designation is... well... It's his gimmick.” He casts a glance at Zero and says, “No offense.”

Zero shrugs, unbothered.

“What do you mean?” I wonder.

“It's different with Zero,” Kip continues. “He was already well-known because of who he is. So you took something that was already valuable and put it to a different use. It was a show a wealth and strength. Like... Like you're so confident that you don't need this fighter to protect you that you can afford to waste his skill. So you fuck him instead, because you can.”

That's pretty close to what I was going for when I decided to swap Zero, although more for attention and necessity than anything else. At the time, Zero's will to fight had been broken, and pleasure was my only option to salvage his life without breaking his soul.

“Go on,” I prompt.

“There's a difference between making a calculated move like with Zero, and throwing social expectations to the wind and doing whatever you want. Red isn't like Zero. He will look out of place as a domestic without the added bonus of being valuable or interesting.”

“Are you... Do you not want to train him?” I wonder, trying to puzzle out where this is going.

“No!” Kip says, jerking back in his seat with surprise. “I need him! Ruby can't peel a damn potato and I can't be everywhere at once.” He lowers his volume and says, “I just... I want to set reasonable expectations for you. Red isn't going to be a show-piece, like Zero. He doesn't have skills, like Lee does. And he doesn't have experience, like I do. He's going to start from the bottom and work his way up.”
“You don't think he’ll be ready to compete this year,” I deduce. “Even if he had the right look.”

There’s a noise of frustration – unusual from the normally calm blonde.

“I don't know that it was ever reasonable to expect that from him, or from either of them,” Kip says slowly, and I can tell that he's trying to hide his irritation. “The other assets competing will not be novices. These are men who have trained and studied their entire lives for this event – not to mention men who might literally die if they do badly. I mean, look at the team you've already got,” he says, and gestures to Lee. “A certified genius with years of medical practice.” Then to Zero. “A clone who was literally designed for his category.” Then to himself. “And a man who’s had years or rigorous training with Competition-level domestics under an owner who allowed for nothing less than perfection.”

He takes a breath and puts his hands in his lap.

“We are strong competitors,” he continues after a moment. “But we are by no means the strongest. Most of the other assets will be similarly skilled. It isn't fair to expect two teenagers to get on that same level in less than a year, no matter how good their trainers are or how hard they work.”

“So you don't think we have a chance to win,” I surmise, feeling nauseated. How can I salvage this? How can I win... without getting rid of Ruby and Red? Do I let them drag the whole team down?

“I didn't say that!” Kip blurts, his expression showing surprise.

“But...”

“You have three very strong competitors, not to mention two that are already cross-trained. As long as your last asset is a strong competitor as well, I think you have a chance.”

“It isn't a bad idea to let Red enter the Competition,” Lee chimes in. “Assuming you understand that he's likely to come in last place. Taking last place is still slightly better than forfeiting entirely.”

“Right,” Kip agrees. “Assuming he isn't going to humiliate you with substandard skills.”

“Yes,” Lee acknowledges back. “That would be a pitfall.”

“How strong do you think our chances of winning are?” I ask, shifting the topic.

“It's... I can't really say,” Kip admits, glancing to Lee for confirmation. “It's going to depend on how our opponents do, and who you get as your last asset. I think... I mean, it's still a long shot. Possible, but not definite by any means.”

Lee nods in agreement. I sit back in my seat and scrub a hand over my eyes.

“So... where does that leave us?” I wonder. “Category-wise.”

Lee answers with, “I will compete in the Scholarly and Combat divisions. I believe that I will place very well in the scholarly, as I have trained other assets specifically to compete. I have competed and placed well before. I think that I can also place very well in the combat division, depending on how much I manage to recover by then.”

Kip goes next with, “I know I can place very well for you in the domestic division, as long as my health holds.” He frowns then and says, “I suppose I could also compete as a pleasure asset if...”
“No,” I deny immediately. “We'll cross train you in something else.”

“In scholarly,” Lee says, his voice calm.

“What?” Kip asks, and I look at Lee in surprise as well.

Lee takes a sip of his tea and sets the cup aside before saying, “I'll cross-train him in the scholarly division. I think he has an aptitude, although I doubt he'll be able to take a top score this year. Within the time frame we have, I think I can at least get him to place moderately well.”

“But I don't have any scholarly skills!” Kip protests. “You'll be starting with nothing!”

“I don't think that's true,” Lee says, this time responding directly to Kip. “Your knowledge of molecular gastronomy shows a talent for chemistry that could easily be segued into a scholarly talent. But we'll discuss our options and the Competition itself more at another time. But I should ask first, do you want to be trained? I won't force you if you are unwilling or if it's too much with you current training.”

“No!” Kip gasps. “I mean, I'd love to learn. I just... I don't know if I can...”

“You should do it,” Zero says, inserting himself so abruptly that it makes me glance at him. Even Kip is surprised into silence. “You have the intelligence for it.”

Kip is still unable to find a response, and I see a blush steal across his face.

“For what it's worth,” Lee adds, “I agree with Zero. I wouldn't offer if I didn't think you could do it.”

“Well... I mean... Alright,” Kip stutters. “I never thought of myself in that category, but... if you want to teach me, I'm willing to try.”

“Good,” Lee says, smiling. “I'm excited to take on another student.”

My gaze shifts to Zero, who has been relatively silent through the conversation.

“And what of you?” I ask him. “How do you think you'll fare in the Competition?”

“I can give you a win in the combat category,” he assures me with no hesitation. “Top three, if not that top spot. With my hip as it is, I could still manage top ten. With the advantage of full mobility and training with Lee, I'll be able to score extremely well.”

“Excellent. And in the pleasure category?” I ask.

“I have no idea. Probably not very well,” he responds.

“What? Why?”

“Because I've never seen a pleasure competition,” he growls. “And neither have you. I don't know what they're looking for. I don't even know what they do. Some kind of sex show? Is it about who can take the biggest dick? Or who can ride one the longest? Or... what the hell are they even testing?”

He's right. I have no idea either.

“I will find out,” I promise. “I... have resolved some issues in my business,” I tell them, although it's technically a lie. While I have decided not to focus on my business any more, I certainly haven't
figured out my financial issues. “So I will be able to focus on networking and getting this information for you. Also, I am hoping to purchase a pleasure asset soon.”

“A covert would be better,” Zero says, “but they're nearly as expensive as the scholarly. If you can even find one.”

“Covert assets are fairly rare,” Lee explains. “While anyone can designate their asset as covert, I've heard that the Competition winners all come through a single trainer. I've seen her a couple times scouting at the arena. Rumor has it that she's extremely selective about who she'll sell to. She would prefer to ‘lease’ her assets.”

“To what end?” I wonder. “Owners aren't allowed to harm each other, correct?”

Zero chimes in with, “Most owners aren't secluded in the Leash. They usually have shady dealings and rival competitors outside of other owners. That's where covert assets come in.”

“You did some of that, didn't you? You were... your last owner's enforcer.”

“Yes,” he acknowledges with a frown, “but I don't have any formal training in covert. I don't know anything about their Competition.”

“So we need pleasure and covert equally, and I have a better shot at getting a strong pleasure asset.”

Not to mention that I already have one that I'm interested in.

“Is there anything else?” I ask, feeling like we've made a lot of progress, but also that there's a long way to go. And a lot that I need to do.

“You might not be aware of this,” Lee says, “but top assets in the Competition are usually purchased by the Controller after they compete. No one seems to know what he does with them, but they are never seen again.” He pauses a moment, then continues with, “While I'm sure that's not your intention, I think it would be a good idea to hear you say it. In case one of us is able to attain first place in our category.”

“Of course I'm not going to sell you!” I snap. “I don't care what the Controller offers in exchange!”

“As I said,” Lee responds calmly, “I think we all needed to hear you say it. If I'd had any doubts, we wouldn't have made it this far.”

Right. That's probably fair.

“What about Ruby?” Zero asks, shifting topics. “Where does he fall.”

“Not in the kitchen,” Kip pipes in. “He's a menace.”

“He'll be my spare, correct?” I ask. “Does anyone know what he could be doing in that role?”

Again, silence. Zero has never been part of a team, and Kip was part of a large team that focused exclusively on domestics. Lee has never been in a typical setting either. None of them have much reason to know what a standard Leash team would look like outside of their own disciplines.

“Give him to me,” Zero says after a long pause. I glance at him in surprise.

“For what?” I ask, which... probably isn't the most generous response.
“Fighting with Red was only good for one thing – honing my control. I had to be sharp every moment to keep from injuring him, given his unpredictable and uncontrolled movements. It was good practice. Also, if Ruby is ever going to be good for anything, he needs to work off some aggression and build up confidence.”

“You think he'd make a good fighter?”

“Not any time soon,” Zero responds. “Maybe an assassin – he's got the build for it. There's enough overlap between combat and covert that it won't hurt to start him in combat and then switch him later. We'll need to find someone to train him, though. I don't know enough about how they compete to do it myself.”

It's a logical plan, and Ruby has already indicated to me that he'd like to be stronger. I have concerns about Zero being able to control his temper around Ruby, but he hasn't shown any aggression since Kip was ill. And at this point, I'm running out of options for the willful teen.

“Okay,” I agree. “I'll see if I can get more information on covert assets. Until then, Zero will train Ruby in combat.” I glance at Lee and ask, “You'll be training with them as well, correct?”

Lee inclines his head and says, “I will assist in... supervision.”

Meaning I can trust Lee to keep Zero from harming Ruby in any significant fashion.

I glance at Zero, but his face is passive. If he has a reaction to this development, he doesn't show it.

“Does that cover everything?” I wonder. “Is there anything I've missed?”

Another brief, awkward pause. Then Kip comments quietly, “Ruby and Red will both need lessons in etiquette. They probably should have started already, but I... I mean, I wasn't sure...”

He didn't know if I'd be keeping them.

“Go on,” I prompt.

“If you're going to take them around other owners or have other owners here, they will need to know how to act. Specifically, they'll need to learn how to avoid reacting, even if they're being humiliated or abused. Because of their age, other owners will target them to test your control.”

“I see,” I comment, feeling a shiver of revulsion at the idea of such behavior here, in my home.

This is where my assets can be safe.

Where I can keep them safe.

“How likely is it that other owners will want to visit me here?” I ask.

Kip frowns and says, “It was pretty common. I'm surprised it hasn't happened yet. Maybe because you're new?”

Or possibly because I've been distant lately. If I'm trying to change that, I might be required to return invitations. Damn.

I sigh and say, “Add that to the list of things we need to cover. And please make sure I'm present for at least one of the lessons.”
Behavioral standards are probably something that I should already be aware of. Zero and Kip are so well-trained that there was never a need for me to take them to task about manners. I might not be so lucky with another asset.

“Of course,” Kip agrees.

“I have an event tomorrow with Magdelena,” I continue. “I’ll see what I can find out the Competition and covert assets.”

“Tomorrow?” Zero questions. “Why wasn’t I told?”

“You... will not be attending. It is for owners only.”

There is a tense, pregnant pause. All the off the assets go silent, with Kip and Lee glancing at each other. Zero glares at the table. I feel like I’m missing something.

Finally, Lee says softly, “Zero’s surgery is tomorrow.”

Oh shit. I forgot.

“It's fine,” Zero says, before I can respond.

“Can we delay the surgery?” I ask. “Would another day make a difference?”

“I said it's fine,” Zero snaps, and shoves himself to his feet. “I don't need you to hold my hand.”

He leaves the room, his shoulders tense, his head down. Obviously, it is not fine.

I glance at Lee, who says, “We've delayed this a long time already. Probably too long.”

“Will... I mean... Should I be there?”

“Emotional support is always important,” Lee admits, “but the procedure itself is minimally invasive. It carries low risk to the patient. He will, in fact, be fine regardless of your attendance.”

“I’ll be there,” Kip says softly. “And Zero is comfortable with Lee. It's not like he'll be alone.”

“The timing could have been better, though,” Lee says. “I'm sure he'll be worried about you while you're gone.”

“Owner-only parties are pretty common,” Kip says. “We did a lot of them when I was Carmé's asset. It's not... shady or anything. I can reassure Zero, if you want?”

“It’s not like this is the first time I’ve been alone with Ellaine,” I point out. “Zero wasn’t happy the first time either, but it was fine.”

“I doubt that Zero will be reassured by prior experiences,” Lee points out. “He’s more likely to assume that she was lulling you into a false sense of security.”

“You think she could be?” I wonder, as it’s a fear that had been lingering in my mind as well.

“Owners aren’t allowed to harm other owners,” Kip points out with conviction. “If you want to get to an owner, you hurt his slave or humiliate him. You don’t try to harm the owner himself. They’re not going to attack you.”

I share a glance with Lee. Kip’s confidence would be reassuring, if he knew the whole situation. If
Ellaine has any suspicions that I’m a spy, then all the rules could disappear down a black hole.

“You’re probably right,” I agree. “Could you... I know Zero was upset. Can you go find him?”

“Zero doesn’t like surprises,” Kip says, pushing himself to his feet. “I don't think he's mad at you or anything.”

I repress a snort, knowing the Zero damn well should be mad at me. I should be here. His health should be the top of my priority list.

Kip puts a hand on my arm as he passes, then exits the room as well.

Damn.

Is there anything I can't screw up today?
Care - Zeke POV

Chapter Notes

Did I say I was on vacation this week? Apparently, that translates to, "How many home-improvement projects can we fit into five days?" Ugh. But I will still be working on updates tomorrow, so hopefully we manage with no interruption. :) I'm doing my best!

All my gratitude to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

With Kip chasing an upset Zero across the ship, Lee and I are left alone in the small kitchen on the bottom floor. I take the opportunity to heave a sigh and slouch in my chair, rubbing a weary hand over my face.

I cast a glance at Lee from between my fingers and say, “That... could have gone better.”

“Mm,” Lee agrees. “You're still finding your footing now that you've switched focus.”

“I can't afford to miss things,” I reply.

Instead of agreeing with me, he says, “You look tired.”

I look at him, dropping my hands for an unimpeded view. The table is small, and we're sitting within arm's reach of each other. He's on my right side, sitting straight in his chair, his hands wrapped around a mug of tea.

“I should probably be completely overwhelmed at this point,” I admit, “but... I don't feel it. I just feel exhausted.”

Lee makes a thoughtful noise, then says, “I'm sure you've learned to compartmentalize extremely well in your... career.” He hesitates over the word, like it doesn't quite fit.

“Maybe.”

“You should come down and practice meditation with me. A bit of time to reflect and focus would be good for you.”

I chuckle and say, “You'd be pretty annoyed when I fell asleep on your mat.”

“You wouldn't,” he responds. “Your mind is always going at a thousand miles a minute. I can see stray thoughts buzzing in there like insects, always watching and calculating.” He makes a dry sound, then says, “Of course, I suppose you're equally likely to leave with a headache, given so much time to think.”
It wins a laugh from me, and I'm surprised by how nice it feels. To be honest with someone. To be... myself. Honest and broken and so, so fallible.

“I think you should spend some time with Zero and Kip tonight,” he says after a moment of companionable silence. “You need to reconnect with them.”

And that's definitely true, given how badly I've messed things up with Zero today. But... Being with Kip and Zero is difficult. I always have to watch myself, always have to make the right move and say the right thing. Always careful not to break character. It sounds... exhausting.

“Won't you come?” I ask on impulse. He looks surprised, but he lets me place my hand on his wrist. After a moment, he covers the hand with his own.

“Not... yet,” he says. “We aren't...” He flounders a moment, then decides on, “I'm not ready for that.”

Then he pauses, like he expects me to argue. I nod instead. I find myself a little disappointed but mostly unsurprised by his refusal. It hasn't been that long since he was trying to murder me. We've come a long way already.

“Someday,” he assures me, or maybe himself. “Just... not quite yet.”

“Don't miss your chance,” I find myself cautioning him. “There's no telling what tomorrow will bring.”

He nods once, his expression thoughtful and concerned. Then it clears and he pulls away from me.

“Go,” he says. “Your lovers are waiting.”

I try to catch any underlying meaning in that sentence, but his words are calm, his expression open. Is that the issue? He has agreed not to ask monogamy from me, but is the expectation proving to be different from reality? And yet, he doesn't seem to hold any ill-will towards Kip or Zero. So perhaps it's something different entirely?

Maybe I've simply found someone who isn't eager to leap into my bed. Perhaps it's such a novelty in my life that I find it unaccountably strange. And perhaps that's a sad commentary on the people I've interacted with so far.

I leave Lee at the table, contemplating his tea. It's getting late – my workout took up the morning hours, then my calls in the afternoon and into the evening hours. Ruby and Red's drama took a chunk of time from my day, and I realize that I missed dinner entirely. I find that I'm not hungry, and instead head for the master suite, hoping to find Kip and Zero there.

I open the door to find Zero, naked and damp coming out of the bathroom. I can hear running water and assume that Kip is still in the shower. Zero doesn't meet my eyes, instead turning to pull his clothes out of one of the built-in dressers. I move quietly across the room and put myself at his back. When he stands again, I loop my arms loosely around him.

“I'm sorry,” I whisper.

He doesn't shove me off, but neither does he lean into my hold, as he usually does. After a moment, he turns to face me, necessitating that I release him. He frowns at me, his expression more... displeased than angry.

“You don't need to apologize,” he says, and his voice is gruff. “This isn't...” He gestures between
us. “We're not...” A sharper gesture, as he struggles to find the words. “We're not in a relationship. You're my owner. I'm your slave. Holding my hand shouldn't even be on the fucking priority list.”

Accurate. But also... ouch.

“I know,” I tell him gently, trying to keep the hurt out of my voice. “But... that doesn't mean that I don't want to be there for you. Or that I'm not sorry that I won’t be.”

He makes a frustrated sound and turns away from me. He tosses his sleeping pants onto a nearby table and drops onto the bed, still naked.

“I don't know how to act with you,” he says. “I don't know what to expect.”

I don't have a response to that. Instead, I move and settle beside him on the bed.

“Sometimes you're so distant, it's like I don't even know you,” he admits. “And then others... you're like this.” He gestures at me. “All... supportive and caring and... whatever.” He stares at the ceiling. “It's not fair to ask me to swing between that all the time.”

“I'm sorry,” I reiterate in a soft voice.

“It's not like I want you to be an asshole!” he growls, turning to scowl at me. “I was okay with you getting close to Lee because this isn't... because we aren't...”

Because we aren't in a relationship. Because I'm not more than his owner, and he can't be more than my slave.

“But you can't swing it back and forth,” he continues. “I'm having enough trouble letting Lee... get closer.” Closer to me, I wonder, or closer to him and Kip as well? “I can't deal with issues from you as well.”

“Okay,” I respond, but it sounds too grave. I try to lighten it with, “I promise to be a complete jerk from now on.”

“Don't,” Zero says, his voice flat. “Don't joke about it. Just...”

He makes a noise of frustration and shoves himself up, until he's kneeling on the bed. His hand grabs my chin in a rough grip, but when he kisses me it's gentle. Fierce, but gentle. And... thorough. By the time he breaks the kiss, my head is spinning and my cock has started taking an interest. He doesn't pull away, though. Instead, he leans his forehead against mine and closes his eyes.

“I am trying my best to accept that I can't have you,” he says, his voice fraught, his breath brushing against my cheek. “Don't make it harder than it already is.”

Then he shoves himself to his feet and disappears into the bathroom.

Damn. I feel just... gutted. I hadn't realized... Or maybe I just hadn't wanted to see. Maybe I didn't want to admit how much I was relying on Zero. How much I was using him. Not just sexually, but... emotionally, too.

He's right. It isn't fair.

And I'm not sure I know how to stop.

I'm contemplating leaving the room and finding somewhere else to sleep when Kip enters, still toweling his hair dry from the shower. His left eye is uncovered, and it's one of the few times I've
seen it exposed. There isn't anything noticeably wrong with it – not the milky white cover or distorted pupil that might indicate an issue. Still, if you watch his face closely, you can definitely tell that something is... off. Perhaps it moves more slowly than the other, or perhaps the dilation is slightly uneven. Just enough to tell that it's not working properly if you look very, very closely.

I glance away before he catches my gaze. He's self-conscious about it already, and I don't want to add to his concerns. I think I've done enough damage to my assets' psyche for one day with Zero.

“Turning in early?” he asks, referring to the other nights recently where I stayed up late to pour over notes and charts. That's in the past now, thankfully.

“I think so.”

“You skipped dinner – did you want me to get you something?” he offers.

“No,” I respond. “I'd really just rather-”

I interrupt myself with a yawn.

Kip chuckles and says, “So I see,” before moving to join me on the bed. There's a towel wrapped around his waist, and he drops it to the floor before climbing onto the coverlet with me.


I smile and pull him into my arms, his slim, naked form draping over my large, clothed one. His hands come to my shoulders, his lips press against mine. He rubs his cock against the fabric of my pants, and I feel myself harden under him. After a few minutes, he breaks the kiss and pushes himself up, looking toward the bathroom.

“Zero!” he calls. “Quit sulking and get in here! I'm not waiting for you.”

I'm surprised by Kip's boldness, although I suppose he has been getting more assertive now that he's been feeling better. After a few moments, Zero appears in the doorway, still naked. He shifts uncertainly and glances from Kip to me without moving into the room.

I resist the urge to apologize to him again, knowing that I probably shouldn't have done it in the first place. But I can't seem to find my footing tonight, and all these tiny upheavals aren't helping.

“Come,” I request, putting a hand out to beckon him.

We're not in a relationship. I am his master. But... I still care about him. And even as my slave, his place is in my bed. Everything else... we'll figure out as we go.

He seems to relax at that, his posture straightening as he moves to join us. Kip moves back to make space for Zero, but I don't want that. I have the urge to have both of them on top of me, and I reach out to tug Kip closer, but when my fingers wrap around his wrist he gasps and pulls sharply away.

“What...?” I ask, bewildered. Kip cradles his wrist against his chest, and casts me a pained, sheepish look.

“Had an... um... little incident in the kitchen.”

“What happened?” I ask. Zero and I both sit up and bracket Kip on either side, any amorous
thoughts banished. I reach out more carefully and grasp Kip's wrist, turning it over to reveal a long, angry, red stripe on the underside.

“I touched a hot pan with my arm,” he admits. “I'm still adjusting to the reduced visibility. It's nothing too bad. I've had loads worse burns than this. And Lee has been helping me the last few days to adjust to... Well... to missing sight on my left side. He says that my brain will eventually learn to compensate.”

“Kip...” I murmur, stroking my finger along the pale skin on the inside of his wrist, just below the red line. “I... I know that winning the competition this year is important to me.” To us all, actually. “But I don't want you injuring yourself to do it. We'll find another way.”

Would we, though? If I weren't so certain of his denial, would I even offer? With as many handicaps as I've already put on us this year, would it mean failure for all of us?

“No!” come the expected reply. “Master, I'm fine! Lee gave me an ointment and it doesn't even hurt unless I bump it. Please, I want to compete!”

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“Okay,” I agree, as though I have another choice. “But let me know if it gets to be too much.”

“It's nothing,” he lies, and damn me for being so used to it that his deceptions don't even bother me anymore. “I'm fine. That's why I didn't mention it.”

“I worry,” is the best I can respond, knowing that he'll continue to tell me it's nothing. Knowing that I will continue to pretend to believe him.

“You're sweet,” he says, and leans forward to give me a quick, gentle kiss. “But I don't need anyone to be concerned about me.”

His hands move to my shoulders, then trail down to the buttons on my top. I intercept his fingers as he starts to undo them.

“Maybe... we should just sleep?” I offer. Given all the events of tonight, I'm... starting to feel a little overwhelmed. I really just like to hold them and sleep. But...

Kip and Zero look startled. They cast concerned glances at each other, and I can see the expression morph into uncertainty. They tense, where previously they'd be relaxed.

“If... If that's what you'd prefer,” Kip says, but I can hear the anxiousness in his voice. I'm deviating from our standard routine – that when the three of us have time together in bed, it generally involves sex as much as sleep. Kip doesn't understand what's causing the deviation, because he has no idea what's going on with me. He turns to look at Zero, and I have to wonder if I'm making too much of his actions when he turns to keep his left eye away from me. Is he feeling self-conscious? Has he leapt to the conclusion that my refusal has something to do with his injury?

At the same time, Zero frowns and stares at his hands, avoiding eye-contact with me. His shoulders are tense. Is he blaming himself as well? Does he think our argument is causing me to reject him and Kip both? Or is he just as started and concerned with my behavior as Kip is?

“I just meant,” I try to cover, “if you're not feeling up to it...”

“Oh no!” Kip says, his face brightening as he jumps on the easy excuse. “I'm fine! Really, Lee looked it over and everything. Put some kind of medical sealant over it, said it will be good as new in a couple days. So if you...”
“Of course,” I cut him off. “I just want to make sure you're well, that's all.”

Both of them relax, even though I don't think I'm being terribly convincing. Maybe they're both accepting what they want to hear as well. Maybe that's just how humans function.

It's like a wave breaking on the shore, the way they move. We're back to the familiar routine. Kip kisses me, settling himself on my lap, rubbing his pelvis against the fabric of my pants. I wrap my arms around him loosely, giving him room to undo the buttons of my shirt. Over his shoulder, I can see Zero stroking himself to hardness.

When the buttons are undone, Kip pushes himself from my lap, giving me room to stand and divest myself of the rest of my clothing. Zero goes to a side table for lube while Kip palms his own cock, strong hands moving over his pale flesh. Zero and I return to the bed at the same time. I move in front of Kip, pulling him on to my lap, while Zero moves behind him.

Kip isn't particularly fond of penetration. He has trouble with my large cock, so I haven't penetrated him since he recovered from his illness. He does better with Zero's smaller cock, although Kip rarely requests to be penetrated. Still, he doesn't protest when Zero's lubed fingers search out his hole, instead hiking himself higher on my thighs to give Zero better access. Kip rubs his cock against mine, and I can tell that he's moving in a slow, shallow rhythm on Zero's fingers. I warp a hand around our cocks, giving him more friction to distract from the intrusion.

It doesn't take Kip long to be panting with need, his cock dripping with interest despite his body's reluctance. Zero moves behind him, and I help shift Kip's weight until he's sitting on Zero's lap, slowly sliding down the dark clone's cock. Kip's eyes close, his mouth opens in a breathless noise of pleasure. He falls by minute increments, his body constantly shifting, his cock bobbing between his legs.

Zero is very good at this. He remains perfectly still for Kip, letting the smaller slave ride him. His hands hold Kip's thighs only for balance, never trying to rush or guide the blonde. When Kip stills – his body needing a moment to adjust – Zero kisses the juncture on his shoulder softly and kneads Kip's thighs. Kip lays his head back on Zero's shoulder, exposing his long, pale throat.

Damn, they look good together. Dark and light intertwined and debauched. It's a shame that Kip seems so lost and exposed when he's on display for other owners. He's gorgeous with Zero like this.

As Kip continues to stay still, I decide to assist with distracting him. He gives me a wary glance as I lean in, then throws his head back with a moan as I swallow his cock. His skin is salty and sweet, his member small enough that I have no trouble taking it all the way down to the base. He's hairless, due to a common procedure that permanently removes facial and body hair. His cock twitches in my throat, and I pull back enough to get a taste of his seed on my tongue.

I don't often indulge in giving oral to my assets. It's another thing that seems out of place for an owner, another red flag on a veritable field of them that should tell my assets that I don't fit in this role. I try to do what I can to minimize my oddities, to explain them away as personal preference or intentional choices. Still, I'm going to have to do better. Lee knows my secret, and Zero has seen through the illusion enough to form dangerously deep emotional attachments to me. Kip is the only one who really treats me as an owner, and his ingrained mistrust of my position almost got him killed. How do I find the balance? How do I keep them safe without shutting them out completely?

Kip groans, and the noise jars me from my thoughts. In my distraction, I'd slowed my pace, teasing him with a slow, steady motion and small, teasing laps of my tongue. He bucking on Zero's cock now, he's previous discomfort all but forgotten. I can tell that Kip is close, but I can also tell that Zero is holding back his own release. Still, Zero's hand moves to the base of Kip's cock, giving it a
few strokes into my mouth, and I get the message that Zero wants Kip to come first. Obligingly, I speed up my pace, and it only takes a few more minutes before Kip has his head thrown back and is climaxing into my mouth.

“So good,” he pants, turning to give Zero a messy kiss over his shoulder. Then he turns and gives me the same treatment, unconcerned with the taste of his own come on my lips.

Zero shifts him as we kiss, pushing Kip onto his knees and then backing out from under him, his still hard, glistening cock bobbing between his legs. I think for a moment that he might slide off the bed and come suck my cock, as he sometimes likes to do. But instead, he goes to his hands and knees, dropping his shoulders to the bed and presenting his ass to me. I can see the wet glisten of lubricant, although I have no idea when he managed to prepare himself. Earlier, perhaps? When he disappeared into the bathroom? And what does that mean, in light of our earlier conversation? Is he asking to restrict our relationship to a purely physical level? Or is he trying to keep this piece for himself, this part that Lee has not shown interest in?

It's too much to contemplate right now, with my cock hard between my legs. I push the thoughts away as I move behind Zero. I take a moment to rub a thin layer of cold, slick lubricant onto my own cock, before taking a firm hold on Zero's hips. I press my cock into his body with deliberate, delicious slowness. He gasps, his hands fist ing the coverlet, his hips bucking in my grip. I hold him still, pushing in until I'm fully seated, feeling my testicles brush against his skin. He groans, shifting beneath me, but he doesn't try to take control. He waits, panting, for me to move.

I don't manage to hold out for long. After a few moments of being surrounded by his heat, I find myself shifting, pulling back, my cock sliding out incrementally only to be thrust back in. Shallow, teasing thrusts, not enough to push either of us over the edge. His hands flex, still gripping the fabric. His back arches. Still, he doesn't thrust, doesn't try to control the pace. He takes what I offer without reaching for more.

I thrust my cock in again, burying myself in his body. I lean over his back and wrap an arm around his chest, then pull him up until he's sitting on my lap. He shifts to get his legs under him, his back pressing against my chest. Once he's settled, he takes over much of the effort, using his legs to bounce himself on my cock, letting my hands on his hips guide his pace. The thrusts are stronger and deeper like this, with his weight giving added force to the movement. He throws his head back, reaching his arms over his head to tangle his fingers in my hair. He uses that grip to turn my head, giving me another passionate kiss before releasing me.

Damn, he's fierce like this. Wanton and exposed, yet so strong and dangerous. He drops his arms, his hands settling on his thighs. I watch his cock bounce between his legs, red and engorged, a drop of pearly white liquid beading at the tip, another cascading down the side. Kip leans in and licks away the drop from the tip, then chases the other drop down the length of Zero's shaft with the tip of his small, pink tongue. Zero lets out a gasp, and I wrap my hand around the base of his cock, giving it a warning squeeze.

“You come after I do,” I warn him. He responds with a sharp nod and another panting, breathless noise.

Kip chuckles and says, “You don't look so intimidating now,” in a teasing tone.

Zero glares, but it lacks heat. The expression disappears altogether when Kip runs his tongue up the underside of Zero's cock, causing Zero to give another jerk in my arms, his body squeezing tight around my cock and sending sharp cracks of pleasure to my brain. I groan, leaning my head against Zero's shoulder, and speed up the shallow thrusting of my hips. The encouragement spurs Zero on, and he quickens his own thrusts, his cock now smacking against his thigh with every movement. I
growl and push him forward, returning him to his hands and knees. This time, though, he meets my
thrusts, his body jerking back every time my hips surge forward. My fingers keep a bruising hold on
his hips, my cock pounding into him in a desperate rhythm. I feel the pleasure building in me, but
make no move to reach for Zero's cock. Instead, I shove him forward, pinning him against the bed,
and groan as my orgasm hits me. I feel my cock jerk, feel the splash of hot come filling Zero's body.
He groans beneath me, unable to stop himself from grinding against the bed clothes. But I don't let
him up until my pleasure has fully run its course.

Using my grip on his hips to guide him, I pull him back to his knees, careful not to let my cock
slide from his body. I push myself back until I'm sitting, dragging Zero with me, until he's once again
settled on my lap, my softening cock still inside him. He makes a noise of confusion, but doesn't fight
me. I cross my legs beneath us, pulling him into the circle of my legs without letting my cock fall
from his body. Zero is still tense, his body still held on the cusp of orgasm. I hike his legs over my
thighs, forcing his thighs wide open. Then I nod at Kip, who crawls on his belly in between Zero's
parted thighs, taking Zero's cock into his mouth and swallowing it down with one decisive
movement.

Zero yells, throwing his head back against my shoulder, his back arching like he's been
electrocuted. Kip works his cock unrelentingly, and I can feel the way Zero's body tenses and
twitches in my arms, the pleasure building inside of him until it finally hits its peak. He empties
himself down Kip's throat with a strangled scream, his hands gripping my thighs with a bruising
force. He arches almost completely off of me, and only the tip of my cock remains in his body,
feeling the spasms of pleasure as they wrack through his form.

Then he sags against me, panting. Kip giggles and pulls back, licking his lips. He kisses Zero, then
me, the taste of come still in his mouth. I lap my tongue against his lips, tasting Zero on them.

When the kiss is over, Kip leaves the bed. He returns a moment later with a damp cloth and a dry
towel – he's the only one of us with enough energy left to think about cleaning up. Zero is boneless
in my grip, and it takes two of us to maneuver him enough to clean the mess between his thighs. I
clean my own cock as Kip helps Zero settle under the blankets, and then I toss the dirty laundry into
a pile on the floor. Kips gives it an annoyed look, but he doesn't protest as I pull him into the bed on
my other side. He settles against me, and Zero is already falling asleep on my other side, so I pull him
closer, wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

Then, finally, we're clean, sated, and curled together on the bed.

And we can get to the part that I'd been hoping for all evening.
PreOp - Lee POV

Chapter Notes

I am still working on replying to the reviews from last week, but I wanted to make sure this chapter got out on time. Next week's has been written as well, so we should be good for a couple weeks. :)

All my gratitude to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

“You don’t have to know everything to place in the Scholarly competition,” I explain. “You simply need enough general knowledge to do okay on the written portion, and then have a skill to display for the judges.”

“What does the written portion cover?” Kip asks from the rolling chair, as I stand at the counter in the medbay.

“The written portion is a general knowledge test, and it will cover the widest variety of subjects. However, no one has ever gotten a perfect score. Even I don’t usually score higher than proficient. You can make up for that by displaying a useful or impressive skill.”

“I’m still not really sure how we’re going to manage that, given that I’m a chef and not a scientist.”

“We’ll cover that part later,” I respond. “For now, we need to get you a solid general knowledge base, then we can work on targeting chemistry and biology.”

“Okay.”

“I’ve loaded several texts onto your tablet that I’d like you to study this week. I understand that you still have another event to train for, but I’d like you to spend some time getting familiar with the material.”

“Of course.”

“Once we’re through with that, we’ll work on the skill portion.”

“Will I... How do you perform your skill? Will I be imitating it?”

“No, I don’t think we should focus on medical skills for you. Given that most of Ellaine's assets study medicine, there's too much direct competition. I'd like to focus on your skills as a chemist, and show off your talents in that direction. A small explosion, perhaps.”

“Is that how you demonstrate the medical skill as well? Do you... Do you operate in front of the crowd?”
“I don't. But I have been told that some of the other competitors do. I would never put a patient in that kind of danger. And also, when I'm working with a patient, they are my sole focus. I think that it wouldn't be very entertaining to watch.”

“So how...?”

“I have a hologram of the human body that I demonstrate on. Here, let me show you.”

I grab my tablet from a drawer and set it on the counter. I run the command, and a three dimensional holographic image of a human body appears above it in miniature. The projector on the tablet isn't strong enough for the full-scale model that I usually run. The Competition will have more sophisticated equipment.

“I've had to start remaking the demonstration from scratch,” I tell him, moving the image so that he can see some of the areas of muscle and bone have yet to be filled in. He slides his chair closer to get a better view of it. “Ellaine didn't send any of my materials with me. It shouldn't be a problem to get it done in time, although if I had the original it would save me a lot of effort.”

“It's very cool,” Kip says, grinning at the model. “And you perform a surgery on this?”

“Yes. Including several complications and emergency measures. It's similar to demonstrations that I used to teach my students, although much more complicated.”

Kip frowns and says, “What's to keep someone from using your model to give the same demonstration?”

“Nothing,” I respond, “but it wouldn't be a very good idea. Other than the trainers, we don't actually know who is scoring the Competition. However, it seems to be the same people every year. Demonstrations that get reused or overused tend to score very badly.”

“Ah,” Kip says. “We don't face that issue in the Domestic competition, as they provide new challenges for our skills every year. But the written portion is similar. We get a lot of questions on etiquette and household maintenance and the like.”

“We'll concern ourselves with your demonstration later, though. I'm hoping that you'll score better by showing a skill that is novel and unusual to the judges. Scholarly is a bit over-saturated with medical skills, in my opinion.”

I close up the tablet and set it aside, then move closer to Kip. I gesture, and he removes his white chef's jacket and extends his arm. The red welt on his inner forearm is significantly better this morning, with some of the inflammation and redness having abated overnight. I touch it gently, and Kip grimaces but does not pull away.

“How sore is it?” I ask, feeling gently for any signs of infection or rupture.

“Not too bad,” Kip says. “I hardly remember it's there unless I brush it against something.”

“It looks like it's healing well,” I tell him. “Best to keep it uncovered unless it ruptures. Let me know if it grows more tender or you begin to feel ill.”

“Of course,” he says, shrugging back into his jacket and doing up the buttons. “I can't believe I did that – I haven't gotten a silly burn like that in ages. Shows me for cooking with bare arms like a novice!” he says, and there's a smile on his face but he looks sheepish as well.

“I doubt the coat had much to do with it,” I counter as I pull out a pen and hold it in front of him,
watching as he tracks its movement. Each day, he does a little better with following it, and his
distance increases minutely. He's still limited – his left eye is completely compromised, and his right
eye is myopic, giving him a range of vision that barely reaches the tips of his fingers. Anything
outside of that range is a blur. Still, his eye grows stronger by the day, his vision adding incremental
distance. It's very promising, although Kip only seems frustrated by the speed of improvement.

“You're adjusting to monocular vision,” I continue as I set the pen aside. “It will take time to
adapt, as I warned you it might,” I chide gently. “You will probably experience more of these small
injuries as your brain adjusts to the limits on your sight. Judging distance and managing peripheral
vision will be especially challenging until your brain understands how to compensate.”

“I know,” Kip sighs. “I'm sorry. I wish I could...”

“I'm not blaming you,” I cut him off. “If anything, I'm trying to tell you not to be so hard on
yourself. You need to give yourself some time to adjust.”

“I just wish there was something I could do speed up the process,” he says.

“There is, and we are,” I respond. I grab a basketball from the floor – the only object I've managed
to find in the weight and size that I'm looking for – and toss it to him. He gasps and reaches for it,
over-judges the distance, fumbles, tries to hold onto it with his wrists, and then drops it entirely. It
bounces a bit and rolls back to my feet.


“Well yes, I suppose anything is better than letting it smack me in the face.”

I toss it to him again, and this time he manages to hold on to it. It might look like an orange blur to
him, but it's large and bright enough that he can still track it against the pale walls of the room. He
tosses it back, but the throw is short. My black scrubs stand out starkly against the pastel walls, so I
have no doubt that the short throw came from his inability to judge distance, not his inability to see
me. I take a full step forward and drop to my knees, managing to catch the ball before it hits the floor.

Zero enters then, and quirks an eyebrow at the sight of us.

“Medical technology at its best?” he asks.

Kip laughs, but I scowl in response.

“Occupational therapy,” I scold him, “is about function. It doesn't have to look fancy to get the job
done.”

“Does he get to move to soccer if he does a good job? Or volleyball?”

“Don't tease,” I warn him. “You'll be learning ballet as part of your recovery.”

Zero looks suitably horrified, and it wins a full-throated laugh from Kip.

After a moment, I ask, “Did you come down here simply to criticize my medical technique? Or
was there something you wanted?”

“Zeke went with the scholarly woman,” he says, and I feel a chill even at the thought of Ellaine.
Darnable harpy. “He's expecting to be back late. Ruby is helping Red in the kitchen.” Kip snorts at
that assessment. “I don't have time to start training him right now.”
Before his surgery, he means.

I set the ball on the counter, then turn and lean my back against it. I take note that Zero is still standing across the room, just inside the doorway. He looks tense, like he'd rather be anywhere but here.

“We can start the procedure at any time,” I tell him, modulating my voice into my professional tone. “I have the equipment already prepared. The procedure itself will take a couple hours, and then it will take you several more to come out of sedation. Barring any complications, you should regain full consciousness by this evening.”

He shifts his weight. His hands clench and relax at his sides. Nerves? Or something more?

“Can it be done without sedation?” he asks, his tone flat.

I give a mental sigh, careful to keep my expression neutral. I knew that sedation would be a sticking point with Zero. Given his history, I don't blame him for being reluctant to be that vulnerable. However, I can't see a way around it, and I'd been hoping that he'd have enough confidence in me as a medical professional not to fight me on it.

“It would be too big of a risk,” I tell him. “If you move even the slightest bit while I'm operating, it could do irreversible damage. Your career as a fighter would be over. Your life could be at risk.”

“I wouldn't-...”

“Even if you don't move,” I continue over his protest, “there's no reason to put you through that kind of pain.”

“I can tolerate-”

“I am aware of how much zeroes can endure,” I cut him off. “It's not about that. If I know that you are in pain, I will not be able to effectively continue to operate. I don't inflict unnecessary pain on my patients.”

There is a long pause. I wait him out. He shifts his posture again, and then drops his eyes.

“How do we proceed?” he asks without looking at me.

“There's a medical wash in the bathroom,” I tell him, nodding toward the small bathroom attached to the medbay. “You'll need to shower and scrub with it. Be thorough, especially on your groin and hip areas. I will get the equipment set up in here while you wash.”

He nods, then moves past Kip and myself to disappear into the small room.

“I've never seen him so... out of sorts,” Kip says softly once Zero is gone.

“Medical procedures seem to arouse painful memories for him,” I respond, tucking the basketball away under the counter. “I assume you've heard the rumors about where the zeros came from? It seems that they have at least some basis in truth.”

I've heard that the zeros were created and raised on a satellite called The Labs – a group of interconnected, self-contained research areas. Conditioned to be fighters and raised more as lab animals than children, if even a portion of the rumors is true, then Zero's ability to adapt and recover is nothing short of miraculous.
I can understand and even sympathize with his phobias. But I cannot let them impede my effectiveness as a physician.

"Is it okay if I stay?" Kip asks. "Zero hasn't mentioned it, but... after all he's done for me, I'd really like to be able to return the favor."

"I don't have an issue with you staying until he's fully under," I respond, "but you will need to leave for the procedure. Even if I were planning to teach you medicine, I would not allow you to watch me operate on someone you care about."

It's difficult enough for me to do it, knowing that any small mistake on my part could do permanent damage to Zero. It becomes too difficult to be calm and methodical when you have close ties to a patient. Too easy to panic. If there were another choice, I would hand the duty off to a less-involved doctor. But, then again, I don't know if I could convince Zero to submit to this with a perfect stranger.

"Of course," Kip says, jarring me from my thoughts. "Can I... wait in the cargo bay? Or..."

"That would be best," I let him know. "I can pull the privacy curtain, but..." There are noises involved in operating that are unmistakable. The sound of a drill digging into bone. The drip of blood. Scissors. Staples. All manner of unsettling things for someone unaccustomed to a medical setting. "I think it would be best for you to have some distance."

"Zero spent all that time with me while I was ill," he says softly. "I don't remember much, but what memories I do have are almost all of him. His voice. His hands. His scent."

"He loves you," I point out, and watch as Kip's countenance becomes troubled. "What?" I ask. "Do you doubt it?"

"No," Kip responds. "I know that. Only..."

"Do you not love him in return?" I wonder.

"It's not that either," he says. "It's... I know he loves me. It's only... the way he loves me that troubles me. His love is... it's all-consuming, but... unimpassioned."

I raise an eyebrow. That information borders on more than I'd prefer to know. Does he speak only of sex, or...?

"What do you mean?" I ask, although once again I worry that I'm pressing too far into personal matters. But I suppose my impartiality has gone out the window by this point.

Kip sighs.

"It's like... He's almost proprietary of me. Like I belong to him. And sometimes it's nice to be so deeply cared for, but others... I feel caged." He pauses, and says almost to himself, "Isn't that ridiculous? I'm a slave, and yet I feel more trapped by someone loving me than I ever did as an asset."

"You have very little self-dominion," I respond. "You are entitled to feel threatened when someone broaches the little control over your own life that you have left. Have you spoken to him about it?"

"No. I don't really know how. You have to understand, we don't really act like a couple. I don't know what I would even complain about. We are almost totally separate, except for when we're
together with Zeke. And even then, Zeke is what brings us together.”

Yes, I've definitely delved too far into this topic. We've now segued into discussing the sexual relationship between two of my patients and the man I'm trying to court. Still...

“Honesty is key in any relationship,” I advise. “It doesn't sound like you've spoken to Zero much about his feelings. Perhaps you should consider it?”

“You're probably right,” Kip says with a sigh. “I'm just... kind of afraid that I'll make everything worse. I worry that Zero loves me in a way... that isn't healthy for either of us.”

Much the same way that Zeke's relationship with Zero wasn't healthy or beneficial in the long run, I wonder if Kip's relationship will face the same issues. Perhaps they are all too poisoned by this setting. Perhaps even my attempts are doomed to fail in such constrained circumstances.

“I just want what's best for him,” Kip continues. “And yet... how do I push him away, after everything that's happened with Zeke?”

With me pushing my way into Zeke's affection, he means. I feel a twinge of guilt at that. It was never my intention to push Zero out, but I was always aware of the possibility. There is only so much of Zeke's attention to go around, and it's stretched thin already.

“Sinking deeper is never a good way to free yourself,” I tell him, although it seems like he already knows.

“Easier spoken than followed,” he returns, and then sighs. “It probably isn't a good time for this discussion. I won't be speaking with Zero about this any time soon. I do care about him deeply, and I would never want to make him question that. I just...”

“You want what's best for him,” I surmise, echoing his words from earlier. “I think that's noble, and it's wise for you to see that your relationship might not be in his best interest. However, Zero must be allowed to make his own choices in the end. You cannot decide what is best for him, only for yourself.”

Zero enters then, cutting off a conversation that was at its close anyway. He's nude, and I've come to understand that it's not a direct attempt to make me uncomfortable – Zero is simply unconcerned with his own nudity. I try to take it in stride, averting my eyes. I look in Kip's direction, and get to see the blonde roll his eyes dramatically.

“Was the towel too heavy?” Kip asks. “You couldn't bring it with you?”

“What's the point?” Zero asks, and he seems a bit more relaxed while teasing with Kip. “It's coming off anyway.”

“Common courtesy is the point!” Kip responds. “Not everyone wants to see your genitals all the time!”

“You weren't complaining last night,” Zero responds with a predatory grin.

“Enough!” I cut in, feeling the heat rising in my cheeks. I turn my back to the two of them, trying to hide how flustered I am. For honor's sake, I am not innocent. I know that they have sex, although I am still unused to people I am... familiar with speaking so openly about it. But I shouldn't let it affect me like this.

And now I'm feeling embarrassed about feeling embarrassed, and I need to cut off this spiral
before I get caught in a loop.

“Situate yourself on that gurney,” I instruct Zero, and I try to regain some of my professionalism by grabbing the cart with my instruments and moving it closer to the cot.

When I glance back at Zero, I find that he hasn't moved. The tension has returned to his posture, and he's shifting his weight between his feet again. As I watch, he glances quickly toward Kip, who seems oblivious, then back to me. His jaw clenches, his hands clench and release.

Ah.

“I'll page you before Zero goes under sedation,” I assure him.

Kip smiles and hops to his feet, giving Zero's hand a quick squeeze as he passes. Zero doesn't say anything, but I see the set of his shoulders relax. When Kip is out the door, Zero finally moves to the cot as instructed.

“Is there a reason Kip couldn't be here?” I ask as Zero lays down on his back.

There's a long hesitation, but I wait him out, busying myself by putting several monitors on him and checking the readings. The bed itself is able to monitor its occupant's condition, but it doesn't have the sensitivity that I'm looking for.

“It was too exposed,” he responds eventually. “Having two variables in the room.”

“Two people?” I ask, questioning his wording.

“Yes,” he responds simply.

I take a moment to glance him over. His expression is still a bit strained, his eyes distant. He's laying down, but his body doesn't seem relaxed. More like he's forced his muscles to go lax and still. He's breathing is shallow but not overly fast.

“How are you feeling?” I ask directly. He glances at me, but doesn't respond.

“Zero?” I ask again. This time he shakes his head, like he's clearing his thoughts.

“I am in optimal condition,” he replies, a second instance of worrying phrasing. “Except for the left pelvis, which has sustained previous damage.”

“Right,” I respond slowly. “Are you okay?”

“L...” he blinks at me in confusion for several seconds. “What?”

“Are you okay?” I ask again. “Your mannerisms have changed. If this procedure is stressing you or causing mental discomfort, then I can delay it. We can try again on another day.”

Even though we've delayed too long already. But if it's Zeke's mission compared to the well-being of my patient... there's no contest. I can't allow my priorities to change. Not even for the good of the group.
Another long pause, with Zero's eyes trained on my face, searching my expression. Finally, he says, “I'm okay,” in a softer tone. One that sounds more like the Zero I know.

“Are you feeling anxious? Would you be willing to take something to help?”

“I already said no,” Zero responds. I have offered him relaxants previously, to which I received the same response. “Besides... I don't think that it would help. I think it might make things worse.”

I am aware of Zero's unique circumstances, that his upbringing gives him a wariness of the medical community that goes beyond normal anxiety. However, I am willing to do whatever I can to make him more comfortable.

“Is there anything I can do that would make things better?” I ask. He hesitates at this, and seems to genuinely think it over.

“Keep talking to me,” he says. “They rarely spoke, other than to ask about reactions and condition. So... just hearing you helps.” A pause, and then, “Responding is difficult, but... I can if you need me to.”

I don't ask who “they” are. Likely the scientists or technicians from Zero's past at The Labs. I'm curious, but I don't want to arouse painful memories for him. So I let it go.

“You were pretty quick to take Ruby on as a student,” I point out, shifting the topic as I continue to get Zero ready. Absently, I don a pair of latex gloves and start setting the IV. I need it in his left hand, so I walk around the bed to get on his left side. Zero tracks me with his eyes, then looks away when I stop, his gaze fixating on the ceiling. I sterilize the skin and prepare to set the needle into his vein.

“Are you so eager to take on another student?” I ask. “Or have you realized something about him that the rest of us have missed?”

“I owe him,” Zero says softly, his voice muted and dull. He doesn't react when I press the needle beneath his skin, doesn't flinch or jerk away. His voice continues steadily, like he doesn't even feel it. “It was the only thing I could do to make it up to him.”

“Ah. I see,” I say as tape the cannula in place. I'll attach the drip line once I have him positioned. Releasing his hand, I cross back around to his right side.

“Put your left hand here,” I instruct. “I need to secure your wrist so you don't pull out the IV while under sedation.”

He complies, turning on his right side and laying his arm over the metal railing at the top of the bed. His left hand goes on top of the rail, as I'd planned. His right arm, pinned beneath him, is secured to the bottom rail. I'm making due with what I have, even though these conditions aren't optimal. I use the velcro straps to secure his wrists to the guard rail, making sure that Zero won't be able to move around while he's under. Then I put several pillows between him and the guards – keeping him secure on his side.

There is a second set of railings at the bottom of the bed, which I raise and secure his knees and ankles against. More pillows go between him and the rail, as well as a sheet and several pillows between his legs. I need to have his leg level and still for this operation, and this seems to be the closest I'm going to get.

This position exposes the length of his hip and thigh to my gaze, the rest of his body buried in a mass of fluffy white cotton. The shattered-glass scars on his hip stand out under the bright fluorescent
light, looking jagged and still-painful. If all goes as planned, I'm hoping to fix the damage beneath. But the scars themselves will never fade.

“I'm not sure Ruby will thank you once he finds out how strenuous combat training is. Do you think he can even manage?”

It takes several seconds of waiting for Zero to respond, but I give him time. During the pause, I pull the equipment for the IV over and get it in place by the head of the bed.

“He's strong,” Zero says eventually, his words careful and measured, like they're difficult for him. “He'll adapt. All of this... uncertainty isn't helping him. He needs to be shoved, not coaxed.”

That makes me pause, and I wonder, “You think he'll do better under pressure? Unlike Red?”

“Red gets pushed and he stumbles. Panics,” Zero replies, the words starting to come more easily. “Ruby digs his heels in. He just needs to be directed so that his strength is with us, not against us.”

There could be some truth in his assessment. Ruby and Red have almost polarized personalities. Perhaps they've simply been reversed.

“Still not enough time to turn him into a strong fighter before the Competition,” I point out.

“No,” Zero agrees. “But it should be enough to get him out of everyone's hair. And Kip is recovering well, so ideally Ruby won't be needed.”

“Speaking of Kip, can I call him back in? You're set for now, all the other preparations will be completed once you're under anesthesia.”

It takes Zero a worrying amount of time to say, “Yes,” and nothing else.

“Are you sure?” I press. “If it's too much, I'm sure he'd...”

“It's okay.” Then a short pause and, “I'm sure he's worried.”

I'm sure he's right, so there's nothing I can say to contradict that. I move to the wall panel to page Kip, but Red informs me that Kip is already on his way down. When I open the door, Kip is standing in the hall, shifting nervously.

“How are you doing?” he asks in a soft voice, stroking his fingers along Zero's face.

“I'm fine,” Zero responds, but he seems to settle a bit under Kip's touch. Some of the tension leaves him, and his eyes droop slightly. He moves his head toward Kip's fingers, encouraging the gentle stroking.

“I'm going to start the anesthesia now,” I inform him, hooking the IV bag up to the cannula in his hand. “You should start to feel tired in a few minutes. Just let it relax you, and don't try to fight sleep.”

Not that it's really an option. I am aware of the zero's tolerance, and prepared the anesthetic with that in mind. I don't want him coming out from under it in the middle of the surgery, dazed and
confused and in pain. That would be the makings of a disaster.

I start the anesthetic and then move to a chair along the wall, giving the two of them a bit of space. The sedative will take some time to take effect, and I want to give them space. Kip leans against the bed-rail, talking in soothing tones. After a few moments, I assume that Zero is starting to feel the effect of the anesthetic, as he begins to shift restlessly. It's the opposite effect the anesthetic should be having, but it's likely a psychological effect more than a physical one. Zero does not like to appear weak, so I'm not surprised that he would fight against something designed to make him helpless. He'll likely settle as the chemical continues to take effect.

I'm alerted to something being wrong when Kip's voice begins to pick up volume. I find my feet only to see that Zero is struggling against his bonds in earnest now, pulling against the velcro holding his wrists.

“Zero!” Kip cries sharply. “Stop!”

It's the wrong move. I can see the shifting expression on Zero's face. From perfectly blank to dark and angry. He twists in his bonds, his left hand lunging out to snap around Kip's wrist, which is still within the darker clone's limited reach. Zero's tight hold causes Kip to gasp in pain and fall to his knees, his arm twisted painfully over the bed-rail, still pinned in Zero's grip. Zero's other hand pushes out from under him and manages to snag the IV line connected to his left hand, tangling in the tube and effectively pinching it shut. Without the sedatives entering into his bloodstream, I've no hope that Zero will continue to tire and fall asleep on his own.

I get to the side of the bed too late to do more than watch the pair warily, unable to intervene and risk Zero harming Kip. Zero, for his part, is still feeling the limited effects of the sedatives already in his system. He scowls at the fabric strips holding his arms in place, a restraint that would never hold him at his full strength. Still, his iron grip on Kip's arm tells me that Zero is far from being weak.

“What are you doing?” I ask, trying to keep my tone calm and professional. “Stop this.”

Zero's eyes flick between my face and Kip's. The blonde's expression is pinched with pain, but still serious and concerned. His eyes are trained on Zero's face, or whatever parts of it he can see through the bed-rail. Zero's grip constricts again, and Kip lets out another tiny, pained gasp, but doesn't try to pull away.

I turn my attention back to Zero. Over-dilated, almost black, metallic eyes glare up at me. Messy, dark hair frames a scowling face that I hardly recognize. A cold, guttural voice says, “Release me.” And Kip makes another sharp sound of pain as Zero grinds his hold on the blonde's wrist.

And it dawns on me that having Zero's surgery while the only person who can feasibly put him down is half a universe away, perhaps was not such a wise decision after all.
Chapter Notes

Another week, another dreadful cliffhanger still... hanging. Lol. I'd like to apologize, but... honestly, the drama keeps everybody coming back. :)

All my gratitude to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

Lunch is finger foods and cocktails served in Magdelene's formal garden, with a quartet of string instruments playing in the background. There are perhaps two dozen owners in attendance, some drinking and snacking on the veranda, others playing croquet in the grass. There are all manner of brightly colored drinks available, mostly mimosas and Bellinis. A domestic asset holds out a tray and I pick up a champagne flute with a strawberry garnishing the glass and a pink, opaque liquid inside. The domestic moves away, joining the other six fair-haired, light-skinned young men circling through the crowd with various trays of snacks and drinks. Even the ones at the bar along the far wall and the buffet at the back are of a similar complexion, made even more noticeable by their identical dress. How had I never noticed that before? And yet I know I saw several dark-skinned men at the fighting arena, and even a few mixed in with the pleasure assets. Is the preference confined only to domestics, or am I likely to face resistance no matter where I shift Red?

“Mister Price,” I hear, and turn toward the voice. I find Owner Carmé approaching me, an older gentleman with graying hair and sharp, hazel eyes. Despite his age, he moves with purpose, showing no signs of feebleness. Following in his wake is a young man of a similar complexion, with brown eyes and auburn hair. Both are wearing dark suits, with Carmé's being black and the young man's being navy. My own attire is a bit less formal; black slacks and a navy blue button-down, matching with Ellaine's knee-length dress. Given the dress of the rest of the room, I would say that I'm more in line with the attire, while Carmé seems a bit overdressed. Not to the point of standing out, simply giving off an air that is a bit... stiff. Perhaps old-fashioned.

“Mister Carmé,” I respond in return. “It's been too long,” I comment as I shake his hand.

“I'd like to introduce you to my grandson,” Carmé says as I seamlessly transition to shake the younger man's hand. I'm unsurprised to find a familial connection between them, although I hadn't anticipated grandson.

“Finn,” the young man introduces himself across our gripped palms. His shake is firm, although I can sense a slight tremor in his grip. Excited? Or nervous? Exactly how old is he?

“Zeke, please,” I reply as we separate. “Would you be the domestic dealer that I've heard so much about?”

I've actually heard very little about him, but the boy ducks his head at the compliment anyway.
“Guilty as charged,” he jokes, then blushed at himself. “I mean, grandfather has been helping me get settled into that role over the last year.”

“I’ve decided to retire from selling,” Carmé puts in. “I really prefer to train and compete more than dealing. I was still able to rent out my assets as the dealer, of course, but I couldn’t enter the Competition directly, and I find that I miss the sport of it. I might enter next year, if I have a team ready.” He gives me a sly look and says, “Maybe I’ll even offer to buy back the little blonde clone, if he does well enough this year in the Competition.”

“I still don’t know that I’ll enter him,” I remind, trying to play down my Competition status. “His health is still uncertain, and he hasn’t trained in domestics since I got him.”

Carmé makes a displeased sound.

“That whole batch was bad,” he complains. “They never should have been brought in. What a waste of training years. But quality and supply have always been a problem.” He casts a glance over my shoulder and his expression lightens. “That is, it’s been a problem until now.”

I turn my head to see Ellaine approaching. Her dark hair is pinned up, a few stray strands hanging artfully around her face and. Her navy blue dress hugs her curves and makes her dark skin seem almost luminous. The gown itself is somewhat traditional, with a plunging neckline and off-the-shoulder straps. The skirt billows and shifts as she walks, ending just above her knees. She's wearing matching pumps with tiny, sensible heels.

“Misses Arcrest,” Carmé greets, taking her offered hand and kissing the back of it. Finn follows suit. When the greetings have been exchanged, Ellaine steps to my side, linking her arm with mine.

“Can you believe that I managed to drag him out of hiding?” she teases, inclining her head toward me.

Carmé chuckles and then says, “We were just talking about the quality of assets and how it's risen dramatically since you've started providing us with a steady source.”

We hadn't gotten that far, but I suppose we'd been heading in that direction.

“It's been a great benefit to my home satellite,” she replies earnestly. “With the upheavals in the commercial district in the past few years, we have a lot of displaced populations. And you know that the lower classes breed obscenely quickly.”

“We're still only taking the males, though?” Finn asks. “It doesn't seem like that would be a great solution to the breeding problem.”

Ellaine sighs and gestures with her champagne flute.

“It's like stray cats – one male can impregnate a hundred females. But we have to start somewhere, don't you think? Even simply lowering the adult population has reduced crime and poverty in the whole area.”

“Why is it only the males?” I ask casually. “Is there a reason?”

“Not that we know of,” Ellaine responds, her tone casual. No hints that she's lying, if she is. “The Controller says we can't, so we don't.”

“I don't suppose you could point me in his direction, so I could go ask him myself?” I ask.
Ellaine gives a bark of laughter that is too loud among the murmuring voices. Carmé chuckles, Finn looks uncomfortable. So he knows, then. Is he a Champion? Or has he simply used his grandfather's connections?

“You know we can't tell you that,” Ellaine chides. “Besides, they'd simply deny it. And then where would you be?”

“Not even giving me a gender for this person?” I ask, trying to tease out more information.

She smirks.

“Who says they're even here for you to talk to?” she asks, and it makes me glance around the room. Anyone I would even consider to be a candidate for Controller is here – all the key players in the Leash. But what if the Controller doesn't intercede personally? Or what if it isn't a single person?

Is she giving me a clue? Or being purposefully misleading? Damn. There's just no way to know for sure.

Ellaine turns back to Carmé and continues the earlier conversation.

“Honestly, I wish I were able to bring in a higher volume of assets, but there are only so many vagabonds and street punks that I can grab before people will get suspicious. And then moving them poses a risk as well, before they're chipped and under control. With the demand for new assets so high...”

“I've heard talk of other suppliers coming in,” Carmé says. “Do you know anything about that?”

“It's still just speculation and rumors,” she responds. “But from what I hear, my Satellite isn't the only one looking to offload the bottom of our population pool.”

“You think others would be willing to work with us?”

“I think we're really just looking for feasible transportation and a believable cover story, at this point.”

“There are other sources, too, aren't there?” Finn asks. “I mean, less reliable ones?”

“Of course,” Ellaine responds. “We wouldn't get anywhere if we were pulling from my stocks exclusively. Sometimes we can get shipments from the prison system, but it's quite difficult to find any assets that are good for anything except combat in that group. Specifically, they tend to be older than we generally want.”

“We get shipments of unwanted clones as well,” Carmé puts in. “But those tend to be rife with health problems.” He gestures toward me and says, “Your domestic is a case-in-point for why we need to vet them more carefully.”

“Of course, his zero is the counter-argument,” Ellaine responds.

“Not entirely,” Carmé argues. “After all, they tend to have temperament problems, don't they? That's why there are so few of them left.”

“I've never had any issues with mine,” I reply, but it's not entirely true. My mind returns to the time Zero tried to kill Ruby. Still, that wasn't so much a temper issue as a psychological break. And I would be hard pressed to find any asset that didn't exhibit psychological symptoms, given the environment they'd been living in.
Carmé shrugs and says, “Perhaps they're better suited to pleasure than fighting. Or maybe you just got lucky with yours.”

I refrain from comment, thinking that both are probably true, but for different reasons than he's implying.

“Alright, enough shop talk,” Ellaine says, turning to me. “I came over here to ask you to dance.”

“I'm surprised Dillon hasn't already whisked you off,” I respond, offering her my arm. We nod politely as we separate from Carmé and Finn, both turning to wander off as well.

“He has his own amusements,” Ellaine replies, gesturing across the room as we walk. I glance in the direction she indicates, and find Dillon taking drinks with Carter and Jackson. Dillon is in a similar outfit to my own – slacks and a button-down, although his has long sleeves and both items are in pure white. Tailored pants highlight his long legs and lean form. He has a white vest over his shirt, but no jacket. Crisp, stark lines and colors. It offsets his dark hair, his angular face. I notice a pop of color on the right of his chest – a pocket square in the same color as Ellaine's dress.

He must sense my gaze, because those eyes flick in my direction. Our eyes meet, and I'm struck by the intensity of his stare. It's a hunter's gaze. It's the look a predator gives when it's trying to decide if the prey is worth the effort of the hunt. Trying to decide if it's hungry enough. Trying to decide if the chase will be entertaining.

Carter says something, and Dillon's gaze moves back to the other occupants at the table. I force my attention back to Ellaine, who is leading me to an open space in front of the gazebo. A slab of smooth marble functions as a dance floor, only large enough for five or six couples at a time. We join two others; Magdelene and Vikram, along with a middle-aged couple that I don't know. The woman looks to be near Carmé's age, while the man in the couple is a bit younger. The two of them are wearing matching colors, likely signaling that they came together. Unlike Magdelene and Vikram, who are in red and brown, respectively.

“Carter's mother,” Ellaine says, noticing my gaze. “She attends events occasionally. She's not particularly active in the organization.”

“Adrienne Powers,” I pull from memory, thinking back to the bio I have on the powers family. “Only daughter and heir to the Powers line.”

There's a lot more known about Carter's mother than his father, given that she was a legacy and he was relatively nameless. That being said, I can tell that there are some big chunks of information missing just from her presence here.

“You've done your research,” Ellaine says, smirking approvingly. “Although she goes by Addie with friends.”

“If I'd properly done my homework, I'd have some idea of who the man on her arm is. I'm afraid I'm at a loss.”

I know that Carter's father has passed away. So is this man... his step-father? Or simply his mother's paramour?

“Flavor of the week,” Ellaine dismisses. “He's a low-level owner. Some... politician on one of the wealthier satellites. He uses his membership as an owner as a sign of a status, but he's only been invited today because of Addie's interest.”

That paints a better picture, and I do feel like I vaguely remember him now that Ellaine has
pointed out his chosen career. I dismiss his presence from my mind. He's hardly more than an
accouterment to Adrienne's outfit anyway, and worth even less attention.

But I do spare a bit more attention to Carter's mother as I lead Ellaine out onto the dance floor,
putting my hand modestly at her hip as we fall into step with a slow-paced waltz.

Carter's mother is no stunning beauty – likely wasn't even in her youth. Her features are too
rounded, too plain. She's fair-skinned and lean, with a delicate build. Her son shares a lot of her
looks – brown hair, although hers is a bit lighter in shade. Gray-blue eyes. Average height, if leaning
a bit toward short. She's wearing a teal dress, with the skirt hanging modestly to her ankles. The man
accompanying her has a teal tie over his white button-down and black slacks. Was this a last-minute
decision? Or did she choose to have such a flimsy link between them, that only the tie would signal
them as a pair?

Can I use this new presence to my advantage? Is there a way to exploit the situation? Dillon has
been my main target for a Competition sponsor, but only because I know he has the funds available
and has taken an interest in me. Courting him is dangerous to more than just my mission – it likely
puts my life in jeopardy too. I chose Carter as a backup option because he's a champion as well, so
likely has the funds to back me. But he hasn't shown much interest, so I don't really know where I
stand with him. Could his mother prove to be the safest route? She likely has the same access to
funds that Carter does. If I could...

"It's a bad idea," Ellaine says.

"Uh... What?"

"I can practically see your thoughts from here," she says, and I'm spinning her slowly, hardly
registering the dance that we're moving to. "You're still looking for a sponsor, correct?"

"Th... That's right."

"Don't aim for Addie," Ellaine cautions. "It wouldn't work, for one thing. You're almost the same
age as her son, and she tends to like men in her own age bracket."

My age had never been a detriment before. Could I overcome her objections? Dress in outdated
styles, talk to her about issues from a generation ago. Certainly a bit of makeup could age me nearer
to her own age.

"And second reason?" I ask.

"Carter would likely take exception to you trying to seduce his mother, even if your efforts don't
pan out. Carter's a fairly established player. I wouldn't burn my bridges with him just yet."

Sound advice. In this ever-complicating situation, I'd be a fool not to take it. Damn, there are so
many connections. Vikram and his missing uncle, Carmé and his grandson, now Carter and his
mother. Ellaine and Dillon, wife and husband, soon to be mother and father of another child. And, of
course, there's Ellaine's first child, the young girl I met on her ship.

"Your father doesn't have any involvement with the Leash, does he?" I find myself wondering, the
question blurted before I can think better of it. Luckily, she laughs and shakes her head.

"He's a politician, so he's had to learn to be a pragmatist. But, at heart, I think he's still too much of
an idealist. I know him. He'd protest that this is too big of a risk, that there will be backlash if the
public finds out, but it would really be his own misgivings that prevent him from acting. So no, he
doesn't have any ties to the Leash. I've kept him naive of my current occupation." She pauses a
moment, then says, “He is thrilled about my marriage to Dillon, though.” There's a slight roll of her eyes, conveying her own opinions on the matter.

“Ah yes, the husband that you've been avoiding all evening.”

“Not avoiding,” she counters with a sly grin. “Merely... distracting.”

“I'm surprised he hasn't come storming over here to reclaim you.”

“I'm surprised he hasn't interceded as well, although not on my behalf.”

“If he has any eye for beauty, he would never throw over a lovely lady like yourself for a plain creature like me.”

“Hm. Modesty is a virtue, but it doesn't suit you. You know what you look like. Some of the other owners have taken to calling you 'The Golden Prince.’”

“I see,” I reply, uncertain about my reaction to that news. On the one hand, notoriety can be a good thing. On the other, I don't want to get a reputation for being standoffish or snobby. There can be drawbacks in being... overly elite.

She must sense my hesitation, because she says, “It's a good thing. You've already got the attention of the most powerful actors in this play. They won't hesitate to approach you, and it cuts down on interference from social climbers who might want to attach themselves to your coattails as you make a name for yourself. So far, you've managed to impress and interact with some key players in this circle. I would hate to see you waste time with people who can't help boost your social standing.”

“What do you get out of all this?” I wonder, pivoting as part of the dance. She spins with me, little strands of dark hair shifting in the breeze. “You're being awfully helpful.”

She smiles, and it fails at looking pleasant or demure. It is... cunning. And... delighted? She's having fun, whatever her true motives are.

“I'm doing the same thing as everyone else,” she responds. “Making alliances. Moving pieces. Isn't that what this whole game is about?”

I want to snap back, “People's lives are not a game!” but I can't afford to break character like that, so I say nothing. In a moment, her attention is pulled away from me, and she smiles again.

“Here comes another piece,” she says, dropping her voice a bit. I glance over to see Dillon approaching us. “Just be your charming self.”

“Do you want me to seduce him?” I wonder.

She gives a bark of laughter that she tries to smother and says, “I don't think it would take much effort for that!” Then she becomes more serious and says, “Play coy, if you can. Give him a bit of a chase. He'll lose interest once he's secured his prize.” Her expression goes darker and she says, “They always do.” Then it clears as she pauses at the edge of the dancing platform.

Dillon joins us a moment later. I take a moment to note that he is also wearing Ellaine's colors. Where she is in all blue, I'm in a blue top with black slacks. Dillon is in a white outfit – stark white slacks and a clean, pressed white top – but he has a blue handkerchief in his pocket that matches Ellaine's dress and my top. Another manipulation? A subtle implication? Once Ellaine removes herself, it will look like Dillon and I came as a couple. I suppose I should be used to it by now, but
her machinations send a spike of irritation through me.

“Radiant as always, my wife,” Dillon says, bowing to kiss the back of her hand. “And even more so with this splendid creature on your arm.”

His gaze flicks over to me. Roving. Assessing.

“It's good that you caught us,” Ellaine says, responding before I have chance to. “I was beginning to tire. Would you mind taking over for me? I would hate to leave Mister Price without a partner.”

“That would be a shame,” Dillon agrees, his gaze still fixed on me. “Take a break, wife. I have it from here.”

I can see the pleased smirk as Ellaine excuses herself. Dillon misses it, his gaze focused on me. Just as she'd intended.

“Shall we?” he asks, moving into my space without waiting for my consent. It takes a moment for my brain to make the necessary adjustments. Where I had been able to lead with Ellaine, now I must follow with Dillon, as he immediately assumes the dominant role. My first few steps are less than graceful, but I manage to adjust without actually falling.

I find my footing, and my movements smooth out. As with any other role, I've been trained in both parts. Dominant and submissive, masculine and feminine. I find myself shifting between the two, depending on which will be a more effective manipulator of my target.

Dillon reacts very strongly to my submission. Once I find my footing, his pace increases. When we turn, he pivots with more force than necessary. His arm around my waist is a steel band. His gaze burns into my skin.

“You're wasted with her,” Dillon says. “You follow so beautifully.”

I have to think, “Smooth. Graceful. Delicate.” Or I'll bumble the entire routine. This dance is easy. Common. I've done it a thousand times. Yet with Dillon, I feel like I'm walking on broken glass. Heavy-footed and painful. Is it from nerves? Or am I finally realizing what a dangerous position I'm putting myself in?

“One can only follow as well as they're led,” I respond. It's not eloquent, and I cringe at the words. Where has all of my confidence gone?

“True enough,” he acknowledges with a smile.

We lapse into silence for a few minutes, focusing only on the dance and the music. The song ends, and I notice that Magdelene has changed partners. Vikram departs, and Carter moves to take his place as the orchestra begins again.

“Maggie's a terrible flirt, don't you think?” Dillon asks, noticing my gaze. “She loves to wear different men on her arm throughout the night.”

“I can't say I blame her,” I respond. “It's not like I've kept to the same partner. And there's such a variety of handsome men to choose from.”

It's a veiled compliment, but his smile goes a little sharper at it. His eyes are fixed on my face, and I know that I need to push him a bit further while his attention is so focused on me.

“Actually,” I continue, “I'm glad you decided to approach me. I've been meaning to speak with
you.”

“Oh?” he asks, as though he has no idea what I might be after.

Another turn, this one with a bit too much spin. I find myself clutching at his shoulder for balance. His smile takes on a predatory aspect.

“Perhaps we should find a quiet corner somewhere,” he suggests.

Alarm bells begin to chime in my head, but I smile and say, “That would be nice.”

Without preamble, Dillon uses a turn in the dance and guides me off of the dance floor. We move casually across the room, although it feels like this interaction is moving too quickly. Dillon snags a pair of champagne flutes and hands one to me. I take a sip of the sweet liquid, needing the alcohol to calm my nerves.

The room is mostly open space, but toward the back there are some rose bushes and hedges surrounding a small fountain and a couple marble benches. It's as secluded as we're likely to get without leaving Magdelene's ornate gardens. Moving us somewhere else in the ship must be too bold even for Dillon, and it would be too decisive a sign for me to allow. I still haven't figured out exactly how the other owners will react to me sleeping with Dillon, although context clues are giving me the impression that it's not a big deal. Still, getting a reputation for sleeping around might have a negative impact on my reputation, so I have to be careful. Wouldn't want to turn the “golden prince” into a harlot.

We settle on the bench. I take a seat first, and Dillon chooses to sit beside me instead of on the bench across from me. The bench is small. Turning to face each other as much as we can leaves our knees touching. Dillon would only have to lean forward to kiss me, barely an arm's length of distance separates us. But Dillon doesn't make any immediate sexual overtures, so I take a sip of my drink and wait for him to speak.

“My wife thinks I don't know what she's doing,” he says, his voice low. “She thinks she can just throw a pretty thing like you at me and I'll forget what a cold, conniving woman she is. She's keen on keeping me out of her way.” He leans forward, putting a hand on my knee. “She's lucky that I'm so willing to be distracted.”

“I'm not sure that I want to be anyone's distraction,” I respond levelly.

“I don't think you can help it,” he says, moving his hand from my leg to my cheek. “With that face. With those lips. You distract everyone around you. Half the people at this party would like to fuck you. Maggie would mount you right on that dance floor, if given half a chance.”

That's an interesting idea. I wonder if she could fund me? But then... she's rather clingy. Best to keep my options open.

“What would it take to ignite your passion?” he wonders. “What spark can I throw to bring out the fire in you? To make you let go of this perfect veneer and become the wanton thing I can see under your skin.”

“I'm not sure what you're offering.”

He's quiet a moment, and his thumb strokes across my bottom lip. Despite the tension of the situation, I feel a spike of instinctive arousal at that motion. There's something carnal about it. There's something heady about the danger, too.
“I should have spawned with you,” Dillon says at a whisper. “We’d have beautiful offspring. Not like the little devil Ellaine is likely to give me.” His thumb pulls on my bottom lip, parting them ever so slightly. “Such a shame.”

There's a moment where I think he might lean in and kiss me.

Then:

“Dillon, are you monopolizing all of Zeke's attention again?”

We glance up like a pair of startled teens. It's Magdelene, with Carter on her arm looking amused. I can see the irritation flash in Dillon's eyes before he suppresses it. We separate and get to our feet, the moment broken.

“I can't help it if he finds me irresistible,” Dillon defends, giving Madelene a sly smile as he shoves his hands in his pocket and saunters past. I find myself feeling acutely disappointed. I'd been so close to... something.

“What were you two talking about?” Carter asks.

“This and that,” I respond curtly.

“Did we interrupt something?” he asks, grinning.

I frown, but then let my displeasure fade. I find myself smiling back at him. Perhaps I can still salvage this event, and I did make some progress. At least I know Dillon is interested. Now I just need to wait for a better opportunity.

“Nothing important,” I reply, trying for casual.

“Oh?” he replies, a laugh in his voice as he falls into step beside me. Magdelene is trailing Dillon, and the four of us head back to the main area.

“Why are you so interested?” I ask.

He shrugs.

“No reason.” A small pause and then, “You just looked a bit... overwrought.”

“Perhaps I was excited.”

“Were you?”

“I...” I hesitate, wondering how I should play this. Carter could still be an option for funding. He's a Champion, after all. I don't want to seem too keen on Dillon. “I'm not sure.”

“I thought you'd have better taste. You know all he's really after is power, and he'll do anything to get it.”

“Perhaps I have ambitions of my own,” I respond.

“Do you?” he asks. “And what ambitions are those?”

“Maybe I'm hoping to be a Champion this year.”

“High hopes indeed, for someone who hasn't confirmed that he's competing and doesn't have a
“Well, I haven't decided for sure. I'd like to make sure I have a chance before I give it a shot.”

He pauses for a moment, and I can feel the weight of his gaze on me. Eventually, he says, “You seem to be adjusting quite well to this society. I have to say, I'm impressed. I expected you to struggle, but you've slotted into place like a puzzle piece. It's refreshing.”

There isn't any way to tell him, “I've spent years adapting myself to fit my surroundings,” without giving up my cover, so I don't respond. It doesn't matter, because the rest of the group has come to a pause next to the concession table, and we join the conversation in progress.

“...don't know why we can't have assets here,” Dillon is complaining. “At least for some entertainment.”

“We have assets for music and for food,” Magdelene argues back. “Just because you're not balls-deep in one doesn't mean this is a bad party.”

“It doesn't have to be sex,” Dillon said, and there's that cold, predatory smile again. “There are other amusements to be found.”

I am aware that Dillon is a sadist, but after our recent encounter his words still give me the chills. Am I putting myself in too much danger? More than that, am I putting my assets in danger if Dillon proves to be more than I can handle?

“How did your zero take being left at home?” Carter asks me, but it's loud enough to invite group comment. I find myself suddenly at the center of attention.

“It's actually rather fortuitous that assets were banned from this gathering,” I reply casually. “I... seem to have played a bit too rough with him yesterday. You might not be seeing him for a while.”

Let them assume what they will.

“Pleasure assets are so easy to break,” Carter acknowledges. “But then, at least you have a scholar in your group now. A doctor, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Oh,” Magdelene chimes in. “Ellaine's little Asian, right? I've seen him before.”

“Maybe Zeke will let you see him again,” Carter says. “I've heard he was a stunning creature. Isn't that right, Ellaine?”

“Mm. He was fierce, I'll give him that. Best teacher I've had in years. I'll be interested in seeing how... cooperative Zeke has managed to make him.”

“That would be worth seeing,” Magdelene says. “Would you fuck him for us?”

“He's not a pleasure asset,” I protest, keeping my expression neutral.

“That doesn't mean you can't fuck him,” Dillon points out, standing at the edge of our group and casually sipping a glass of champagne. “Just means he might not be very good at it.”

There's a cold feeling in the pit of my gut, and a denial stuck in the back of my throat. My mind shies away from the entire prospect. I don't want Lee here, among these monsters. It's bad enough that I have to bring Zero, a man I've twisted and warped to serve the needs of my mission. Will they...
never be satisfied?

“I’ll... have to think about it,” I reply. “I don't want him injured.”

“So don't injure him,” Magdelene says with a sniff. “You can be gentle, can’t you?”

“I'm not sure how hard he'll fight me.”

I’m acutely sure of how hard he’d fight me - that’s the problem.

“That’s where this vaunted control of yours comes in,” Carter points out. “It isn't a challenge if they fall into bed with you.”

“I... suppose,” I respond, knowing that any more protests will come across as weakness. Best to let the subject die, and hope I can avoid it in the future.

“We'll have to set up a day,” Carter says, pushing past my reluctance. “It'll be a nice distraction until the new club is open. Speaking of which,” Carter turns to Dillon, finally shifting the attention away from me. “Where is Peterson? Isn't he usually stepping on your coattails?”

“He had something come up at the club. He's hoping to open on time, but he had to go deal with it. He was simply distraught over missing the party, although I told him it would be boring,” Dillon says, and nudges Magdelene's arm teasingly.

“Of course it's boring to you!” Magdelene replies. “If it isn't sex or violence, you've got no interest. Some of us have more sophisticated tastes.”

“I think I have excellent taste,” he replies, and glances at me over the edge of his champagne flute. “Don't you agree, Zeke?”

“I can't say I'd know,” I respond teasingly.

“Alright, enough flirting,” Magdelene says. “Dillon, if you're so bored then you can have the pleasure of dancing with me. That should amuse you for a little while.”

Dillon makes a face, but lets Magdelene lead him to the dance floor. Carter departs as well, leaving me alone at the drinks table. But not for long. Ellaine must have been watching the interaction, and joins me almost as soon as Carter’s back is turned.

“How am I doing?” ask her, my voice low and conspiratorial. She hides a smile behind her wine glass.

“Oh, you're doing excellent. Keep up the good work, darling.”

There's something a bit too pleased about her words, something that makes me feel like I'm walking deeper into a trap.

But I don't know how to get out, so there's nothing to do but move deeper.

I sigh, wondering if Lee is having any better luck with his evening than I am.
Surgery - Lee POV

Chapter Notes

Is anyone super-familiar with GoogleDocs? I've been trying to move from my laptop software into GDocs - I'm currently using OpenOffice, which has a glitch where it separates from it's lock file and I've lost an entire document because it got corrupted, so I'm trying to jump ship. So, currently I copy my file from OpenOffice into GDocs and then from GDocs to AO3, and we're fine; it copies and pastes into AO3 just fine. But if I WRITE my document in GDocs, when I paste it to AO3 (richtext or html format, either one) I lose all of my indents. I've tried taking out the automatic indents and using the tab, but it doesn't make a difference either. And it won't let me see the code to check the formatting. I think I might have had this issue before, which is why I went to OpenOffice, but it would be a lot easier for me to run in GDocs. So if anyone has any suggestions, I'm all ears. :)

All my gratitude to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

“Zero,” I say, fighting to keep my voice calm and quiet. “You need to let him go. You're hurting him.”

Kip is kneeling next to Zero's bed, his arm twisted painfully in Zero's grip. Zero's other hand is tangled in his anesthesia line, pinching it shut. Without the soporific, I've little hope that he'll pass out on his own. His grip on Kip's arm makes it so that I can't attempt to drug him or restrain him myself, lest I risk him breaking Kip's wrist. And in his current position – reclined and pinned by the straps on his wrists – Zero is likely to take any move I make, even compliance, as a threatening gesture. It leaves me few options to diffuse the situation other than calming Zero down.

“Release me,” Zero demands in a cold, unfamiliar voice.

“Let Kip go, and I'll release your bonds.”

“Compliance is denied. Release me now.”

The tension amplifies in the room, and Kip makes a pained noise as Zero tightens his grip.

“I don’t know what you think is happening,” I try desperately, “but no one is trying to harm you.”

“Then why am I restrained?” he asks in the same cold, toneless voice. He pulls harder against the straps and I hear the hiss as they shift. Even under partial sedation, the velcro restraints won’t hold Zero for long.

“You are restrained for your own safety, and for ours. Calm yourself, and I'll release the bonds.”
“I am calm,” he responds, his voice still made of steel, his arms still straining against straps.

“You need to stop pulling,” I instruct, watching the way the velcro bites into his wrists. A trickle of blood seeps from under the left cuff. “You've hurt yourself.”

“Minimal damage,” he responds, and the tension only seems to increase. “Function is not impaired.”

The wording sends a chill through me. I've never heard Zero sound so... inhuman.

“Zero…” I try again, but he’s not listening. I can practically see him calculating; his thoughts moving like molasses through the narcotic haze in his brain. His body shifts, and I realize a moment too late that his legs are still unrestrained. He managed to hook his right foot over a rung of the bottom bedrail. It gives him significantly better leverage than he had with his arms, and he kicks with all the strength he still has. The bedrail gives with a screech of metal, flying across the room to land against the wall, with the bottom brackets shorn and the rail itself slightly bent. It wasn’t meant as a physical restraint, let alone for someone of Zero’s strength.

Kip gives a frightened shriek that he manages to cut off once the projectile lands. There is silence in the room, in stark contrast to the clamor a moment ago. Then Zero gives a growl of frustration - I realize that he was hoping the bedrail was one piece, and breaking the bottom would release him from the top restraints as well.

I glance at my patient. Under the fury in his expression, there are definite signs of fatigue. Perhaps if I can simply stall him long enough, he’ll wear out on his own, with the help of the sedatives already in his system.

I’m not sure what else to do, at this point. With Kip as a hostage, he has me at an impasse.

“Why do you need to be released?” I ask. “We are not harming you.”

“Restraint is not needed. Sedation is not needed.”

“Restraints are for safety only,” I try to reason. “The procedure requires absolute stillness.”

“Restraints are not needed. I will not move. Restraints are a sign of weakness.”

Restraints are... By the ancients. I feel a wave of nausea washing over me. Even Kip makes a sound of horror from where he’s kneeling on the floor.

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“Zero,” I tell him. “Whatever you think is happening, we're not trying to hurt you. This isn't an experiment.”

He looks at me, and finally there's a hint of confusion in his expression. He frowns, then looks down at Kip for the first time. His expression darkens as he stares at the blonde clone kneeling on the floor.

“Then why have you brought a tech?” Zero asks.

I glance down at the same time Kip does, both of us staring at his clothes. We’d never thought to question his choice of garments. It’s the same thing he always wears - a white chef’s coat and long white pants, complete with sensible black shoes. Looking at it from Zero’s perspective, though, and it wouldn’t be much different from the lab coats a medical tech would wear. A little shorter, perhaps, and the front buttons are definitely different, but... In Zero’s muddled mind, I doubt he could spot any of those differences, let alone with Kip hovering over him like he was. I suppose we’re only
lucky that I opt for black scrubs instead of the standard white, or we would both look like enemies.

“Zero, it’s not—” Kip gasps, and he’s already fumbling with his coat despite the confines of his position. He manages to twist out of the right sleeve, then shove the jacket down as far as it will go, until it meets the barrier of Zero’s grip.

“Look at me,” Kip demands, now only wearing his white pants and gray undershirt. “Please, Zero. I’m not… I wouldn’t… I’m sorry. I never realized…”

Zero blinks heavily for several seconds, his eyes moving over Kip’s face. He seems to struggle, confusion and wariness darkening his expression.

Then finally:

“Kip?”

“I’m sorry,” Kip reiterates. “I mean, yes, it's me.” Zero’s grip releases, but instead of backing out of reach, Kip pushes himself up on his knees and leans over the bedrail, wrapping his hands around Zero’s still-clenched fist.

“Everything’s okay now,” Kip soothes gently, laying his palm against Zero’s cheek. “I promise, no one's going to hurt you.”

After a moment, Zero relaxes, releasing his hold on the IV line. His hand wraps around Kip’s, but there’s no threat of violence in it this time.

“You look just like them,” Zero says, his eyes starting to droop. With some of the chemicals already circulating in his bloodstream, he’s quickly succumbing to the effects now that he’s receiving the sedative again. “I couldn't tell you apart.”

“I know,” Kip says, and there are tears on his cheeks. “I'm sorry. I won't...”

“Glad it's you,” Zero interrupts muzzily, and twines his fingers with Kip's. “Would always rather you than them.”

Kip gives a hiccupping little sob, but Zero is already asleep.

There's a moment of quiet while we both process what has just happened.

“Holy hell,” Kip says. “That was...”

“Terrible,” I finish. “I knew Zero's childhood was traumatic, but I didn't realize...”

“Me neither,” Kip says.

Another long moment of silence.

Zero lies still on the bed, his face relaxed in sleep. There’s hardly a sign of the intense situation that just occurred. Zero’s hands are still restrained near his chest, but they’ve become tangled in the sheets and it only looks like he’s holding his arms together in sleep. His legs are splayed, his left foot dangling over the side of the bed where he kicked the railing free. The sheets have covered the sharp edges of the stripped fastenings, giving the appearance of a casual, comfortable slumber. His breathing is deep and even, and I can see the slow rise and fall of his chest with each breath. Whipcord, almost sculpted muscles wrap around his torso, and even under sedation he looks like a resting predator. He’s nude beneath the tangle of sheets, and the fabric seems to almost artfully cover
him, highlighting the curves and angles of his body. Even the jagged, broken-glass scars on his hip seem little more than decoration in this moment.

I sigh.

It’s hard to remember how much pain lies beneath, when he looks so attractive like this. Difficult to remember that even the most beautiful sword was wrought in fire and then beaten into hardness.

“I should probably check his wrists,” I comment.

“You don’t think he’ll wake up?” Kip asks. I glance at the monitors and shake my head.

“Even for Zero’s metabolism, he should be well under.”

I move to Zero’s side, pulling away the tangled sheets and pillows. As expected, the dark-eyed fighter stays asleep, breathing softly but unresponsive to my touch. I unfasten his arms from the top bedrail, checking to find that he’s managed to bruise himself a bit and he’s broken the skin on the underside of his left wrist, but hasn’t managed to do much damage to himself overall. The position of his arms, most likely, prevented him from getting the leverage to cause much more damage.

“I’m wondering if I should cut the anesthesia and let him wake up,” I tell Kip.

Kip looks surprised and asks, “Why would you do that?”

I hesitate, feeling uncertain.

“Given his reaction, we might want to wait for Zeke after all. Perhaps he can…”

“I don’t think repeating this whole process is going to be easier on Zero,” Kip cuts me off. “Especially after what he just went through.”

I had the same thought, but I also feel conflicted. I would have preferred to get Zero’s consent again to proceed, now that he’s had such a reaction. But getting that consent would require waking him up, which would only create more stress on him.

“I don’t think it’s wise to delay the procedure,” Kip says. “After Zero’s reaction… after all the stress he’s just gone through, it would all be for nothing if we had to repeat the whole thing on another day. And I feel like it would be harder on him the second time. He might not want to do it at all, regardless of the consequences to his body.”

I’d had a similar train of thought, which is why I’d hesitated. But Kip is right, it would be a waste to start this all over again, and likely more traumatic on Zero in the long run.

“I want to check out your wrist before I start Zero’s procedure,” I let him know, holding out my hand. He obligingly puts his left wrist in my hands, turning it as I guide him.

“It doesn’t feel broken or sprained,” he tells me. “Just badly bruised.”

“I’d like to scan it later just to make sure there aren’t any hairline fractures, but I think you’re right. It doesn’t look like he did any real damage.”

“If Zero really wanted to hurt me, he easily could have. He just…”

“The anesthesia confused him,” I confirm. “And then something about your outfit triggered him. Or even the way you were standing, combined with the color of your clothes. It’s hard to tell what exactly set him off.”
“Yeah,” Kip says forlornly. “I just… I wish I’d thought…”

“I wish he’d mentioned it earlier,” I grouse. “You can’t know everything that’s in his head. He has to tell us. You couldn’t have known.”

Kip is silent, and I can see my logic warring with his tendency to blame himself for things beyond his control. It seems that it extends beyond his habit of blaming himself for his health issues - a trait that I’ve already witnessed in him. I wonder if it’s an aspect of his perfectionist personality, and if that might be why he’s become such a successful domestic? But it’s toxic to him on a personal level; he can’t feel guilty when anything goes wrong around him.

“He always has to act so… so tough,” Kip says quietly. “I want to be there for him, but… he makes it hard.”

I have to point out, “The reverse is probably true as well, you know.”

His eyes flash with guilt.

“I don’t like to be a burden. It’s not the same.”

“We don’t get to pick and choose what aspects of ourselves we show to others. Not when you’re as close as this group is.” What are we, really? Family? Friends? Lovers? All of them? “Sometimes you’re a help and sometimes you’re a hindrance, and the key is letting others balance the equation.”

“It’s hard,” Kip admits. “Zero has so much on his shoulders between training himself and training Red - and now training Ruby. This whole… thing with Master Zeke. I don’t want to put anything else on him.”

“That’s his choice. It’s not fair for you to make it for him.”

He doesn’t argue, but I can tell from the stubborn set of his jaw and the way his eyes train on the floor that he doesn’t fully agree. Still, I’ve done what I can to help, and pushing Kip will only make him dig in harder. Especially right now, when his emotions are running so high from the previous events, I know that he needs some time to internalize and think it all over.

So I let it go, turning my attention to my slumbering patient.

“Can you help me get Zero shifted?” I ask, knowing that it will be easier with two pairs of hands now that he’s dead weight. “I can call down Red or Ruby, but…”

“He wouldn’t want them to see him like this,” Kip finishes. “I’m okay. I can do it.”

“I need to turn him around to the undamaged side of the bed,” I explain. “Then I can turn the bed around so that he’s situated in the same direction as before.”

In the end, we untuck the fitted sheet from the bed and use it as a sling. Kip winces when he has to lift, but otherwise manages without a problem. It’s slow going, as I don’t dare remove the sedative line for fear of Zero metabolizing too quickly and waking up. We have to pause several times while I move his IV stand during our progress.

Eventually, though, we get him turned around, and then the bed turned around, and then resecured against the undamaged bedrails. Kip is a quick study and jumps in to help anywhere he can. He isn’t shy, as I thought he might be. He watches what I’m doing and easily picks up on the setup, jumping in to help replace the padding and secure Zero’s limbs. Kip’s hands are strong and his movements confident. He’d make a good medic, if I had time to train him in that skill. But we’re better off
aligning his training with his current skill set if we’ve any hope of getting him ready to compete in
time, so I let the notion go.

“Alright,” I tell him when Zero’s position is almost identical to his earlier one, with only the
headboard being swapped to the foot of the bed. “This is the part where you leave. I’m going to start
the procedure, and I want you to go put some ice on that wrist before it starts swelling.”

“You’ll call me back in when it’s over?” Kip asks, but he’s looking at Zero, staring at the soldier’s
sleeping face.

“Of course,” I assure him. “He’s in good hands with me.”

Kip meets my eyes then, a small smile playing on his lips.

“I know he is,” Kip assures me. “Or I’d never leave him with you. It doesn’t stop me from
worrying, though.”

“Try to put your fears aside. Despite the rough start, this is actually a fairly minimal procedure.”

Kip laughs and says, “He always has to make things difficult, doesn’t he?” in a conspiratorial tone.
Then the smile fades, and he gives one final stroke to the side of Zero’s face. Without another word,
he turns and exits the medbay, snagging his discarded coat on the way. The white fabric trails from
his fingers, and I have a feeling that I won’t be seeing that particular article of clothing again today.

Then I’m alone with Zero’s steady breathing and the quiet hum of my equipment.

I take a couple deep breaths to center myself, clearing my mind of everything that has happened
recently.

Then I get to work.

Practicing medicine isn’t that different from meditation. Both require perfect concentration. Both
require patience. One is still, and the other requires movement. But in essence, the two are very
similar.

They both give me a deep sense of calm, as well. Nowhere do I feel as at peace with myself than
when I am meditating or performing surgery. Even under dire circumstances, there is a lasting sense
of… balance when I practice my skill. It is something that I don’t find in fighting, nor in studying,
nor in socializing. Only here.

Zero’s surgery is not intensive. It is one of the easier procedures I’ve done in a long time. Far less
stressful than caring for Kip and his tenuous health. My biggest concern is that Zero will fight his
way out from under the anesthesia, but I keep a careful eye on his vitals while I work. As always, an
extra set of hands and eyes would be helpful, but I am used to working by myself in far less
conducive settings than this one, so it is no large imposition to be alone.

Time passes in a way that I track only through Zero’s continued heartbeat. I work slowly, making
my way through the long list of steps by practiced habit. It is not a short procedure. Bone fragments
need to be gently pulled from muscle and tissue. Crevices in the pelvic bones need to be filled. Sharp
edges need to be filed. Uneven surfaces need to be sanded smooth, allowing for a better range and
ease of motion. And all of these tasks must be performed with microscopic instruments, leaving the
least amount of damage to the flesh beneath.

By the time I finish, it is well into the evening. Zero is still sound asleep, a bandage covering his
left hip. Likely tomorrow, even that will not be needed. The damage to his skin is almost negligible,
but the bone beneath will need time to heal, and the calcium composite used to fill the gaps and fissures will need time to harden. My hardest task will probably be convincing the stubborn soldier to wait and give his body time to heal.

There will be pain, of course. Even with the analgesics that I will administer and slowly wean him off of, there will be a tolerable level of discomfort. In a normal patient, I could trust that the body’s natural increase in pain would be a suitable deterrent to the movement and strain that would otherwise damage my careful work. In Zero, though, I have no such system of preventative measures. From his use of a limb that should be completely unable to function, I can tell that pain will be of little consequence to him, even levels that would fully stop another fighter. I’ll have to watch him closely. It makes my job all the more difficult when my patient and I have two different goals. Mine is to get him healthy, and his is to get back on his feet as quickly as possible. Allowing him to fulfill his goal would likely damage mine.

But those are concerns for a later time. I try not to let them ruin the pleasant, optimistic feeling I get when a procedure went better than expected. There was considerable damage to be repaired on Zero’s hip and I still expect a lengthy recovery period, but the procedure itself went smoothly. There was no excess bleeding, no unforeseen complications barring the somewhat rocky beginning. Overall, with the ease of the procedure and Zero’s naturally fast healing, I might be able to shave a few days off of his confinement.

When Zero is well into his recovery and all the instruments have been sterilized and put away, I step into the main bay. As expected, Kip is sitting by the door. He’s changed his clothes, now wearing more casual clothing; black slacks and a gray, cotton shirt. He’s holding his tablet on his knees, glancing through pages of text. I can only assume that it’s the reading material I’ve assigned him. He’s so deeply engrossed that it takes me stepping into the hall to get his attention. Only then does he look up, his eyes hopeful but also concerned.

“How is he?” Kip asks immediately. I let myself smile.

“The procedure went well and he’s in the recovery phase. He’s still sleeping.”

“How is he?”

“Of course, but let him wake on his own. You might want to bring the tablet. It could take a while.”

He gives me a grateful smile and pushes himself off the floor, brushing off his pants as he stands. He tucks the tablet under his arm and follows me back into the room.

As he settles into the rolling chair next to Zero, I can’t help but ask, “No word from Zeke yet?”

“Nothing,” he confirms, “but that’s to be expected. These parties always run late.”

“Yes, but… it still makes me nervous. This is the first time Zeke has been on his own, is it not?”

“I think Zero said it wasn’t?” Kip asks, frowning. “Zeke went with Ellaine on his own when he got you?”

“Oh. I guess he did.” I’d forgotten that Zero hadn’t been there at my first meeting with Zeke; hadn’t met me, in fact, until we arrived at the ship and I had attempted to attack Zeke. “Still… I don’t trust her.”

“You shouldn’t,” Kip says with a shrug. “You can’t trust any owners. Not even with each other.”
And the casualness of the comment probably hints at the deep-seated trust issues that Kip has, but I don’t have the energy to explore them right now.

“Ellaine is particularly devious,” I point out.

He scoffs. “Particularly dangerous, you mean. But still, I don’t think she can ignore one of the founding rules of this group. Owners aren’t allowed to attack each other directly.”

“No, but they have all kinds of ways to go around that. Manipulation is her strong suite, which is what concerns me.”

“I don’t see any advantage to her attacking him. Why would she go after one of her own?”

Kip doesn’t know that Zeke isn’t actually an owner like the rest of them. He has no idea of the danger Zeke faces every time he leaves the ship, nor the scrutiny he faces almost constantly. I can only hope that Ellaine hasn’t figured it out yet. If the Leash finds out that Zeke is a spy, there’s no hope for any of us.

I’m saved from responding when Zero stirs, effectively ending that line of communication. It’s sooner than I expected him to wake, but it’s likely due to his heightened metabolism and resilience. He’s on his back, his arms free, his hip covered in bandages, and his body draped with a light sheet. I move to Kip’s side, prepared to intervene so that we don’t have a repeat of earlier.

I needn’t have worried. Zero blinks slowly, his pupils dilated from the narcotics, then closes his eyes for several seconds. He frowns, forcing his eyes open again, but they drift lazily around his surroundings, unable to focus on anything. His hands lift, then settle against the bedclothes again. He still has the IV drip, so I’m glad that he still appears lethargic. I don’t want to have to restrain him to keep him from pulling on it.

Finally, his eyes settle on Kip’s face.

“Hey,” Kip says gently, moving closer. I allow it, considering how sluggish Zero is. I can see his steady pulse and respiration on the monitors, and I don’t think we’ll have a repeat of earlier. I step back, allowing Kip to lean over the bedrail.

“Kip?” Zero asks, his voice raspy. His eyes slip closed even as he says it.

“I’m here,” Kip assures him, reaching out to stroke his fingers through Zero’s hair.

Zero swallows, and then there are several seconds of stillness before he can force his eyes open again.

“S everything okay?” he slurs, and there’s a slight uptick in his pulse. I move closer to Kip’s side, but don’t intervene just yet.

“It’s fine,” Kip soothes. “Everything went fine. Lee says it went better than he expected.”

“I… had dreams… Did something…”

“Just bad dreams,” Kip assures him, stroking his cheek. “Anesthesia can do that to you. Just try to forget the whole thing.”

“Okay,” Zero says softly, and he manages to raise his hand enough that Kip takes it, lacing their fingers together. Kip leans down and presses his lips against Zero’s knuckles.
“Just rest,” he whispers, pulling away.

“’S Zeke back?” Zero whispers, unable to even open his eyes.

“Not yet,” Kip responds easily. “But it’s early. It’s not time for him to be back yet.”

That’s not technically true - it’s not early, and I don’t know if Zeke ever specified when he’d be back. Still, it mollifies Zero, who drifts back to sleep again. Kip settles in the chair beside him, content to wait beside the slumbering fighter.

I give it several minutes - well enough time to make sure Zero is solidly asleep - before asking, “You don’t think he’s going to see the finger marks around your wrist?”

“I burnt my arm,” Kip says sternly, and his eyes dare me to correct him. There’s a stubborn set to his jaw that I haven’t seen before, a stiffness to his shoulders that convinces me not to argue. “You told me to keep it covered this time, so I don’t risk infection.” A pause, and then, “Zero will be out of it for a few days anyway. Once it’s faded a bit, I can cover it with makeup.”

“And Zeke? Will you tell him?”

“It’s none of his concern,” Kip says firmly. “Zero didn’t do anything wrong, and my work won’t be impeded. So there’s no point in telling him anything.”

I hesitate for a long moment. Kip’s silver eyes are fierce. If I go against his wishes in this, I’ll lose his trust. He is ferociously protective. Painting myself as an enemy - as Zeke’s ally? I’m not entirely sure I understand the sides in this - will do no one any good.

“I am going to tell Zeke about Zero waking up from anesthesia,” I inform him, then raise a hand to silence his protest, “but I won’t tell him about your arm or the fact that he threatened you. I can’t really hide the damaged bed, though.”

Kip relaxes and gives me a nod. His expression eases into a smile.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I just… I don’t want Zero to get into trouble over something I…”

“It wasn’t your fault either,” I correct. “But I can understand how protective you are. I will abide by your wishes, assuming Zero makes no other aggressive moves.”

“Thank you.”

We lapse into companionable silence. I have my own work to complete in preparing myself for the Competition, and Kip is deeply engrossed in his reading. Eventually, Red and Ruby bring us dinner. It’s some kind of rice and bean dish - it must be something Red has made before, because he preens a bit when Kip compliments the spices in the dish. It isn’t fancy like the food Kip makes, but it tastes good and it fills us up. Red and Ruby clear away the dishes afterwards, making themselves scarce. With precious little free time, I can only assume that they are making the most of it in the way that teenagers typically do.

Hours pass. It grows late, and then it starts to grow early again. Zero stirs, and I let Kip give him a couple sips of water. He goes to sleep again. Kip and I sit with him, both of us pretending to focus on work that we’re less and less able to concentrate on.

Worry eats at me. Doubt infects me. Indecision cripples me. Should I try to contact Zeke? Should I wake Zero? If someone attacks while Zeke is away, we’re at half strength with Zero unconscious. Maybe even less, as I’m still at less than full strength. And what if Zeke is stranded? I don’t know
how to pilot. Does Kip? Could Zero manage it drugged and half-conscious? Will any of it matter, if he really has been found out? There’s nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide.

No one left to save us.

In the early hours of the morning, I finally hear a ship pulling into the dock. Kip and I look at each other, startled even though we’d been waiting for it. I get to my feet and move to the doorway, putting my back against the wall and listening. If I hear unfamiliar voices, I want to be able to get the drop on them. They’ll likely be expecting docile, unresisting slaves.

What they’ll get is the polar opposite.

I’m impressed when Kip moves around to the other side of Zero’s bed, standing and facing the door. He keeps his hands at his side unthreateningly - he’s not a fighter, after all - and stares straight ahead. It’s actually a pretty good tactic for someone untrained in combat. If anyone comes in, their attention will immediately go to Kip, keeping them from noticing me. It also puts him directly in the line of fire if they bring a pulse gun or a throwing weapon, but I note how Kip’s body is blocking most of Zero’s sleeping form and I assume that it’s probably on purpose again. Kip, it seems, is no coward. A liar, perhaps, but not a coward.

The jump ship disembarks from ours a few moments later. I don’t relax, because taking the main vessel could be part of their overall plan. Whoever they are. Owners? Robbers? Kidnappers?

Soft footsteps coming across the bay. I tense as the door slides open. The light from the hall casts a long shadow, but only a single one.

Then Zeke steps in.

I let out a long breath, stumbling back against the wall as my body relaxes all at once. Zeke glances at me, an amused smirk playing on his lips.

“Jumpy,” he teases.

“We had no idea when you’d be back,” I growl. “We thought…”

I don’t give voice to that thought, unwilling to make it any more real than it already is. Zeke is back; he’s fine. A little mussed, with his dress clothes rumpled and wrinkled. His hair is tangled at the ends, and it’s lost some of the glossy sheen it usually sports. He smells faintly of alcohol, and his eyes seem tired despite the smile on his lips. Still, he’s whole. Unharmed. And here.

“They wouldn’t let me go,” he explains, and he’s moving toward Zero’s bed even as he says it. “There was always one more person to meet, or another dance, or something else to discuss. I just couldn’t get away without being rude.”

Kip has resumed his seat next to Zero, and Zeke leans over the rail on the other side, stroking the sleeping fighter’s cheek.

“How did it go?” he asks me as I approach.

“The procedure was a total success,” I inform him. “We had a bit of an issue early on, as Zero was able to fight his way out from under the anesthesia.” I see Kip stiffen, watching me. “But it was quickly resolved with minimal incidents.” I gesture to the missing bedrail, and I see comprehension flash in Zeke’s eyes. He doesn’t comment, though, and I continue with, “Overall, there were no complications, and the damage was easier to repair than I had anticipated. He will still need to keep off his feet for several days while he heals, though.”
“He’s going to be thrilled,” Zeke says with a smile. “Zero in bed all day - I can only imagine. Good luck keeping him down.”

“Thanks,” I quip dryly, and he chuckles as he runs his knuckles along Zero’s cheek. Zero’s lashes flutter and he stirs, forcing his eyes open a moment later.

“Hey,” Zeke says softly.


“I am.”

“I was… c’ncerned.”

“I was worried, too,” Zeke admits. “You’re all I could think about all day.”

“Liar,” Zero accuses, but he’s got a lopsided, goofy smirk on his face that tells me just how doped-up he’s still feeling.

“I’m wounded,” Zeke teases back, then leans down and kisses Zero’s forehead. When he pulls back, Zero is sleeping again.

“Damn,” Zeke comments at a whisper. “He looks… almost fucking adorable like this.”

Kip stifles a giggle from his chair next to the bed.

“You’d be surprised how different people look when they’re on high levels of narcotics,” I put in. “Even a tough guy like Zero.”

“I’ve never seen him so relaxed,” Kip says with a soft smile.

“Speaking of relaxing,” Zeke says, stretching his arms and yawning. “I’m exhausted. Is there some way for me to stay close? I don’t want to go all the way back to the third floor, but I’m about to fall asleep on my feet.”

He really does look exhausted. There are stress-lines in his face, and I can guarantee that makeup is covering bags beneath his eyes. He’s probably keeping himself standing through sheer force of will.

I’m feeling a bit the same, now that the panic is over. The procedure was not difficult, but it was long. Combined with the stress of Zero’s earlier outburst, and I’m pushing my body’s limits as well.

“You two should both go get some rest,” Kip says. “I was planning on sleeping in the extra bed, so it makes sense for you two to sleep in the captain’s quarters.”

The captain’s quarters are the closest room to the medbay. It’s where I’ve been sleeping for the last several days, since Kip convinced me that my rigid denial of comforts was only hurting myself.

“Do you need to stay with Zero?” Zeke asks. “Can you monitor him from another room?”

I bristle at the implication that I would be derelict in my duties as Zero’s physician, but then I rein my temper in. Zeke is exhausted. He likely isn’t thinking his words through. I know that he wouldn’t intentionally accuse me of something so unprofessional.

“I can set up alarms to go off if his condition changes. They’ll come through the intercom system in any room I’m occupying. If Kip is planning to sleep in here anyway, he can call me if Zero wakes
or becomes restless."

“Good,” Zeke says, then to Kip, “I appreciate you looking after him.”

Kip nods in acknowledgement, and Zeke moves around the bed to kiss the top of Kip’s head, before turning and strolling out the door. I take a final moment to check on Zero and set up my system of alarms before following him, my body almost moving on its own as lethargy settles over me.

In my bedroom, Zeke has already stripped to his boxers. Any other time, I’d… Well, I don’t honestly know how I’d react. Equal parts longing and irrational panic, I suppose. But tonight, I’m just too tired.

“Hey,” he says softly as I enter, reaching out and taking my hand. “Don’t punch me for this.”

Then his arms are around me, encircling my shoulders in a loose, gentle embrace. I’m so tired, my mind short circuits. I don’t even have enough brain power to wrap my arms around him, or to shove him away. Not even enough sense to decide if I want him closer or I want distance between us.

“Thank you,” he whispers against my hair, “for being here. For taking care of them… when I couldn’t.”

“Of course,” is all I can think to say. Because… of course I’d watch over them. Protect them. Heal them. They’re… I mean, we’re… They’re my…

“Come on,” he says gently, and disentangles himself from me. “It’s late. You look as tired as I feel.”

I don’t doubt the truth in that. We’re probably on equal footing as far as being exhausted goes. I want to ask him questions about tonight; about Ellaine and the party and his interactions with the other owners, but I’m just too tired.

Then he’s slipping into my bed, under the sheets I’ve been sleeping on all week. His smooth, flawless skin is disappearing by inches under my bedspread, and I have the sudden image of me sliding in next to him, my body in a similar state of undress.

It makes me jerk; a physical shock to my system.

“Zeke…” I say uncertainly, understanding for the first time what we’re about to do. “You won’t…”

“I won’t take advantage of you,” he says, and the words are casual. Even if I hadn’t been thinking about it, clearly Zeke had anticipated the question. “Honestly, I’m not even sure I’m capable right now.”

“I just…”

“Shhhh,” he quiets me. “No more tonight. Just sleep. We’ll talk about everything else in the morning.”

Then he rolls away from me, putting his back to my side of the bed. As far as reassurances, it actually does pretty well. I take off my shoes and my shirt, slipping into bed in only my cotton pants. I’m surprised that I’ve been bold enough to even go bare-chested, especially with Zeke practically naked beside me.
But Zeke’s breathing is already starting to even out in sleep, and I find myself too exhausted to be stressed. I let myself fall asleep as well, the warmth of Zeke’s body a welcome presence just beyond my fingertips.
“I hate all of this,” Zero grouses, glaring his best despite the muggy, drugged quality of it.

“You poor thing,” Kip says. “Your life is a tragedy. Did you want powdered sugar on your waffles?”

Zero glares harder, but it doesn’t have it’s usual effectiveness. Kip grins and spreads a dusting of white powder over Zero’s breakfast before handing the plate over. In my bed - lavish, gigantic thing that it is - Zero mopes on a pile of white, fluffy pillows. The picture of discontent.

“I don’t see why I can’t at least move to the couch,” he argues, and makes an aggravated gesture. “It’s right there!”

“No unnecessary pressure on that hip for at least another day,” Lee responds calmly. “If you would let someone help you…”

“I am not going to be carried like a child!” he snaps, then eyes me pointedly. “Again.”

To be honest, he was a lot easier to handle yesterday, drugged to his eyeballs on painkillers. At about midday, when the anesthesia was finally out of his system and Lee was beginning to reduce his intake of painkillers, I suggested that he might be more comfortable upstairs. Lee had agreed, but he’d been adamant that Zero could not put any stress on his still-healing hip. The use of a wheelchair was so aggressively dismissed by Zero - despite his drugged state - that we didn’t even try to find where the ship might have one secretly stored. Instead, I’d offered to “help” him. Given the narcotic daze he was in, the offer of assistance became a full carry immediately, with Zero unable to do more than lean his head against my shoulder and hold on.

Toward the later half of the trip, I would be very grateful that he did not try to fight my hold. Zero has put on a lot of muscle since he first came to me. His body in my arms was a bit like a stack of wet blankets - warm and soft, but also dense and heavy. Any shift he made caused me to stumble slightly as it threw off my balance. I would later think that perhaps I should have had Red carry Zero. How in the world would I have explained a strained back to the other owners? Sex injury, perhaps?

But we managed to make it to the upper floor without incident, although I was definitely a bit out of breath by the time I got him in the bed. Zero settled in immediately and fell back asleep - even the small strain of being carried had been enough to exhaust him. No longer having to fill all my spare time with trying to squeeze my company for more funds, I’d taken the opportunity to curl up around him and doze off myself.

“You keep complaining,” Lee says to Zero, bringing me back to the present, “but you’re going to
miss this when you have to start walking on that leg. There will be no small amount of discomfort.”

Zero makes a scoffing noise and stabs a strawberry. He doesn’t usually prefer sweets, but Lee had nixed a heavy breakfast and had suggested something lighter. Zero has a small dish of scrambled eggs and a single, small waffle with a generous helping of fresh strawberries on top. It’s finished with a good sized dollop of cream and a sprinkling of powdered sugar. Zero has also been provided with a glass of water and a mug of hot tea. He eats the strawberry with a fervor usually reserved for combat, then sighs and relaxes back into the pillows. Despite all his bluster, he looks tired.

“I was thinking that you could sit in with me while I make my social calls later,” I suggest mildly, thinking perhaps the root of Zero’s issue is feeling like he’s not useful while he’s recovering. “I’d like to show them that you’re still alive, since I mentioned that you were injured before.”

It’s a twofold reason, actually. To show the other owners that Zero is still alive, but also to prove that he’s been injured. Lee and I discussed it, coming to the conclusion that the other owners might not take me seriously based on how healthy my assets are. If it seems like I’m too gentle or lenient with them, it might hurt my cover.

“I’ll wrap your ribs after breakfast,” Lee offers.

“There’s nothing wrong with my ribs!” Zero snaps.

Lee raises an eyebrows and says, “I know that, but they don’t.”

We’d discussed this, too. Purposefully misleading my competition about the source and extent of Zero’s injuries. It wouldn’t be a good idea to point out his weak points to people likely to exploit it.

It takes Zero a moment longer than it should to process that information, but then he nods gravely.

“You’ll need to rest after breakfast,” Lee says, spearing his own strawberry. “Too much movement right away will make you sick. We’ll give it an hour. Then Zeke can carry you into the bathroom and I’ll…”

“I can make it to the bathroom!” Zero snarls. “I’m not an invalid!”

“No,” Lee responds calmly. “You’re injured. That’s not the-”

“I’m not weak!” Zero cuts in. “I don’t need babied! I can-”

“What makes you think that being weak and being injured are the same thing?” Lee says, cutting Zero off in turn.

Zero glares, then drops his eyes, refusing to respond. Lee sighs.

“No one here doubts your ability to cross the room,” Lee explains, a note of tired frustration in his voice. “Your strength is not in question. However, if you try, you will do permanent damage to your leg. We will be past repairing it, and the only option will be to completely replace the bone. That kind of procedure is difficult and invasive in the best of situations. It’s not something that I can complete here. Even with the equipment needed, the chances of reattaching all your nerves and ligaments to give you the same range of motion you had before are almost none. You would likely be crippled for the rest of your life. I don’t want to frighten you, but fighting against me only makes your recovery longer. Believe me, I’d like to have you healthy and out of my hands as quickly as possible.”

There are several moment of tense silence, where I think Zero might continue to argue. Then he
sighs and pushes his tray away on the bed, flopping back into the pillows behind him.

“Fine,” he growls, turning his face so he doesn’t have to look at us.

Another few minutes of awkward silence elapse, and finally it’s Kip who pushes himself to his feet and approaches Zero. Kip settles himself on the edge of the bed, even though Zero pointedly ignores him. Lee gives my shoulder a nudge, and when I glance his way he nods toward my plate of untouched food. I pick it up, understanding the message that Lee is trying to convey. Perhaps Zero’s stubbornness isn’t totally due to his own insecurities. Perhaps, with the three of us in the room, he’s embarrassed by all the fuss and attention.

I hear Kip talking in low tones with him, and I force myself not to glance over when Zero gives a low chuckle.

A moment later, Kip’s voice returns to a more normal volume, and I hear him say, “Seriously, don’t be such an asshole that Lee just decides to sedate you for the rest of the week!”

“He can try,” Zero shoots back, but it sounds like his normal posturing.

“Yes, that kind of asshole,” Kip teases, and I can hear the grin in his voice. “I have to go supervise Red and Ruby, so don’t pick a fight with your doctor while I’m gone! It’s medically unwise!”

I cast a glance at Lee, and I can see him smirking, although he tries to hide it behind his teacup. I smile openly. With my face turned toward Lee, it’s not like they can see it anyway.

There’s the sound of shifting, and I don’t doubt that they’re hugging, although I don’t dare to look up at them. Another moment, and I hear the sound of Kip’s feet hitting the floor as he slides off the bed. There’s a bustling of dishes, and I assume that it’s Kip putting Zero’s breakfast back on his lap. Then the sound of soft footfalls coming in our direction.

I glance up when Kip stops in front of us, his hands casually thrust into his pockets. He’s in a dark blue t-shirt and soft, gray jeans. It makes him look younger, somehow, to be out of his professional gear and in more age-appropriate clothing. I suppose I shouldn’t support his casual appearance, but it’s nice to see him relax a bit. Outside of the kitchen, I hadn’t seen the chef’s jacket or servant’s uniform for the past couple days.

“I’ll send Ruby up for the dishes in a little bit,” he offers. “I’d stay longer, but I want to get Red started on some new techniques before our session.” He looks to Lee and asks, “Still at the same time? And up here? Or in the medbay again?”

“Up here is fine,” Lee responds. “I’d like Zero to get an idea of what therapy is like before we are able to start his. And better plan to give me an extra half hour. Dealing with Zero’s attitude alone will probably take that long.”

“I heard that,” Zero grumbles from the bed.

“I should hope so. I’m not trained as an audiologist, so you’re on your own if you’re going deaf.”

Kip laughs, a surprised burst of it sounding too loud in the large room. He glances quickly at Zero, looking sheepish, but Zero simply rolls his eyes and then leans his head back against the headboard so he doesn’t have to look at us. Kip shakes his head at Zero, but there’s a fond expression on his face. He leaves without saying anything else.

There are a few terse minutes after Kip leaves, where Zero continues to avoid looking at Lee and me. We eat our respective breakfasts in silence, giving Zero time to work through whatever he’s dealing
When I’m just starting to wonder if he’s fallen asleep in that position, Zero asks, “Are you really going to make me be carried again?” without looking in our direction.

I remain silent, as the question was obviously directed at Lee. I expect an immediate affirmative answer, and am a bit surprised when Lee hesitates and seems to mull the question over. He casts Zero an appraising glance, although my fighter still doesn’t return the gaze.

“It wouldn’t hurt you to be vertical,” Lee says carefully. “Only putting weight on that leg will cause damage. I understand that laying down for so long might be causing some of your frustration. However, for me to let you walk, you would need to guarantee me that you would allow Zeke to assist. You would be hopping and hobbling more than actually walking. And even then, only to the bathroom and back. You’d be seated in there and then you’d come right back to the bed.”

“Done,” Zero says, finally meeting Lee’s eyes. They lock gazes for a moment, and then Zero begins to eat again, his entire posture relaxing. Lee looks like he’s bit into something bitter, his expression sour and displeased. I can tell that he’s having doubts about giving Zero this concession, but it’s too late at this point.

“It was the right call,” I reassure softly, confident that Zero can’t hear me from his place on the bed. “Being on his back is driving him crazy. If you didn’t let him get up for a little bit, he’d probably try it on his own.”

“Well, I hope this appeases him, instead of proving all of his complaints true. He’ll do himself real damage if he tries this when we’re not around.”

“I think he’s smart enough to know better,” I say. Lee gives me a dubious look, so I follow it with, “How about we just agree not to leave him alone?”

“That’s a suggestion I can support,” he says dryly.

“Hey!” Zero calls. “What are you two talking about?”

“The pros and cons of tying you to that bed,” Lee sends back. “Luckily for you, your master is against it and he has veto power.”

“Come on,” I chide, joining the conversation. “Zero is going to behave, isn’t that right? He’s a perfect angel of a patient. A delight to be around.”

Even Zero snorts at that one.

The rest of the meal is finished in companionable silence. As Lee predicted, Zero needs some time after his food to rest, as even the act of eating (and arguing) exhausts his still-healing body. Ruby comes while Zero is dozing and takes away the dishes. Kip comes up a bit later to point out all the things that Ruby forgot - a glass on one of the end tables, clearing the crumbs from the table where Lee and I ate, grabbing Zero’s dirty sleeping clothes from the floor by the bed, which is where we’d dropped them last night after the arduous task of helping him get changed. Kip then directs Ruby to take a dust cloth to all the visible surfaces - which is apparently something he does every time I’m planning on taking a meeting in here. He explains that it’s because the background for my call needs to be immaculate. Ruby makes an expression that conveys his opinion that this is probably overkill. I hate to admit that I find myself agreeing. Then again, this is probably why Kip is the best person to train my new assets. He’s far more familiar with the Leash standards than I am.

By the time Kip has cleaned everything up and left again, Zero is starting to rouse. I nudge him
awake, watching as he blinks in confusion before focusing on me. He has to glance around the room before he seems to realize where he is; a stark change from his normal habit of coming immediately awake and alert.

“Come on,” I guide him gently, “Let’s sit you up and then go from here.”

It’s a bit of a task, even though he pushes himself up on his elbows. Once he’s there, though, he doesn’t seem able to push himself back against the headboard, and I have to help shift him. His eyes slide shut, and from the way his hand clutches around my wrist I suspect the sudden movement makes him dizzy. Still, he doesn’t complain. After a few moments, he blinks his eyes open and turns in my direction, slipping his legs over the side of the bed.

“Slowly,” Lee says, appearing at my side. “Try not to drag that leg.”

He flips the blankets off of Zero and takes a hold of the left leg, using a grip at the knee and ankle to move it. I get a good look at Zero’s hip. It’s a motley of purple bruises, so dark as to be nearly black in some places. The white, shattered-glass scars are hardly visible under the purple spots. The skin itself looks swollen and tender, with a scattering of small, scabbed-over cuts that were likely the insertion points for whatever microscopic instruments Lee used.

“Alright,” Lee says once Zero is on the edge of the bed. “Now, together. Zeke and I will lift you while you assist with your good leg. Ready? Up!”

Zero pushed with his good leg, but Lee and I still end up supporting most of his weight. We needn’t have worried about Zero trying to walk on his own; his leg hangs limply. Zero tries to shift so that his foot is on the ground, but doubles over in pain at the attempt.

“It’s alright,” Lee says. “You’ll regain control of it over the next couple days. For now, any movement will be painful. Just let it hang.”

“Not like I have much choice!” Zero snaps.


“Let’s get Zero into the shower,” I put in. “Shall we?”

“Of course,” Lee agrees.

It… doesn’t get much easier from there. We get Zero into the bathroom with a method that is half drag, half carry. By the time we’re over the threshold, Zero is panting from pain and exertion. I have my doubts about actually getting him out of the shorts and tank top he slept in last night, but Lee is able to skillfully maneuver him out while I hold him up. Moving him into the shower is perilous, as there is a lip at that edge that we need to get over and the tiles are slick from previous use. I take my shoes off, afraid of slipping because of them. Somehow, we get Zero onto the stool that’s waiting for him, and I make sure he stays seated while Lee attaches a corded shower head to one of the hidden faucets at the bottom of my lavish shower. We’ve previously considered putting him in a bath - the master bathroom sports the same kind of in-the-floor bath as the captain’s quarters, although considerably larger. However, we nixed that idea quickly, realizing that getting him in and out of the low pool would be next to impossible.

Lee hands the shower head over to me once he’s got it to an appropriate temperature and vacates the shower. Obligingly, I run the spray over Zero’s skin, wetting him and the stool both thoroughly before running a rag over his skin.

“I can manage this on my own,” Zero says quietly, even though he seems to be enjoying my fingers
lingering on his skin. He shifts his injured leg, probably trying to alleviate some of the discomfort. “You don’t need to do it for me.”

“And disobey Lee?” I tease. “I don’t think so. Besides, it’s nice to finally get to spend some time with you. I feel like I’ve hardly seen you lately.

“I’ve been training,” Zero responds, but his voice is subdued. Almost… melancholy. “And you have responsibilities as an owner now. I know that.”

“It doesn’t mean that either of us has to like it.”

“Hm,” Zero says, and we lapse into silence.

I finish washing his body and move to his hair. He lets me go without complaint, sitting quietly as I work.

Eventually, he says, “It’s so different this time. That’s why I think I’m having so much trouble accepting it.”

“What’s different?” I wonder as I run my fingers through his dark locks. They’ll need trimmed before long.

“The last time I broke my hip. When I got hit with the pulse blast. You know I ran on it, don’t you?” he asks. “That’s probably how I did a lot of the damage. But it wasn’t safe to stay where I was, so I got myself onto a jump ship and flew back to my owner. It was lucky that I hadn’t gone too far. I don’t know if I could have managed a long trip.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Even when I got back, no one… No one really seemed to care. They put me back in my room. It was hardly more than a cell, just a mattress on the floor, a toilet, and a little sink. I thought I would die. I had to crawl to the toilet. A couple times, I got sick on the floor, unable to get across the room fast enough. My foot kept trying to turn in, and I had to keep forcing it straight, knowing that I’d be a cripple if it healed badly. Still, no one came other than to drop off some rations every couple of days. I think my owner was angry I failed, and then later he didn’t want to admit that I was hurt.”

“I’m sorry. That sounds awful.”

“For a while, I thought I would die. Then I started thinking that maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, not to have to deal with this anymore. But I didn’t die. I kept getting back up, all on my own, and eventually I healed enough to be able to get out of my cell. To still be valuable. I think if I had been crippled, he probably would have just killed me instead of keeping a broken slave.”

“You know that’s different now, don’t you?” I ask, guiding him to tilt his head back as I rinse his hair. “Everyone here cares about you. We would never let you suffer alone.”

“I know,” he replies softly. “But I can’t help… thinking about it. Can’t help… reacting like this.”

Can’t help pushing to get back on his feet, no matter what cost to himself.

“That’s okay, too,” I let him know. “Just as long as you don’t hurt yourself over it. Trust us to take care of you.”

“I’m trying,” he says. “It’s just difficult.”
“I know,” I tell him, leaning my forehead against his wet hair, feeling the soft strands against my face. I’m getting soaked, still fully clothed, but I don’t care at all. Zero leans against me, taking the offered support. I wrap my arms around his wet form and hold him close.

As far as hugs with Zero go, it lasts a long time. I only pull back when he starts to shift, the discomfort from his hip obviously bothering him.

“Come on,” I coax gently. “Let’s get you out of here so Lee can bandage your ribs.”

“Right,” he says, “and Kip has therapy. I wouldn’t want to miss seeing Lee throw things at Kip.”

“What… Uh… What does that mean?”

Zero grins, sliding off the stool and bracing himself on my shoulder.

“It means Lee is a sadist.”

“That’s not what it means,” Lee argues, appearing at the entrance of the shower and taking some of Zero’s weight as I guide him out. “I’m exercising Kip’s distance vision. It’s the best method for preventing further deterioration and helping him adjust to his new limitations.” Then to Zero, “You’ll get to see what a sadist I am next week.”

“I’m terrified,” Zero sends back blandly. Lee rolls his eyes. I have the stray thought that they might bicker like this until Zero is healed. Or longer, if they begin to train together. I might have to listen to this forever.

Somehow, I seem perfectly okay with that.
Zero has his head pillowed on my thigh, his body laying along my right side as I sit. He’s on his stomach, naked, with his face turned toward my abdomen. We’re on the long couch in my bedroom. It’s a pale shade of white, like most of the furnishings in the master bedroom, and his tawny skin stands out in a way that my pale complexion doesn’t. His breathing is deep and even as he dozes, exhausted from his earlier shower. The discomfort of his hip probably doesn’t help, nor the lingering effects of the mild painkillers that Lee is still insisting on. I’ve noticed the way Zero has stopped fighting his medications so fiercely, and the way he shifts restlessly any time he’s left in one position for too long. It must be quite a bit of pain, for Zero to show signs of it.

I let my fingers follow the line of his shoulder down his back, trailing over the unneeded bindings around his abdomen, a decoy from his real injuries. I pluck at the sheet artfully covering Zero’s lower body, hiding the actual damage from sight. He’s kicked it off of one leg already, hinting at his state of undress beneath. I lift the sheet, exposing the rest of Zero’s form. Underneath, Zero’s hip is partially obscured by the back of the couch, but the motley of purple bruises and red scabs can still be seen. Lee packed it with ice after Zero’s shower, reducing some of the swelling, but it still looks tender and raw. Zero makes a noise of protest when I run my fingers along the heated skin.

“You sure you’re up for this?” I ask him softly, dropping the sheet back down. “Maybe…”

“It’s fine,” he assures me, his sleepy gaze looking up at me. “Just… don’t touch it.”

“I’m sorry,” I apologize. “It just… It looks miserable.”

“Yeah,” he scoffs. “It doesn’t feel great either.” Then after a moment’s pause, he settles his head back against my leg and says, “Let’s just get this over with.”

The first call is to Ellaine, something of a follow-up to the party that I attended at her behest. She appears at a smaller scale in a semi-translucent hologram over my coffee table. It’s a side view of her. She’s wearing a burgundy, off-the-shoulder gown with a long skirt. Her hair is pinned up, with a few stray curls hanging loose around her face. She’s seated, leaning toward a vanity mirror, still putting the finishing touches on her makeup. The camera must be on the wall in her bedroom, just like mine is on the far wall in front of me.

“Hello darling,” she says without turning to me. She’s applying mascara to her kohl-lined eyes. “I can only spare a moment. The husband and I have to attend a charity gala together - completely unrelated to our organization. You’d think that would get me out of attending, but no, apparently not.”

“Which charity?” I ask idly.

“Oh, who knows? Something to raise money for drug-addicted infants or some such nonsense.” She pauses in applying her mascara, her expression turning bitter and cold. “Like it will make any
difference in a year or two. Like we can just throw money at the symptoms to cure the disease.”

I don’t have a response for that, but she doesn’t seem to expect one. I’m fairly certain she hadn’t meant to voice those thoughts out loud. She seems to come back to herself with a start, shaking her head to clear her thoughts. She glances at me and smiles, her expression abashed.

“Look at me, going on about something so trivial. What do I care what silly old me throw their money at? I’d skip the event entirely, but father has been hounding me to make an appearance with my new husband. I don’t know why he gets so irritating around election years - it’s not like they can replace him.”

While Satellite 30 is technically a democracy, it’s an open secret that the electoral process is so corrupt that it’s unlikely anyone would ever be able to overthrow the Castillo family. For one thing, only property-owners are allowed to vote, as the rest of the population is considered “temporary workers” despite living on the Satellite for generations. And of the voting population, most are either directly related to the Castillo patriarch or own companies that rely on Castillo properties for supplies, storage, or transportation.

Yet despite his virtually totalitarian control, I haven’t found much evidence that Eduardo Castillo is involved with the illegal dealings happening around him. He certainly isn’t involved with his daughter’s illegal human trafficking, from what she’s told me about her enterprise. Whether he’s too noble to agree with his daughter’s actions or simply not ambitious enough, the fact remains that Ellaine appears to be totally independent of his influence.

“Perhaps he simply wants to make a good impression on his constituents?” I suggest.

“Mmm. Public image has always been first, last, and everything in-between for daddy.” She smiles bitterly. “He was appalled when I chose to keep Charity, and so pleased when I told him I’d married Dillon Arcrest. If only he knew.” She drops her mascara in disgust and sighs. “Family always brings out the worst in us, doesn’t it? You’re lucky your parents died young.”

I hold my tongue, because I can’t think of a polite response to that. Zero must sense my unease, because he nudges my leg until I run my hand through his hair.

Ellaine glances at me, and the topic seems to be dropped as she says, “Is that your zero? My you really did a number on him.” She tuts. “You really must be more careful with your toys.”

“Yes, I’m lucky he’s so durable. Another asset wouldn’t recover so quickly.”

“If you hurt a zero, you would have killed another asset,” she says, and turns back to the mirror. “Then again, I suppose he is getting up there. What is he, late twenties?”

“Mid, I believe.”

“Hm. Combat assets are worked hard and age fast. Zero’s in particular. I suppose it’s a good thing that you’re using him for pleasure instead.”

He’s only twenty-five, damn it. That shouldn’t be considered old by any standards.

“Right,” I agree, trying to keep my face neutral. “Of course.”

“That’s not what I wanted to talk to you about, though.” She flashes me a small smile as she turns back to her mirror. Her fingers glide over a immaculately organized makeup case, finally settling on a wine-colored lipstick. “I just wanted to say how thrilled I was with your performance at Maggie’s. You were the center of attention. Dillon was quite taken with you.”
“And yet, I haven’t gotten a meeting or a call from him. Not even a message.”

“Oh, that’s not his style. I wouldn’t let it worry you. You’ll be seeing him again, I’m sure. He likes to interact face-to-face.”

More likely that he wants to stalk his prey in person.

“That’s good. I wasn’t sure.”

She finishes applying her lipstick and turns toward me. It’s a matte finish, deep and dark enough to compliment her skin tone.

“What do you think? Acceptable?”

“You look lovely,” I tell her. It’s true - as usual, her makeup is impeccable. Subtle. Heavy enough to cover any imperfections, but light enough to look natural. Tonight is a formal occasion, so she’s gone a little heavier on the eyeliner and a little darker on the lipstick.

“Maggie keeps telling me that I need to get a domestic to do this for me. It used to be that I so rarely went out that there wasn’t any point. Now that I’m married, it seems like I have something formal every other day. Perhaps I should ask her to sell me one of assets she keeps.” She tucks a piece of hair behind her ear off-handedly. “I suppose castration would be a good lesson for my new group of scholars to learn.”

I can’t think of a response that’s anything short of appalled. Thankfully, she doesn’t appear to need a reply from me.

“Did you talk to Leonid yet?”

The artist and photographer who’d shown an interest in Incubus. He’d particularly liked the look of Incubus and Zero together.

“No, he’s next on my list. I can’t imagine what he’d need to speak with me about, though.”

“I think it’s something to do with the party next week. James is hosting - I’ll assume you got an invite?” I nod. “I think James is worried that we’re all going to forget about his club since the renovations are taking longer than he was hoping. Did you hear they pushed back the opening for another couple weeks?”

“No, I hadn’t heard.” It’s a relief, though. More time for Zero to recover. I’ll need him with me for such a big event. “James is on my list of people to call today, though.”

“Yes, get in touch with both of them. Carter, too. He mentioned wanting to speak with you.”

“I’ll call them all straight away.”

She smiles at me and says, “You won’t regret it.”

I manage to hold myself back from saying, “We’ll see.”

Instead, I smile and reply, “You haven’t lead me astray yet.”

I can hear a voice in the background of Ellaine’s call, and she looks over her shoulder. She glances back at me and says, “Have to go now,” and disconnects the call.

I stare at the empty space above my coffee table for a moment before giving a sigh and sagging back
against the couch. Calls with Ellaine are always a minefield. I never know if she’s helping me avoid the bombs or trying to get me blown up.

“I’m glad she’s not my owner,” Zero comments without lifting his head from my leg. I look down to find him gazing up at me, all the grogginess from earlier gone. It seems like having the voice of another owner in the room put him on high alert.

“Separating you from that lovely cock would be a crime against humanity,” I tease, ruffling his hair. “I would be bereft.”

He snorts and rolls his eyes. Still, I know what he means. Assets are all just tools to Ellaine, meant to be used, reshaped, or thrown away. From our interactions, I can’t say that owners rank much higher in her opinion. At least not the male ones.

We all have our uses, I suppose.

“How are you doing?” I ask, stroking my hand over his shoulder. “Are you alright like this?”

He shifts to get more comfortable, then nods against my leg.

“I’m fine,” he says. “It’s not like I’m doing much anyway. Just… tired.”

Tired and sore and probably hurting as well. But it won’t be much longer, and then I’ll be able to get him back into bed.

I take a moment to check that the sheet is still situated, and then I use my Key to send a call through to James.

Brown-haired and green-eyed, James Peterson has a charming smile that belies his advantageous nature. He’s in a high-backed chair, dressed business casual with a green button-down and black slacks. His legs are crossed at the ankle, and he’s leaning his chin against his arm, which is propped up on the arm of the chair. Like Ellaine, he appears in slight miniature above my coffee table. Unlike Ellaine, he straightens and smiles when he sees me, giving me his full attention.

“The shipment just arrived,” he says in way of greeting, “and it’s just amazing! These wines are going to create such a stir at the opening.”

James has taken a particular interest in me since he found out that I have access to Earth-made, vintage wines. He’ll be showcasing a selection of those wines at the grand reopening and expansion of his Leash-only club, The Line. The wines in question cost me a sizable amount of money to provide him with, as I had to pay both export and shipping fees to get them off-world and into his hands.

“I’m glad I could help,” I respond.

“I’d love to talk about getting a continual supply for the club. At the right price, of course.”

“James,” I sigh, stroking my fingers through Zero’s hair. “Can’t you see that I’m relaxing? No business today, please.”

“Of course,” he agrees, although he doesn’t look happy about it. “Another time.”

“I saw my invite to your party next week,” I comment. “So soon?”

“Yes, well… The opening of The Line has been delayed for another two weeks. Shipment issues,
supposedly. Damn lazy workers is what it sounds like. Honestly, I don’t know how anything gets done in the rest of the universe. You can only trust your assets, and then only when you’ve got eyes on them.”

“True,” I agree with a nod. “But do you really think you need another party?”

“We like to keep the social calendar pretty full around here. Besides, Carter is hosting a party the week after, and I didn’t want to step on his toes. The week after that, The Line better be ready to open at last.”

“I’m looking forward to it. Was there anything else? I have a few more calls to make.”

“No, no. Just wanted to thank you for the wine. Confirm that you’re coming next week. This is an open party, so feel free to bring your zero with you.” His eyes flick to my side and he says, “Although I suppose that will depend on his condition.”

“I’ll have to see how much he’s recovered,” I respond. In a week, Zero will be back on his feet, but… Is it enough time? Or do I run the risk of seriously injuring him if things get out of hand? Can I keep him from danger in such an unstable environment? Or would I be better off to go alone, without protection or backup?

“Either way,” James says with a dismissive wave of his hand. “The important thing is that you’ll be there.”

“Can I assume this will be one your private vessel? The coordinates didn’t give me a particular satellite.”

“Yes, it’s just a small party. A few dozen of my closest friends.” Given what I know about James, it’s likely to be closer to a hundred, meaning there will be a lot of risk for Zero. A lot of opportunity for exposure for me, though. Showing off my zero might be a good idea. I’m still trying to gain a presence within the group after all.

“I’m honored to be included.”

He laughs and says, “Keep providing me wine like this, and you’ll be my closest friend.”

I still haven’t figured out how to tell him that it’s not going to happen. The Department denied my request to overlook a smuggling operation, meaning that I’ve got no way to get my goods offworld without paying the exorbitant export fees. If I try and fail, I’ll lose any product that the Department seizes. Not to mention, there isn’t much benefit for me in working with James. He’s turned out to be a small-time player trying to make a name for himself, much in the way I am.

“It’s been fun chatting with you,” I tell him, “but I need to take another call. I’ll see you next week.”

“Ah… Yes! I’ll see you there.”

I cut the call and rub my forehead, exasperated. I’d been hoping that the shipment of wine would appease him for a while, but it only seems to have made him more determined.

“That was a short call,” Zero comments.

“James is someone that I can tolerate only in small doses, and even then only when required,” I respond. “Obviously, he doesn’t feel the same way about me.”

“You’re too charismatic for your own good,” Zero teases.
“What can I say?” I respond. “It’s a curse.”

He chuckles, and I ruffle his hair with one hand as I send a call to Leonid with the other. He must be expecting my call, because he takes it almost immediately.

Leonid Saal, a popular artist and photographer, stands out a bit from the owners that I typically see. He’s a bit on the short side, thin and delicate-looking. His hazel eyes are framed by spectacles that are likely more about style than function. His sandy-colored hair is short and just a bit mussed, like he’s too distracted to really pay attention to it. His clothes are stylish, if a bit classical. Today he’s wearing a white button-down shirt with a flannel bow-tie and blue jeans. A quirky look, which is what I’d assume he was going for. It labels him as an artistic type on first glance.

Leo is standing, so his form appears to be hovering just a bit above my table. He has a drink in his hand; a dark liquid in a crystal tumbler, likely a liquor of some kind. He smiles as he sees me, grinning through the projection.

“Zeke! How’ve you been? How’s it going? And…” He trails, his eyes going wide as he spots Zero beside me. “What have you done to your zero!”

“We’ve had a minor incident,” I explain. “I got a bit… overzealous. He’s recovering, though.”

“Will he be coming with you to James’ party?”

“I… don’t know. We’ll have to see how he’s doing by then. He might not be fit to show yet.”

“No no no! He has to come!”

“Why do you need him there?”

“James is showing off his opening night prizes again, including Incubus. I got his permission to let Incubus interact with your zero again.” He hesitates, and almost as an afterthought says, “With your consent, of course.”

I don’t like him assuming liberties with my assets. However, having Zero and Incubus interact again would be a great opportunity to garner more of a reputation among the owners, assuming they attract a crowd like last time. But if Zero is still hurt…

“I’ll have to see how he’s doing next week,” I let him know. “I wouldn’t be adverse to showing him off, but I won’t send him out if he’s injured enough to embarrass me.”

“You don’t understand!” Leonid snarls, and smashes his glass against the floor. A glittering shower of holographic glass shards sprays from my coffee table, fading into nothing before they can hit the ground. Through the image, I can see Leonid still in the wake of his own outburst. He straightens after a moment and calmly removes his glasses.

“My apologies,” he says as he wipes any stray dots of liquid from the lenses with a handkerchief that he pulls from his breast pocket. “Sometimes my enthusiasm gets the best of me.” He returns the glasses to his face. His hands open and close nervously now that they’ve got nothing to occupy them. There’s a touch of blush on his face, and an embarrassed hunch to his shoulders. Context clues tell me that the outburst was unintentional, although still troubling.

“You have to understand,” he continues, “since I saw the two of them together, I’ve been… inspired. I’ve been painting like mad - I’m likely to have a whole exhibit from this. Perhaps I’ll win Incubus on opening night, and then I’ll have at least one of my muses with me all the time. But if not, this could be my last chance to see the two of them together.”
He sighs, running a hand through his messy bangs. All signs of the rage from only a moment ago have disappeared. If it weren’t for the missing cup, I’d wonder if I could have imagined the whole episode.

“Let me try again,” he says. “I would consider it a personal favor if you would bring your zero to James’ party next week, and allow him to interact with Incubus. I would love the opportunity to see them together again.”

“I’ll go my best to ensure that my zero is healthy enough to attend. That’s the best I can do for you.”

“Well,” he says with a conciliatory smile. “I suppose I can’t say much about someone else’s lapse in control without looking like a hypocrite, can I? But please try to be more careful with your zero. If you’ve lost interest in him, I’d be more than happy to take him off your hands.”

“I think I’m having the opposite problem,” I respond, still playing nice but also wanting to get that thought cut down immediately. “I’ve been playing too much with him, and too rough. I’ll see that he rests up this week.”

“Glad to hear it! I’ll be seeing you soon! Ciao!”

And with that, he cuts the connection.

“Such a nice man,” I comment dryly, but Zero doesn’t scoff at the joke. I glance down at his face, finding his expression pinched and tired. Even just laying across my lap is a challenge for him at this stage, and it’s wearing him down quickly.

“Not much longer,” I assure him. “Just need to make one more call. Will you be alright?”

He ignores the question, instead answering with, “I can go to Peterson’s party.”

“Maybe,” I respond noncommittally. “Or maybe not. It’s not up to you. Or me either, really. I wouldn’t dare go against Lee’s expert medical advice.”

“If you need me,” he says firmly, ignore my attempt to distract him, “I’ll be there. I’ll get through it.”

I sigh, giving in to the temptation to run my fingers through his hair.

“I know you would,” I assure him, “but damaging yourself unnecessarily doesn’t help me at all.”

He’s silent at that, but I don’t really expect a response. After a moment, I tell him, “One more, and we can get you back into bed.”

Then I send a call through to Carter Powers.
It's a bit of a short chapter this week, hopefully it's entertaining enough that it's not a problem. We have hit the point where I don't have anything left that was written over hiatus, so I'm trying my best to keep up the pace. :) So far, it's going pretty well, but chapters might be a bit shorter than usual. (In all fairness, Dragon has longer chapters than the other sections, which might be adding to my predicament.) We've still got a good bit left to go - at least 8 chapters. Nearing the tail end, but not quite there yet. :) All my gratitude to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

It takes a couple minutes for Carter to actually answer my call. Although he sent the initial interaction request to me, a while has elapsed since that happened. When he finally appears in a smaller scale above my table, he’s toweling his hair dry. His skin still has a wet sheen, and he’s wearing only a pair of silk pajama bottoms.

Carter… is a bit of an enigma. With brown hair and cold, blue eyes that border on gray, he is one of the youngest of the owners, perhaps only older than Carmé’s nephew, Finn. And yet, Carter is a Champion in his own right, having been brought into the Leash at a young age - perhaps as soon as he hit adulthood. His mother, who I’ve only seen on one occasion, is an owner, as was his deceased father. He’s part of a rather typical trend in business of bringing in close friends and relatives as trusted allies and conspirators.

What bothers me about Carter is that I can’t quite tell what he wants from me. With the others - James, Leonid, Dillon - it’s rather obvious. Even the ones that don’t want something directly, like Magdelene and Carmé, are looking for an advantage by forming ties with me. With Ellaine, I know that she’s using me, at least, although I haven’t a clue how or why.

With Carter, I can tell that he has an interest in me, but I haven’t managed to establish a motivation. He’s friendly enough, and he’s taken the initiative on several occasions to reach out to me. Yet he hasn’t made any obvious gestures of sexual interest, nor has he pointed to any potential business ventures we could embark on. Not that money would be a good motivator for him anyway - as he’s already a Champion and well-established in the group, he likely has plenty of capitol. If I could find his angle, I might be able to consider him as an alternative source of funding if Dillon’s support falls through. Given how passive he seems within the group, I’m not sure that he would need my support socially, even if I gain more influence than I currently have. He showed a hint of interest initially in Zero, but even that seems to have waned. Overall, I can’t find any advantage on his side to his interactions with me.

Maybe he genuinely likes my company.
Or maybe I haven’t figured him out yet.

“Hello Zeke,” he greets, even as I watch his eyes flick to the side and notice Zero. “What have you done to your little pet?”

“Played a bit too rough,” I admit, and I run my fingers down Zero’s side in display. Obligingly, Zero shudders and hunches his shoulders, just as he would if he were actually injured.

“So I see,” he says, but his eyes linger on Zero, taking in the bare torso, covered only by the nylon bandages around his middle. Carter’s eyes pick apart the details, and I hold myself back from looking down to check on the sheet covering Zero’s hip. I know it’s still in place, but that observant gaze makes me nervous.

Finally, Carter lifts his eyes back to mine, pulling his attention away from Zero’s exposed back.

“Have you heard that I’m having a little gathering in a couple weeks?”

“It’s come to my attention,” I reply, “although I haven’t received anything… formal yet.”

He smiles as he says, “Written invitations are for strangers and people you can’t stand to talk to. I wanted to call you about it. Much more intimate, don’t you think?”

“It is a nice change of pace. I’d be honored to attend. Where will you be having it?”

“Dillon has offered to host for me, so it will be at the Arcrest Manor. I trust you can find your way back there?”

“Yes, of course,” I reply as I feel my pulse ramp up. This could be the perfect opportunity to talk to Dillon. This could be exactly what I need.

“I haven’t really decided what I’m going to do for entertainment,” he mentions, tossing his towel casually over his shoulder. The small image hits the edge of my coffee table and disappears.

“Oh?”

“I was thinking perhaps I’d showcase some owners playing with their assets. It’s bit overdone, but with the right owner and the right asset…”

Two weeks. Will that be enough time for Zero to recover?

“Assuming he’s presentable, I could bring my zero. He’s impeccably trained.”

“Hmm,” he replies, considering. “I don’t know. We’ve seen a lot of your zero lately. I was thinking about something more exotic.”

“Like what?”

“How about your other Asian? The scholar?”

I’d hoped Carter’s interest in Lee was a passing fancy.

“He’s not trained well enough for me to display him. He’s been rather… stubborn. Willful, even. Almost unmanageable.”

“Well, he must be at least a bit manageable,” Carter says with a smile. “Unless you put those bindings on the zero yourself.”
I stop myself, at the last second, from glancing down at Zero. I already know that the bindings across his ribs are clean and smooth, wrapped in an almost artful design of crisscrossed bands. It’s not something Zero could have managed himself, and certainly not something he could have done while his ribs were broken. And I can’t admit to caring for my asset so closely, or I’ll undo anything I’d hoped to gain by claiming that I’d injured him. Perhaps Kip…? But no, I’ve waited too long, given away too much with my silence. If I can’t deny that it was Lee, then I need to mitigate the damage.

“The scholar has formed a bond with my other assets,” I explain. “He’s become… rather attached to them. He’s still unwieldy and difficult to control on his own, though.”

“So bring them both,” he says with a shrug. “He’s a smart boy. Your scholar will understand the implication.”

“I suppose…”

“Honestly, I’d like to see them together. I’d like to see you fuck them both.”

“But… he’s a scholar. I…”

Carter laughs, loud and deep, unconcerned with offending me.

“That’s the nice thing about being in a society with no rules,” he says, and I don’t contradict him although I’ve found plenty of rules. “Even though he’s not a pleasure asset, you can still have sex with him.” Carter grins at me. “Maybe you’ll even want to make another designation switch. Maybe you’ll like him better as a pleasure than a scholar. Since you’re not competing this year, it shouldn’t matter. Right?”

“…Right,” I respond slowly. It makes him laugh again.

Somehow, I get the impression that he’s seeing right through me. Like he’s not buying any of my lies. Is that the joke? Is that the part I’m missing?

“So you’ll bring him?” Carter asks, his smile toning back to something more congenial.

“I’ll think about it. It’s not a lot of time to prepare. I can’t make any guarantees.”

“Mm,” Carter responds. “We’ll talk again at James’ party. Until then,” he closes, and cuts the connection.

I sag back in my seat, exhausted. Damn, that was… unexpectedly intense.

Zero props himself up on his arm to look at me.

“What are you going to tell Lee?” he asks.

“Nothing,” I reply. “He doesn’t need to know.”

Zero looks at me for a moment, then says, “It seems cruel to take him completely unprepared.”

“I’m not taking him there!” I snap. “He isn’t ready!”

There’s another pause while Zero stares at me. It gives me enough time to regret my momentary lapse in composure.

Finally, Zero asks, “Were any of us ready?”
And I know that he has a point.

But… I just can’t.

“Let’s get you into bed,” I offer, sliding out from beneath him. “I know you’re hurting.”

He frowns, but doesn’t push the issue. He levers himself up, pushing onto his good hip, and moves like he’s going to try to stand. I put a hand under his arm for support and immediately feel the tremors running through his body.

“Let me?” I ask gently. “It’s just the two of us here. You don’t need to be tough right now. Let me help?”

We both know that “help” means carrying him the few paces from the couch to the bed. But we’re also both equally aware that Zero is unlikely to make it on his own. After a moment, Zero sighs and nods his head.

He still has to shift to a sitting position for me to be able to lift him. He moves slowly, his face pinched in pain, his body shaking from the effort.

“Does it hurt like this all the time?” I ask, giving him a moment to recover once he’s settled on his back. He shakes his head.

“It… aches,” he admits, “but it’s more intense when I shift it. It feels like someone hollowed out my leg and stuffed it full of glass. There are… lances of pain from my abdomen down to my knee. Even when I’m still, it… throbs.”

I hiss in sympathy. Zero’s been a bit more open lately, and I’d like to think that he’s realized that he can trust me with his thoughts and feelings. However, there’s an equally strong possibility that he’s being affected by a combination of stress and drugs, making him less able to censor his words. We’ll have to see if the honesty lasts once he’s back on his feet.

“Let’s get you into bed,” I offer, and lean down to pick him up.

We have to be careful, even in the lifting stage. Zero’s bad leg goes on the outside of my grip, so that it’s not crushed against my chest. He twines his ankles, letting the weight of his left leg rest on top of his right. I lift him as gently as I’m able, but still he cringes in my grasp. Every step makes him take a pained breath. Even he seems a little surprised by how much he’s affected.

“Was it this bad last time?” I wonder, slowly making my way from the couch to the bed, Zero’s solid form in my arms.

Zero waits long enough to respond that I start to think he won’t. It’s not until I’m settling him onto the mattress that he says, “It’s different this time.”

“Oh?” I ask as I tuck the comforter around him. “How so?”

“I didn’t… feel things then. Not like I do now.”

“You were on suppressants,” I remember.

“Yes. But… my mind was different, too. Pain… just happened. It didn’t happen to me. Like… Like my body wasn’t my own. I could see the damage, but it didn’t affect me.”

“It would almost be a blessing at this point,” I acknowledge.
“No,” he growls. “It wouldn’t. The pain is bad, but… nothing is worse than not feeling like a person.”

I don’t know how to respond to that, so I settle beside him on the bed. The silence leaves an opening for him to continue, and after a moment he does.

“You don’t get to pick and choose,” he says softly. “You don’t feel the pain.” He raises his hand to my arm, brushing his fingers along my wrist. “But you don’t feel the pleasure, either. You don’t feel anything. I could have been a gun, or a chair. I could have been anything. Because I was nothing.”

I lean down and brush a gentle kiss against his lips.

“You’re not like that anymore.”

“I know,” he responds, “because you changed me.”

“You changed you,” I correct. “I just gave you an opportunity.”

“Maybe,” he acknowledges, “but no one else would do that for me. I owe you everything.”

I feel a stab of guilt. If only I could tell him how much I’ve used him. How much I owe him in turn.

Instead, I kiss him gently on the lips. His eyelids are drooping as I pull away, exhaustion winning out despite his efforts to stay awake.

“Get some sleep,” I tell him.

As I move to get up, his hand tightens around my wrist.

“Stay?” he asks. Then he blinks and seems to rouse a bit, quickly releasing my wrist. “Unless you have something you need to do.”

I have a lot of things I could be doing, but Zero so rarely asks for anything that I can’t bring myself to deny him. I kick off my shoes and slide in beside him, resolved to stay at least until he’s deeply asleep.

“Never anything more important than you,” I tell him, pulling him into my arms.

He falls asleep almost immediately, his deep, even breathing brushing against my throat. It leaves me unfortunately alone with my thoughts, and I’m plagued by uncertainty. The earlier conversations of today have brought into light what a precarious situation I’m in.

How do I move forward while still keeping my assets safe?
Chapter Notes

If anyone hands you a baby and says, "Here, can you hold him for a second?" It's a trap. My toddler-nephew passed me the summer cold from hell. So I am hoping to have a chapter up next week, but no guarantees. I considered splitting this chapter in half, but it just flows too well as a whole piece. It's a bit early because I'm probably going to come home and nyquil myself into oblivion tonight. :) Lol.

All my gratitude to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

“It’s been six days since your surgery,” I grind out from between clenched teeth. “You cannot practice with Ruby. You are not healed enough to fight!”

“It’s been seven days,” Zero counters.

Technically, if you count the day of the surgery, then he’s right. Either way, it feels like an eternity.

“Are we counting the minutes now?” I snap. “Is that how we’re managing time?”

“Were we ever not?” he asks back, equally irritated. “It’s been one hundred and seventy-two hours since I went under anesthetic. I gave you an extra four hours to complete the procedure. So by your own estimates, I should have mobility back by now.”

“I told you a week of bed rest!” I snarl. “You should just be getting back on your feet! I only let you walk yesterday because you’ve been healing faster than I anticipated. But you are not healing at super-human speeds! If you push too hard-”

“I am not a moron!” Zero yells, losing whatever tenuous hold on patience he was struggling with. “I am aware that my body has limits! I am aware that I could damage it further!”

Ringing silence settles in the room. Zero takes a breath and schools his features into a neutral expression.

“If I have to put any kind of actual effort into fighting Ruby, then I’ve lost all hope of competing this year. I’m not being reckless,” he explains. “Teaching Ruby is the aspect of my training least likely to strain me.”

Is that true? Are there things that he could teach Ruby without the required mobility of actual fighting? Without undoing all of my effort? The bone itself should be stabilized - as I let Zero know yesterday, when I let him walk for the first time. The fusing agent has fully hardened by this point, making standing, walking, or even jumping feasible without further damage. The muscles and tendons are a bigger concern. They have yet to heal and fuse in the places where I removed bone
shards. They could easily tear or separate if put under too much strain.

“Fine,” I grind out, acknowledging the wisdom in Zero’s words, and also realizing that he’s likely to do something even more foolish if I leave him with nothing to do for another day. Yesterday’s walk had been prompted by a similar motivation - Zero’s incessant fidgeting and constant attempts to get up on his own. “However, I have some conditions.”

“Name them.”

“Therapy before you start. Standing only for training. No running, jumping, or kicking. And afterwards, we’ll need to ice your hip. And you’ll take your pain meds without giving me a bunch of hassle.”

“Agreed,” he says, and turns away from me.

“And I get to call a halt if you seem to be getting overstrained!” I shout at his back. He doesn’t acknowledge me, just continues to limp out the door of Zeke’s bedroom, leaning heavily on a crutch for support. I growl and grit my teeth at his dismissive attitude.

There’s a chuckle from behind me, and I glare over my shoulder at Zeke, who’s sipping a coffee on the couch.

“You find this funny?” I growl.

“Well,” he drawls, smirking over the rim of his cup. “You did give him tacit permission.”

Kip smiles, perched beside Zeke on the couch.

“Trying to coral Zero is like...” Kip hesitates, searching for the right words. “Trying to change the orbit of a satellite. Trying to knock the moon out of alignment.” He grins at me. “You had to know he was going to push back at some point.”

I sigh, feeling the anger drain out of me. Put like that, I suppose I should have seen this situation as inevitable.

“I’ll go keep an eye on him, if that would make you feel better,” Kip offers.

“Finish your breakfast,” I chide. “We’ll be heading down there soon enough. You’ve got your own therapy.”

“I’m done,” he says, putting his tea cup aside. His plate is empty, although there wasn’t much on it to begin with. “I should go check on Red anyway. I’ve had him and Ruby starting out their mornings with some exercise. It’s a good idea to keep in shape, even for a domestic. But I’ve had him stick with cardio. We don’t need him bulking up any further.”

“Are you feeling alright?” I ask as he pushed himself to his feet. “You’re not experiencing a loss of appetite, are you? Headaches? Dizziness?”

“I’m perfectly fine,” he responds with a grin. “I just don’t eat a lot in the mornings.”

He heads out the door, his hands tucked into the pockets of his khakis. He’s stopped wearing his uniform outside of the kitchen, from what I’ve seen. It’s likely in direct response to Zero’s admission that the outfit reminded him of the handlers from his childhood. I wonder idly if I should speak to Zero about it. It’s possible that the outfit is only a trigger when he’s too drugged or too stressed to know the difference.
“It’s nice to see Kip starting to relax,” Zeke comments, noting a different perspective on the same change in routine. “He works too much and too hard.”

I haven’t told Zeke about Zero’s episode when I tried to put him under anesthesia. To my knowledge, neither Zero nor Kip have informed him. I contemplate explaining the situation, but quickly disregard the impulse. Zeke is Zero’s owner - not his boyfriend, not his husband, and not his relative. Zeke isn’t entitled to information that Zero doesn’t want to give him, and I won’t risk Zero’s trust by pushing that boundary.

But I make a note to tell Zero that I think he should explain the situation to Zeke. It’s hard to tell if this specific issue will come up again in the future.

“I’m more concerned with Zero’s behavior at the moment,” I respond, shifting the topic back to Zero. “He’s pushing himself too hard, and I can’t figure out why.”

“Ah,” Zeke says as I settle beside him on the couch. “Maybe I can offer some clarity. Zero overheard me talking to another owner, who specifically requested I bring Zero with me to the party later this week.”

“What? He can’t-”

“I know,” Zeke cuts in. “I told the owner that I would have to see how much Zero has recovered. However, I think Zero is pushing himself because he doesn’t want me to go alone.”

“If he thinks you need him, he’ll push himself to the breaking point to manage.”

“I know,” Zeke sighs. “Can you… keep him from doing anything irreparable?”

“While he’s under my supervision,” I reply. “But if he goes with you…”

“I don’t know if I’m going to take him. I… was planning on asking your opinion tomorrow. If he’s not recovered enough, then I’ll go alone.”

I take a sip of my tea, mulling over my answer. It’s a hard decision.

Eventually, Zeke prompts, “Do you think there’s a chance he’ll be ready?”

I sigh and put the tea aside.

“A lot of it will depend on his progress in the next couple days. It’s a close call. I would give you an immediate no, but… he’s been recovering much more quickly than the average patient. That’s likely due to genetic tampering, making him stronger and faster than a normal person. Apparently it has also affected his healing. That being said, he is still healing, whether he wants to admit it or not.”

“I think I can keep him from anything too strenuous,” Zeke says. “I made sure several owners saw the bandages around his ribs. A little makeup will create enough residual bruising to make it look like he’s only half-healed. But…”

“But they’ll want to see him doing something sexual,” I sigh. “With you?”

“No… I don’t think so. There’s… There’s another asset that they’re trying to show off.”

“That complicates things. We haven’t discussed Zero…” I search for wording, “…returning to intimacy yet. And if the other person doesn’t know about Zero’s injuries, they could inadvertently hurt him.”
“He’ll be with another pleasure asset. If I give them instructions, I should be able to set up a scenario to minimize the possibility of damage. It is still a risk, though. I’ll leave you to decide whether he’s healed enough.”

“We’ll see. I think the chances are pretty good, though. As I said, he’s healing more rapidly than I expected.” I finish my remaining toast and sip at the last of my nearly-cold tea. Brushing the crumbs from my lap, I ask, “What will you be doing while I work with Kip and Zero?”

“I have a few messages to check, then I’ll probably head down for a swim.” Swimming has proven to be Zeke’s preferred method of exercising, likely because it allows him to stay trim without becoming too muscularly defined. Despite being offhanded about it, I’ve noticed that he spends a few hours most days swimming laps. He’s also known to take a few circuits on the running track on the outskirts of the gym if Red and Ruby aren’t working out. He spends a lot of time maintaining his physique, likely because it gains him as much attention from the other owners as his assets do.

I don’t really know how to feel about that. I can acknowledge, at least internally, that I find his form… physically appealing. I’m attracted to him; to his compassion and vulnerability as much as his looks. But there’s another part of me that understands Zeke uses his appearance to get what he wants… and wonders if I might be falling for the same trap. Can I deny that my base desires have any influence over my interest in this relationship? Am I so arrogant that I believe I alone am immune to Zeke’s looks? His charm?

And what will I do if Zeke wants to continue this semblance of a relationship? If he asks to pursue our interactions to… to their ultimate destination? What then?

“If you’re still in the pool when I finish Zero’s exercises,” I comment, trying to shake off the errant thoughts, “I’ll probably hand him over to you. Swimming is likely to tire him out, but it won’t cause the same discomfort that walking would. Perhaps you can supervise him while I work directly with Kip.”

“Of course,” Zeke responds, oblivious to my earlier turmoil. “I’ll delay my swim for an hour or so to give you more time.”

“I’d appreciate it.” Then, with a smirk, I add, “I think Zero and I could probably use some time apart.”

Zeke laughs and says, “Yes, I can see how that might be true.”

I depart a few minutes later, leaving the dishes on the table as Kip requested. Apparently, Ruby and Red need to get used to the way typical owners act, which includes leaving things strewn about for their assets to clean up. In that respect, Zeke is atypically tidy, both because he rarely brings guests home and because he tends to be fairly neat. It speaks of a long history of taking care of himself that other owners likely don’t share.

In the gym, Ruby and Red are doing laps, with Ruby looking considerably less winded than Red. Kip and Zero are standing near the entrance, talking. Zero says something, but Kip raises his hands and shakes his head, before moving off to talk to Red. I see Zero open his mouth to call Kip back, but then he closes it again. He glances over when I approach.

“What were you two talking about?” I ask, curious. Although, it’s really none of my business. Zero scowls, as though he’s having a similar thought.

“Nothing,” he says, and turns away from me.
I follow him across the gym to the matted area. In the past, I’ve used this section for meditation, and
Zero used it to practice grips and throws with Red. It works just as well, however, for Zero’s
therapeutic exercises. Although I only allowed him to walk freely for the first time yesterday, we
started doing assisted walking and physical therapy the day before. So Zero is familiar with the
routine, and knows to wait for me when he gets to the mats. Getting down from a standing position is
difficult for him, and I’ve explained that a fall would be particularly detrimental at this juncture.

I take the crutch from him and set it aside. Then, keeping a good hold on his arm, I help him fold
slowly to the matted floor. He bears it with all the dignity he can seem to muster, although the
continued scowl tells me that he hates it. Finally, after several seconds of maneuvering, he’s sitting
on the thick padding covering the floor. His clothes are comfortable - fitted, cloth shorts and a tshirt -
and I help him remove his shoes, as it is difficult for him to bend his left leg enough to reach.

It’s not until I’m kneeling by his legs, his left foot in my grip, that he says, “I was trying to…”

“Trying to what?” I ask, once it becomes clear that he’s not going to finish. I slide his foot up,
bending his knee and slowly rotating his hip with the motion.

As he’s holding the knee-bent position, Zero asks, “Can I trust you to be honest with me?”

“Yes,” I respond. “Always.”

“Did something happen during my surgery? While I was under anaesthesia?”

“Yes.”

His eyes meet mine, and I hold his gaze without flinching.

“I attacked Kip,” he says.

It’s not a question, but I confirm with a nod anyway.

Zero sighs, but it seems almost like a relief. Like he knew the answer, and just needed someone to
confirm it. He lays his head back against the mats, looking at the ceiling.

“At first, I didn’t remember;” he says softly. “Then, it started coming back in little bits and snippets.
Only… it didn’t make sense. Was it a dream? A memory? When I asked Kip, he told me everything
was fine, and that I shouldn’t worry about it. He’s such a good liar…”

“Concerningly so,” I confirm as I allow Zero’s leg to straighten. Another rep, and we’ll switch to a
different movement.

“I just wanted to know what happened,” Zero says as I guide his leg into the bent position for the last
time. “But he gets so wrapped up in convincing me that everything’s okay, he doesn’t listen to what
I’m saying.”

“I... could see how that might be a problem with him.”

“Is that why he’s been acting so strange lately? Taking off his coat whenever I’m around?”

“Yes, that’s likely the case. You said something during the incident that implied that the coat might
have a negative association for you.”

“He wouldn’t talk to me when I asked about it. He just said that he didn’t want to wear it outside of
the kitchen, and then avoided the topic.” Zero pauses for a moment, then says, “I know the
difference between a lab coat and a chef’s jacket. It isn’t… Him wearing it wouldn’t make me have a breakdown. If he’d just asked, I’d have told him as much.”

“Kip should have been upfront with you when you asked him about the incident,” I tell him. “I apologize for my part in the deception. He thought it was best to let you forget the episode, and I deferred to his judgement. Zeke was not informed of the incident either. I will let you decide if and when you want to tell him.”

Zero nods and says a quiet, “Thanks,” but continues to stare at the ceiling.

“Can I ask… If it wasn’t the coat,” I wonder, “what triggered the episode?”

He stares at the ceiling silently through four more sets of the same exercise. I want to give him time to respond, but as we move into the second exercise, I decide that he’s had enough opportunity.

“You don’t have to tell me,” I let him know gently. His leg is flat on the floor now, and I’m guiding it to move slowly to the side with his heel still pressed against the mats. Zero’s expression is showing some discomfort, although that’s to be expected at this stage.

“You don’t have to talk to me about this,” I explain in the face of his continued silence, “but it might be a good idea to talk to someone. Maybe Zeke-”

“No,” he cuts me off. “Not Zeke.”

“Okay, I won’t force you to talk to him either. However, you seem to have a lot of pent-up issues regarding your childhood, and your reaction tends to be particularly violent when you’re overstressed. I am afraid that these incidents could become more common if you continue to isolate yourself. So I would encourage you to talk to someone about it.”

“Who?” he asks, quirking an eyebrow. “You?”

“If you want. I’m not a psychiatrist. The human mind is in no way my field of expertise. However, I am probably the closest you’ll find to a neutral party in this place, and I… I am willing to listen. I want to help, if you’ll allow me.”

We lapse into silence again. It goes on for long enough that I begin to think that Zero won’t respond, and I’m willing to let the subject drop. However, as we’re moving into our final floor exercise, he surprises me.

“It’s not easy,” he says as I move his leg back into a straight position.

“Talking about traumatic events can be difficult,” I knowledge, then have to pause a moment while I move to the edge of the matting. I had to improvise some of Zero’s therapy tools, including a piece of rolled up and taped foam about as round as a loaf of bread. Returning to Zero, I place the foam piece under his left leg, just behind the knee. He immediately begins the exercise, which involves slowly raising the damaged leg, holding it for a count of five, and then lowering it again.

“I think you’ll find that the benefits outweigh the discomfort,” I continue. “Although I understand that there can be a lot of pain involved in excising those kinds of wounds.”

“No,” he says, then is quiet for several moments. I get the feeling that these words are being dragged out of Zero despite his best effort otherwise. He continues his exercises, and I wait quietly, giving him time sort through his thoughts. To choose what, if anything, he wants to tell me.

“It’s… It wasn’t traumatic,” he explains. “It was normal. It wasn’t… not normal… until I got here.”
“You didn’t know any different,” I summarize. “We don’t feel a lack from something we’ve never had.”

“Yes,” he says, and looks relieved. Like he had been concerned that I wouldn’t understand, or that I would judge him for his feelings about his childhood.

“Wait,” I tell him. “You’re done with this set.” I tap him gently on his foot to remind him that we’re still in the middle of therapy. He has exceeded the number of repetitions that I usually allow him. Working the muscles too hard will do more damage than not working them at all.

Zero lets his leg lower back to the floor, his expression a bit surprised. I get the feeling that he lost count of his repetitions while we spoke. I remove the wad of padding and set it aside. Zero it done with his floor exercises, so I offer my hand to help him up. He takes it, letting me help to pull him up and stabilize him when he’s standing. His leg has recovered enough to hold his weight while standing, but the muscles are still damaged, making walking more precarious. He wraps an arm around my shoulders as we walk the few paces across the room, to the area where Zero will complete his standing exercises.

Just outside of the matted area, I’ve set up a few of Zero’s snap-together pieces into a waist-height, rectangular box. It’s the same pieces that Zero has used to create his obstacle course, and I have to admit that they’re pretty convenient. When we reach it, Zero leans against the black structure, which is able to hold his weight without sliding or shifting due to the magnets that hold it together and secure it to the floor. Zero doesn’t really need my help for these exercises, but I still want to keep an eye on him, in case he decides to exceed my instructions.

“It was never a problem before Zeke,” Zero says as I move beside him and lean my back against the structure. He’s doing his exercises already, keeping balanced on one foot while slowly moving his left leg to the side, lifting it as high as he can manage, then slowly returning it to the floor. I note that he’s already lifting it higher today than he was yesterday.

“What wasn’t?” I ask, losing the flow of the conversation.

“My… reactions.”

“Well… no. I would expect not. You were in physical peril most of the time as a combat asset, and in your childhood as well, I’d assume. Violent reactions were the key to your survival.”

“I always knew who the enemy was. There was always a clear goal and path to get there. It’s only now that things get all tangled up and confused. I feel like I’m under attack and I…”

“You react violently, which is the only coping mechanism you’ve ever been taught.”

“Yes.”

“That’s perfectly understandable, given the circumstances.” Then I hesitate before pressing, “You are aware that you’ll need to work to change that, aren’t you? That, given your current environment, it is neither safe nor beneficial?”

“Yes,” he says dryly. “I’m aware that trying to murder someone every time I’m upset is a bad idea.”

“I’m not condemning you for it,” I remind him. “Those instincts kept you alive in your youth. But now…”

“Now they could kill the people I care about,” he says. “Now I’m the danger they need to be protected from. Yeah, I get it.”
“I won’t try to tell you that changing ingrained reactions is easy. Breaking the reaction itself might prove impossible; humans have deep-seated fight or flight instincts. Yours is stronger than most because of your history, and because your innate strength makes your reactions more dangerous.”

The conversation pauses while he switches to the next set of exercises, which involves bringing his leg straight back without bending his knee.

“Do you…” he says, and it’s quiet enough that I have to lean toward him to hear. “Do you think I should go back on suppressants?”

I’m too surprised for words, and he follows quickly with, “I keep thinking that everything was clearer before. That maybe it would be better if I went back on them.”

“Better to deaden yourself inside than face the hardship and uncertainty of living as a person?” I scoff. “Better to be a robot than deal with the complications of a human? Coward.”

His head snaps up and he glares at me, his expression pinched and angry.

“I’m trying to do the right thing!” he snarls.

I shake my head.

“No, you’re not,” I chide. “You’re feeling guilty about hurting Kip, and you’re trying to punish yourself in a way you think Zeke will allow. In a way that you think you can justify. But really, you’re just running from your emotions because they’re hard and messy. Because humans make mistakes, and you’re not used to doing that.”

“My mistake could have killed him,” Zero replies, but his voice has lost its anger. His expression just looks… pained.

“You could have killed him, but you didn’t.”

“He still has bruises!”

“Bruises, and an unbroken wrist. Some would call that the best possible outcome.” I gesture to his leg, “Switch.”

He sighs and changes his posture, giving himself enough space between the block he’s braced against to do a set of leg lifts. These ones seem to be easier for him, likely because most of the damage was toward the back of his hip. We’re quiet while he quickly completes the set, lifting his knee straight up in front until his upper leg is perpendicular to his body.

It’s not until he moves into his last set that I decide to break the silence. Zero’s last exercise involves bringing his foot up behind him and getting it as close to his rear as possible. This seems to pose the most difficulty for Zero, and I have it last in the rotation to minimize his frustration.

“Emotional health and physical health have always struck me as pretty similar,” I comment as he struggles.

“You think?” he asks. “At least I understand why we’re doing this. Emotions are pointless.”

“Emotions form the groundwork of who we are. They guide us toward fundamentals like good and bad, pleasurable and painful.”

“They seem like a mess.”
“Yours are,” I agree. “They’re… damaged. Just like your leg.”

“What are you trying to tell me?” Zero asks, aggravated.

“That you seem to have the same issues with your physical healing as you do with your emotional,” I point out. “You can’t rush through the recovery process. You have to be patient and let yourself heal.”

“You think my mind will just recover if I do nothing?”

“I don’t think you’re ‘doing nothing.’ I think you’re trying very hard to adapt to your new circumstance. It takes time for the brain to reprogram instincts that have been used for so long. Pathways have to be rerouted. Reactions have to be adjusted and redirected. It’s not a quick or simple thing.”

He frowns, like he’s shifted his focus inward and is trying to see the pathways and reactions. Like he could simply change them himself, like flipping a light switch. Zero is a very straightforward person. I have no doubt that working on his mental health will be a struggle for him.

“Sometimes it’s not about changing the reactions,” I continue. “Sometimes it’s just about finding out what triggers them. Isolate the trigger and avoid it - remove yourself from the situation if possible, and control the reaction as best you’re able if not. We can look at coping mechanisms.” I smile at him. “Maybe joining me for meditation would help.”

“Maybe,” he says, but he doesn’t look convinced.

“Zero,” I call gently. He shifts his attention back to me, glancing to his side to look me in the eyes. “The biggest thing is that you need to forgive yourself.”

“For hurting Kip?”

“For not always being perfect. For making mistakes.”

He’s quiet for a moment. Then he says, “When I was young, a mistake would get you punished. Enough would get you killed. I don’t know if I… if I can just let it go.”

“Try,” I tell him. “Constant recriminations will only poison your mind. Acknowledge that you’ve done the wrong thing, try to make amends, and then… let it go.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“It’s not,” I acknowledge. “But it’s something we all have to go through. We’re all broken in some way.”

“Not like me.”

“No and yes at the same time. Maybe we don’t have your strength, but our reactions can be just as dangerous. Kip’s ability to hide and deflect almost got him killed, from what I understand.”

“That was my fault, too. I let my emotions guide me when I should have been logical, and I helped him hide his issues.”

“Don’t borrow trouble. Kip made his own decisions. His mistakes are his own. We’ve all got issues. Even Zeke. Even me.”

“What are your issues?” he asks, his face open and curious. I blush.
“I’m… not good with personal interactions,” I simplify, because I’m aware that it goes deeper than that. “With getting close to others.”

He smirks.

“I hadn’t noticed.”

He’s finished his last set, and he’s simply standing now, braced against the blocks. I think perhaps we’ve made enough progress for the moment, both physically and emotionally.

“Come on,” I guide, taking his arm over my shoulders. “If you’re going to attempt the very bad idea of tussling with Ruby, now is the best time.”

He smiles, and leans against me as we make our way across the room.
Hey there! A bit of a short chapter this week, but I wasn't sure I was going to be able to get anything out this week with how sick I was, so I'm pretty happy. :) Luckily, I seem to have survived the infant-flu and have made a full recovery. So the posting will continue. Yay!

All my gratitude to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

“Let me start by reiterating how much I dislike this idea,” I tell Ruby and Zero. Zero is already inside of the raised, roped area that serves as a fighting space. Ruby is standing by the edge, looking belligerent and uncertain.

“Your protests have been noted,” Zero responds. “But if you’re not going to sedate me to prevent this, then step aside.”

I shoot him a glare, but step back. Ruby casts a glance at me, green eyes uncertain.

“Don’t ‘cha think you should listen to the doc?” Ruby says. “Besides, I don’t want ta beat up a fucking cripple.”

“You couldn’t beat up a cripple if you tried,” Zero shoots back. “You’ve got no chance against me.” He gives a feral grin. “But I promise not to hurt you too badly.”

Ruby frowns, but doesn’t move. He’s leery of the whole setup - as he should be. He has no idea that Zeke isn’t what he appears to be. In the situation as Ruby knows it, it would be tantamount to suicide to hurt Zeke’s favorite.

“You can always run and hide behind your boyfriend,” Zero goads, leaning against one of the ring posts casually, like it isn’t holding him up. “I’m sure he’d protect you from me. Again.”

Ruby’s face turns a shade almost the same as his hair, and he bares his teeth in a snarl. He vaults into the ring, launching himself clumsily at Zero.

It’s an idiotic move, with all the grace and subtlety of a toddler throwing a tantrum. Zero easily deflects, despite being pinned in a corner and unable to dodge. He bends at the waist, keeping his left leg straight, and dodging Ruby’s clumsy fists. Slipping under Ruby’s almost non-existent defenses, Zero grabs Ruby by the thigh and flips him, using the boy’s own momentum against him. Ruby - small and slight as he is - does a full rotation in the air and lands hard on his face.

He lies there for a moment, stunned. Then he groans and pushes himself to his knees. He must have bit his tongue during the landing, because a dribble of blood makes its way from the corner of his
mouth. Ruby turns his head and spits blood onto the suspended floor, then wipes his chin with the back of his hand.

Then he’s on his feet again, surging with surprising agility toward Zero. I almost call a halt, afraid that Zero will be surprised and injured by the move. But Zero is already prepared for the attack - it seems as though he’d anticipated such a reaction from Ruby.

Ruby aims low this time, bending himself almost in half to prevent Zero from being able to get underneath him. He comes in fast, holding his arms in front of him like he means to throw his shoulder into Zero’s bad leg. Zero doesn’t give him a chance, leaning forward just enough to keep Ruby from getting to close. When Ruby is in his reach, Zero drops an elbow into Ruby’s back, slamming the teen down to the floor. Ruby gives a yelp of pain, then writhes on the floor as Zero pulls back and resumes his casual posture in the corner.

“Good,” Zero says when Ruby eventually stops moaning and rolls onto his back.

“Good?” Ruby asks in a snarl, pushing himself into a sitting position. “The hell ‘r you talkin’ about? I got knocked on my ass!”

“Yes,” Zero agrees, “but you got back up. And you learned from your first try. You saw that you were outmatched, so you went for my weak spot.”

Ruby hunches his shoulders and stares at his hands.

“Lots ‘a people would call that a cheap shot,” he says, his voice sullen.

“That’s bullshit,” Zero responds with certainty. “There’s no such thing as a cheap shot in a fight. You find your opponents weakness and you exploit it. That’s how you win.”

“Not that I approve of ‘free-for-all’ style fighting,” I add from the sidelines, “but Zero is right. When you’re fighting for your life, you use whatever advantage you can get.”

Ruby pushes himself to his feet. I notice Zero shift - ready for another surprise attack - but Ruby doesn’t take the offensive. Instead, the red-headed youth stands with his hands at his sides, his expression tired and wary.

“You gonna beat on me some more?” he asks.

“No,” Zero says, dropping his arms as well. “We’re done.”

Ruby looks surprised, then scowls.

“I c’n take more than that!” he growls. “I’m not fuckin beat yet!”

“Yes, you are,” Zero counters. “You can’t win this fight. You never could.”

“I…” Ruby says, then closes his mouth. He knows Zero is right, but he doesn’t like it. The youth clenches his fists at his side, his whole body tensing in anger. “You said you’d teach me!” he accuses. “You didn’t do ‘nothin but beat on me!”

“Experience is the best lesson,” Zero responds evenly. “But there’s only so far that can go. For actual training, you have to wait until I’m healed.”

Ruby blinks and drops his hands.

“You’re not… You still want me to fight?”
“Yes.”

“But… I lost.”

“You lost a fight you could never have won. You were never supposed to win.”

“Then what the hell was that about!”

“It was about seeing your reactions. Seeing how you handle pressure.”

“And?”

“And you get mad,” Zero says with a smirk. “You don’t get scared, you don’t get depressed, you get pissed. Which is the only reaction a fighter can have.”

“Oh.”

“You’re still scrawny and slow, though. You’ll need to work on speed and strength both. But your instincts are good, and natural inclination goes a long way in this discipline. Have Lee take a look at your mouth and then go back to whatever schedule Kip has you on. We’ll start your training routine tomorrow.”

“Umm… Okay,” Ruby says. There’s still an uncertainty to his posture as he climbs out of the ring and comes over to me. He opens his mouth, revealing the expected gash on his inner cheek, small enough that it’s not a concern to his overall health. I advise him to pack it with gauze if it doesn’t stop bleeding soon and recommend that he wash it with peroxide before he goes to bed. He nods, and still looks suspicious - like he’s waiting for the catch.

He turns from me, but before he can get more than a couple steps, Zero says, “It’s not a trick. Or a trap. Or whatever you’re thinking.”

“No?” Ruby says, turning back to glare up at Zero, who is leaning over the ropes that surround the fighting area. “So you’re just… gonna teach me how to fight now? After you tried to kill me like a month ago?”

“Because I tried to kill you,” Zero responds evenly. “And I shouldn’t have. It wasn’t your fault and… I’m sorry. This is all I can offer you as a reparation.”

“And why should I want it? Why should I bother?”

“Because this is how you stay safe. This is how you keep Red safe.”

“By learning to fight?”

“By becoming valuable,” Zero emphases, frustration bleeding into his voice. “By becoming an asset that owners want, that they’ll pay for, and that they’ll try to keep happy and cooperative. You’re an embarrassment and a liability. I’m fixing that, but it isn’t going to work if you don’t want to try.”

“And you’re doing this all because… you feel bad?” Ruby asks, his tone skeptical.

“I tried to kill you,” Zero says with finality. “Now I’m trying to save your life. Call it an even exchange.”

Ruby stares for a moment, as though trying to read any insincerity in Zero’s expression, then shrugs and turns toward the exit. Watching him go, I note that he’s limping - that elbow to the back is going to pain him for a while - but that he’s covering it well. He’s experienced in taking a hit and getting
back on his feet.

Zero gives a sigh and rubs his hand over his face. As Ruby disappears through the door, Zero says, “Not pounding that kid into a pulp is going to be the hardest part of this.”

“No, it’s not,” I comments as I help Zero climb down from the platform. “Once you’ve earned his trust, it will get easier.”

“If.”

“You’ll manage. Students like Ruby have never had an authority figure believe in them. Once he realizes that you’re not going to give up just because he mouths off, you’ll start to get a different attitude.”

“You’ve taught a lot of students,” Zero says, and eyes me curiously as he settles on his feet, still leaning on me for balance. “Why didn’t you offer to train him? You’re skilled enough.”

I hesitate a moment, because the thought had crossed my mind when the option of changing Ruby’s discipline was put forward. But…

“I think you need to do it,” I respond. “Beyond honing your skills, I think training will help center you as a person and a fighter. I think it will be good for you.”

He’s quiet a couple seconds, then says, “I hope you’re right.”

Zero’s therapy is finished for the day, but his body is far from worn out. It’s a fine balance between over-stressing the healing parts and preventing atrophy in the undamaged muscles. As a concession to his overall health, I’ve decided that time in the pool is the best option. Low impact, low risk of damage. I guide Zero to the other side of the gym, where Zeke is already waiting.

The pool room is as lavish as the rest of the ship, with the only concession to cost being size. Half a dozen people could occupy the pool comfortably, perhaps double that in close quarters. For the kind of rigorous swimming that Zeke is currently doing, only two or three people would be able to participate at a time. The design of the pool seems to be more focused on luxury than vigorous exercise. The shallow end appears to only be a few feet deep, and there’s an overly large staircase in the center of the shallow edge that leads down into the water. To perform a full lap, Zeke is required to keep to the far sides of the perimeter on either side of the staircase, where there is a flat edge for him to push off of.

Other than the lavish staircase, the pool is actually of a relatively simple design. It’s rectangular in shape, just barely long enough to accomodate the lap-swimming that Zeke seems to prefer, and shallow on one end. I am uncertain of how deep it is at the other end, although given the overall size of the pool I would think only six or seven feet.

The room is done in white marble tile, with blue tiles scattered in a decorative pattern along the edge and bottom of the pool. There are several dark-colored, wicker chairs placed along the perimeter of the room. A high ceiling gives a feeling of grandeur to the relatively small space.

Either Zeke notices our entrance or coincidentally finishes his laps, because he pushes himself onto the ledge of the pool, his torso still submerged in the water. His hair is tied back in a low tail, and I’m struck by how different it makes him look. Younger, and a bit roguish. The grin on his face doesn’t help - open and innocent, and completely unconvincing. As we approach, it turns impish as he splashes water in our direction.

“ Really?” I ask, wiping the wetness from my shirt. “Mature.”
“Think you’ll melt?” he quips devilishly as he pushes himself out of the pool. I don’t dignify the comment with a response.

Sitting on the edge of the pool, Zeke is unconcerned with the state of almost-nudity he’s in, having nothing more than scrap of back fabric covering his modesty. The water cascades over his skin, dripping in enticing patterns down his chest and abdomen. It sluices from his golden hair, giving an almost crystalline appearance to the already shining strands. His feet still dangle in the water, and I could almost envision him as a siren, luring me to my death.

He pushes a stray strand of hair from his face and turns his attention to Zero.

“You can swim, I presume?”

“Of course I can swim,” Zero responds angrily. “It was a required part of my training.”

“I just wanted to check,” Zeke responds. “It’s not always a common thing off-planet.”

I have to admit that I’d also simply assumed that swimming had been a part of Zero’s education, as it was fairly common on my home satellite.

“Do you think you can make it down the stairs?” Zeke continues. “Or…”


“Of course,” Zeke responds, sliding back into the water.

Zero is already shrugging out of his top and slipping his sneakers off. I have a moment where I wonder if Zero has swimming clothes and if I should run to fetch them, and then I remember that this is Zero, whose sense of modesty is so low that it’s possibly non-existent. As the thought strikes me, Zero is already shoving his lower clothes out of the way, only to have them become entangled around his feet. I steady him as he gets himself free, then help lower him to the ground. He’s already pretty stable when he’s standing, but transitioning to a kneeling or sitting position is a harder task, and it still gives him difficulties. Zeke helps as well once Zero is in reach, and together we slide Zero’s naked form into the crystal clear water.

They twine together, initially as Zeke wraps his arms around Zero for stability, and then simply because Zeke doesn’t let go. Zero doesn’t complain or push away, instead turning in Zeke’s grasp so the both of them are facing me, with Zero’s back pressed against Zeke’s front.

There are so many stunning contrasts between the two that I’m paralyzed as I watch them. Zero’s dark against Zeke’s light. Zero’s smaller, compact form against Zeke’s larger, broader one. Even Zero’s short, messy hair in contrast to Zeke’s long strands. Both stunningly attractive, and their beauty only compounded by the contrasts they pose to each other.

It takes my breath away, and… Somehow makes me feel uncomfortable. Not embarrassed or shy, just… unpleasant. Uncertain. Displeased.

I try to shrug it away, shaking myself from the paralysis.

“Don’t let him drown,” I warn, partially in joke. “His tendency to push past his limits could prove dangerous in the water.”

“I’ll keep a good eye on him,” Zeke assures me. “Besides… I’m trained in CPR.”

“What a relief,” I monotone. “I wonder if anyone else on the ship is trained in such complicated and
mysterious techniques.” Then more seriously, “See that it doesn’t get that far.”

Zeke laughs, and it’s a gratifying reaction. My humor can sometimes be construed as… abrasive.

“I have to get Kip for his therapy,” I continue, “but call me if you need help getting him out.”

“I think we’ll be fine,” Zeke responds, turning his attention to Zero as the two separate, giving Zero room to actually move in the water.

I watch them for a moment longer, and then I retreat. They don’t seem to notice me go.
As I leave Zero and Zeke in the pool, a lingering sense of disappointment follows me. It’s subtle but noticeable, and I try to dissect it as I make the trek up to the kitchen to retrieve Kip. There’s an unpleasant feeling in the pit of my stomach, something that I identify as more of an emotional ailment than a physical one. It adds itself to an overall sense of unease that follows me, growing with each step that I take. What has prompted such a reaction? Was it seeing Zeke and Zero together? Am I… jealous?

But… That’s not it. I am no more immune to the effects of envy than any other man, but… this is different. I don’t simply want to have what they have. It doesn’t feel like the same kind of greed that I associate with jealousy. This emotion is more akin to longing.

I don’t want to separate them, I realized with a start. I simply want to be there. With Zeke.

In place of Zero? Along with Zero? I roll the thought around in my mind and find that I’m ambivalent toward either option. Zero is not required… but he’s not unwelcome.

“Damn it,” I curse, running a hand over my face. When did my life become so complicated?

In the kitchen, Kip is hovering over Red as he slices a green vegetable. I notice that Kip is once again wearing his typical jacket. I also notice Ruby sitting at the side table, watching them as he holds an ice-pack against his cheek, likely dulling the pain from the cut in his mouth.

“No,” I hear Kip say, and he picks up another cucumber from the pile on the table. “Now watch again.”

He takes a small knife and cuts both the ends off and then slices it down the middle. He lays the halved cucumber on it’s flat edge and begins to cut it in tiny, quick strokes. I notice that he doesn’t seem to be cutting the whole way through the cucumber half. When he reaches the end, he sets the knife aside and bends the vegetable in half, making it fan out in paper-thin strips, revealing the white flesh inside.

“Knife work is one of the foundation skills of a chef,” Kip continues, grabbing another cucumber. This one, he only cuts the ends from before beginning to slices it in quick, professional strokes. When he’s finished, he’s left with a pile of almost opaque cucumber shavings. He sets the knife aside again and fans them into a circle, creating the shape of a rose in his hand. “There are so many
different shapes that you can make once you have the knife-skills to do it.”

He takes another whole cucumber and removes the ends, then cuts a strip from the bottom so that it will lay more easily. He then makes a series of small, delicate cuts to the skin on the top. When he pushes the pieces apart, it reveals a diamond-shaped leaf with a white and green striped pattern running through it. He sets it to the side with the other finished pieces.

“It still tastes like a cucumber, though,” Ruby gripes from the corner. “I don’t see wh’ the big deal is.”

I see Kip take a calming breath. He puts the knife aside before responding.

“A chef is judged on his presentation before he’s ever judged on taste. If your plate looks sloppy, it won’t matter how good it tastes.”

“That’s dumb,” Ruby responds. “It-

“Your knife skills are amazing,” Red cuts in, likely looking to avoid an argument. “I can’t believe that you can still do while your vision is compromised.”

“A lot of it is muscle-memory,” Kip says. “Practice will make it easier. It might be hard to believe, but your confidence will show in your cuts. Also, don’t forget that my close-up vision is still okay. I’m not sure that I could still make these kinds of cuts blindfolded.”

“Still!!” Red asks, and his disbelief makes Kip laugh.

“Well, we had to have some fun when we were training. Sometimes we’d compete to see who could make the cleanest, fastest cuts blindfolded. I used to be pretty good, but that was a long time ago.”

“I’d prefer,” I interject, making Kip glance up at me, “that you didn’t try to renew your skills. I’ve quite enough work without you becoming a daredevil.”

“Of course,” Kip agrees easily. “My reckless youth is behind me, I promise.”

“Excellent. Are you ready?”

“Sure,” he says, and wipes his hands on a kitchen towel before removing his jacket and hanging it on a hook. “Red, please keep practicing your skills. When you’re done, you can finely chop all the cucumber pieces and put them into tonight’s diced salad. Ruby, give that ice pack a few more minutes and then start in on the dishes. I might only have your help for a few more days, and I’d like to make the most of it.”

Ruby grumbles something under his breath, but Kip doesn’t react. Red goes back to slicing his cucumber - much more slowly and with obvious difficulty.

In the hall, Kip asks, “The medbay, I assume?”

“Yes, as usual. I want to check your vitals before we start. How do the meds seem to be working?”

“Great,” he says. “No headaches, no nausea. I get a little dizzy sometimes, but you warned me about that.”

“Yes, it’s a known side effect. If you have a spell that causes you to fall or lasts more than a few seconds, that would be cause for concern.”

“No, they’re pretty brief and mild.” He gives me a smile, “Honestly, I haven’t felt this good in ages.”
“That’s always what I want to hear,” I reply, returning his smile. “But we still have to be vigilant. I would prefer to adjust your meds than deal with a relapse. You’re not having any light sensitivity? Any loss of appetite?”

“No, I seem to be okay so far.”

“You’ve been putting on weight at a steady pace. You should move into a healthy threshold soon, and then I’ll be a little less concerned with your energy reserves. We’re still trying to build up your endurance and resistance after such an extended illness.”

Kip frowns slightly and says, “I’ve always been petite.”

“Petite is one thing,” I counter, “drastically underweight is another. But there’s nothing to be concerned about. You’re rapidly returning to where you need to be.”

“I see,” he says, and then our arrival cuts off the thread of conversation.

The tests, being a standard set that I run on him almost every day now, don’t really take that long. It takes more time to get them set up than to actually run them, but Kip is so used to the process by now that he’s able to help by getting himself in position and anticipating how I’ll need him to move. Still, the task keeps me distracted, and I’m not able to carry the thread of conversation.

“How much longer will we have to do this?” he asks as I finish.

“For a while longer,” I reply. “Although in a couple weeks we’ll move to check-ups every other day, and then slowly reduce them over time. But don’t be surprised if we increase the monitoring again at times. Health is not a straight line, and I’m anticipating that there will be relapses and setbacks. I don’t want you to be discouraged if it happens.”

“It seems to be going well so far,” he responds, hopping off of the bed. “But I’ll be ready in case that changes. I’m used to my health being… unpredictable. It’s nothing new to me.”

“I’d rather catch any symptoms early and make adjustments, but that won’t always be possible. You can’t anticipate every potential outcome.”

“I know,” he responds, and it sounds a bit melancholy, but he follows it with a smile. “What next?”

“This is normally where I’d throw something at you,” I respond with a grin, “but your recovery has progressed to the point that tossing a ball around in close quarters is a waste of time. I was thinking we could go up to the gym and try a longer range. Your progress has been rather impressive, but I’d like to push it further, if we can.”

“Sure,” he says, falling into step beside me as I turn to exit the room, “but I don’t really feel like I’ve been making great progress.”

“That’s surprising, especially after the way I saw you wielding that knife a little bit ago.”

“It’s all muscle-memory,” he says with a shake of his head. “I still have trouble seeing anything beyond the reach of my arms, and even that is a bit blurry. It’s great that I can see a giant red ball flying toward my face,” he grins, “but that doesn’t help me when I reach for the handle of a pan and grab the rim instead.”

“Did that happen?” I ask quickly, glancing at his hands. He holds up his left one, and there’s a small burn under the first two fingers - a slightly rounded line that echoes the curve of typical cooking ware. It’s thin and only a bit red, not blistered or overly swollen. Nothing to be too concerned with.
“It’s just a small burn,” Kip says, echoing my thoughts, “and I got it cooled down and put the cream you gave me on it. Still, I burnt the caramel while I was taking care of it.” He sighs. “I don’t know how I’m going to manage to compete in this state.”

“You’re still learning to cope,” I chide, “but… you also need to be aware of your limitations. I’ve told you time and again, wear gloves when you’re dealing with hot dishes. Even if you didn’t need to before, you do now.”

“It just… feel like I’m admitting that I’m… less than I was before. That I’m somehow… still broken.”

His words bring a halt to my steps and a furrow to my brow. After a moment, he stops as well, turning to look at me quizzically.

“I need you to know that the only person judging you harshly is yourself,” I tell him firmly. “Everyone else is impressed with how hard you’re trying and how far you’ve come. I don’t feel like you would judge anyone else this severely, and I don’t think you’re doing yourself a service by holding yourself to impossible standards. It’s impressive to see the length you’ve gone to improve yourself, but… don’t be unreasonable about it. You do have limitations. Work around them, because trying to ignore them is naive and trying to work despite them is dangerous.”

He colors and looks away.

“I’m sorry, you’re right. I shouldn’t have…”

“You don’t need to apologize for how you’re feeling,” I cut him off. “I just need you to know that the only one feeling this way is you. Everyone else is impressed with your determination and resilience. You are fighting to get back the skills you had before, and it’s no easy battle. However, you will never be that exact person again. For better or worse, you are different now than you were then.”

He glances down, the color still on his cheeks, but doesn’t say anything. After a moment, I continue walking. He follows a step behind, and it takes until we get into the lift for him to say, “I’ve always been a perfectionist.”

“A noble, if sometimes frustrating, endeavor.”

“I guess I’m just having a hard time knowing that I’m… less than that.”

“Humans are never perfect. We are inherently flawed creatures. Your eye is no different than Zero’s hip or Ruby’s attitude.” He chuckles, and I continue with, “We all have limitations. Yours is just new.”

“I don’t know that the other owners will see it that way.”

“Then prove them wrong. I have confidence that you can do it.”

He doesn’t seem to know what to say to that, and we complete the rest of the trip in silence.

Once in the gym, I retrieve the ball and select an open space in the large, echoing chamber. It seems larger now that we’re alone than it did earlier, when the others were present as well. I take a few steps away from Kip and stop, turning to face him.

“The rules are simple,” I inform. “For every toss you catch, you take a step back. For every one you drop, you take a step forward.”
“Grade school games now?” he asks, but puts up his hands and catches the first toss. He sends the ball back and it goes just a little above me, making me jump to grab it. I return it again.

My earlier assessment of Kip’s progress hadn’t been an attempt to bolster his confidence; he really has made some remarkable progress. He catches more than he drops and makes it several paces further away from me. An impressive feat, knowing that his left eye’s vision is completely gone, while his right eye is still severely limited in its distance perception. As far as we were apart, the ball probably started out looking like a red blur heading at him. And yet, he would fearlessly reach for it, never becoming discouraged when he couldn’t quite get it. Nor did he call to stop during the few times it struck him, although he was usually hit in the face. He probably would have continued all afternoon if I hadn’t called a stop.

We don’t spend long on Kip’s exercises. The point is to continuously train his remaining eye to adapt to its new circumstance, but we also want to avoid straining it. I take the growing flush on his face as my cue to stop our practice.

“You did well,” I compliment, and he gives me a genuine smile.

“I guess I can see some of the progress we’re making,” he admits, “although I think there’s still a long way to go.”

“There always is,” I respond.

“Can I head back down now?” he asks. “I don’t like leaving Red alone for too long. He’s at a stage in his training when I need to correct mistakes as soon as I see them, lest they become a habit.”

“Yes, of course,” I say. He turns from me, but I call him back as a thought strikes me. “Kip?”

“Hm?” he asks, glancing back.

“I should tell you, Zero recovered some of his memories from the surgery. When he asked about the incident, I confirmed what happened.”

I’m prepared to face Kip’s ire, but he merely nods thoughtfully.

“I thought he might,” Kip admits. “He asked me a bit about it, too. I guess I’d just hoped that he’d let it go. But I don’t blame you for telling him.”

“I see,” I respond, frowning now. “I suppose I’m still a little unclear on why you decided to hide it from him.”

“What would telling him do?” he asks, frowning as well. “It wasn’t his fault, and I knew he’d feel guilty about it.”

“I think he deserves to know the truth about his actions, even if there were mitigating circumstances. How else will he be prepared in the future?”

“I’m not mad at you for telling him, I just think it would have been better for him if he’d never known.”

“You don’t have authority to decide—...”

He makes a frustrated sound and bursts out with, “I’m just trying to help!”

There’s a moment of tense silence as we stare at one another. I take a calming breath and step back to
diffuse the situation.

In a calm tone, I tell him, “I think the point of this conversation is that your tendency to use deception at your discretion is a bit concerning.”

He blushes again, the color rising easily on his pale skin, and glances away.

“I guess it’s just a habit that I’ve had for a long time. With most owners, lying is the best way to defend yourself.”

“It’s different here,” I respond quietly. And I truly believe that, even if it isn’t for the reason that the rest of them believe. “Deception is more likely to cause problems. I’m given to understand that your last one put you in this predicament.”

“That was different,” he says defensively.

“Maybe so,” I acknowledge. “I simply wanted to point out the issue before it grows into something larger.”

He nods in acknowledgement, but doesn’t say anything else.

“Oh,” I tell him, as a last thought strikes me. “And Zero said that your jacket doesn’t bother him. So you don’t need to avoid wearing the uniform around him.”

“Huh,” Kip says, and loses the closed-off expression to surprise. “Maybe it’s only when he’s too confused to know who I am?”

“Perhaps. I didn’t press him for details.”

“Yeah, I’ve tried to avoid stirring up painful memories for him as well.”

“Speaking of Zero,” I say, glancing over my shoulder toward the pool area, “I should probably go get him.”

“Yes,” he pauses, then says, “I’m sorry if I came across as defensive. I just… I don’t like to put Zero through unnecessary pain.”

I withhold comment on his reply, despite having concerns about who gets to decide what qualifies as “unnecessary.”

“You seem very protective of him,” I respond instead.

“As much as I can be,” Kip says with a smile. “He’s so strong that there’s not much I can offer.”

“You shouldn’t underestimate your importance to him. Friendship, affection, comradery. It doesn’t seem like Zero knew much about these things before you.”

“And Zeke,” he points out.

“Yes,” I acknowledge, “but there is a distance between them that he can’t bridge. There isn’t that kind of distance between the two of you.”

“You bridged it,” he says astutely. “I’ve seen how close you and Zeke have become lately.”

“Yes, well…” I hedge, trying to find a way to cover without outright lying to him. “I’m older than the rest of you. It becomes easier with age.”
He gives a bark of surprised laughter, and the tone makes me think that he’s not buying my explanation at all.

“Sure,” he says, still chuckling as he turns away from me. “That must be it.”

I shake my head, feeling a bit disappointed in my own lack of guile. Then I put the conversation from my mind as I start toward the opposite end of the gym, intent on helping Zeke get Zero out of the pool. I expect that they’ll be finished swimming by now.

My thoughts are confirmed when I enter the pool room and find Zero sitting on the ornate staircase that leads into the shallow end of the pool. He’s half submerged, so that his hips are parallel with the water’s surface, his legs and feet still under the water. He’s leaning back against the steps behind him, his hand holding onto an ornate railing for stability. His legs are splayed open, with Zeke kneeling between them. Zeke is lower on the steps than Zero, with only his head and shoulders above the water’s surface. While Zero is facing out toward the pool, Zeke is facing my direction, so that they’re facing one another.

They’re both fully naked.

Zeke has his hands on Zero’s hips, holding them steady.

His head bobs between Zero’s knees.

Zero’s cock is in his mouth.

Their bodies glisten, trails of water flow down the naked skin. Zero’s abs are held taut, and I see the muscles flex with each of his rapid, gasping breaths. A few stray, golden hairs trail over Zeke’s shoulders, escaping their bindings to add random patterns over his skin.

Zero gasps, then makes a sound of strangled pleasure. I see his hips try to buck, but Zeke holds them still. He teases Zero’s cock, pulling back to give only kittenish licks to the tip. Zero makes a frustrated noise, and I see Zeke give him a devilish grin. One of Zeke’s hands moves from Zero’s hip to his cock. Zeke gives a languid stroke and Zero gasps, his body shuddering as he holds himself still. The water ripples with their movement, lapping at their twined bodies.

Arousal burns through me. It surges so fiercely that I stumble back a step. My cock hardens, enough warmth pooling there that I know it would take only a few strokes for me to find completion. I keep my hands at my side, even when the heat builds to an almost painful level.

The water looks cool and inviting, but I know it would do nothing to quell the flames inside me. My heart pounds, but I stay rooted in place. My thoughts are blank. I don’t even have the presence of mind to wonder if I should retreat…

...Or advance.

Zeke dips his head again, enveloping Zero’s cock with his mouth. Zero moans and throws his head back, his body arching in pleasure. His eyes are half-lidded, but he still notices my rigid form. His eyes open fully and he stares at me, our gazes locked. His expression is placid, bordering on curious. I imagine mine must be guilty and embarrassed. Still, I remain stuck, unable to move from under his intense gaze.

After a moment, Zero nudges Zeke with his knee, making the blonde look up in surprise. Zeke notices me right away, and Zero releases my gaze to share a look with Zeke. Communication passes between them, indecipherable to me. It’s over in a moment, and then Zero is looking at me expectantly. Zeke stills, waiting for my response.
I… have no idea what they’re asking.

A moment passes.

My breathing picks up, and I feel a spike of anxiety to rival my arousal.

There is a question in their gazes, but I have no reply. I don’t know what’s being asked.

They share another glance. I can see Zeke’s expression, confused and a bit concerned. I can’t see Zero’s expression, but I watch as he shrugs his shoulders. They turn their gazes toward me again.

Zeke extends his hand to me.

The question - the invitation - suddenly becomes clear.

Zeke’s body is relaxed, his expression neutral, with just a hint of hopefulness. Zero’s body is more tense, but due mostly to his position and state of arousal. His expression is equally open and undemanding.

There is no pressure to join, only an open invitation.

A hand beckoning me to something I so obviously crave.

And then…

…I bolt.

Like a fucking coward.
A couple of things to add to my normal notes:

Sunday evening is going to have to become my new posting night. That's Sunday evening here - USA, Eastern Standard time. I know I have a pretty widespread audience, so it might vary for everyone else. :) I apologize for it being abrupt, but my weekday schedule has changed and I simply can't manage a weeknight posting. (My sister has changed jobs, throwing my entire schedule into array, lol. Where I used to get my niece on Friday evening and keep her over the weekend, I am now getting her several weeknights and keeping her a few hours. Which means that my weekends are more open, but I'm not able to write most weeknights.) So it's looking like Sunday will be the day. :) However, I'm hoping that steady updates will continue!

Second, quick thing is: I use the word "indian" several times in this chapter. I apologize if anyone finds this offensive. Within the confines of this story, it is used as a racially insensitive, historically inaccurate stereotype. I do not intend it to reflect actual Native American culture or heritage. In this setting, it is simply a (bad) costume.

All my gratitude to my beta team. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress are all awesome!

I’m in a saloon, as ridiculous as that sounds.

Rough hewn pine covers the floor and ceiling. The walls are decorated with antiquated wallpaper - vertical golden stripes separating columns of painted flowers. There’s a long bar at the right side of the room, with its top done in a dark, almost black stained wood. The barstools that run along it are bound with leather tops and no backrests. It has seats for a dozen patrons. A domestic asset in a black uniform stands behind it and polishes glasses.

The room itself could hold perhaps fifty patrons comfortably. Circular tables are spread out around the room, done in the same pine as the floor. The chairs surrounding the tables are lower than the bar stools and have curved, wooden slat backs. The room is divided by a high, narrow platform that almost bisects the room, but ends before hitting the far wall. It runs parallel to bar and is done in the same dark, almost black wood. The walls of the room are decorated with antiques from the American midwest; wagon wheels, pistols, ten gallon hats. All manner of themed items.

A cowboy saloon in a spaceship, I muse. How… quaint.

Zero rests at my feet under the table, and I’m less than pleased about him being folded in such a position and kneeling on the hard floor. But the rest of the pleasure assets are in a similar state, and I don’t dare draw attention to him by giving him preferential treatment. However, the more time he spends under the table, the less time I plan to be spending here. Despite Lee’s reluctant approval of this event, Zero is nowhere near fully recovered. The sooner I can leave, the better.

James is the first to greet me, as he’s making his rounds as the host. He’s trailed by several scantily clad pleasure assets, although not the one that I’m hoping to see.
“Zeke!” he says, shaking my hand as I rise to meet him. “I’m so glad you could make it!”

“It’s a pleasure to be here. You have a lovely home. Rather… unique.”

He chuckles and says, “I’ve always had a bit of a fascination with the old West. It’s not popular enough for my club; not ‘in fashion’ right now. I might have gone a bit overboard with it here.”

“It’s certainly memorable,” I respond with a grin, then change the topic. “Are these some of the asset you’ll be offering on opening night?”

“Yes, although not all of them, of course.”

“I know Leonid was quite eager to see Incubus again.”

“Yes.” He smiles, pleased by the interest his investment is bringing. “Speaking of which.”

He gestures, and I glance behind me to see Leonid approaching. His expression is clouded, but clears once he gets close enough to notice Zero at my feet, kneeling under the table beside my chair.

“Zeke!” Leo says happily. “You brought him! But where’s…”

“Incubus will be out in a little while,” James chides, although he’s hiding a pleased smirk. “He has a performance to do first. Then I thought we could move into the parlor for his interaction with Zero. Something of a private showing. Do you agree, Zeke?”

“That would be best. Zero is still a bit injured, so I think a more intimate setting would be better.”

Of course, I understand that the offer has nothing to do with Zero’s injury or my preference. More likely, James is trying to use the exclusivity of Zero’s performance to heighten his own social standing. But since it gets me what I want, I’m not going to protest solely because of motive.

“Fine,” Leo huffs, dropping himself into a chair at my table. “I suppose I’ll have to be patient.”

James gestures, and I follow him while keeping a wary eye on my table, knowing Zero is still taking refuge beneath it. The pleasure assets that trailed James disperse among the crowd he leads me over to the bar. James orders us both a whiskey neat from the domestic working the bar. I notice that the black uniform includes a double-breasted vest with silver buttons and a red cravat. It looks like James has extended the authenticity of the room all the way to the servant’s costumes.

I take my drink and turn, leaning my back against the bar and scanning my eyes over the growing crowd. Other than Leonid, still sulking at my table, I manage to pick out several familiar faces.

Reynard, the pleasure asset dealer, is speaking with Magdelene, the group’s resident fashion entrepreneur. Maggie and Ellaine seem to be friends, or perhaps they’ve simply bonded over being two of the few females within the group. However, I don’t see Ellaine, and thinking back I’m not sure she ever mentioned if she’d actually be attending. She’s been fairly sociable lately, so it would be a bit out of character for her not to attend, although… Maybe the decor offended her refined sensibilities.

Vikram and another blonde man are sharing drinks at a table not far from my own. From the resemblance between the two, it looks like the current proprietor of BloodSports Arena, with his newly-appointed title of combat asset dealer, has decided to bring another relative into the fray. Brother, perhaps?

Carter is standing at the back of the room, sipping a drink and watching the crowd gather. Speaking
with him is one of the larger reasons for my attendance tonight. He’s having a party next week at the Arcrest Manor, which could be my opportunity to finally ask Dillon if he’d be willing to sponsor me. Unfortunately, my invitation seems to hinge on bringing entertainment in the form of my scholarly asset, and… I’d like to avoid that at all costs.

I glance around, because if Dillon is attending tonight, then perhaps I could simply ask him now and avoid the whole issue. However, I don’t manage to spot him. Damn.

“Quite a turnout,” I compliment James, who’s standing beside me, sipping at his own drink. “I wanted to speak with Ellaine. Will the Arcrests be joining us?”

“No,” James sighs. “They’re visiting Ellaine’s father and couldn’t attend. They’ve both promised to be at the opening, though. But I’m a bit disappointed, they’re going to miss a hell of a show tonight.”

“Oh?” I wonder, trying to keep the disappointment from my voice.

“Mm,” James says with a sly grin. “Between the two of us, I managed to get a second Competition-level asset to offer on opening night. Finally talked Reynard into giving me a decent price on one of his better assets. Between you and me, that man’s a bit of a tightwad.” I have to take into account the source when considering that opinion. “I’ll be debuting the new one tonight in the performance with Incubus.”

“What kind of performance?” I wonder. He makes an excited gesture and shakes his head.

“You’ll see!” he promises with a grin. “And, of course, I’m extremely excited to see Incubus with your zero.”

“Speaking of which,” I reply, using the opening to separate from him. “I’d better be getting back to my table. I don’t like leaving him to his own devices for too long - temperamental, you know? Besides, I’ve monopolized you enough this evening.”

“Yes, I suppose I need to mingle,” he responds, moving away from the bar and sounding genuinely disappointed. “But save me a seat at your table, won’t you? You’ve picked the best spot in the house.”

“Oh course,” I agree, and then he heads off into the crowd.

I give a small sigh, feeling exhausted already. With a quick motion, I down the rest of my drink, feeling the pleasant burn drown out the rest of my thoughts for a moment. Then I set the empty glass on the table and head back to my seat, where Leo is fidgeting with his glasses. A quick glance under the table to check on Zero - who looks bored and uncomfortable, although I can’t tell if his discomfort is from actual pain, or from being under a table where he’s unable to assess the room for threats. Despite being here as my pleasure asset, his mind never seems to stray far from the bodyguard mentality.

“I wish they’d get started already,” Leo gripes, putting his glasses back on.

“Have a drink. Maybe it will relax you,” I tease. He rolls his eyes, turning to glance toward James. We’re so close, sitting side-by-side at the table, that turning his head to look across the room gives me a flash of the inside of his glasses. I notice immediately that the lenses are anything but ordinary - the inside of the glass sports a series of lines and boxes that shift and change. It strikes me suddenly that the glasses aren’t just for decoration, and neither are they for vision. There’s a computer hidden in the slim, wire frames, and the lenses themselves function as a camera. No wonder he was so eager to get Zero back here. He wants to take pictures of Zero and Incubus. To use as a reference in his
art? Or for personal pleasure? It’s hard to tell.

I’m not sure how I feel about having someone take pictures of Zero. I suppose, for all I know, they’ve been doing it all along. There were cameras at The Line during Zero’s debut performance; I’ve no way of knowing if they recorded the performance as they displayed it on the overhead screens for our audience. And anyone in the audience could have taken pictures or video of Zero at the time, although I’d simply trusted that they hadn’t.

No, that’s not right. It hadn’t been about trust. It had been a purposeful blindness. I put the risk from my mind, knowing that there was nothing I could do about it. If I wanted to be accepted in this society, I couldn’t risk the other owners for recording devices. I couldn’t demand secrecy from an already secret society. My only choice was to assume that my presence and performance would not be broadcast to the general public, and keep my head down.

Which is, unfortunately, the same situation I find myself in now. There’s no way to subtly accuse Leonid of making recordings, no way to politely ask him to take off the glasses when Zero performs. I could make a fuss about it, but it won’t gain me the kind of attention I’m looking for. It might alienate some of the allies I’ve already made - at the very least, James won’t appreciate me making a scene at his party. And changing my mind about displaying Zero tonight will cause just as much tension, as I doubt Leo will be gracious if I retract my earlier permission. If I weren’t going to allow Zero to perform because of his injury, then I wouldn’t have brought him at all. At this stage, reconsidering would seem petty.

Unable to see a way out, I take a breath and let it go. It takes a conscious effort of will, but I put the issue from my mind.

James is right - it isn’t much longer until the lights dim in warning and the standing crowd moves to find their seats. James joins our table on my left, and Reynard takes the seat across from me. We’re one of the closest tables to the stage, situated roughly in the center. As the crowd quiets and the lights dim fully, I’m expecting to see performers come out from the far end of the stage, where the platform meets the wall and heavy, red curtains block the audience’s view. I assume that there is a door there leading to a backstage area, where our entertainment is waiting.

The lights come up on the stage, shining in rows along the floor of the platform and keeping the rest of the room shrouded. A violin plays a single note - a long wail into the darkness. Something shifts, and then two poles rise from under the platform. A pair of figures stand at the base of each pole, their backs against the metal, facing toward each other.

As the lights illuminate the pair I recognize Incubus, his hair loose and cascading around him. His body is naked except for a tan cloth covering his privates. There’s a stripe of black paint running across his face, covering both his eyes, which are currently closed. A single, small braid is woven into his hair near his face, and two feathers adorn it - both white with black tips. A band of leather wraps around his upper arm, and he’s wearing a necklace interwoven with onyx and turquoise beads.

The other asset is unknown to me - likely the second Competition-level asset that James spoke of earlier. His looks are almost as arresting as his partner’s - both have slim features and narrow bodies, but that’s where the resemblance stops. The newcomer is a bit slimmer in the shoulders than Incubus, a bit more feminine in appearance. Long, almost hip-length strands of shockingly white hair, woven into hundreds of small, thick braids. His skin is paler than Incubus’s, nearly as porcelain as Kip’s. His eyes are a honey brown, his pink lips show the curl of a smile without actually changing his expression. His face is narrow, his cheekbones high, giving him a delicate, almost breakable look. As compliment to Incubus’s outfit, this asset is wearing leather chaps over blue jeans, cowboy boots, and a western-style hat perched atop his mass of hair.
A guitar joins the violin, and suddenly the tempo is upbeat and lively. The two performers move as one, with the cowboy advancing and the indian retreating, circling each other on the limited space of the stage. They keep an equal distance between each other, and the chase ends when they return to their respective starting points. But instead of halting, each of them grabs a pole and uses the momentum to swing themselves into the air, spinning on the pole and climbing in a dizzying circle. When they reach the zenith of the pole, they stop and complete a pair of perfect, twirling splits, hanging by only the strength of their hands.

I feel a nudge at my leg and shift over, giving Zero room to peer around me. I run my fingers through his hair and let him lean into my thigh, his eyes riveted on the performance above. Even in the dim light from the stage, I can tell that his pupils are blown. In preparation for a night of discomfort, Lee gave him a high dose of pain medicine. I’m hoping it’s enough to let him cope, but not enough to make him tired or sloppy. So far, he seems to be tracking pretty well, but I have to wonder if he would be so open about his interest if it weren’t for the cocktail of drugs lowering his defenses.

I turn my attention back to the stage as the music slows. The two slide down their poles, and the cowboy resumes pursuing the indian, but this time at a slower and more seductive pace. Incubus keeps his face toward the other man, backing away until he’s pinned against the other pole. He swings around it, building momentum as he climbs. When he reaches the halfway point he halts his assent, then slowly pushes his legs away from the bar until he’s holding himself almost totally perpendicular. A moment of stillness as he continues to spin, and then he brings his legs slowly over his head to wrap around the bar again. When he finishes, he’s completely inverted, hanging on with his legs above him and his head toward the floor, facing away from the bar. He releases his grip with his hands and arches his back, holding his arms out like he’s flying. His hair swings in a wide curtain with him, the pair of braided feathers giving contrast to the mass of dark locks.

Beneath him, the cowboy pantomimes frustration, stomping his foot and making broad gestures. He reaches up like he’s going to climb Incubus’s pole, but the dark-haired man pushes away from the bar, doing a backflip over the light-haired cowboy. The music picks up again. The cowboy turns and gives chase, and they complete another circuit of the stage, giving the audience plenty of time to admire their glistening, mostly-nude forms.

Incubus stumbles. Whether it’s a choreographed part of the routine or an actual mistake is impossible to tell, but the cowboy is on him in an instant. Incubus goes down to a knee, and the white-haired man shoves him hard with a boot, sending him sprawling to his back. Incubus pushes himself up to his elbows, but not before the cowboy is kneeling over him, his weight settling on Incubus’s hips, pinning him down. The cowboy pins Incubus’s arms with one hand, the other grabbing his face and forcing him into a harsh kiss.

The kiss seems to be catalyst for the “indian” to give up all pretense of resistance. Suddenly they’re undulating against each other. Incubus plants his heels and thrusts up against the cowboy, while the white-haired man throws his head back and rolls his hips, both of them fighting for friction. The cowboy releases the indian’s arms, moving so that he’s now straddling his captive’s head. Incubus’s hands come to the cowboy’s hips, his mouth works against the fabric of the cowboy’s tight pants. The music rises as the two rock against each other, intensity building, until the both of them arch and tense, giving way to silent screams of pleasure. Like their voices, the act symbolic, portraying a climax that neither is permitted to reach.

Incubus sags against the stage; a “defeat” of sorts, I suppose. The cowboy gets to his feet in triumph, then swings excitedly onto his pole and gives several moments of graceful, twirling movements. The music slows. The cowboy finishes and drops to the platform just moments before the lights come up. Incubus stands, and the crowd erupts into applause.
James seems to teleport onto the stage, or maybe he moved while they were still performing and I was simply too entranced to notice. Either way, he appears beside the two performers, a wide grin on his face as he pulls them toward him on either side.

“Aren’t they just amazing?” he asks, and his voice is amplified in the large room. “Don’t forget, Angel and Incubus will both be featured as prizes during the grand opening of the casino expansion at The Line next week. If you have any interest in taking either of these beauties home with you, make sure you attend!”

The three exit the stage, and the crowd begins to shift and rise. James returns to the table, trailing the two assets behind him, and we all rise to meet him.

“Lovely performance,” Reynard compliments. “Very… festive.” And the way he says “festive” doesn’t sound like much of a compliment, but James either doesn’t notice or chooses to ignore it.

“It certainly got the attention I was hoping for.” He turns toward me and asks, “What did you think?”

“Very impressive,” I respond easily. “I hadn’t ever thought to train my zero in pole dancing. Is that something all pleasure assets can do?”

“Not all of them,” Reynard answers, “but a well-rounded pleasure asset will have a variety of… talents.” He smiles in a predatory way. “A good pleasure asset needs to be more than a pretty face and a hole to fuck.”

That strikes me as a dig at Zero, and I frown.

“Now now,” James interjects. “Let’s not get competitive. Tonight is about relaxing and socializing, after all.”

“You’re right, of course,” Reynard acknowledges with a nod. “My apologies, sometimes I forget how… new you are to all of this. I meant no offense.”

“None taken,” I reply. “I’m still trying to learn.”

Reynard nods, then glances toward James.

“I really must be going,” he says. “I only wanted to make sure you were happy with Angel.”

“Oh yes,” James responds, pulling the white-haired asset closer. “I think he’ll be just what I need to attract a big crowd.”

“Then I will take my leave of you,” he nods in my direction as well, before turning away and heading toward the exit.

“Speaking of leaving,” James says, tossing a glance toward Incubus. “You should go get ready. You have a private performance that we’ve all been dying for. Isn’t that right, Leo?”

“Well,” Leo chuckles, wiping his glasses with a handkerchief. “I have to admit that I wasn’t expecting a performance like this one. Quite stunning!”

James gives a pleased smile, but doesn’t let it go. Instead, he turns toward Incubus and says, “Take the zero with you while you get ready. We’ll meet you in the parlor in an hour.”

Incubus nods, but I put a hand on James’ arm in protest.

“I’d prefer not to be separated from my zero,” I protest. “They can be… a bit unstable.”
“Not afraid of your own toy, are you?” a voice from behind me says. I turn to see Carter standing next to our group, Magdelene at his side.

“I… didn’t say that.”

“Then let them run along,” he responds with a shrug. “You hover like a mother hen.”

I bite back on an angry retort, instead settling on a more neutral, “He was injured recently,” to explain my behavior.

“Doesn’t that make him less likely to act up? If you’ve just recently put him in his place?”

“I… suppose so.”

And then, without any further follow up, he turns to James.

“I want to hear how the expansion is going. Are you on schedule for the opening?”

“Absolutely,” James responds, preening at the attention to his favorite topic. “We’ll be opening next week no matter what.”

“I’ve heard so much about the renovations. I think something like this is just what we need, don’t you think?”

“Oh yes,” James replies, and offhandedly gestures for Incubus to continue on his way. From the corner of my eye, I see Zero shift under the table, moving slowly to get himself clear of the chairs. By the time Incubus has come to his side, Zero is painfully levering himself to his feet. I suppose it’s better this way, letting him get on his feet and move around a bit before he performs, instead of going directly from under the table to the center stage.

Zero casts a questioning glance at me, and my only option is nod my assent. Zero looks unconcerned as he turns from me, following Incubus toward the back of the room, both of them ducking through an opening in the bar. Zero usually dislikes being separated from me, but then… perhaps the drugs in his system are making him less paranoid and more mellow. Will they be too noticeable during his performance? Will they be strong enough to allow him to perform? I feel a spike of anxiety myself as Zero and Incubus disappear through a door at the back of the room.

I have to admit that I can only half-heartedly pay attention to the flow of conversation after that, worried that I might not get a chance to check in on Zero before his performance. We order another round of drinks and settle back at our table, pulling up an extra chair to accommodate the full group. Topics range from business ventures to politics, then circle back around to assets and the Competition. I make enough comments and ask enough questions to seem passably engaged, but I’m mostly focused on finding a way to excuse myself.

I don’t get the chance until we’re almost ready for the performance. When James says, “They should be ready soon. Do we want to go on to the parlor?” I seize the opportunity.

“You go on without me,” I interject. “I’ll be down in a moment.”

James frowns, but there’s really no way for him to protest. I back away from the group before he can find an excuse to try to keep me with them. With a shrug, he leads the group away. I watch until I’m sure that they’ve all headed on before I turn toward the door that Incubus disappeared through.

One way or another, I’m checking on Zero.
I hope everyone is adjusting okay to the new posting schedule! Once again, I apologize for the abrupt change. Hopefully things will quiet down until the end of the section, although I don't hold out a lot of hope for that. :) 

All my gratitude to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

With the owners out of sight, I head toward the door that Zero disappeared through, eager to check up on my asset. I manage to slip through a gap in the bar near the rear of the room. Unfortunately, there’s a single domestic still lingering in the room to serve any remaining owners - the bartender from earlier. He’s close enough to notice me and immediately blocks my direction.

“I’m sorry, Owner Price,” he says, bowing his head as he places himself in my path. “That area is only suited for assets. Is there something I can do for you?”

“My zero is back there.”

“I could go and get him for you.”

That won’t work, not if my hope is to get a moment of semi-privacy to check in on him.

“You can either let me through that door,” I say tersely, “or you can explain to your owner why the performance they’re looking forward to isn’t happening tonight.”

To his credit, the asset pales but holds his ground.

“I’m so sorry, Owner Price, but I…”

I take a step forward, moving into the asset’s space. He’s nearly my height, but slim and narrow like most of the domestics. He gives a startled noise and tries to take a step back, but finds himself blocked by the door in question. I lean forward, encroaching on his space.

“I’m not trying to get you in trouble,” I say softly. “If anyone asks, you can tell them that I insisted. But if no one asks, perhaps no one needs to know. Simpler for both of us, right?”

There’s a short pause, and then he nods slowly. I smile and step back. He takes a shaky breath, then moves out of my way as soon as he has room to do so. He looks frightened as he beats a hasty retreat, and I can only hope that fear keeps him from causing any more problems for me. I hate having to bully someone to get what I want, but Zero’s safety is my primary concern.

Through the door is a plain hallway, far from the opulence of the main area. White plaster on the
walls, and dull metal flooring. Cases of glasses sit along the hall, stray boxes and unused decorative pieces. Not even carpet to dampen the sounds, and I immediately hear strained voices echoing down the hall.

“Listen,” I hear Incubus growl. “I’m not buying your alpha-male, macho bullshit, okay?”

There’s a pause, but no one responds.

In a more exasperated tone, Incubus says, “I know how people move with busted ribs! Whatever you’re hiding, I really don’t give a shit. But it’s my ass on the line if we fuck this up, you get me? So I need to know what’s going on with you, because I can tell that you’re hurt, but I can’t tell where.”

There’s a tense silence, and I slow my steps so I won’t be heard as I move down the hall. I head toward the only door that’s ajar, with light showing around the edges.

Incubus makes a frustrated noise and says, “A glare is not an answer!”

“I will be able to manage our performance,” Zero responds, his voice hard. “My condition is none of your concern.”

“We’re gonna be in pretty close contact, buddy. So I think your ‘condition’ is a pretty big concern for me, in case I accidentally hurt you! You think I haven’t seen how protective the blonde guy is of you? You think he won’t throw a fit and a half if I do something to hurt his golden boy?”

“Master Zeke won’t blame you for performing as ordered.”

“Yeah,” he snarks. “I’ll be sure to take that to the bank. But in the meantime, why don’t you just give me a hint to what’s going on, so that I can keep your ass from getting injured.”

“Protecting me is not your responsibility,” I hear Zero reply, and I can tell he’s losing patience as well. “I’ve been trained for this. I’m a pleasure asset as well. I can take care of myself.”

“You’re not a pleasure asset,” the other scoffs. “You’re a pet that he fucks.”

“I’m not -...”

“How many guys are you expecting to fuck tonight?” Incubus interrupts. “Two, including me? Maybe three?”

Zero doesn’t respond, and in a moment Incubus continue with, “You know how many guys I’m gonna fuck tonight? Five. Ten. Maybe more. You know why?” he asks, lowering his voice. “Because I’m a pleasure asset. I’m currency. Get it? You’re a gimmick. You’re here because you attract attention. He doesn’t need to hand you around, because your value is in your exclusivity. But when the novelty wears off? You’ll be a combat asset again, and I’ll still be fucking a dozen guys a day.” His voice goes bitter as he says, “So cut me a break, and help me figure this shit show out. Okay? Just… give me a clue.”

There is a beat of tense silence.

Then Zero says, “There’s nothing to tell,” because I’ve already instructed him not to reveal what his true injury is. Zero is nothing if not loyal.

“Please,” Incubus says, and the pleading tone of his voice draws me up short when I was just about to enter the room. “You really saved my ass back at the Manor that first time. I don’t see kindness like that very often. Please, man. Don’t make me repay it by hurting you.”
“I’m… I’m sorry,” Zero says, his voice surprised and hesitant. “I… can’t help you.”

“Yeah,” Incubus scoffs, “Figures. One time I get to fuck somebody kinda hot, and I can’t even give him a good time. Pretty much how my luck has gone recently.” He sighs heavily. “Let’s just go. We’ll work it out on the fly.”

The mention of leaving spurs me back into motion, and I push my way into the room, quietly closing the door behind me. It’s a small room, hardly more than a closet. It must be some sort of dressing area for performances on the stage. There are costume items strewn around in messy heaps. A full wall of hanging outfits takes up one section of the small room, a makeup table strewn with cosmetics takes up another. I can see an open door to a small, utilitarian bathroom - a toilet and sink only, no shower.

Without looking up, Incubus says, “Yeah, we’re coming-” before abruptly cutting off when he turns and sees me.

“Shit!” he curses, falling to his knees quick enough to crack them against the hard floor, making me wince. Zero doesn’t move. He watches Incubus toss himself to the floor with a look of muted surprise, before raising curious eyes to me.

“Master,” he acknowledges. “Why are you here?”

“I wanted to check on you before your performance,” I respond. Casting my eyes to Incubus, I say, “You can get up.”

“Thank you, Owner Price,” Incubus responds, his voice sedate and formal. Nothing like the spirited, energetic person of a moment ago.

He pushes himself to his feet, and I take a moment to look him over. Gone is the black stripe across his face, as it the tan loincloth and other costume items. His hair is held in a loose plait, with a few strands falling around his face. He and Zero are both dressed in tiny, black spandex shorts - Incubus must have provided the outfit. Zero was originally dressed in plain, black pants and a white t-shirt. He’s still wearing his black sneakers. Incubus is barefoot, but perhaps he hasn’t made it to shoes yet.

They both look… tired. Zero’s state is pretty easily understandable, as he’s just barely recovered enough to be here. Incubus’s is a little more puzzling, although I have no doubt that he’s in for a long night. Still, it’s early for him to have such a pinched, pained expression. And there’s something about the way his eyes are sunken and perhaps a little dull that speaks to me of bone-deep weariness.

I can only be relieved that the casino opening is in two weeks. Incubus… looks to be at the end of his endurance.

“I heard you questioning Zero,” I comment, uncertain on how to broach the topic.

Incubus hangs his head and says, “My apologies, Owner Price. I… overstepped. I only meant to ensure his safety.”

“What makes you think,” I ask carefully, “that his injuries are not due to his fractured ribs? You can see that he’s been damaged.”

I gesture to Zero’s exposed torso, where the left side of his ribs is covered in splotches of purple, some fading to an ugly yellows and greens around the edges. It’s fake, of course. As a cover for the damage to his hip, I’d painted the bruises on myself, then covered the actual damage on his hip with concealer. The makeup is water and friction resistant. Even after hours of being under his clothes, the bruises still look indistinguishable from the real thing.
It’s concerning that Incubus was so easily able to pick it out as a fake. If he can, could the other owners be suspicious as well?

Incubus gives a small sigh.

““It looks real,” Incubus acknowledges. “If you tell me to, I’ll let it go.”

“But you don’t believe it, do you?” I wonder. “What makes you so sure it’s fake?”

He hesitates for a long moment, long enough that I start to think he won’t answer me.

“I know how people move when they’ve got busted ribs,” he says, a little of the slang slipping back into his voice. “He doesn’t move like he’s hurt. Or hurt there, at least.”

“What makes you such an expert?” I grouse, wondering what I’m going to do if Zero’s cover isn’t working.

“If anyone knows, it’s a pleasure asset,” Incubus responds, and there’s something… sardonic about his voice. It makes me take a second glance at him. Makes me see the defensive set of his shoulders, the way he holds his arms protectively around his middle without actually crossing them.

And that’s when it clicks.

I move into Incubus’s space, backing the pleasure asset against the wall. He gives ground, but there’s a defiant look to his eyes. He doesn’t like this, but he doesn’t dare resist me. I place my hands on his ribcage and he hisses, flinches back but is blocked by the wall behind him. To his credit, he doesn’t shove me away, despite the fact that I’m obviously hurting him. He grits his teeth and takes deep, wheezing breaths through his nose, his hands clenched in fists at his sides. It only takes me a few seconds of probing to discover the problem. I’d half expected it anyway.

Shit.

Not one injured asset.

Two.

“Does your owner know about this?” I ask, feeling the heat beneath my left palm. The top two ribs on his right side are cracked, if not outright broken. The actual injury must be covered in some kind of makeup, the way Zero’s it. There’s no outward sign of the wound except for a slight amount of swelling, but the skin is hot and tight under my fingers. The flesh is probably bruised almost to black under a layer of heavy concealer.

Incubus grimaces.

“No,” he responds sullenly. “How would I tell him? He’s not even here.”

“What…” I trail, then remember earlier conversations about Incubus, when I’d first found out that he would be offered as a prize. He must technically still be owner by Jackson, with James acting as an in-between agent. I have to wonder if the same is true of Angel, with Reynard still owning him.

But Reynard was at least here tonight, keeping an eye on the state of his property. I can’t remember seeing Jackson at any of the recent parties Incubus has attended. Is no one watching out for his welfare? Does no one care, as long as he survives until the opening and garners enough attention to bring in a crowd?
“It was my fault anyway,” Incubus continues. “I… tripped,” he says, and I read between the lines enough to hear, “was pushed.” “I fell into a table. The corner got me in the side. It’s okay. I can still perform.”

“Right,” I reply, because that was far from my first concern.

“I did the pole-dancing routine,” he says defensively. “Even though it hurt like hell. I can do this.”

That routine probably did half the damage that he’s dealing with now.

How to salvage this situation? How to keep the two of them from injuring each other? I can feel nervous energy running through Incubus, can almost sense how much he dislikes being cornered like this. I hold my ground, keeping him pinned between myself and the wall.

“Zero,” I call, and he’s moving forward before I can say, “Come here.”

There’s a concerned expression on my fighter's face. He’d missed this, had totally overlooked that Incubus could be injured too. Incubus covers it well. I’d almost not seen it either.

“Right here,” I guide, taking Zero’s hand in my right one, moving it to where my left hand is resting against Incubus’s skin. I move my hand out of the way and let Zero rest his fingers against Incubus’s skin. Incubus hisses, making Zero flinch away.

“Gently,” I guide, settling Zero’s palm against the injury. “Feel it? Most of the damage is here, around the side. Top, maybe top two ribs have been cracked. When you’re with him, don’t wrap your arms around his middle. If you’re laying down, don’t put your weight on his chest. Be aware of the injury.”

“Yes, Master,” Zero says, his tone subdued. He doesn’t like the idea of performing with an injured partner much either.

“Thanks,” Incubus says tightly, his eyes closed and his teeth gritted, “but I doubt I’ll get the same consideration for the rest of the night.”

“Perhaps not,” I acknowledge, feeling my heart sink as I remember his earlier words. A whole night of this? Of being passed around by men who care nothing for him, who have no limits or bounds to what they can do to him, save for damage that might affect his value?

And I… left him to this fate. If I’d taken him when he was first offered, back at the Arcrest Manor, I could have saved him from all this. But I let guilt and fear cloud my judgement. And now… I’m partially responsible for causing him pain again.

I back up, allowing Incubus to move away from the wall. Zero stays rooted, but Incubus brushes past him, less afraid of my fighter than of me. I notice that Incubus puts the washroom at his back this time, ensuring that I can’t corner him again.

“It’s his hip,” I find myself admitting, trusting my gut instinct. “That’s where the damage is. The left one.”

Incubus casts me a suspicious glance, but it doesn’t keep him from kneeling next to Zero in the small space. Tentatively, he puts his hands on the band of Zero’s shorts, and Zero helps push them off his hips, revealing smooth, unblemished skin underneath.

“Damn,” Incubus comments under his breath, his fingers brushing against the pale skin. “This is excellent work. Did Kip do this?” he asks, but doesn’t seem to expect a response. “There were scars
here before. I didn’t even notice they were gone.”

He bites his lip, his expression pensive.

“What is it?” I wonder, the look on his face telling me that he’s holding something back.

“Owner Saal,” he says, referring to Leonid by his last name, “is going to notice. He… picks up on things like that.”

“I don’t suppose we can keep the shorts on?” I ask.

“If… If you order it, we will, of course. But… the other owners probably expect a more… intense show.”

“Right. Of course.” There hesitancy in his expression again and I have to ask, “Is there anything you can do?”

“Yes,” he says, and it sounds a little relieved. “If you’ll allow me, Owner Price. I can try to add some depth. The scars are still there, so I think I can trace them through the makeup. Bring them out more.”

“Go ahead,” I allow. Then, thinking better of it, “Wait a moment. I have to be going. Can you give us a moment?”

He gives me a look that can only be considered baffled, before shaking it off and responding, “Yes, sir.”

He gets to his feet and goes to the door, stepping into the hall and pulling it shut behind him. I’m not naive enough to think that he isn’t listening at the door, but even the illusion of privacy is a relief.

I turn toward Zero. He looks—...

“I’m fine,” he says, cutting off my train of thought. I would probably have said “tired,” but… He’s right. He still looks like he’s doing okay. “You need to get back to the other owners.”

“Yes,” I acknowledge, “but I wanted to check on you first.”

“I’m fine,” he reiterates.

“How’s the pain? Are the drugs wearing off?”

Lee gave him a strong narcotic before we left, but he warned that its effects would start to wane in a few hours. It’s a fast-acting drug, designed to be administered in the form of eye drops. There’s a bottle in the inside pocket of my suit jacket. I can feel the tiny shape resting against my chest.

“I…” he says, and the hesitancy is all I really need to tell me how much pain he’s in. I cut him off with a gesture, handing the bottle over to him. He’s not so far gone that he can’t handle the drops himself, and he moves into the tiny bathroom to make use of the mirror.

“Two drops in each,” I remind him, although Lee said it enough times that I doubt Zero needs the reminder. Leaning against the bathroom door frame, I have to ask, “Are you really doing alright?”

“The sooner we get this over, the better,” he admits, blinking as the drops absorb. “But… I will survive.” He glances at the door and says, “I’m less convinced that he will.”

“Just be careful of those ribs,” I caution as he hands the bottle back. “You’ll both get through it.”
“I hate this,” he admits, although I have a feeling it’s more for the other than himself.

“I know,” I reply, and leave the. “Me too,” unspoken.

“You have to go.”

“I know.”

There’s nothing else to say. I move across the room and open the door. As expected, Incubus is waiting nearby, sitting on one of the empty crates. He gets up and comes over as I exit the tiny room, walking stiffly inside.

I only get a few steps away before I think… Fuck it. And turn back.

“Incubus,” I call, stepping back into the room and closing the door behind me. The wary look is back on the long-haired man's face as he turns toward me.

“Yes, sir?”

“Are you on anything?”

“Sir?”

“Have you taken any drugs today?”

“No, sir. I… I’m clean. I haven’t taken anything.”

From his tone, I can tell that he thinks I’m judging him for substances I’ve seen him take - on one occasion, have given him myself - in the past. He thinks that I want him to be sober to do a scene with Zero, but… I’m having the opposite concern.

It’s a risk. He could be lying. He could have a reaction to the drugs. He could tell his owner that I doped him. I shouldn’t even be considering this kind of chance.

But it’s more of a risk not to. Because I honestly don’t know if he can make it through the performance tonight with nothing to dull the pain.

A moment of watching Incubus tells me that he’s too anxious and exhausted to manage the drops himself - I can see his hands trembling even as he watches me. And Incubus is still uncertain of me, still too nervous and intimidated to let me get in his space again. I don’t have time to cajole him into trusting me, so I toss the bottle to Zero, who Incubus seems more comfortable with.

“Two drops in each,” I instruct. “You do it for him, his hands are shaking too badly.”

Zero nods, immediately understanding my intentions. Incubus takes a few moments more, confusedly glancing between the two of us.

“Hurry up,” Zero snaps when Incubus makes no move. It prompts the pleasure asset into motion, and suddenly he’s on his knees in front of Zero, his face tilted up at the asian fighter.

Zero’s hands are amazingly gentle when he wants them to be. It has often impressed me, how deadly he can be one moment, and then how careful the next. He uncaps the bottle and pulls out the dropper, setting the container on the floor. With the tips of his fingers, he tilts Incubus’s head back, staring somberly into those dazzling purple eyes. His right hand brings the dropper to the corner of Incubus’s eye and squeezes two drops into the dark orb. Incubus blinks hard, then stills himself when Zero moves to do the other. Incubus blinks away the wetness, a few tears escaping over his long
lashes. The liquid streaks down his cheeks, wetting the loose hairs that frame his face and mattig them to his skin. Zero notices, and uses the side of his hand to brush the strands away and tuck them behind the brunet’s ear.

I cough softly, making the two of them jump. Incubus hurries to get back to his feet, and Zero recaps the bottle and hands it back to me.

“Good luck to you both,” I tell them, placing the bottle back in my pocket. “And be careful with each other.”

Then I leave them, hurrying down the hall. When I exit the backstage area, I’m relieved to find the bartender gone and the room empty. It seems all the guests have departed in favor of other amusements now that the performance is over. I’ll have to find an asset to direct me to the parlor, where James and the others are waiting.

Yet, despite the pressing need to rejoin the group, I can’t seem to shake the image from my mind of Zero cupping Incubus’s face, strong fingers holding his chin securely, and a gentle hand brushing the hair from his face. I have no doubts that Zero has taken an interest in the popular pleasure asset. I’ve never seen him behave like that with any asset other than Kip. And even then, only rarely.

If the word can apply to someone like Zero, I’d have to say that he’s… smitten.

As I traverse the hallways in search of the other owners, all I can think is: Shit.

And: When did that happen?
Hi everyone! I hope you are all adapting to the new posting day, which is working out a lot better for me. :) I am supposed to be closing on the house next week, but they kicked up an extra lien on my foreclosure property, so we'll see what happens. Keep your fingers crossed for me! In other news, I came home Friday to a torrential downpour happening IN my current house! The out-hose on the hot water tank broke, spraying hot water across my house and into three rooms for at least a couple hours before I got home (being the out-hose only, it continued to replenish itself with more water through the whole thing). Thankfully, the cats adjusted right away, and were essentially chilling in a sauna by the time I came home and had a COMPLETE MELTDOWN before I managed to find the water shut-off valve for the house. So... that was my weekend. Lol. I can only hope yours was better!

All my gratitude to my beta team for sticking with me through this whole process. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are all the awesomeness. Honestly, just the best.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

“Did you find your little chick?” Carter asks as I enter the parlor and find seat at their table. It’s a larger group than before: James, Leonid, Carter, Magdelene, and now Vikram, although the relative he was sitting with earlier is conspicuously absent. All are watching me.

I don’t dignify the question with a response as I take my seat.

Carter chuckles and says, “Cluck cluck, mother hen.”

Then, thankfully, turns his attention back to the conversation.

“Do you really think the casino will be able to function with such an exclusive clientele?” Vikram asks. “Restricting your patrons only to Leash members is risky, no? Not that I don’t understand your interest - keeping Leash members separate from regular fights at Bloodsports is a challenge.”

“See, but that’s the beauty of it,” James responds. “I’m using assets as staff, so there’s no daily cost for labor. Even if the casino is open with few customers, I’m not losing money.”

“Carmé’s nephew is going to be managing the domestics, correct?” Carter asks. “I know Felix had been looking for opportunities to get some experience in handling assets on his own.

“Yes, we’ve worked out a price for the first year. Next year we’ll renegotiate. Then again, by next year I might be ready to try my hand at the Competition, and then I can buy the assets outright.” He grins. “But it’s a lot of money. I haven’t managed to convince myself to take that chance yet.”

“Oh, you should,” Magdelene puts in. She’s sipping something from a martini glass, and her fingers
play with a skewered cherry as she smiles at James. “I think it would be worth your while. Being a member is one thing, but being a Champion has its own set of benefits.”

“Dillon keeps telling me that,” James says. “Maybe next year.” He turns his attention on me. “What about you? Are you thinking of entering this year?”

“I’m not sure,” I reply. “I must admit to being intrigued by the idea, but… The cost, not to mention procuring the right assets, might be more than I can manage this year.”

“You’ll find,” Carter says, “that as a group we’re pretty generous with our friends. If you’re interested, I’m sure something can be worked out.”

That piques my interest, but before I can ask more, Leonid bursts in with, “How much longer am I going to have to wait?”

“It has been a long time,” James acknowledges. He sounds annoyed, but I can’t tell if it’s at Leo for pointing it out, or for the assets for being late. “What could be…”

He trails off when Incubus enters, with Zero trailing not far behind.

The two look better. I wonder if Incubus decided it was worth waiting long enough for the painkillers to fully kick in, because the tired, pinched expression is gone from both their faces. Incubus looks relaxed, with a small smile playing around his lips. Zero still looks tense, but no longer exhausted and pained. In such close quarters as this, the difference is noticeable.

The parlor, now that I give myself a moment to look around, is done in the same Western style as the saloon, although thankfully a more refined version. The tables here are small and square, done in a light maple and polished smooth. Two chairs sit at each table, and I can see five or six tables scattered around the perimeter. I’m sitting at a longer, rectangular table with the others, and I notice that it’s three of the smaller tables put together. There’s gold trim around the edge of the tables, and it matches with the crown molding at the tops of the walls. The curtains in this room are done in red velvet, almost a scarlet hue. There’s carpet on the floor, softening the sound in the room and giving it a more cozy feel. The chairs are straight-backed, but padded with thick cushions in the same red as the curtains. There’s a bar in this room like the saloon, but it’s much smaller and situated unobtrusively in the back of the room, with a single domestic stationed there. The focal point of the room is a circular platform in the center, raised to almost hip height. It’s covered in red fabric and gilded at the edges as well.

Incubus kneels when he reaches us, and Zero follows suit only a moment behind. They both assume the position for a pleasure asset - on their knees, hands behind them, backs arched in an obscene display of submission. Both are dressed still in the black shorts and nothing else. Zero’s shoes are gone, leaving both of them barefoot.

“What should we have them do?” James asks, a smirk on his face. “Leo? Any ideas?”

“Plenty of ideas,” Leo responds. “I’d like to watch penetration, if that’s possible?”

“I’m okay with it,” James responds. “I’m assuming that the zero will be penetrating?”

“That… might be for the best,” I respond. “I don’t know how he’ll react to being vulnerable with an asset he’s unfamiliar with.”

James grins at me.

“We wouldn’t want him damaging the merchandise, would we?”
I laugh because it’s what expected of me.

However, my concern is not so much about Zero injuring Incubus, and more that Zero would visibly struggle with a cock of Incubus’s size, especially given his current injury. From what I’ve seen in the past, Incubus’s cock is large, with a girth to match. Although Zero can typically handle my cock without trouble, I don’t want to press his skills when he’s already injured.

“I’ll make sure he behaves himself.” I turn to Leo. “Anything else?”

“Well…” he hesitates. “I was kind of hoping I could see them get off…”

“Not Incubus,” James cuts in, and the tone is a bit more serious than the question should warrant. “He’s strictly banned from orgasms until after the opening.”

Leo deflates a bit, so I add in, “He can get my zero off, though. I have no issue with that.”

“I suppose it will have to do,” Leonid says, as though he were being drastically inconvenienced. “Can we get to it?”

James gestures, and the two assets glance at each other.

And then… nothing.

I have a surreal moment watching them hesitate, watching them tread awkwardly. Uncertainly. It’s a strange thing to watch something like this, to be so close and personal with such an intimate thing. To know the actors in a play, the person underneath the character. Zero is taking the top position in this scene, and so he should be the one leading, guiding. But Zero has rarely taken a dominant position before, and never in front of a crowd. Meanwhile, Incubus is meant to be the submissive one, but I can see impatience in his eyes. He’d like to shove Zero onto the stage and get to it, but the action doesn’t fit with the role he’s been given - or, at least, he doesn’t think it does.

Add to that the fact that they know each other now. Not enough to make things easy between them, not enough that they can be confident with each other, but just enough that their interactions are off. Awkward. Too close to be strangers, not close enough to be partners.

Watching them hesitate, it’s easy to read all of this in Zero’s uncertain eyes, in Incubus’s nervous posture. But only because I know them, and because I can see what’s brewing beneath the surface. To the other owners, it likely looks like stalling, and it doesn’t take long for them to become restless as well.

I clear my throat and make a large gesture to the asset as the back of the room. It distracts the group for a moment, as they all wait for the asset to bring over a tray of liquor and glasses. I take a scotch, neat, and several other owners take a glass or get a refill. The domestic retreats, but he’s served his purpose. The earlier tension has broken up, and the focus of the room is not so sharp.

“Now,” I say, pulling the attention back to myself as I swirl the contents of my glass. “Clothes off.”

Zero takes my instructions immediately, seeming almost relieved to have some sort of guidance. Incubus takes a moment longer to decide that he has no alternative to obeying my command, and thus can’t get in trouble for it.

“On the platform,” I guide once they’re both naked, and I make sure to modulate my voice, keeping my tone low and soothing. I don’t want to make the assets nervous, nor do I want the owners to rebuff my efforts. So far, the crowd has reacted with varying levels of interest to my tactic - from Leonid, practically bouncing in his seat, to James, who appears to find the whole thing mildly
distasteful. But Zero is my asset, so James has no choice but to let me continue, or risk having me call the whole thing off.

And if this is my only way to help the two assets, I’ll take the risk of irritating my host.

Zero climbs onto the platform first, with Incubus standing behind him and blocking our view. There’s plenty of space for the both of them to go up at once, so I know it’s deliberate, unobtrusively shielding Zero as the my asset struggles to force his leg to bend to that height. It’s a small gesture, but a meaningful one. Incubus has so little to give, it’s hard to tell how much each gesture is costing him.

“Take your hair down,” I instruct softly, causing Incubus to glance at me. He’s on his knees now, his face pensive. He pulls the band from the bottom of his braid, shaking the tresses loose. It falls in soft waves against his back, slightly crimped still. In the bright overhead lighting, it’s easy to pick out strands of multiple colors. The base seems to be a dark, rich brown intermixed with threads of gold and copper. Zero reaches out and lets the soft strands swirl around his fingers - a bold move from my reticent asset. It speaks of how vulnerable he is right now, between the pain and the drugs. I’ll have to be careful with him.

“Zero,” I call, snapping him back to attention. “Put Incubus on his back.”

The instruction is really for both of them, but Incubus makes a show of letting Zero guide him. Letting Zero’s hands hold him at shoulder and waist, letting Zero lean him back until he’s on his elbows, then flat on his back. His hair cascades over the edge of the platform, dangling in a glossy curtain until it brushes the floor below.

“Would you like to see them kiss?” I ask the group at large, but directing the question mostly at Leonid, who instigated this whole event. Leo nods without glancing in my direction, his eyes locked on the two assets. His hand is cupping his cheek, and I would take it for a casual gesture except that his fingers hover at the rim of his glasses. Is that how he works them? How he records images? Or whatever he’s doing.

Incubus tilts his head back, thrusting his chest out and arching his body. He looks straight at Leonid, where he had previously avoided eye contact with the other owners, and curves his neck. He flutters his eyelashes and opens his mouth, pink tongue darting out to wet his lips.

He knows, I realize with a start. Somehow, Incubus is obviously aware of Leo’s illicit device. Do the others know as well?

“Go on,” I urge Zero, giving him permission. As James has not spoken up, I assume that he has no objections. Zero leans down to brushes his lips against Incubus’s.

The pace I’ve set is slow, both with my instructions and my tone. And yet, the kiss is… glacial. Incubus pushes himself up on his elbow, just enough to meet Zero’s movement. Zero places a hand on Incubus’s cheek, steadying them both. His other hand goes to the brunet’s waist, carefully below the damaged ribs. Their lips brush, a butterfly-soft movement. Almost as quickly, they separate, only to meet again a moment later. Incubus leans up this time, initiating, almost like he can’t stop himself from asking for more. The kiss deepens, and Zero’s hand moves from Incubus’s cheek, burying his fingers in the long, dark strands. Incubus makes a sound of pleasure, tilting his head back further. He groans against Zero’s mouth, throwing his legs wide so that Zero can put their bodies flush against each other. The position lets Zero get closer without requiring that he put his knees on either side of Incubus, which would be too much strain on his hip. I wonder if Incubus realized this, or if it’s simply a coincidence.

“Turn around,” I find myself saying. And then, because I’m already committed, I continue with, “Put
Incubus between your legs. I want to see you stroke him.”

“No orgasms,” James repeats.

“Oh pish,” Magdelene cuts in. “They can still play. I want to see that magnificent cock.”

“Incubus can call for a stop if he gets too close,” I add in, both to assure James and give Incubus and Zero their instructions.

Zero shifts to his back and sits, spreading his legs enough for Incubus to nestle between them. If the move pains him, he doesn’t show it. Incubus helps by sitting between his legs, instead of on Zero’s lap. There’s a bit of space between them and Incubus leans back, resting his head on Zero’s shoulder. He pushes his hair to the side, keeping it from getting trapped between them. Zero’s arms come around him, stroking along his sides and resting his hands on Incubus’s abdomen, all while avoiding the injury that only the three of us are aware of.

Incubus’s cock is already stirring between his legs, half-erect at least and impressive even at that stage. Fully erect, his cock rivals my own in size and girth.

Zero starts by suckling the skin of Incubus’s throat at the juncture of his neck and shoulder. It’s so close to his face that it must prove too tempting for my fighter. Incubus makes a noise of surprise, his hands clenching at his sides, but he quickly tilts his head back in pleasure. He gives a soft moan, his cock bobbing excitedly as Zero’s hands sneak across his thighs and tease around the base of his cock. Incubus makes a tiny, aborted thrust of his hips before he can hold himself still. Zero must feel it, though, because he wraps his fingers around the base of Incubus’s cock, his other hand moving to the brunet’s abdomen to hold him in place.

Then, with excruciating slowness, Zero moves his hand along Incubus’s cock. It’s not so much a stroking motion as a glide, with barely any real friction. Still, Incubus’s cock swells visibly, gaining full erectness by the time Zero’s hand reaches the tip and begins a descent. Incubus moans, and I take note that Zero is still nuzzling his neck, licking and sucking at the skin there. The span has increased now, from the juncture of his shoulder all the way up to the curve of his jaw and the back of his ear. I see Zero’s tongue flick out and tease the shell of Incubus’s ear just as a bead of fluid begins to pool at the tip of Incubus’s cock.

Zero’s hand reaches the base of Incubus’s cock, and his fingers wrap tighter for the second stroke. He twists his wrist as he moves back up, making Incubus shudder. This movement is faster, and he seems to be gaining speed. By the time he hits the third stroke, he’s managed a more normal speed and seems to have leveled off. By the fifth stroke, Incubus’s cock has gained the darker color signifying increased blood flow, and the pleasure asset is panting against my fighter’s shoulder. The bead of liquid at the tip drips over the edge and onto the side of Zero’s hand, disappearing under his smooth strokes.

By the tenth stroke, Incubus has to call a panicked, “Stop! Stop!” or risk losing control. Zero’s hand disappears, and Incubus’s own takes its place, squeezing tight around the base of his cock, forming an almost vice-like grip to prevent orgasm. He bites his lip, closing his eyes at the pain that the grip obviously causes him. He’ll have bruises later, I would guess.

Given how quickly Zero was able to bring him to almost-completion, I have to wonder if Incubus has been denied release for too long, or if he’s more affected by Zero’s behavior than he might be
with another asset. Or a simple combination of these things.

There’s a quirk of Zero’s lips in amusement - the echo of a smile, gone before it can really take hold. But it’s enough that I notice, that I can see how the two might play off of each other.

Promising, but only if I can make Incubus mine.

Incubus’s hand falls away from his cock, his body back under control. The two of them pause, waiting for further instructions. I’m trying to decide what I should have them do next when James chimes in with, “Shall we move it along before they start to chafe?”

I hide a flicker of annoyance. I get the feeling the James simply doesn’t like to be upstaged in his own home. Placatingly, I ask, “What do you think they should do next?”

James just waves a hand dismissively.

“You said you didn’t mind your zero getting off?” Leonid interjects. “Can we see that?”

“Of course. How would you like them?”

“Put Incubus on top,” Magdelene chimes in. “So we can see him.”

Zero is watching me, and I give him a nod of permission. He lays back, putting himself flat on his back. Incubus shifts out of the way and waits until Zero is settled to mount him, throwing a leg over Zero so that Incubus is braced with a knee on either side of Zero’s hips.

“Is he prepared?” I ask, wondering if anyone took the time to open him up and lubricate him before this performance.

James scoffs.

“If not, then it’s his own problem,” he says derisively.

And there’s no real way for me to protest that, so I can only hope that Incubus has taken care of himself.

Zero’s cock is already hard, stimulated from playing with Incubus. The long-haired asset pushes himself up on his knees and takes Zero’s cock in his hand, guiding it toward his entrance. Then he slowly lowers himself down, taking Zero’s cock little by little. Zero has an average-sized cock, a bit thick but of a normal length. Incubus’s larger cock bounces between his legs, an angry red and untouched, with no hope of release. Incubus ignores it as he lowers himself down, Zero’s cock disappearing into his body. Zero face is placid but his shoulders are tense, proof of his struggle to keep still. He’s unable to withhold a tiny thrust, and Incubus lays a hand on his pelvis to steady him.

When Zero is fully settled in Incubus’s body, I notice that Incubus’s legs are still tense, holding most of his weight off of my fighter. The strain of it is making his legs tremble, but I appreciate the effort that he’s putting forth to protect my asset and, to some extent, my reputation. I can only hope that I get the opportunity to repay him for it some day.

Incubus only stays still for a moment, then pushes himself back up and off of Zero’s cock, dropping himself again just as quickly. Zero makes a strangled, pained noise and his hands come up to clutch at Incubus’s hips.

It’s easy to make this position look ungainly. The movement has to be done by the person on top, and all of the effort is absorbed by the legs and thighs. It’s a lot easier to manage a simply up and
down motion, which looks stilted and awkward, with no real finesse. Incubus is better trained than
that. He turns each thrust into an arch, rolling his hips and letting the movement wash over him,
arching his body from his hips all the way to his shoulders with each upward thrust. It’s a lot more
effort than strictly necessary, but… Damn, it looks erotic.

At one point, Incubus moves his hand to his head, pushing his fingers into his hair and arching his
back. It looks almost like he’s doing this for his own pleasure, and Zero is practically forgotten
beneath him. I don’t begrudge this - Incubus is trained to do this, to garner as much attention as he
can. Zero only grabs attention because of what he is, of who he is.

And perhaps Incubus is right. Perhaps I need to be more concerned that the novelty might wear off,
and Zero will have to compete against assets like this on his own merit. While he has come a long
way as a pleasure asset, he’s not up to these standards yet.

And that… could be a problem for me.

When I notice Incubus starting to tire, I say, “You have my permission to bring my asset to orgasm.”

Incubus glances at me, the first time he’s looked at an owner other than Leonid. His expression is a
bit surprised - perhaps he didn’t think I’d notice. Or maybe he didn’t think I’d care.

Either way, he goes back to teasing Zero with renewed vigor. He speeds up his thrusts, practically
bouncing on Zero’s cock. It only takes a few moments for my fighter to be groaning, his body
curling toward Incubus, his hands clutching the brunet’s hips. There might be bruises there, too.

Incubus stills as the orgasm hits Zero, letting my fighter clutch at him, letting my asset spill hot seed
into his body. When the separate, I can see the pearly fluid dripping down Incubus’s thighs. Zero is a
mess, as expected, with sticky liquid smeared all over his groin and his quickly deflating cock.

“That was a good show,” James comments, although it seems like an almost reluctant compliment.
“Was it everything you’d hoped for?” he asks Leonid.

“And more,” Leo responds. I can see that his cock is hard in his pants, a spot of liquid darkening the
fabric.

“Perhaps we should move back to the main party? I’ve got some other assets to entertain us,” James
says, putting an emphasis on “entertain” which I take to mean that they’re available for sex. “Incubus
can join us after he’s cleaned up.”

The group begins to shift and get to their feet, but I notice that Carter makes no move to rise. As I
push away from my chair and stand, he looks at me and says, “Join me for a moment, would you?
We’ll join everyone shortly.”

I cast a glance at James, but he simply shrugs and moves off without me. The rest of the group
follows him, with Incubus trailing at the end. Zero stays by my side, wet and sticky as he is.

“You can let your zero go get cleaned up. I’m sure he can be out from under your watchful gaze for
a couple minutes.”

“Of course,” I respond, because the alternative is letting Zero stay as he is, sloppy and dirty, which
reflects on me as an owner. Turning to Zero, I instruct, “Go along with Incubus and get cleaned up.”

Zero hesitates, his expression dour.

“Go on,” Carter scoffs. “Your master doesn’t need his guard dog right now.”
Zero’s eyes flick in his direction, but thankfully stay low. If he’d met Carter’s gaze, I’d need to discipline him, and I don’t want to do that to him. Given the pain and drugs in his system, I can’t tell how he’ll react. It’s not a situation I want to put either of us in, if I can avoid it.

Incubus has paused by the door, hearing my instruction to Zero. My fighter waits a long moment, enough time for me to worry that he might disobey a direct order, here in front of Carter, where I have no choice but to punish him for it.

Then, thankfully, he steps back and turns, following Incubus out of the room.

Leaving Carter and myself in the relative privacy of the parlor.

Alone.
Once Zero is out of the room, I move back to the table where Carter is sitting. Before I can resume my seat, he stands, handing me a filled glass of brandy. Manners dictate that I take it, although I’m nearing the limit of how much alcohol I’d like to ingest. Especially since Zero is on high-level painkillers, meaning I’ll have to pilot us home at the end of the night.

I take a sip of the dark liquid, and Carter moves to stand companionably close. He looks at me mildly. Something in the lighting of the room is making his eyes look more blue than grey, but no less sharp with intelligence. He has a slight smile on his youthful face. I’m reminded again that he’s one of the few owners here who might be younger than I am - him and Jackson and Felix. And yet, Carter is far more at ease, having navigated this society for years longer than I have. It’s that kind of experience that could be a benefit to me.

Or a danger, depending on his intentions.

“I think you may have gotten the wrong impression of me,” he begins, swirling his own drink and leaning against the back of one of the chairs. It puts me a bit more at ease, to be standing like this. Easier to maneuver if I need to make a quick exit. I don’t feel like I’m trapped between the table and chair, as I would if sitting.

“Oh?” I ask curiously, mirroring his stance. “And what impression is that?”

“That I’m trying to embarass you in front of the other owners. That I don’t like you.” He takes a step closer, tilting his head to look up at me. “Actually, I find you quite charming. That’s why I’ve been making comments.”

“I don’t understand.”

He sighs, and smiles softly at me. Like I’m adorable, if a bit incompetent. I find it difficult to judge his motives. Is he genuinely amused? Or is he trying to embarass me?

“You think the others haven’t noticed how you act?” he asks. “Just because they haven’t said anything? They’re all watching you,” he points out. “You’re new, and you’ve climbed very quickly. But you’re not watching your step, and you’re going to fall just as fast if you’re not careful.”

“Careful about…?”

“Fitting in,” he says gently. “And keeping an appropriate distance between yourself and your assets. Anything else can be dangerous. Can make you look weak.”

“I thought owners weren’t allowed to attack other owners.”
“They’re not. The Leash won’t tolerate in-fighting. But the opinion of your peers matters in how well you do around here. And they’re not the only ones who can be a danger to you.”

“What do you mean?”

He takes a sip of his drink, and it speaks to me of someone considering their words carefully.

“The chip gives you power over your assets, but you’re not invulnerable. An asset like your zero needs a firm hand and steady boundaries to be stable. Anything else, and you might see a side of your asset that you never knew existed.”

“I have full confidence in my zero.”

“That’s a mistake,” he says gently. “I’m sure you don’t want to hear it, but… zeroes are known to be aggressive. Once they turn on you, once you lose control, there’s no stopping them.”

“I’ll… keep that in mind.” He isn’t the first owner who’s told me that. Still, the trend is… concerning. “I appreciate your concern.”

“Good,” he says, smiling. He sets his empty glass aside and takes my arm.

“I suppose we should catch up with the rest of them?”

“Oh,” I respond, surprised that the conversation is already over. I set aside my own glass of liquor, still half-filled. “Right. Where to?”

“I think they’re headed toward the garden. It’s this way.”

Carter’s grip on my arm is loose. Casual. He uses it to guide me out the door and down the hall. It could easily be a platonic gesture, innocent and friendly. Still, it speaks of a familiarity that we don’t really have. I wonder if I’m construing the gesture for my own ends, thinking it’s a sign of deeper interest.

Is Carter looking at me as a friend? An ally? Or does he have a similar interest to Dillon’s? I already know that Carter has an interest in other owners, as Jackson is his on-again, off-again boyfriend. If I try to solicit Carter’s interest (and possibly consider him as my sponsor for the Competition) will I find myself with more issues than I can handle? Or would I be safer with Carter than Dillon, regardless of Carter’s current state of engagement?

There’s little time to weigh my options as Carter maneuvers us down a narrow hall, unerringly finding his way through the maze of James’ ship and into a larger, open area. He slows and separates from me as we approach an oversized oak door. I can hear voices inside as Carter pushes the door open and holds it for me.

Like most of the ships in the Leash, James’ home has a large outdoor style area, and that’s where the crowd has decided to congregate at this point. I’d been a bit concern that his tastes might run so far toward the Wild West that we found ourselves in a barren desert, inhabited by tumbleweeds and cactuses. Thankfully, the garden is less themed than the rest of the ship. It’s a bit plain, with dark grass and a seemingly-natural meandering brook. A few flowers dot the perimeter, along with some shrubs and some small trees. Pine and oak, if I’m not mistaken, although miniaturized versions of both, with the tallest of them topping my height by less than a foot. There’s a high ceiling in here, so I have to assume that it’s the root system keeping them dwarfed.

Vikram is the first to notice as Carter and I enter, and he approaches us. Carter tilts his head in a questioning way, glancing around the room before asking, “Where’s your brother gone?”
“Eh,” Vikram says with a shrug, his expression a bit embarrassed. “He doesn’t… How would you say it? He doesn’t have an interest in men.”

“Ah,” Carter says, understandingly. “I’m sure that little show would be more than he could stomach, then.”

Vikram nods gratefully, and I take the opportunity to put in, “I’m sorry I missed him. Will he be helping you at the Arena?”

“Yes, Torben has always been involved in the Arena, but I’ve only recently been able to get him admission to The Leash. It would be a big help to have him involved, but… he’s not taking as much of an interest as I’d hoped.”

Carter claps him on the shoulder.

“We’ll get him set up with something he’ll enjoy. For someone who isn’t interested in men, this whole setup is likely to disgust him. Contact me after the party and we’ll get in touch with Ellaine and Reynard.”

Vikram nods gratefully. I want to ask more questions - get set up with what? - but the two are moving off and the conversation seems closed.

“Enjoying yourself?” asks a voice from behind me, and I turn to find James standing behind me. The new asset, Angel, is on his arm.

“Of course,” I respond easily. “Although I have to admit that I’m getting a bit tired. I might call it a night early.”

“That’s a shame. I hope you’re not coming down with something. The Line’s grand reopening will be next week.”

Yes, as he’s told me several times already.

“I wouldn’t miss it.” Turning my attention to his asset, I ask, “Is this the newest prize, then?”

“Yes,” he responds, guiding Angel by the hand until he’s between us. The white-haired asset is now dressed in cutoff blue jeans and plaid shirt, his hair still topped with a cowboy-style hat. He certainly isn’t shy about my attention, doing a slow turn before going back James’ side. His honey-colored eyes holding me for a moment in a sharp, intense gaze.

“I was going to have Incubus as the focal piece at the opening,” James says, placing a hand proprietarily on Ange’s shoulder, “but he just hasn’t managed to generate the interest I was hoping for. Other than you and Leonid, most of the owners seem mildly intrigued at best.” He shrugs. “Probably because of his age. I should have realized before I bartered with Jackson.” A sigh. “Still, it’s too late now.”

“Perhaps…” I say slowly, feeling my heart flutter with excitement, “if he’s no longer your centerpiece, I could make an offer on him? Save you the trouble of displaying him, and recoup your investment?”

James grins, but shakes his head.

“Now that would be cheating! Don’t you think?” He laughs, “I’m sure Incubus will get some attention, and between him and Angel we should secure a pretty good turnout. Besides,” he nudges me with his elbow, “he’s my only way of ensuring that you show up.”
And that would be an added benefit that I hadn’t thought of - being able to skip the accursed event altogether. Although I suppose I would still probably need to make an appearance.

“Can’t blame me for trying,” I respond with a grin of my own, which hopefully doesn’t look as forced as it feels. “I regret not buying him from Jackson when I had to chance.”

“Well, you might get lucky and get him at a discount. The price of your individual gamble won’t be nearly what I paid for him.”


“What kind of gambling are you thinking?” I wonder, reaching out my fingers to flick the brim of Angel’s cowboy hat. “A sharpshooting competition, perhaps?”

James laughs, although Angel gives me a sour look.

“No, nothing like that.”


He laughs again and says, “We’ll have all of those things, of course. Angel here will be the grand prize for our poker tournament, if you’re interested.

“And Incubus?”

I notice that Angel’s gaze turns a bit frosty, but I ignore it. He seems to have plenty of interest building already, if the glances he’s getting from owners around us are any indication.

“With Incubus, I’m going to showcase one of the games that you won’t find anywhere else.” James gives a devilish smile, making my stomach lurch uncertainty. “One of the perks to the expansion being Leash-only.”

I hide my anxiety and respond with, “I can’t wait.”

“Speaking of waiting,” James comments, “Incubus should be back by now.”

“I’m sure they’re around here somewhere,” I reply, concerned that Zero might be the reason for their delay.

“Perhaps....”

Someone calls for James, and I take the opportunity to move away. By the time James turns back, I’ve already melded with the nearest section of crowd. I see him glance around for a moment, then is distracted by his hosting duties. He walks away from the spot that I vacated, trailing Angel behind him.

Angel, who never once loses sight of me, despite remaining silent during James’ obvious search.

Once the pair have moved away, I make my exit back into the hall. The crowd in the garden is starting to hit a state of drunk that becomes rowdy, and there are several naked slaves around the room in various positions of service. It’s time to extricate Zero and myself from this situation.

If I can find him.
In the hallway, I’m at a loss. I have a vague notion of where I’ve been, but James’ home is set up differently than mine, probably due to the additional entertaining space. I have to wonder if his eagerness to expand his business isn’t due in part to lavish purchases like this one, with no function other than to please his own sensibilities. His ship is at least twice the size of mine, although not quite as large as Ellaine’s training vessel.

I head back in the general direction of the saloon. There are narrow corridors connecting the larger, open reception areas. I take the nearest one that I think will lead me in that direction. The walls are done in a muted green color, with unpainted wood wainscoting coming to hip-height. Lantern-style lights line the walls, giving the area a soft glow.

My instincts, for once, are good. Not long after turning the first corner away from the main area, I see Incubus and Zero heading toward me. Zero is walking slowly, unable to hide his limp. His face is pinched with pain again, and he looks tired.

Beside him, Incubus casts a worried look between us, stepping in front of my injured asset and holding his hands up in a placating manner.

“I’m sorry, Owner Price. I didn’t mean to delay you. We…”

“What happened?” I cut in, looking over Incubus’s shoulder to find Zero’s gaze.

“I fell,” Zero admits, “on the way to get cleaned up. Landed on my left side. It took a long time before I could get to my feet again.”

I hide a flinch, but just barely. Damn. Lee is going to have my balls for this.

“Are you alright?” I ask, although he appears to be okay now.

“I’m fine. It’s just… stiff.”

I can read “practically unmovable” in the subtext.

“Will you be able to walk back to the ship?”

“Yes.” There’s an undertone of, “Of course,” that he doesn’t verbalize.

“Good. We’re leaving.”

“Now?” he asks, uncommonly surprised - he’s usually the most intuitive of my assets.

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

He glances at Incubus, and I can finally understand his hesitance, his reluctance. Leaving means leaving Incubus behind, if hopefully for the last time.

“Yeah,” Incubus says. “I… Well, I should be going, too.”

Zero seems to want to say something, but he mulls it over without ever finding the correct wording. Incubus turns to me and gives a respectful bow.

“Will I see you at the opening, Owner Price?” he asks.

“Of course,” I respond. “I wouldn’t miss it.”
He smiles at that, then stands and moves off down the hall.

When he’s out of sight, I turn back to Zero, only to find my fighter giving me an intense stare.

“He’s going to be your last asset, isn’t he?” Zero asks, uncharacteristically bold. I move to his side, hoping to take some of the weight off of his leg. He seems to be alright with standing, but walking is more of a struggle. As I get close, I can see that his pupils are dilated. Despite the pain, he’s still well drugged.

“If I can,” I assure him. “I will do my best to win him.”

Zero does not look reassured. If anything, the statement makes him look more troubled. But there’s not a lot I can do about the circumstances.

As much as I want to take Incubus away from this, I have no guarantee that I’ll be able to. When it comes down to it, I don’t know if I’ll be able to protect any of them.

Zero and I make our way down the hall at a slow pace. Zero seems to gain some use of the leg as he walks, his steps becoming more fluid. My concern - that I might have to carry my slave out of here - doesn’t appear to be materializing. However, it was a close thing. It makes me wonder if maybe I’m relying too much on Zero, that him being injured means I have no assets that I can take with me in public.

Another reason that having an experienced pleasure asset - like Incubus - would be a benefit to my team.

We round the corner, and I discover that James has already found Incubus. The two are exchanging harsh words just outside of the oak doors that lead to the garden. Angel is with them, standing a few paces away and looking bored. Incubus’s body language, if I had to judge it, would be… aggrieved. As though he’s being asked to do something he doesn’t want to. He makes a sharp gesture toward Angel, and I have to amend that opinion. It seems as though he’s being asked to do something he doesn’t want to... alone.

Incubus says something else to James that I can’t make out, with both of them keeping their voices low due to the proximity of the general public. James frowns, but Incubus pushes forward. He brings his hands in front of him, palms up, a gesture of confusion and frustration. He makes another protest. Then he’s on the ground, clutching his cheek. James’ clenched fist is still held over him, despite the first right-hook obviously being enough to put him down. But that isn’t enough for James, even with the red welt already showing on the pleasure asset’s face. James grabs a hunk of Incubus’s long hair near the scalp and twists it around his fingers, using the thick strands to pull Incubus up.

The display makes me nauseous. I find myself glad that I’m in the dim hallway, unseen. I don’t know if I could stop myself from intervening if my presence were known. Not sure that I could have stopped myself from saying something regrettable to James in my anger. Something that would have a negative impact on my overall mission.

I remind myself that I need to be friends with these people right now. It’s the only way I’ll ever get close enough to stop them.

Zero… doesn’t have the same justification, though.

I feel him shove against me, and reach out instinctively to grab his arm, thinking his leg has failed him. My hold doesn’t arrest a dive toward the floor, though, and I find myself pulling him back from charging into the common area. The expression on his face is murderous.
“No!” I hiss, shoving the both of us flush against the wall so we won’t be seen. Zero continues to pull against my grip. If he weren’t injured, he probably would have already shaken me off. “Zero, no! You can’t!”

It stops him. He doesn’t look at me, nor does his attention ever waver from the two in front of us, but… he stops. His body tense and rigid, but motionless.

In the main area, Incubus goes to his knees, pushing himself up as high as he can manage as James drags him up. He cries out when James gives a sharp yank on his hair, forcing him to tilt his head to the side. James hisses something low and menacing in Incubus’s face, then drops the man altogether, unconcerned with the way Incubus goes sprawling against the floor.

With a final, snapped order, James stalks off. Angel trails behind him, not even casting a glance at Incubus.

Incubus spends several minutes in a heap. I’m starting to grow concerned that he might have hit his head in the drop, when he finally pushes himself up. His eyes are dull and lifeless, his shoulders sagging, his hands sitting listlessly on his lap.

It seems like it takes a long time for him to push himself to his feet. He sways at first, but then steadies on his own. He shakes his head and rubs his fingers against this eyes, then smooths down his hair. He stretches his neck a couple times and rolls his shoulders. He bounces on his toes, and the action seems so familiar to me, but it takes a couple minutes for me to place it. Then I realize that Zero does the same thing before he’s about to spar - pumping himself up, releasing adrenaline, preparing his body for whatever it has to endure.

The realization makes me feel cold all over, and sick to my stomach. And still, there’s nothing I can do. I don’t have anything to offer Incubus. No way to help him. Not even the assurance that it will soon come to an end.

If another owner wins him, will his life remain the same? A constant struggle for survival, with a master who cares only for the value of his flesh, while servicing owners who value him even less? Is that the life that awaits him? Is it the life he leads now?

By the time he pushes the door open, the grin is back on his face. The red mark on his cheek has faded, although I have no doubt that it will bruise. He enters the room to several cheers, cut off abruptly when the door shuts behind him.

The hallway is eerily silent with him gone.

“Come on,” I say softly. “We should be going.”

I’m not prepared for Zero to yank his arm away from me. For him to spin toward me, all his weight on his good leg.

“You,” Zero snarls, turning his enraged gaze on me, his body vibrating with tension. “This is your fault! You could have stopped this!”

“Zero…” I try to placate, but I find my words cut off as he shoves me against the wall, his superior strength easily overcoming my larger stature. He leans toward me, an arm across my upper chest pinning me uncomfortably in place.

“You could have had him!” Zero growls, the arm along my chest increasing pressure. The slant of his arm creates a diagonal line, from my left shoulder, across my collar bone, and down to my right pectoral. The hold makes it hard to expand my chest, and I find that I’m unable to catch my breath.
I’m shocked into immobility. For several seconds, I don’t even know how to react. I stay still, not even fighting against his painful grip. Zero’s never done anything like this. I’m too surprised to even formulate a response.

It’s only when my restricted breathing becomes noticeable that I’m spurred into action. I push against his arm, but… Even braced on one leg, he’s too strong for me. Fueled by anger and adrenaline, still likely feeling the effects of the narcotics I gave him earlier, I’m no match for his sheer strength.

“Calm down,” I tell him, my words soft and gasping even to my own ears. They only serve to infuriate him further.

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” he snarls, shoving his weight against me. His arm slips, sliding up my body, until his forearm is pressed against my throat, cutting off my oxygen completely. My hands come up to shove at his arm, but it’s like pushing against steel. I’d be better off trying to go backward, through the solid wall behind me.

I could black him with the chip, but I can’t get the breath to make words. My Key is in my breast pocket, pinned and potentially damaged by his grip. I can’t think of any other way to escape, with his body a solid wall of muscle in front of me and an actual wall behind me. Dots start to form in my vision. My chest heaves, my lungs fighting to gain air.

And all I can think is, “What happens to my assets, if I’m unable to complete my mission?”

Then the arm is gone, and Zero is cursing resoundingly, but I can barely hear him over the sound of my own desperate breathing. I gasp, sagging against the wall. The cool air feels like icy needles in my throat, but I suck it in desperately.

Almost immediately, my symptoms abate. I don’t fall to my knees. I don’t black out. My reaction is limited to little more than frightened panting and clutching at my painful throat. He didn’t, in all honesty, have me pinned for that long. My reaction probably had more to do with panic than lack of air. But still…

…He could have killed me.

I don’t let myself pause long to breathe. I’m afraid that someone might find us, and that would be a disaster. Caught not only unable to control my slave, but also with him directly attacking me. I don’t know how I would manage to cover that up. If I even could. What response should a master have in that kind of scenario? I’d prefer not to find out.

I grab Zero’s wrist, not tightly, but a hold meant to keep him by my side. Not that it appears that he’s going anywhere, as he kneels by my side, his face ashen and his expression frightened.

“Are you okay?” Zero asks. I give him a nod, not able to trust my voice at the moment.

I can’t look directly at his face. Can’t meet his eyes and see the guilt there. Guilt that I can practically feel him radiating, guilt that it’s my responsibility to address and alleviate. I just… I can’t right now. Later. When we’re not in danger of being discovered.

I keep my hold on his wrist and pull him down the hall with me. He doesn’t take his place at my side. It takes until I stop and gesture aggressively for him to realize that I’m lost, and even then he hesitates before stepping up to direct me.

Eventually, we make our way down to the hanger, where I’m hoping that we’ll be the only two leaving so early.
Given my luck recently, that’s obviously not the case.

It’s Carter, of course, because he’s basically shadowed my every step this evening. He’s looking away from me, standing under the bow of a jump ship with Vikram and Magdelene, in the middle of a conversation. The ship is black and sleek, and I have no doubt that it belongs to one of them, if only because it appears shiny and new, but in a classy, understated way. Just beyond them, I can see my own red vessel waiting three hangers down.

I have no choice but to approach them and hope they let me pass unbothered. I walk with purpose, my gaze on my ship. When Vikram notices me, I give a nod, but continue walking. Magdelene smiles and waves. My left arm gives a pang when I try to raise it, so I return the gesture with my right hand.

I’ve almost managed to get past them when Carter notices me. I’m so close to my ship that I’m actually thinking that I might be able to make my way out of here without having to interact with any other owners.

“Zeke?” Carter calls, and I utter a curse in my head. For a moment, I consider just continuing to walk, pretending that I didn’t hear him. But the risk of being rude in front of three owners is too great a risk to my social standing.

I pause and turn back, swallowing hard before asking, “Yes?”

Thankfully, my voice sounds normal, if a bit rough. I can only hope it will hold out.

“Leaving so soon?”

“Yes. It’s been a long week.”

“Understandable. I’ll see you this weekend at the Arcrest Manor?”

“Of course. I can’t wait.”

I turn then, thinking the conversation is over.

But as I head to my ship, I hear Carter call out, “Don’t forget to bring your scholar with you!”

And then, when I don’t turn to respond, he finishes with, “Bring the entertainment, or don’t bother coming at all!”

Damn.

In the silence of the cabin, his words echo in the back of my head. I pick at them, like a puzzle that I can’t quite fit together. How do I get around this? How do I make this work?

Zero is kneeling on the floor beside my chair, ignoring the copilot seat that he should be strapped into. His face is blank. Not neutral, more… hollow. I don’t have it in me to tell him to buckle down. Or to reassure him. Or to be angry at him.

Another thing I’ve failed to deal with. Another thing that I’ll have to put right. If I even can. At this point, all of my tactics are suspect. Am I just making everything worse?

My throat aches when I swallow. My shoulder hurts, and I pilot with my right hand because it hurts to raise the left. I will have bruises tomorrow. Will they fade by next week? Or…

I let the thought fade, not wanting to contemplate next week. Not really wanting to think about
anything at the moment. I watch the stars pass as we zip through space. Everything moves so fast. And yet, it feels like I’m standing still.

“What should I do?” Zero asks. His voice is subdued. Broken. I can’t bring myself to look at him, uncertain of what my own reaction will be. Anger? Sadness? Betrayal? It all swirls around in me tumultuously, mixing and blending with my own feelings of failure and inadequacy. How did I let it get this far?

I take the throttle with my left hand, despite the pain it causes me. I shift my right hand to lay on Zero’s head, stroking his hair gently. I can’t stand the press of his imploring gaze, so I guide him to lean against my thigh. I stroke my fingers through his short hair until his breathing evens out and he sleeps.

It’s quiet through the rest of the long trip home. But inside, there’s a deafening roar of problems. Zero. Lee. The mission.

How will I fix this?
There’s always a bit of bated breath when I wait for Zeke to return from a social event. The tide can turn so easily in a group of owners, and Zeke, for all his skills, can’t protect from every danger. I’m always prepared for an emergency, although I would have to hope that Zeke would call ahead to tell me of any life-threatening issues.

The ship lands - candy apple red and sleek, shaped like a bird of prey. It turns in the bay, slotting into its cradle, hydraulic lifts stabilizing it as magnetics keep it from moving. Another hiss, and the side door opens, putting down a narrow set of stairs. Zeke appears in the doorway, seeming unharmed, although his dark suit would hide any blood, if I were expecting that type of injury. Zero appears, following only a step behind, his face uncertain. He looks pale, and the tension in his shoulders tells me that he’s in pain, even before he clings to the handrail and limps as he descends the stairs.

Something… tense hangs between them. It makes me approach instead of waiting in the entrance to the medbay. I glance between them uncertainly.

“What’s happened?” I ask as they dismount the stairs. “What’s going on?”

The reaction I get is puzzling.

Zero looks to Zeke, his gaze expectant. Zeke continues to look at me, although I can tell that he feels Zero’s gaze as well. The tension between the two heightens.

“Zero has injured his hip,” Zeke responds, his voice quiet and a bit rough. Was smoking a part of this evening’s entertainment? Or has he simply overused it talking to other owners? Or… overuse of a different kind, given Zero’s state of near-undress.

The quiet returns.

Zero’s injury is evident from the way he carefully made his way down the stairs. The fact that he was able to manage them on his own, however, tells me just as much about the limited nature of the damage. I didn’t anticipate him coming through this evening unscathed. Even walking too much is detrimental to his recovery at this point, and I doubt that was all he was asked to do.

Zeke turns, as though he’s going to leave the cargo bay and move into the main part of the ship. Before he can make it far, Zero asks, “Are you serious?”

Zeke pauses, but does not look back.
“We’ll discuss this later,” he says, his voice still rough. Too rough for just talking - it must have been an inhalant of some kind. Is that what this is about?

“You can’t keep putting this off!” Zero growls, and seems genuinely upset.

Zeke turns back slowly, his eyes finally meeting Zero’s. The argument is between them, but I get the feeling that I am somehow involved as well. My puzzlement heightens into outright confusion, and I feel no small bit of trepidation as they square off.

“I will address this issue in my own time,” Zeke says, his voice is low and firm. “It’s none of your concern.”

“He deserves to know!” Zero snaps, confirming my suspicion that I am somehow involved in this situation. Zeke, however, refuses to be moved, still leveling Zero with a stern, cold stare.

“This is not your-...”

“You can’t keep ignoring these things!” he snarls, and takes an angry step forward.

And in the oddest reaction in an overall strange evening, Zeke… flinches. He takes a step back from Zero, giving ground. Puts his hands up defensively between himself and the fighter.

Zero blanches and goes pale, his expression stricken. The fight seems to drain from him, and his shoulders sag. His expression goes hollow. Dark eyes, usually so full of passion, are like empty voids.

Zeke, as a counter, seems to realize his own odd reaction, and his expression fills with anger. His stance shifts, his body going from defensive to offensive in the blink of an eye. Exhaustion gives way to anger, and it’s obvious that Zeke is at the end of his endurance for the night. He takes an aggressive step in Zero’s direction, and this time it’s Zero who shys back. I take a step forward, prepared to intervene if needed. In the long run, though, they’ll need to work this out between themselves. Having me prevent them from coming to blows won’t mend whatever rift has formed between them.

“I’ve had enough of your fucking attitude tonight!” Zeke shouts. It surprises another uncertain step backwards from Zero, because Zeke so rarely raises his voice.

Zero’s retreat seems to placate something in Zeke, because the owner turns on his heel and heads for the exit. Zero watches him go without protest, his posture etched with defeat.

I’m wondering which one of them I should deal with first; neither seems to be in immediate physical peril, although Zero’s hip will need assessed for damage. But then, I also need to check Zeke’s throat and see what he’s managed to do to himself. They seem about even in terms of mental anguish.

Zero takes the decision from me by collapsing to the floor. He’s close enough to the wall of the hanger that he stumbles backwards, trying to reach its support, but unable to reach. I rush to his side, managing to arrest his descent before he’s fully down.

“Go after him,” Zero says quietly.

“I will,” I assure, “Once I make sure you’re okay.”

He says nothing as I help him settle on the floor, shifting him until he back is against the wall. His puts his weight on his right side and extends his left leg, hissing in pain at the movement. He’s in bare feet and black, nylon shorts. I pull the fabric out of the way, but I can’t tell how bad the damage
is under the makeup Zeke used. The only sign of the injury is the heat coming from the area, and the slight puffiness to the skin. I have a hand-held scanner in my pocket and I pull it out, then slowly move it over the affected area. The reading it gives me is imprecise compared to some of my other equipment, but it doesn’t find any chips or cracks in the bone beneath. For the moment, a quick and convenient scan will suffice. Only an actual break needs to be dealt with immediately. Any small cracks will heal on their own now that the bulk of the damage has been repaired.

“How bad is it?” I ask, pressing gently against the skin, letting my senses act as a precaution against anything the scanner might have missed. There aren’t any tell-tale shifting under the skin, no movement that would indicate that a fragment has come loose. There’s definitely swelling, though. More than I would anticipate from just walking too much.

“It hurts,” he admits. “I fell.”

“I thought as much,” I respond. “Landed on it?”

“Yes.”

“It doesn’t look like you managed to damage it. Must not have been a hard fall.”

“No,” he responds. I wait, and after several seconds he says, “Someone caught me. Or… tried to catch me.”

“Lessened the impact?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good.”

He falls quiet again. I lay the scanner on the ground and move until I can sit beside him, my back against the wall. The silence stretches, but I don’t press him.

“Do you want me to tell you?” he asks eventually, his voice soft.

“No,” I respond, glancing at his tired face, his ashen complexion. “Zeke will tell me. I won’t put you in that position.”

“Okay.”

Another brief silence, but this time I break it.

“Do you want to tell me what happened between the two of you?” I ask. “Or is it the same thing?”

“No.”

“No… it’s not the same thing? Or no, you don’t want to tell me?”

“Both.”

“Oh.”

Silence.

Then:

“Can’t you guess?” he asks, running his hand across his face. “I’m a fucking monster.”
That doesn’t really help me.

“I don’t understand.”

He blows out a frustrated breath.

“There was… an asset. He… performed with me. Helped me.”

“The one who arrested your fall?”

He nods.

“His owner was hurting him, and I… I was so angry. I couldn’t think. I just wanted to make him stop.”

“You tried to intervene,” I deduce.

“Zeke stopped me,” he confirms. “But I…”

“Shit,” I curse as everything suddenly clicks into logical order. “You turned on him.”

Misdirected his anger at the person in front of him. The person trying to protect him. Zeke.

“Yes.”

“Is that what happened to his throat?” I ask, wondering now if perhaps I should have looked at Zeke first.

“Yes,” Zero says, barely a whisper.

Quiet falls again, but this time it’s Zero who breaks it, turning first to look at me.

“I need you to fix me,” he says slowly. Seriously. Like it’s just that easy. Like there aren’t a million complicated little flowing pieces in the human brain. Like I can just pull out the wrong piece and install a new one. He doesn’t understand that the human brain is a thing of liquid. A million colors swirling together in a pool. Pull out the dark color? Good luck even finding it. Good luck changing the chemistry of the pool without toxifying the whole thing. The smallest touches must be used to maintain balance. Sometimes, diverting the water is best. Or clearing old, dead brush from the stream. Only when it has already toxified, bubbling and boiling beneath the surface.

Is that Zero? Have I missed signs of discontent? Or does he seek a simple answer that is anything but easy?

“Tell me what you remember.”

“What?”

“Tell me,” I repeat, keeping my voice low but firm, “about attacking Zeke. About what you remember in the moments before and after.”

He hesitates for a long moment. Long enough that I question whether he’ll talk about it at all. It might be too fresh for him, too raw. That’s when I want it, of course. Before time has managed to gloss it over, to remove all but the most vivid bits. Still, I won’t push him if he’s not ready.

Eventually, he says, “It was… Everything was out of control.”
“How so?”

“I… Zeke could have stopped him. Could have prevented the whole thing. But he just… he didn’t do anything.”

“I’m assuming you mean that Zeke could have stopped the other owner from hurting his asset?”

Zero nods.

“And you were angry because Zeke didn’t?”

“And… because he stopped me. I could have fixed it, if he’d just let me. I could have… could have made them stop.”

“What do you remember about lashing out? About attacking Zeke?”

“Just…” he huffs an angry breath and puts his hands over his face. “I remember being angry. I shoved him against a wall. I didn’t… I couldn’t understand why he didn’t see it.”

“What?”

“How out of control everything was.” Hmm. “He was supposed to be in charge. He was supposed to prevent this from happening!”

“What happened then?”

“I… I had him pinned against the wall. My arm… slipped. And then it was against his throat.”

“Is that what happened? Was it an accident?”

“…I don’t know,” he admits. “If I were you, I wouldn’t believe it was an accident.”

Being similarly well-trained to Zero, I know that he’s too aware of his body for something like that to truly be an accident. Do I think he was aware that he was escalating the confrontation with Zeke? Yes. Do I think he meant to kill him? No. I really don’t. If that had ever been Zero’s real intention, Zeke wouldn’t be here.

“What happened then? With your arm against his throat?” I ask, knowing full well what the consequence would be, but needing to see if Zero can face it for himself.

“It… cut off his oxygen. Strangled him. I strangled him. I could have killed him.”

“What stopped you?”

“When I saw his face turning red, I realized what I was doing. I let him go.”

I hadn’t been sure that Zero would be able to do that, would be able to stop himself. I had thought maybe Zeke had used the chip on him, or another owner had intervened. The fact that Zero stopped himself is a good sign, although a small one in a very dangerous situation.

“Tell me about when you attacked Kip,” I ask, shifting the topic quickly enough to make him blink at me. “Was it similar? What did you feel?”

“I…” he hesitates, and I can see him thinking back, trying to remember. “There was… I thought there was a tech. We were doing maintenance, but he… No one was following protocol. You were there, but you weren’t a scientist. You weren’t in the right clothes. And then… it was just…”
“Out of control?” I ask, seeing a pattern starting to form.

“Yes.”

“The tech, he should have been in control? Should have kept me out? Should have followed proper procedure?”

“Yes.”

“How about with Ruby?” I ask. “You attacked him before I was here.”

“Yes.”

“What happened there?”

“I… Zeke and I had to go to BloodSports Arena. We left Kip and Ruby behind. Only, Ruby snuck out with us. By the time we got back, Kip was unresponsive.”

“Why attack Ruby?” I press. “It certainly wasn’t his fault.”

“It…” he makes a frustrated noise. “I know it wasn’t his fault. I don’t… I shouldn’t have hurt him.”

“But why did you? Why were you so angry at Ruby?”

“He was supposed to be watching Kip!” Zero snaps, his hands clenching into fists. “That was his only responsibility, and he couldn’t even do that! And then Kip… he…”

“He almost died,” I finish, knowing that’s the case. “Which would have happened whether or not Ruby had been there. Kip’s sickness would have played out the same.”

“I know that now.” His hands relax, going lax against the metal floor. “And I should never have attacked him.”

I have nothing to add to that - Zero is obviously remorseful, so there’s no reason to add to his guilt. Instead, I move slowly and lay my hand on his cheek, turning his face to look at me. I tilt his chin back, so the overhead lights give me a good look at his eyes.

“How many doses of the painkiller have you had?” I ask, noting the dilation in his pupils, the redness at the edges of his sclera.

He pulls back from me, and I let him go.

“You gave me a dose before I left,” he confirms, although I knew about that one. “And then Zeke gave me a dose when we arrived, and then another before I performed.”

So three doses in an evening. Within the advisable limits, but… still a lot.

We’re quiet again for a moment. I’m trying to decide how and when to speak with Zero about this. He seems open to my suggestions tonight, but he’s also inebriated and exhausted, not to mention emotionally overwrought. It doesn’t seem fair or wise to push methods of correction for his behavior when he’s in such a state.

Zero seems to be contemplating his own thoughts just as gravely, so I’m not totally surprised when he says, “I want to talk about going back on suppressants.”

“No.”
“Lee…”

“There’s no need to talk about it, because I am not putting you back on those.”

“I can’t be trusted without them!”

“Yes,” I say sternly. “You can.”

“After what I just did?”

“You let your anger get the best of you. You did not, however, black out. You did not panic. You did not lose time. You did not deny culpability for your actions. You got mad, and you used your strength and your skills in a destructive way against someone you love. That’s not a mental illness. That’s a bad decision.”

He gives me a look then, so hollow and faithless that it would have crumbled a lesser man. It does not sway me.

“Can’t you see,” he asks softly, “that I’m broken?”

I sigh in response. Ancestors save me from the melodrama.

“I’m going to say this again,” I respond. “You are miraculously well-adjusted considering your history. It is most likely because you were on suppressants for the bulk of your adult life. I’m sure it was an unintended side-effect, but no emotional reaction managed to make it through the robotic haze that you were trapped in. You are not traumatized - at least, not from that - because you were unable to feel trauma. You were, however, able to get used to a very specific behavioral routine. When faced with tension or chaos, you reacted violently. Your violence was rewarded with a return to stability. Your mind calmed. Adrenaline was replaced by dopamine, and your brain learned that chaos caused pain and stability caused reward.”

“I want stability,” he says, factually. I can’t tell if he’s trying to confirm my theory, or if he’s defending his own wishes, outside of what his body is demanding. We are more than the sum of our chemicals, after all.

“Of course you do,” I respond easily, not arguing. “Stability is generally accepted to be a good thing. Most humans are drawn to it. Stability. Security. Happiness.”

“I can create stability. I can eradicate chaos.”

“No,” I tell him gently. “You can’t. Chaos, uncertainty, stress. These are as invariable as their counterparts. We constantly waver between the two. Nothing can wholly prevent them.”

“So I’ll always be like this.”

I hold myself back from saying, “There’s nothing wrong with you,” because that’s no really true. After what we’ve been through and the circumstance we’re in? There’s something wrong with all of us. Zero is no exception.

“Anger is not a mental illness. Feeling upset or stressed in circumstances that are upsetting and stressful is normal. It’s healthy. Feeling nothing in those circumstances would be cause for concern. Humans get mad. It’s okay.”

“I… lash out. I react violently. Even toward people… people I don’t want to hurt.”
“And \textit{that is} something we have to deal with. You can’t continue to reward yourself with this cycle. It has become toxic and dangerous. It needs to be modified.”

“Yes,” he responds, and finally there seems to be a spark of interest in his face. “It isn’t working.”

“Your circumstances have changed, but we’re creatures of habit. We don’t change as easily as our surroundings do.”

“I know that it’s the wrong thing,” he admits. “Even while I’m doing it, I know that I’m not making things better. I just… I can’t think.”

“You default to what you’ve always done, because you haven’t found any other coping mechanisms. We’ll train you. Find ways to divert that energy so it’s less destructive. You are not alone in this. Zeke will help, too.”

The mention of Zeke changes Zero’s mood again, like flicking a switch. His shoulders sag. He won’t meet my eyes.

“Zeke should just give up on me.”

“He would never,” I reassure, reaching out to lay my hand over his. He allows the touch, but doesn’t react to it.

Without looking at me, he asks, “What should I do now?”

“Tonight?” I ask, withdrawing my hand. “Nothing. Drink some water and go to sleep.”

He frowns, like he’s not entirely pleased with that idea.

“And tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow, we sit down and have this whole conversation over again. We talk in painful detail about this incident and about the last two. We talk about your childhood. We talk about your previous owner. We dissect this toxic idea you have that someone must be ‘at fault’ when things go wrong. We try breathing techniques to moderate your emotional responses. We practice meditation. We learn what triggers your aggressive response, and when you need to remove yourself from a situation. We get as close to reliving the incident as we can without putting anyone in actual danger.”

“Yes.”

“It’s easy to say that now, but… it won’t be easy. It will be particularly difficult for you, because your emotions are so new and untested.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes.”

“There’s another thing.” He glances at me, and I look him in the eyes when I tell him, “I’m going to need to seriously reduce your painkillers, and remove narcotics altogether.”

He flinches, then nods.

“A punishment.”

“No,” I counter, “not at all. I am not punishing you by withholding meds - I would \textit{never} do that. However, if you take it easy on your body, you’ve moved into the phase of your recovery that you can do without them. Two out of three incidents where you lost control were under the influence of narcotics. I think the drugs are imeding your self control. I’m not saying their totally to blame, but I
think it’s dangerous to continue at the levels we’ve previously been using. We’ll make substitutions to avoid narcotics; a combination of painkillers, topical analgesics, hot and cold stimulation, and sedatives. I would also advise that you avoid alcohol and any form of recreational drug. I’ll give Zeke my instructions as well.”

“You should go to him,” Zero says. “I want to… I can’t…”

“You need to give Zeke space for tonight,” I tell him softly. “I understand that you’re remorseful, but you’re both too raw tonight. Let the wound scab over. And let him come to you.”

Zero nods, staring miserably at his hands. He’s right, though. I have another patient to check on.

No.

That’s not right. Zeke isn’t my patient. That’s an excuse. This isn’t an occupational calling - none of this is professional. I care about all of them. And I’m… worried about Zeke. More than as his doctor. As his friend? As his… paramore? It’s all so confusing. So tangled and messy. I like things to be neat. Straight lines and even rows. Zeke, though… He makes the mess seem exciting. Makes it seem worth the invariable hassle.

“I want you to stay with Kip tonight,” I tell Zero, knowing that I can’t leave him alone in this state. “Can I call him to come down?”

Zero shakes his head.

“I need some… some time,” he says hesitantly, running his hand over his face. “Can I have that?”

“You’re not punishing yourself through isolation, are you?”

“No,” he says softly. “I deserve it, but… you wouldn’t allow that. And Kip would notice eventually, and he’d bug me until I came upstairs. I just… I need a minute alone.”

I nod in understanding and approval.

“I’ll call Kip on the intercom and tell him to retrieve you in an hour.” I give him a pointed look and tell him, “I will be displeased if you disappear before he can find you.”

He shakes his head, and looks too exhausted to run off anyway.

I push away from the wall and get to my feet. I look down at Zero, still on the floor, his head down and his expression miserable.

“Feel this,” I tell him softly. “Be here, with remorse and regret. Look at it. Understand it. Resolve never to be put in this position again. Then set it aside. A boat cannot sail when anchored. Take this feeling and hold it close. Then let it go.”

And with that advice, I go to find Zeke.
Aftermath: Zeke Part 1 - Lee POV

Chapter Notes

It's been kind of a meh weekend. Anyone else experiencing 48 hours of constant rain? Lol. I'm posting early on the off-chance that I don't have the energy to later. Enjoy! (Actually, on second thought, "Enjoy" is probably somewhat misleading. These last couple chapters have been painful! Lol.)

Once again, have to give a shout-out to my beta team. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are just the best for helping me out.

If you like this fic, please leave Kudos or Comments, I really appreciate it. I am also on Goodreads, if you would be kind enough to rate or comment there. You can also follow me on my Weebly website or on Livejournal.

“Where’s Zero?”

I’m unsurprised that Zeke’s first words to me are about Zero’s welfare. If I had any doubts about Zeke’s resolve to put things right between the two of them, that question would put them to ease.

“He’s still in the bay.”

“Is he okay? How bad is his hip?”

“Preliminary scans indicate no damage to the bone. Honestly, if he were at a stage where a fall could undo all my hard work, I wouldn’t have let him go with you.”

“So… he’s okay?”

“It’s still a setback. He definitely bruised the muscles there, which were already damaged from the surgery. He’ll need to keep off of it for a day or two. Nothing too serious. I asked Kip to come get him in an hour or so. He’ll bring Red, and the two of them should be able to help Zero move into one of the empty bedrooms on that floor. Kip is going to stay with him tonight, just to be safe.”


“And who’s going to take care of you?” I ask, trying to keep my tone light. It fails to lighten the mood.

“...I’m fine.”

“Yes,” I respond letting my eyes run over him. “I can see that.”

His clothes are soaked. His shoes are gone. He’s tucked himself into the back corner of the massive shower in the Master suite, and is nursing a bottle of liquor. The imitation waterfall is cascading to the left of us, getting cool water and mist everywhere.

“I should…” he trails, then sighs and runs a hand through his bangs. He takes another swig from the half-empty bottle. Where did he even get it? “I should go talk to Zero. I know he’s… upset.”
I settle beside Zeke, snagging the bottle from his hands and sniffing. Vodka. I take a small sip. It’s strong. And as a habitual reaction to stress, it’s a worrying trend. I take another drink, knowing that now is not the time to deal with Zeke’s reliance on alcohol. It’s likely an issue that can’t be dealt with while he’s acting as an owner.

“I think the two of you could use some time apart.”

“Maybe,” he responds, taking the bottle back from me. He takes a long swig, then asks, “Did he tell you?”

“About what he did? Yes. About what you’re hiding from me? No.” I reach over offhandedly and pull down the collar of Zeke’s dress shirt, exposing the darkening bruises beneath. “You’ll tell me when you’re ready.”

He pushes my hand away when I prod at the injured skin. It looks okay, but it’s hard to know for sure without doing a full exam.

“I’m fine,” he says.

“You are far from fine,” I counter. “But if the question is, ‘Will I live?’ Then yes, I think you’ll survive.”

“I should have seen this coming. After Ruby. After Kip.”

“Two incidents make a suspicion, not a pattern. They could have been unrelated anomalies in Zero’s otherwise stable personality.”

“I should have seen that something was wrong. That’s my job. I’m supposed to take care of him.”

I remind myself that Zeke is quickly nearing the precipice of drunk, so morose thoughts are to be expected, and are not necessarily an indication of his overall mental state. However, his tendency to blame himself for Zero’s misdeeds is worrisome.

“You should share your secrets,” I tell him, and he blinks at me in confusion. “Since you’re obviously a mind reader. Since you know what’s going on in Zero’s head before he even does. Since you know how to treat him when even I’m struggling to decide how to overcome a lifetime of conditioning.”

He looks at his hand, shifts the bottle so that the liquid sloshes inside.

“I didn’t… say that.”

“You’re obviously trying to blame yourself for Zero attacking you - which, beyond being unhealthy, is really confusing. I’m pretty sure you didn’t ask him to strangle you.”

“I…should have seen this coming.”

“No, you shouldn’t have. Because Zero is a person, and people don’t always react how we want them to. People break down. They fail at unexpected times. And, as other humans not privy to those thoughts, we don’t always see it coming.”

“...I want to help him.”

“Now, that I can support. I think he’s going to need you.”

“I should tell him it’s okay.”
“No!” I sputter. “You should not! What part of that was okay?”

Zeke sighs and bends his left knee, leaning forward to rest his head against it.

“What do you want me to do?”

“It’s…” I struggle to withhold a frustrated noise. “It’s okay to forgive him. It’s okay to help him. But you can’t absolve him of this guilt. That’s just tucking the problem under the rug. This is Zero’s issue to deal with.”

“Okay.”

I sigh and lean my head back against the shower wall. The cool mist feels good against my skin, although my cotton pants are uncomfortably wet. I listen to the sound of the water flowing. Beside me, it seems that Zeke might have fallen asleep. I let him doze, thinking that perhaps the sleep will sober him up. Fearing that it might make it impossible to get him into bed later. Wondering if maybe I should just bring him a pillow and let him sleep in the shower.

He surprises me when he says, “I should tell you.”

Hmm. Not asleep, then. Perhaps just deep in thought as well?

“Tell me what?”

“The… What Zero and I were arguing about. He thinks I should have told you right away, that I shouldn’t have hidden it. He’s probably right. I just… I don’t know. I thought maybe I could change it. Maybe I could fix it. But…” he makes a frustrated noise and takes an angry swig from his bottle. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand as he says, “I can’t change anything.”

Now is not the time to argue with him, although that is patently untrue. I don’t think he actually believes it anyway. He’s frustrated and at least half drunk. His words are only reflective of how he’s feeling now, just after a major failure with Zero and with… whatever this is looming on the horizon. I try not to let myself be stressed by the dramatics inherent in a situation like this, but… Zeke’s continued reluctance to bring me into his confidence is making me more concerned, not less.

“I assume,” I tell him calmly, “that this situation has something to do with me. Since you seem inclined to believe it is unavoidable at this point, I think the best option would be to tell me. I can’t advise on what I don’t know.”

He sighs and lays his head back on his knee. Without looking up, he says, “They want me to bring you to the party this weekend. They want to watch us perform.”

“Perfo… Oh.”

Sexually.

Shock hits me, like an electric pulse through the water I’m sitting in. I feel my back straighten, my pulse elevate. I take a stilted, calming breath, but it still feels like my nerves are on fire. I let the breath out slowly, reaching for the calm I had just a moment ago.

“Can you refuse?” I ask, trying to see options. Trying not to focus on the act so I can look at the situation as a whole.

“Not if I want to attend the party. He’s made my attendance contingent on bringing the… the entertainment,” he says, and his voice reflects his distaste at the idea. “I can’t deal that kind of insult
to another owner. Especially not a Champion.”

“Which one?”

“Carter.”

“Hmm.” I’m not familiar with that one. Or, I know of him, as most assets who have been around long enough learn the names and faces of the key players - the Champions and the Dealers. But he didn’t come to the Arena much, and I rarely saw anyone other than assets when I was with Ellaine. For once, I find myself devoid of useful input. Instead, I continue with, “Can you skip the party?”

“I… could.”

“But?”

“Dillon will be there, and I still haven’t secured funding for the Competition. I don’t want him to… lose interest.”

Zeke’s relationship with Dillon - another Champion, although this one I am familiar with. He’s spent a lot of time at the Arena. The assets he sent to battle rarely lost, but those that did weren’t worth his time. He wouldn’t let me treat them, and cancelled them on the spot. The idea of Zeke trying to tempt this man is repugnant. It gives me a cold, slippery feeling in the pit of my stomach.

But… there’s nothing I can do about it.

“Ask me,” I demand, feeling like it needs to be said.

“What?”


He sighs and doesn’t pick his head up when he says, “Will you come with me to the party? Will you perform various lewd acts with me for the pleasure of a rabid and debased audience? Will you let me have sex with you in front of a roomful of strangers?”

Well… I didn’t really need such a graphic description. I push down a hundred warring emotions as fear tries to thrust itself to the top of the pile. I take a breath and smother them all, knowing that now is not the time to face my own reaction to this development.

“Yes,” I respond, even though the entire scene sounds like my nightmare.

I trust that Zeke will get me through it. That even if the act shatters my soul, he’ll help me piece it back together as best he can.

“Okay,” Zeke responds, looking no less miserable than before. He shifts his face so that he can stare at his liquor bottle while still leaning his head against his knee. He tips the bottle, watching the contents splash against the glass, but doesn’t take another drink.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask. “Did you think I would decline?”

“No,” he breathes softly. “I knew you’d do it. You’d do anything to protect the assets, and my mission is part of that.”

“Then… why delay so long?” The argument with Zero hadn’t seemed new. They’d been too reactive for this to be a recent development. It struck me instead as something that had been seething and building between them. Along with half a dozen other issues, of course.
He shrugs and says, “I didn’t want to.”

“Did you think I’d be angry?” I press. “That I’d accuse you of failure? Because I’m not angry about it.”

“I know.”

“Then why?”

“I… didn’t want to,” he says, closing his eyes and hiding his face against his leg again. “I didn’t want to do it.”

“Do what?” I ask, confused.

He sighs and shifts so that he’s leaning back against the wall. His eyes, now open, are wet. It makes the blue irises sparkle like crystal. He tosses the bottle of liquor and it skitters across the stone floor, coming to rest against the opposite wall without shattering. A bit of the liquid pours into the bottom of the shower, but most remains trapped below the neck of the bottle. It was half empty anyway.

“I didn’t want to seduce you. I like what we have now. I like being… friends. Being partners. Being… equal. I… I didn’t want to change that.”

“Oh.”

“ Asking you… would change everything,” he continues. “I’d have to figure out how to convince you. How to manipulate you into sleeping with me. Whether it’s the least objectionable option, like with Zero. Or you hate it but pretend not to, like with Kip. Or you throw yourself on the sacrificial altar, like with Red.” He closes his eyes, tears glistening on his lashes but refusing to fall. “Or you fight me until I can’t stand myself, like with Ruby.” He glances at me, pain naked and bare in his eyes. “No matter what, something changes. And I… I didn’t want that.”

I… don’t know what to say to that. He spends so much time protecting his assets, it never really occurred to me that… that maybe he would need to protect himself.

Instead of replying, I take his hand and lace our fingers. I shift closer, so that our arms are touching from shoulder to wrist. The dampness beneath me is making my skin cold and clammy, but it seems like the least of my worries. Zeke is still warm, his body putting off enough heat that I can feel it through the wet fabric of his shirt. Maybe it’s the liquor still coursing through him.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, just enough to be heard over the falling water.

He gives a wet, surprised little laugh and pulls my hand up to press against his cheek. After a moment, he releases me and scrubs his hand over his face. He gives me a tight smile, the pain fading from his eyes.

“We should probably get out,” he says. “This is getting really uncomfortable.”

“What was the idea behind this?” I wonder, letting him lighten the mood as we push ourselves to our feet. “Seems like an odd place to drink.”

“I don’t know,” he says, a tired sigh in his voice. “I guess I just wanted to listen to the water. Seems pretty dumb now.”

I shrug.
“It’s not like you did any harm. I can think of worse ways to calm down.”

“Hmm,” he says, peeling his wet shirt off and revealing his damp torso. The wet skin is… enticing. But on the heels of our conversation, his bare skin brings up thoughts and feelings that I’m not ready to deal with yet, so I force myself to look away.

“I think I might have wrecked this suit,” he continues, oblivious to my turmoil. “So much for ‘no harm done.’”

“You can always get another suit.”

He moves into the bedroom as he divests himself of clothing, and I follow behind.

“True. Although this one was from Maggie, and I’m definitely not going through that again.”

“Maggie?”

“Magdelene Empire.”

“Oh. Right.”

“She’s been sending me outfits. Keeps trying to get me to come in for another fitting.”

“Is that… Does she need another fitting?”

“No,” he sighs. “She wants to watch me have sex. She… seems to like that.”

I don’t know how to react to that. The expression on my face must give Zeke a clue, because he chuckle and shakes his head.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be dumping this on you. I think I’ve had too much to drink.”

That’s not it. His words are clear, and he’s having no difficulty undressing himself despite the wet and clinging clothing. He’s hardly drunk, if at all. It wouldn’t surprise me if that were an old bottle of liquor he’d been sipping. I’d hazard a guess that it had been partially empty when he’d picked it up. No, Zeke’s not drunk. He’s just desperate for someone to talk to. Someone who can listen and understand the whole situation. That it’s not just Zero getting to him, that it’s not just the impending performance with me. It’s a hundred other little things, pressures and expectations.

He needs a friend. And I… don’t know if I can fill that role. Not after what we’re going to do together. Is he right? Will this change everything?

“Here,” he says, and tosses me a pair of pants from one of the drawers. I hold them up and realize that they must be Zero’s. They’re much too small to be Zeke’s.

“Thanks,” I reply, and turn to change. I’m not overly modest - I’ve been in locker rooms as a boy, and lived in quarters where privacy was impossible as an asset. Still, I find myself oddly shy, probably because it’s Zeke. Maybe because of everything else going on. I change quickly, putting my soaked clothes in the laundry chute.

When I turn back, he’s dressed in soft, cotton sleeping pants. His chest is still bare, and his hair hanging limp and damp against his shoulders.

“Is it too much to ask you to stay?” he asks. I’d been hoping he wouldn’t.

“I…” I hesitate and take a breath. “I need some time to think on this. Can I join you in a bit?”
“Of course,” he says, his tone neutral. “It’s fine either way.”

I don’t really believe that - I know he would have preferred me to stay, or he wouldn’t have asked. But he settles on the bed, and I hesitate a moment more before backing out the door.

Leaving us each to our separate, tumultuous thoughts.
It's been a long weekend. :) I don't really have more to say than that. I'm exhausted! But I wanted to get this chapter out before I pass out. (Or somebody needs something else! Lol)

Once again, have to give a shout-out to my beta team. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are just the best for helping me out.

I find myself in the gym without really thinking about it. It’s closer than the medbay, and there’s less of a chance I’ll run into Zero or Kip. The lights are off, and I only turn one set on, leaving the room in half darkness. I find my way to the matted area where I meditate, but I don’t take my usual position in the center. Instead, I tuck myself into a back corner, pulling my knees to my chest. I don’t bother trying to achieve a meditative state; my mind is simply too unsettled for that. Instead, I take a few deep breaths and let my forehead lay against my knees, just needing time to process.

It’s not like I find the idea of sex with Zeke objectionable. And that’s possibly the worst, most confusing aspect of this scenario. Being… physically intimate with Zeke was always… I always knew that it was a possibility. And I didn’t… I didn’t find that idea distasteful. I still don’t. It’s only the outside circumstances that make the situation so unpleasant.

If I had to perform the same act with someone else, someone not Zeke, it might be easier, too. If they took the choice completely from my control, I could close my eyes and suffer through. It would simply be another torture, another torment visited upon my body and mind. Perhaps it would finally be too much pain for me to endure. Perhaps it would finally be the piece that broke me. But it would not cause me such moral and internal strife. It would simply be something that happened, beyond my control, and I would endure as best I could.

That is not that case now. I know that if I truly believed I could not endure this act, Zeke would not make me. I could tell him no, and he would find a way around my attendance. Even to the detriment of his overall mission, Zeke would not force me to go through with it. Could not force me to go through with it, like he couldn’t with Ruby. There are some lines that even Zeke is unable to cross for the sake of his mission.

And because he is not forcing me and because of who he is, I know I cannot endure this the same way I would with another owner. I can’t close my eyes and suffer through. Can’t put myself in a trance, and simply… float away. That kind of treatment would break Zeke, who’s struggling so hard already with acting as an owner. He suffers under the demands that his mission has placed on him, and I fear that rejection from me could be the piece that breaks him. And I don’t mean that as a matter of ego; I mean that he’s so precariously close to a breakdown already that any collapse of his almost-nonexistent support system would be too much for him. I am the only one who can actually reject him, and not simply the costume that he wears. I am the only one who knows the person underneath, and that makes my actions all the more significant.

I think about… what I’m giving up. What we’re both giving up. The part that Zeke seems most stuck on, the fact that our relationship will no longer be our own, be a separate thing from his mission. Agreeing means that I must admit to myself that I’m giving up on letting the relationship evolve
naturally. Letting it find its own course. Letting go over our control of the pace and shape of it. At its core, we’re giving up on our own right to choose. Maybe that seems shallow. In one light, it’s only sex. A physical act, with a start and a finish. It doesn’t necessarily need to have such a far-reaching effect. But in another light, it’s intimacy. It’s a level interaction that we haven’t reached yet, which now we’re being forced into. Where our first kiss was spontaneous and hesitant, now our first act of physical love will be engineered and meticulous, rife with issues and stressors outside of our control.

Does this place poison everything? Do these people infect everything they touch with a black miasma? But then, I already know that they do. It was only foolishness that let me think I could keep something separate, something whole and clean. Anything untainted attracts them, makes them want to smear it with their own filth, drag it down into the bog with them until no traces of purity are left.

And Zeke walks among them, hidden in a cloak of ill-intent. What happens if the cloak slips? What happens if they find such purity walking among them? What then?

The idea unsettles me. I move to my knees, focusing on my breathing. Letting the thoughts come unhindered has helped, to a point. But now I need to focus, before I get pulled too far into the hypothetical and find myself distraught.

I take another deep breath and try to let go of what I can’t control. I let go of my resistance and reluctance. This is happening. Not just because I want to save the other assets - although I do, and that would be enough to drive me if needed. But also because I want to… for me. I want to be free. I don’t want to finish my life as someone’s pet, or repairing someone’s pet, or fighting someone’s pet. I might be older than many of the assets, but not so old that I can’t envision a life outside of the Leash. A life where I choose when and how and what I do. Who I do it with. Where I go and who I take with me. That kind of freedom… I’ve never really known it. Not when I was younger, in my strict and rigorous culture. And not since I was sold, moving from one line of duties into another seamlessly over the years. I would like to experience that freedom. And I’d like to take Zeke with me.

So this is a step on that path. A step toward reaching the goal. Zeke’s goal, and mine as well.

Zero mentioned being trained when he first came to Zeke, and as reluctant it makes me, the idea has its merits. This is not my forte. Sex is not something I’m overly experienced in. Even in my younger days, when my… motivation was higher, I lacked much in the way of opportunity.

I let myself heave a sigh, realizing that this is something I’ll have to address with Zeke. And isn’t that a humiliating idea? Discussing my lack of previous lovers with my future lover, who’s completely confident in his own sexuality. Who has the body of an adonis and sexual appetite of a nymph. Who keeps a literal harem, for gods’ sake.

I scrub a hand over my face and push myself to my feet. We’ve moved to the part of the evening where I worry and sulk, which is never productive. I make my way across the room silently, bare feet hardly a whisper against the metal floor. I flick the lights out, and head upstairs to find the source of my problems.

In the Master bedroom, I’m surprised to find Zeke still awake. The room is dim, with only a single lamp on the wall lighting the space as Zeke flips through information on his tablet. He seems surprised to see me as I approach, perhaps just as convinced that I wasn’t coming back as I was that he would be asleep by now. I find that I’m relieved that he’s not, though. I wouldn’t have woken him. I likely would have retreated to my own room and spent the night shifting through my own insecurities. Instead, Zeke sets the tablet aside and motions me closer, shifting over so that I have room to climb into his monstrous bed. I turn off the light as I pass, plunging the room into semi-dark, lit only by the dim glow of base-lights at the edge of the walls.
“You came back,” he comments quietly as I slide under the coverlet. I turn, and we lie facing each other, hardly able to see more than an outline. It seems easier like this, without having to actually see each other. I settle, and Zeke leaves a polite amount of distance between us. Zeke tends to like physical contact, but I can’t handle it right now. He seems to sense that, somehow. He doesn’t push, doesn’t shift to encroach on my space.

“I said I would,” I respond.

“I know, I just…” His expression goes uncertain; not sure how to express that he wouldn’t have blamed me for staying away. For running from him, now that I know what’s going on.

“I never run from a challenge,” I comment, more to my own thoughts than his words.

“Is that what this is? A challenge?” He doesn’t seem entirely pleased by the idea.

“It’s… an attack,” I explain. “On our relationship. On… whatever we’re trying to build between us. They’re trying to tear it down.”

“…okay,” he says, but doesn’t seem convinced.

“We won’t let them. We can do this,” I tell him, with more confidence than I feel. “We can… can perform. We can use this… this act to make it stronger. To build it higher. Stronger. As long as we can do it together.”

It’s quiet for a moment, in the darkness. Zeke doesn’t seem to know what to say.

“I’m relying on you,” I admit. “I don’t… this isn’t really my forte.”

“You seem… uncertain.”

He doesn’t say “afraid,” but it’s probably to spare my feelings.

“I am.” Another admission, but this one is more obvious. “Not because it’s you, but… You know this is going to be difficult for me, don’t you?”

“I’ve gathered, although… I don’t know entirely why.”

He reaches out and puts his hand between us on the coverlet, where I can touch him if I choose. I lace our fingertips together, just the barest brush of skin and heat. It’s all I can handle at the moment.

“Tell me what I need to know,” he implores. “I can’t help you without all the facts.”

I sigh, even though I knew it was leading here. It has to go here, to minimize the risk of damage. I can’t send Zeke into a situation like this blind. It will be fraught enough if he knows what he’s in for.

“I need you to remember where I came from,” I tell him first. “In my culture, being homosexual was not acceptable.”

“You’ve told me this.”

“Yes, but I don’t think you really understand. It’s difficult to grasp the full extent of a culture you’ve never been a part of.”

“Then make me understand.”

I make a scoffing sound - as though it’s so simple. But I have to try.
“It wasn’t just that it was illegal. It was… fundamentally immoral. Like theft or murder. There wasn’t any difference. If you were caught doing any of those things, you would lose all social standing. Your career, your home, your family. Everything was forfeit. For most of my formative years, I felt like a criminal. If I had not buried myself so deeply in my studies, I think I would have gone mad.”

“Was no one… like you?” Zeke asks, his voice puzzled.

“There were others,” I admit, “but we did not interact. I could not have been friends or allies with them - if they were of the same social standing, then we were threats to one another. That kind of a secret could be too easily used against me. Or them. That kind of power… it was too dangerous. Too easy to gain an advantage in a cut-throat political climate.”

“I see.”

“It’s not only that, though. In my home, you just… Some things were simply understood. You just knew to hide your differences, your weaknesses. You knew to keep your sexuality a secret if it was anything outside of cultural norms. To seek love only in dark spaces, and only with people who were of a lower social standing, and thus had no power to bring the act against you.”

I pause, but he doesn’t press me.

“I just need you to understand,” I continue, “that I’ll never be as you are. Outgoing and charismatic, at ease with my body and my impulses. My culture taught me that sex is something to be hidden, to be ashamed of. You’re not going to overcome that kind of conditioning in a week. Possibly not ever.”

“Okay,” he says gently. “That’s okay.” He hesitates a moment, then asks, “Can you tell me about your sexual experience? You said that the interactions were hidden, but… that implies there were some.”

I give another dry, humorless chuckle.

“Yes. I’m not a blushing virgin, but… it’s close. Most of my experience has been in watching, not participating. There were brothels where I come from that catered to all kinds of deviancy, not just sexual. Drugs and gambling were popular as well. When you visited, you would wear a cloak and a scarf, wool or silk depending on the season. It would keep your face obscured. It was… impolite to speak with anyone, to minimize the risk of other clients recognizing a voice. Sometimes they would have the prostitutes perform together to show off their skill. Sometimes, it would be two women, and rarely it would be two men. It was safer to watch than to interact, so I did that more often.”

“But you did… interact?”

“Yes. When I was… perhaps twenty? I finally worked up the courage to buy a prostitute for the night. He seemed to be a bit older than I was, and that made me feel a bit less like I was taking advantage. He had an open smile. Strong hand, but a very gentle disposition. We went to a private room and he performed oral sex on me. It was the strongest orgasm I’d ever had. Couldn’t have lasted more than ten minutes. I paid him handsomely, and he asked me to come back. Afterwards, I threw up in the alley until I thought I’d pass out.”

“From guilt?”

“And fear. Excitement. Terror. There were so many emotions running through me, it was a miracle that I didn’t throw up before I got outside.”

“Was that… the only time?”
“No. I was young. I couldn’t help myself. I went back at least a dozen more times, always to that same prostitute. We did other things. He let me touch him, explore his body. Let me return the act as he had done it for me. But we never went further than that - hands and mouths and skin. I have a feeling that what you’re intending something much more… intense than what I’ve experienced.”

He’s quiet for several seconds, then asks, “Why did you stop going back? Was it… because you were sold?”

His voice is concerned again, and I have to wonder about it for a moment before it clicks. He’s worried that I have a lover waiting for me. Someone that I’ve been separated from by circumstance, that perhaps I would return to.

“No,” I reply easily. “One night, someone tried to follow me home from the brothel, tried to find out my identity. After that, I was too frightened to go back. And… I was never more than a client to him anyway. He was kind enough, but it was always… professional. Restrained. He didn’t even know me, let alone like me.”

“Was there anyone else?” he presses, and I shake my head in the darkness.

“No. For a while, I simply got too busy with my work for anything else. And once I got to the Leash, I… couldn’t. Lots of men offered, but it was only from gratitude. They had nothing else to give, and I wouldn’t take what little they had left.”

We lapse into silence. My mind is so filled with memories that they seem to be tumbling out. I find myself saying, “I saw him again, though. The prostitute. A few years later, when I was just starting to do charity work in the slums. He and his wife had just had a baby. Their fourth child. She was a weak, cholicky child, born several weeks premature. There wasn’t much I could do except leave them with formula. If I’d been able to halt the premature labor, perhaps… But it doesn’t matter now.”

“Did he…?”

“No. He didn’t realize. He was so grateful that I think he would have offered himself to me if he had known, and that… That would have undone me. Bad enough that I paid him when he was a nameless, faceless whore. I couldn’t have done that if I’d known he was doing it to feed a growing family. Or that his wife was likely in the same… profession. The thought that his children would grow up with few other options.”

I shift onto my back and stare at the ceiling, seeing my life as a timeline running across.

“There’s never one little thing that creates who you are,” I tell the darkness. “It’s an endless stream of little things. But sometimes there’s a shove, where all the others were a nudge. This… This was my shove. Where I finally realized that there was something fundamentally wrong with my culture, and I needed to change it.”

“A noble goal,” Zeke says.

“Foolish,” I scoff. “Look where it got me.”

“Idealistic,” he says, shifting onto his back, so that our shoulders touch. “And I might not like the path you had to take, but… I’m glad you came here.”

I give a small smile, although I’m sure he can’t see it in the dim light. We’re quiet for several minutes, with both of us contemplating our own thoughts. There are many, at least in my head. Too many to sort through. Too much to contemplate sleeping.
Eventually, Zeke breaks the silence, since neither of us are sleeping anyway.

“I don’t have to overcome your conditioning,” he says, and his tone is a bit hesitant, like he doesn’t think I’ll like what he’s saying.

“No?” I question.

“I can’t, even if I tried. Anxiety is internalized, and I can only control the external. I can make it easier for you, can reinforce the positives and minimize and negatives. But… you’re the only one who can overcome the conditioning. If you… if you want to.”

“Of course I want to,” I respond immediately. “I’ve… This path was always leading here. Perhaps not this exact place - I didn’t think our first sexual act would be a public show. But… I knew I wanted to be with you. I knew this was part of that. That you’re… a very sexual creature.”

“It didn’t have to,” he says, and his voice is quiet. Subdued. “We could have stopped where we were.”

Could have let our affection remain platonic, with affectionate touches and little kisses, nothing more. It says a lot that Zeke would be okay with that. It tells me how often his experience has been the opposite, leaning heavily toward the physical and ignoring the emotional.

“It’s okay for it to go further. I’m okay with that.”

I see Zeke nod in the darkness, his outline shifting in the gloom. I can barely see him, but somehow I can still read his unhappiness. His hopelessness.

“The same offer extends to you, you know,” I counter in return. “You don’t have to do this, if you don’t want to.”

He gives a hollow little laugh and says, “I think it’s much too late for that, don’t you?”

And I’m silent, because he’s right. If it weren’t me, it would just be another asset. Zero, perhaps, or someone totally new. This cycle doesn’t end for Zeke until it ends for all of us.

“You… trained Zero,” I begin hesitantly, shifting the topic.

“Yes, but that wasn’t the same,” he explains. “Zero was a blank slate. No personal experience with sex, and very little second-hand knowledge. It made him very easy to guide. And he was… an enthusiastic learner, once he got the gist of what I wanted.”

“You won’t be able to train me the same way,” I surmise. “I am… well, more experienced than that, at least.”

“Zero hadn’t experienced lust before he was with me, so he never learned to be ashamed of it. It’s a lot different from your history, where every sexual impulse was suppressed. We’ll have to start slowly. Explore what triggers you and what doesn’t. See if we can pull out any of the desires that you’ve repressed.”

“We don’t have much time.”

I feel him grimace beside me as he responds with, “I know. I’m sorry.”

Because he delayed in telling me, which is what has put us in this mess. I contemplate being mad, but… there’s no point. He didn’t hide it from me so much as refuse to admit it to himself. In the end,
it wasn’t really about me. It was about Zeke’s own desire to keep our relationship separate from his role as an owner. A desire that, unfortunately, won’t be fulfilled.

“In the future, I would appreciate being informed about situations that involve me,” I reply. “But… it’s okay. I understand.”

He gives a heavy sigh and says, “We’ll need to start soon. Tomorrow?”

“Maybe. I need to check on Zero’s recovery. His physical therapy will take longer than usual, and I’ll need to start working on his temper.”

There’s a fraught, awkward silence.

“Should I…”

“No,” I cut him off. “Whatever you’re about to say, no. Don’t do anything with Zero until you’re certain. Until you know what to do. Until it feels right. That’s all I can tell you.”

He chuckles and says, “Fair enough.” Then, “I am going to forgive him. You know that, right?”

“I don’t believe that he actually meant to hurt you. He had an unfortunate reaction to a combination of drugs and stress. That being said, it isn’t an excuse. It just lets us know how to help him. But, mostly, he has to do the work himself.”

“I just…”

“Enough,” I comment, cutting him off. “That’s enough for tonight. Just… enough. Let it be until tomorrow. We can deal with it then.”

He curls toward me, but doesn’t protest. It’s quiet in the darkness.

And, surprisingly, I fall almost immediately asleep.
I'm hoping this chapter is as fun for you as it was for me. :) I think we're going to get quite a few "fun" chapters coming up soon. I hope you enjoy!

I have to give credit to my beta team for this chapter, it was pretty messy and they really bailed me out. :) Thanks a bunch guys! Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are just the best for helping me out.

“Lee said you wanted to see me,” Zero says, approaching slowly. We’re in the area at the back of the gym that functions as a locker room, although it’s half the size and sans lockers. Instead, there are a couple showers and two rows of dark, mahogany benches. A wall lined with a low shelf of white, fluffy towels. Several full-length mirrors. A steam-room large enough for four or five people.

It’s quiet and secluded. Neutral territory for both of us. A good place for our first meeting since the… incident.

“How’s the leg?” I ask him, although I already know. Lee has given me everything from a clinical diagnosis to a frustrated, “He’s fine, damn it! Ask him yourself!” Still, I worry.

Zero shrugs.

“It’s okay,” he says, and leans against the wall, taking the weight off of his damaged leg. He’s in cotton shorts and a loose tank top. His feet are bare. He’s been working with Lee all day, and now it’s well into the evening.

“Yes,” he replies. “But it’s okay. It’s mostly… I mean, it doesn’t actually hurt more, I just…”

His words trail, but I know what he means. Lee has taken him off all narcotics and restricted him only to low-level painkillers. So Zero isn’t really in more pain, he just feels it more acutely than before.

I sigh, and it makes Zero frown.

“How are your lessons with Lee?” I ask.

Zero shrugs noncommittally.
“They’re okay,” he says. “I mean, it’s only been a day.”

A day’s worth of time that we didn’t really have, but there wasn’t another choice. We all needed a day to settle. Even Lee, who’s trying his best to act unaffected.

“It seems…” Zero starts again, then hesitates. “I don’t know. It seems dumb. The meditation.”

“What does Lee think?”

“He says it’s always difficult for beginners. He says I need to learn to turn my focus inside, to tune out the external and focus inward. To learn to calm my thoughts and emotions, so that I can better handle my circumstances. He thinks I’m too focused on what’s going on around me to be present in the moment.”

That sounds accurate. Zero’s hyper-vigilance is nothing new. As a bodyguard, it would have been a necessary skill. Even as my pleasure slave, he’s always been aware of threats, always been ready to defend me. Maybe I let it get too far. Maybe something that kept him alive in dangerous surroundings has been slowly eating away at him now that he’s safe.

Or as safe as he can be, given the circumstances.

“Lee thinks you’re doing okay?”

“Yeah. He says…” Zero’s eyes flick to the floor, unable to hold my gaze. “He says my determination will take me a long way, but some of it just takes time and practice.” He meets my eyes again, his dark orbs troubled. “I… am determined. I’m… I’m sorry.”

“I know,” I tell him softly, holding myself in check against the instinct to tell him that it’s okay. That I know he didn’t mean to do it. That I forgive him.

It’s all true, but… I can’t offer him what he’s truly after. I can’t take away his guilt. Can’t absolve him. Can’t fix what’s wrong with him. It’s all on his shoulders this time.

He must sense my reluctance, because he clears his throat and stands straighter.

“You still haven’t told me what you want,” he says, and his voice loses that soft, uncertain quality. “Lee could tell you all of this. Or Kip.”

Kip, who’s been bunking with Zero on the bottom floor for the last two nights. Who’s still recovering himself, along with training a new domestic asset, and training with Lee as a scholar, and keeping up with the maintenance and daily demands of the ship. Kip, who I hardly see any more, and even then only in passing. And now he’s taking care of Zero, on top of everything else. My house would crumble without him acting as the keystone, the piece that keeps us all from falling apart. How he holds up under the pressure, I’ll never know.

I shake the thought away. Now is not the time to get distracted.

“I’ve talked to Lee about the upcoming party. I don’t have time to train him the same way I did you.”

It’s my fault, but that doesn’t change the facts. I don’t have time to ease him into it, to play and practice like I did with Zero. We only have a handful of days left, and Lee is far more reserved than Zero ever was.

“Instead,” I continue, “I want to focus on building a single scene. On trying to find out what Lee’s strengths and interests are, and play to that. I want to get him comfortable with both of us, as I intend
to bring you to the party for support. I’d like to do a scene with you, if you’re physically able.”

“I’ll submit to whatever you want. I can take it.”

I’m hit with momentary confusion as to his wording, and the intensity suddenly in his eyes. Then it strikes me.

“Zero… This isn’t a punishment.”

“No?”

“No. It’s just… It’s just sex.”

“Oh,” he responds, and the excitement drains from him. It makes me feel like I should be apologizing. Somehow, I manage not to.

“I just… I’d been expecting...” he continues, but he can’t seem to find words to finish that sentence.

“There isn’t going to be a punishment,” I tell him gently. “Not like that, anyway. Hitting you isn’t going to do any good this time. This isn’t the kind of demon I can exorcise through pain.”

“So… what? I’m just on my own?”

“You’re the only one who can fix this.”

“Yeah.” He makes a frustrated noise, and runs a hand through his dark hair. I notice how long it’s getting. There’s almost enough to clench in his fingers now, where before it was too short. “I know this is my fault. I broke your trust, and I have to earn it back.”

His eyes meet mine, and there’s energy in his gaze again. Determination.

“And I will. I’ll prove to you that I’m better than this. That I’m worth… being yours.”

He takes a step in my direction. Not enough to encroach on my space, but just beyond the bounds of polite distance. The tension in the room intensifies. I try to remind myself that I’m being ridiculous - this is Zero, for one. And we’ll be a hell of a lot closer than arm’s length soon enough. But somehow, neither of those thoughts help to dispel my anxiety. I might know, logically, that Zero won’t hurt me, but my body remembers quite vividly the kind of damage Zero can do. My chest aches with phantom pain, and there’s a burning in my throat from remembering his arm cutting off my oxygen.

Zero’s eyes go abruptly dull, his expression fading into something dim and lifeless. It’s like he can see into my thoughts, or did my expression somehow give me away?

“I’d better get showered,” he says, his voice flat. He retreats several steps before he starts to turn.

I can’t ignore the pain in his expression. My hand grasps at his wrist, halting him before he can move out of my reach. His eyes jump to my face, surprised.

“I haven’t given up on you,” I assure him firmly. “I know you can do better. That you will do better. But Lee is right. It’s going to take some time.”

Some of the weight seems to lift from him. His expression becomes just a bit less cold and shuttered. He doesn’t quite smile at me, but there’s light in his expression as he turns his wrist in my grip, wrapping his fingers around my hand.
Then he pulls away and goes to the back of the room, where he undresses and gets into one of the showers. I take notice that there’s hardly any limp when he walks, and it’s not likely that he’s hiding it for my benefit. So I doubt that he managed to do much damage with his fall the other day, if he’s already mostly recovered.

I turn and leave the room, feeling a bit more optimistic.

An hour later finds us back in the gym. Zero is stretched out on the matted area, naked. His dark eyes watch my expression carefully. His movements are still uncharacteristically hesitant and subdued, where he’s normally brash and confident. We’re better after our earlier conversation, but it’s obvious that we’re still in a strange place with each other. But then, so many things about this situation are strange.

Lee is kneeling just beyond arm’s reach. His expression is carefully neutral as he watches us, but he does so with intensity. I can see his eyes move as we shift, following every gesture. His chest rises and falls evenly, but there’s a hum of excitement about him. Or is it fear? The two seem to war heavily within him.

I’m doing my best to help, but it’s difficult. Every attempt makes me wonder if I’m making things better, or exacerbating existing wounds. Talking about it makes him uncomfortable. Touching makes him tense. Nudity makes him retreat. I understand that his history has a lot to do with his reactions, but I don’t know how I’m supposed to help him. How in the world I’m going to make this performance tolerable for him, when it’s light years outside of his comfort zone.

But I have to start somewhere.

So I had Lee meet us in the gym, and I intercepted Zero as he was leaving the showers. The bedroom seemed like too intimate a place for this, and the playroom was too adventurous. Not to mention Zero’s guilt-ridden interest in punishment, which I didn’t want to encourage.

The gym is neutral territory. And it’s not unfamiliar to Zero and myself, even for this use. Although, thinking about it, perhaps it’s in bad taste to let Lee watch me take Zero in the same place that Zero lost his virginity to me. Or maybe it’s not a big deal. Maybe I’m making it into an issue when it’s not. I feel like all I do any more is pick between two bad options.

I toe my shoes off and kneel on the mat next to Zero. He watches as I work at the buttons on my top. Zero is still nude from the shower, having left the back area in nothing more than a towel. He’d tossed that aside as soon as I’d told him my intention, ever comfortable with his own body. Lee had joined us only moments later, and had balked at the sight of Zero, naked and unconcerned on mats they’d practiced on only hours before. But he had controlled himself, managing to take the seat that he currently occupies near the matted area’s edge.

Zero blanches as I drop my shirt to the floor. It takes me a moment to realize that it’s the first time he’s seen my chest since the incident. The bruising there is hardly faded, with only the barest edges starting to turn a sickly shade of green and yellow. I have to hope that the healing process picks up some speed, or I’ll need to cover the injury with makeup before our next event. There’s an obvious line across my chest, and tell-tale bruising at the base of my throat. It would be difficult to concoct a story to explain it - easier just to keep it hidden from prying eyes and easy gossip.

His hand comes up, fingers splayed and quivering, like he wants to touch the discolored skin and verify its authenticity. A moment later, and the hand falls back to the mat without having so much as reached toward me. His eyes meet my gaze and there’s naked pain there. I don’t think he realized before just how close he’d come to accidentally killing me.
There’s nothing I can say to make him feel better.

So I lean down and brush my lips against his. Unable to reassure him with my words, I let my body speak for me. Let my hands find a sure grip on his shoulders. Let my legs straddle him, keeping my weight away from his damaged hip. Let my lips find their way down his throat, until I’m lapping at his collar bone. His interest stirs against my thigh, and I grin as the hesitancy seems to leave him. His hand finally reaches for me, his body curling in a taut arch toward mine.

And all the while, Lee watches, silent as a sentinel and still as a stone. Only his eyes move, tracking our motions with interest. His breathing picks up, but only in the slightest. A small sign of his excitement, but at least he’s not totally apathetic. As with other performances, I try to put his attention from my mind, focusing solely on Zero.

Zero, who has found some of his old confidence. His lips part, a silent request. I acquiesce, deepening the kiss. My tongue darts out to taste him as he tightens his hands on my shoulders, pulling me closer.

“Please,” he says softly. His cock is already fully erect, bobbing between us. This is the first time that we’ve been together since his surgery, I realize. The first time I’ve held him like this, touched him like this, in over a week. Other than James’ party, Zero’s been completely celibate, a stark contrast from his previous level of sexual activity. No wonder he’s desperate for it. Zero has always been a physical creature, even in the beginning, when he still didn’t understand physical affection.

I pull away from Zero. His hands clutch my shoulders, and for a moment I think that I might have to tell him to let go. Then he releases me completely, returning his hands to his sides. I get to my feet and quickly remove my pants, pulling a small container of lubricant from the pocket as I divest myself. They join my shirt and my shoes in an untidy pile on the hard floor beside the mats.

“Over,” I tell Zero as I kneel beside him. He gives me a speculating glance before turning onto his stomach, careful to roll toward his right side.

There aren’t a lot of things that we can do without risk of injuring Zero. I’ve talked to Lee about Zero’s recovery and flexibility, about how to best avoid straining him. Missionary position would be impossible, as would having him straddle me. Both positions would force his left leg to bend too far and take too much strain while we couple. It might be counter-intuitive, but it’s better to risk putting pressure on the area than to over-extend it.

Which is why I guide Zero to lay flat on his stomach, careful to guide his erection between his thighs, so it doesn’t get pinched beneath him. Then I cover him with my body, slotting my cock in the crevice of his ass. I don’t attempt to enter him - we’re not there yet. But I let Zero feel my skin against his, let my cock slide along the natural valley of his body. I keep my knees splayed wide on either side of Zero’s hips, careful to put as little pressure as possible on Zero’s left hip. If I do brush against it, Zero doesn’t seem to notice. He gasps and writhes below me, unable to get leverage needed to push against me. Forced passivity, but it’s better than letting him over-exert himself.

“Be still,” I warn when my own cock is fully hard from rutting against Zero’s pliant body. He goes lax beneath me, and I pull myself back until I’m kneeling behind him again. I guide Zero’s legs apart, just enough that I can reach between his spread thighs. The shift reveals his cock, still fully hard between his legs, pinned against the mat and pointing in the opposite direction of its natural inclination. If it causes him discomfort, Zero takes no heed, shifting only to spread his thighs wider for me. I stop him with a grip on his ankles, returning his legs to where I’d had them. Parted enough to give me access, but not enough to injure him. It’s a balance that I’ll continue to struggle with until Zero is fully healed.
The small jar of lubricant from my pocket lays forgotten on the mats beside us. I take the lid off and spread some of the slick, glistening gel on my fingers. Zero is accustomed to this process by now, but he still makes a deep, needy sound as I press my middle finger into him. He thrusts back against me, as much as he’s able from flat on his stomach. The warm, tight feeling of his body around my finger makes my cock jump with excitement, and I’ve barely given him a dozen thrusts before I’m adding a second finger. His body widens obligingly, making room for a second and then a third digit. By then, his body is well prepared, and I pull my fingers away and use the remaining gel to coat my own cock. I wipe my fingers on my discarded shirt, then straddle his hips again.

I push my cock against his hole, burying my length slowly, inch by agonizing inch. There is only the barest amount of resistance as the head pushes past his entrance, and then the rest of my length slides along smoothly. Zero whines breathlessly beneath me, panting and writhing, unable to thrust himself back. I take no heed, continuing the slow assault until I’m fully seated, and then I stop completely. Zero moans, a desperate, plaintive noise. I kiss the juncture between his neck and shoulder, lapping at the salty skin while I give his body time to adjust.

“Please,” he begs, after a length of time that borders on cruel. “Please, Master!”

“What are you asking for?” I ask, teasing him. “What is it you want?”

“Yes,” I promise, rolling my hips against his body. He groans as I rock against him, and makes a pleading sound as the movement turns into actual thrusts. His own cock, still trapped under him, is likely getting very little stimulation, but Zero has always enjoyed penetration. I have no fear that his enthusiasm is ingenuine. It would be difficult to fake this level of excitement.

Zero rises to meet my thrusts as best he can despite being pinned down, and I lose myself in the rhythm. I keep my movements controlled and even, drawing this out for as long as I can. It’s not until the last few thrusts that I lose myself, my pace picking up until I’m rocking my hips with wild abandon. My hands are braced on either side of him, supporting my weight so that I don’t forget myself and grab his hips. When orgasm hits me, I wrap my arms around his shoulders, bending my body over his prone form and muffling a groan against his shoulder. My cock spurts hot and deep inside of him, and I still as the pleasure rolls over me. Zero calms as well, although I can still feel him panting with need beneath me.

When my orgasm has abated, I pull out completely, leaving a trail of white seed across his thighs. Zero whines, a disappointed, melancholy sound. I can only assume that he thinks we’re finished, that he expects me to sadistically deny him orgasm even after all of that. Instead, I guide him to roll over, once again turning on his undamaged hip until he’s laying on his back. I push his legs up so that his feet are planted on the floor, opening his body for me. He casts me an uncertain look as I move between his legs, then gasps as I shove three fingers back into his wet, gaping hole. With my other hand, I give his cock several firm strokes in time with the thrusts of my fingers. Then I bend my head and take his cock into my mouth, burying my fingers in his ass as I swallow him to the root. Zero screams, coming almost the second his cock hits the back of my throat. I swallow his orgasm, feeling the way his ass clenches around my fingers in time with his shallow, helpless thrusts into my mouth.

And then we’re both finished. Spent. I push myself off of Zero, settling on my back beside him. We’re both a sticky mess, tired and sated.

It’s only then that I think to glance at Lee, trying to gage his reactions to all of this. Looking at him, I have a moment to wonder if maybe…

Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.
Lee looks excited, the evidence of it tenting the cloth between his legs. But he also looks shell-shocked and a bit terrified. Overwhelmed. It makes me realize just how long Zero and I have been together, how comfortable we are as lovers. Was it a mistake to drop Lee in the middle of that? To flaunt it in his face? That was never my intention, but that seems to be the result.

Zero is the one who reaches out. I’m too surprised to stop him when he crawls across the short space and puts his hands on Lee’s thighs. It’s only Lee’s sharp gasp that prompts me into movement.

“Zero!” I warn. “Don’t-”

“He’s okay,” Zero says, without breaking his gaze with Lee to look at me. “He wants this.” Then to Lee, “Don’t you?”

Lee is stone again, his expression like marble, his body completely still. Only the rise and fall of his chest betrays him for flesh and blood.

Then he blinks, slowly and deliberately, and swallows hard.

“Yes,” he responds to Zero, his voice barely more than a whisper.

It’s enough for Zero, who has no reservations about sex. He pushes forward, and Lee is knocked out of his kneel and onto his ass. Zero stays on his knees, leaning over Lee, giving me a view of the come dripping down the back of Zero’s thighs. Zero takes a little time running his hands along Lee’s body, down his sides, across his legs. Then Zero is pulling at Lee’s cloth pants, and I see a panicked expression on Lee’s face as his cock escapes its confines. It’s an average size, perhaps a bit thicker than Zero’s sleek cock. Uncut, which gives Zero a moment of hesitation. Most of the assets’ cock have been circumcised, likely for aesthetic reasons. But Lee has never been a pleasure asset, and there would have been no reason to alter him if he came to the Leash intact.

Zero’s confusion lasts for less than a moment, and then his mouth is on Lee’s cock. Lee makes a sound that is equal parts pleasure and pain, throwing his head back as his hands clench uselessly at the plastic mats under him. I’m finally prompted into movement, and I put myself at Lee’s back, giving him something to lean against. It helps to steady him, and his hands clutch at my legs as Zero mercilessly lavishes his cock with attention. Lee’s mouth is open in surprise, his dark eyes wide with shock. I find myself unable to help leaning over and capturing those lips in a kiss, swallowing the little noises he makes as Zero works his cock.

I’m not surprised when Lee comes soon after. When he seems close, I break our kiss and wrap my arms around him, holding him tight as the pleasure hits him. He screams, an animalistic sound, and pushes against my grip, his body strung painfully tight. In anyone else, I’d take it as a sign of a job well done, but with Lee it’s harder to predict. Zero swallows Lee’s orgasm, lapping at Lee’s cock even when the organ starts to deflate. Lee sags against me, his breath coming in shakey, erratic pants. I hold him, stroking his hair quietly for several minutes. After the first couple seconds, Zero shifts back and watches us, throwing worried glances between the two of us.

It takes a long time for Lee to calm. Knowing his history or his reluctance, I’m not entirely surprised, but… It’s not a great sign, considering the sexual act that he participated in is likely the least intimate or demanding that we could manage. How will he react when he’s the one in Zero’s place? Or will we even get that far before Lee hits his breaking point?

Eventually, Lee seems to come around. His breathing slows to a normal pace and he blinks rapidly, pushing himself away from me and getting unsteadily to his feet. He tucks himself back into his pants as he moves, clearly uncomfortable with having his genitals exposed despite the fact that Zero and I are totally naked.
“I’m sorry, I seem to have spaced out for a minute.” He doesn’t wait for an answer, but turns to Zero and bows at the waist, a formal gesture of respect. “Thank you for helping me. I owe you a debt of gratitude for your assistance.” He then turns to me and gives me a shallow, less formal bow. “If I am not needed for anything else, then I would like to go wash up.”

I’m too started to do anything but nod, and I only realize my mistake after he’s already retreating to the back of the room. I would have preferred to talk a bit about everything, but it seems that Lee is in no mood.

Zero stares after Lee’s retreating back, a puzzled frown on his face.

“Did… Did that go okay?” Zero asks, his gaze fixed on the back of the room even as Lee disappears into the showering area.

“Honestly?” I respond. “I’m not really sure.”
Chapter Notes

Updates:

My house has been held up in legal limbo, which sucks, but it's also giving me more
time to work on this, so it's kind of a mixed bag at the moment. Speaking of mixed
emotions, I think we're finally (actually!) nearing the end (unlike the last five or six times
I've said that). Probably about ten chapters left, maybe a couple more or less. (This is the
part of the book where in the written version you can start to feel the pages dwindling
on the right side, and you start to sweat about how much we've got left to handle and
how few pages there are left. Lol!)

My betas are always instrumental in getting an excellent product out to the audience, but
no where do I rely on them quite as much as when we're nearing the end of a section,
and I start to sweat because the pressure is on. So I have to give them all the credit for
helping me out. Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are the best
team I could hope for.

If you haven't jumped to my Weebly website or Livejournal, now might be a good time
to check that out. Specifically, I've been updating some of my recommendations, so if
you're looking for something to distract you once I'm on hiatus again, check out the
links to some of my favorite fics. :) I won't steer you wrong! (Or, at least, I'll try not to!)

When Zeke finds me, I’m sitting on a bench in the locker room, staring at my hands. I’d come back
here with a vague notion of cleaning up - my thighs have a sticky, slimy feel from Zero’s saliva and
my own semen - but instead I found myself sitting rather than… What? Showering? Even the
thought of being naked right now makes me feel vulnerable enough to clench my fists and cross my
arms over myself. There’s a ringing in my head. If I let myself think about it too hard, I’d be
overwhelmed. More than I already am, anyway.

“Hey,” Zeke says, settling on the bench at the other end, thankfully giving me space. He’s got his
pants back on, and it shouldn’t be such a big relief that he’s semi-dressed, but it is. “Are you okay?”

I scoff, choking on a laugh. Of course I’m fine. That was… voyeurism with the barest touch of
fellatio. I’m overreacting. I’m overthinking. Even I know it.

And I can’t seem to stop it.

“I’m fine,” I respond, an answer that doesn’t make him look less concerned. He frowns at me,
shifting the slightest bit closer.

“That was a lot,” he admits, his voice soft and worried. “Maybe…”

“It was not a lot!” I snarl. “It was hardly anything! I’m being ridiculous! I don’t… I can’t…”

“It’s a lot for you to process,” Zeke counters, more firmly this time. “You’re not used to this. It’s
okay to feel overwhelmed.”
And that’s a pretty good summary of how I’m feeling. There’s just… so much.

I put my hands over my face, scrubbing harshly at my eyes. When I drop my hands, Zeke is still looking at me with concern.

“What are we going to do?” I ask him, point-blank. “I’m never going to be ready in time.”

“Let me worry about that.”

“But I—...”

“No,” he cuts in. “Stop worrying so much. We have time left, and this is what I’m good at. I’ll let you know when we need to be concerned. I just need to you to trust me right now. Can you do that?”

I’ve been trusting him all along, despite the questions and the second-guessing. It’s just not in my nature to let someone else lead. I have difficulty setting aside control, and even more so in a situation that I’m so thoroughly out of my element.

“So what now?” I ask, trying to gauge our next step. He gives me a somewhat wane smile.

“Now, you go take a nap.”

“A nap?” I parrot, surprised and affronted.

“Or read a book. Take a bath.” He tilts his head, his smile becoming more genuine. “Relax.”

“I don’t think—...”

“Good,” he cuts me off. “Don’t think. Let me think about it, think about our next step, think about how to play this. You go and take some time to process. See how you feel about it in a couple hours.” He puts his hand over mine, and I have to suppress the urge to pull away. I’m too raw for it, despite the fact that he keeps the touch light and loose. “Trust me to keep us on schedule and working in the right direction. Please.”

I do trust him, and so my only recourse is to nod my head. He smiles, and then releases my hand. He leaves the room without another word. I wait until I’m sure he’s gone before getting to my feet.

Semen and saliva have dried on my thighs, making the skin feel uncomfortable and tight. I eye the showers longingly, but then a wet the corner of a towel and clean myself off the best I can. I can’t stand the idea of being naked right now, shedding the protective layer of clothing and making myself more vulnerable.

It takes a bit of effort to force myself to leave the shower room. I glance at the open area as I pass through the gym and contemplate doing some katas, but I know I don’t have the concentration. I pointedly don’t look at the matted area. Zero and Zeke are gone, as I expected, but there’s always a possibility that remnants of our coupling might remain. Even if they don’t, I know my mind would supply visions of the two of them, twined together on the ruby-red canvas. And Zero leaning over my lap, a backdrop of red behind him. Zeke leaning over me, golden hair a halo around his face.

I hurry from the room as I feel my breathing pick up, excitement and anxiety mixing in equal measure.

Zeke instructed me to relax, but his ideas of “book” and “bath” are both beyond my capabilities. I haven’t the concentration necessary to read, and the idea of being nude and submerged right now...
makes me physically ill. The best alternative I can come up with is wandering aimlessly through the halls.

It’s only when I find myself standing in the doorway to the professional kitchen on the top floor that I realize my wandering wasn’t nearly as aimless as I’d intended. It only takes a moment before Kip notices, almost before I realize where I am. Kip takes a single look at me - his uncovered right eye giving me a thorough once-over - and rounds on the other two occupants of the room.

“Out.”

“What?” Red protests. Ruby has a mildly confused look on his face, still with his hands in a sink full of dishes.

“Go. Get out. Vacate the premises. Leave.”

“But what about the chicken? Won’t it…”

“It’s got another hour to bake. Go prune the garden - the cucumbers are getting out of hand. Take Ruby with you. And don't massacre my plants!”

The two beat a hasty retreat, Ruby flicking the suds from his hands and wiping them on his jeans. I move further into the room as they pass, pausing next to the small side table that I usually occupy.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt your lesson.”

“It’s okay,” Kip says with an easy smile. He brushes a strand of hair aside, pushing it to the left side of his face, where his bangs hang over his damaged eye and obscure it from view. He’s forgone the scarf now that his hair is long enough to hide his blind eye. “They could use a break anyway.”

“I suppose, although pruning the hydroponics doesn’t sound very relaxing.”

“Yeah, no. I cut everything back this morning. Those two are going to sneak off to make out in the meadow.”

“I… what?”

“Well, they’re teenagers,” he says with a grin. He leans over the counter that separates us and braces his head on his arm. “And they’re not the first pair of newbies I’ve helped hide an illicit relationship. If I tell them to take some time and go be adorable together, they’re just going to get into a fight. But if they think they’re sneaking around, then it all goes okay.”

It surprises a bark of laughter out of me. The shift in emotions is so abrupt that it leaves me almost dizzy. I have to steady myself with the table.

“Sit down,” Kip says more gently, nodding at the closest chair. “I’ll get tea.”

And he does. In minutes, he has a delicate, white porcelain teapot and two tea cups laid out on a silver tray. There’s a plate stacked with little butter cookies and pieces of biscotti dipped in white chocolate. The tea is already brewed, and it has a light color when he pours it, holding the glass in one hand and the pot in the other to compensate for his limited vision. He’s adapting well as his vision continues to improve in his right eye, but there will always be limitations from his monocular vision. Still, I know how lucky he is to even have that.

The tea is a pale honey color instead of the dark brown of black tea or the mossy shade of green tea. The aroma hits me with notes of citrus and peach, and I take a sip of the white tea blend to find its
taste sweet and subtle.

Kip settles in the chair across from me and takes one of the round cookies in his mouth, snapping it in half before setting the remaining piece on the edge of his saucer.

“You knew I was coming,” I accuse, suddenly realizing that this setup is too perfect and too quick to be happenstance. “You were prepared for this.”

“Zero told me about the party and what you’re being asked to do,” he responds, entirely unrepentant. “When Zeke asked me to keep Ruby in the kitchen for a couple hours, I just figured it was related.”

That explains Ruby’s sudden disappearance, at least.

“How did you know I’d come here?” I wonder.

He shrugs and says, “I didn't, but I figured you might want someone to talk to. Besides, if you hadn’t showed, I just would have fed the cookies to the teenagers - it’s not like they’d complain. They’re both ravenous pretty much all the time.”

“They’re hardly teenagers,” I counter. “The youngest of them is eighteen.”

Kip waves a dismissive hand and says, “They’re all teenagers until they hit twenty-two.”

“Red can hardly be much younger than you are,” I protest. Kip gives me a sad smile in return.

“I’m decades older than Red,” he replies softly, and I realize that I don’t know much about him.

If he’d been brought in as a teenager, like Ruby, then Kip has been here for the better part of a decade. Zeke had given me access to his Key during Kip’s treatment, so I know that Kip’s at the tail end of his twenty-sixth year, just like I know that Zero is barely twenty-five. And I know that the zeros were brought in older, like Red and myself. I’d been twenty-two when I’d been sold in, while Kip might have been hardly more than a child.

“Hey,” Kip says, and I pull my attention away from contemplating my cup to glance at him. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course,” I respond soberly. “Anything.”

“Are you okay?” he asks, surprising me. “I mean, physically? I know you’re a doctor, but… Well, it can’t be easy to treat your own wounds. If that’s an issue, then I would be willing to help. I want you to know that.”

“I appreciate your concern, but my wounds are purely psychological.”

He smiles again, and says, “Ah. The worst kind.”

“I’m coming to understand that.”

“Physical wounds can be seen and treated, but mental injuries tend to hide and fester. I have some experience with that type of pain. Can I help?”

I choke on a sip of tea and cough to clear my throat.

“No,” I respond when my throat is clear. “I don’t think adding another person into the mix will do much good, at this point.”
“I meant,” he corrects, still with that polite smile, “do you want to talk about it?”

“Oh.” I feel my face heat just at the thought of repeating what happened earlier.

“It might do you some good,” Kip says more softly. “I know what it’s like to have someone use sex as a weapon. I know how hard it can be to shift from that mentality.”

His words are like a bucket of ice water, and suddenly I feel cold all over. And then heat builds from my toes and climbs my body, until I’m surging forward in my chair and demanding, “Who?”

Kip shrugs and sits back in his seat, like it’s no big deal.

“It was a long time ago. My first owner liked to use sex as one of the many tools of torment that he could use to keep us in line. It only happened a few times, but… Well, it was more than enough to have an impact on me.”

“I’m so sorry,” I murmur. “I had no idea.”

“It hasn’t really come up. Besides, we’re not here to talk about my trauma. We’re talking about yours.”

“No one has ever harmed me in that way,” I tell him, ashamed to admit all the issues I’m having when Kip was able to overcome so much more. “Luck and circumstance aligned, and no owner was willing to compromise my skills to have my body. And the other assets were dissuaded by my martial arts abilities, and then later because they could see my benefit to them.”

“That’s a good thing,” Kip says, his face pinched with confusion. “Why do you sound upset?”

“It’s just further proof of my own deficiency. If you can overcome something like that, then I have no excuse for—...”

“It’s not a competition,” Kip cuts in sharply. “I’m not trying to outdo you for who’s had it worse. I thought it might make it easier for you if I shared first.”

“You’re right,” I respond contritely, feeling even worse. “I’m sorry.”

We’re quiet for a moment, both awkwardly staring at the table settings. Then Kip sighs and raises his eyes to me.

“Lee,” he says softly, “I’m trying to help. Just talk to me.”

I scoff, feeling another stab of embarrassment stab through me.

“Talk about how useless I am as a sexual being?” I respond bitterly. “Talk about my utter humiliation? Talk about how I can’t even manage the most basic sexual acts? No, I think I’d prefer to avoid that.”

“I had a lot of trouble when Zeke trained me,” Kip admits. “It’s why he doesn’t use me for pleasure, doesn’t take me to parties. I never adjusted like Zero has.”

“Oh.” I had thought that only his frailty kept Zeke from using Kip. “I didn’t know.”

“I still don’t like being penetrated, although it’s easier with Zero than with Zeke.”

“Negative associations,” I comment, unable to stop the analysis. It makes sense - in Kip’s mind, at least, Zeke is still an owner. He has a lot more in common with the man who hurt Kip than Zero
Kip nods and continues with, “It took a lot of work to get me to a point where I can accept penetration without panicking. Even after that, it was a struggle to enjoy it, to not see it as a chore or a requirement.”

“I don’t have that kind of time,” I tell him softly, feeling cold wash over my body.

“If there’s one thing working in your favor, it’s that Zeke is very good at this. But you’re going to have to let go of these reservations and work with him. There’s not much he can do if you aren’t cooperative.”

“My reservations are deep and entrenched. They’re almost as old as I am.”

“Tell me?” he asks gently, and I sigh.

“On Satellite 12, where I grew up, we have a very traditional society. Our views on morality are rigid and ancient. Being with another man is prohibited, and I realized fairly early in my teen years that I did not find women attractive. I knew that if I ever let on to my family that I was only interested in the same sex, I would be a pariah. Disowned. Abandoned and alone as an outcast. That’s how much my sexuality would have cost me.”

“The sounds terrible,” Kip says, and seems genuinely upset. “I was adopted by an elderly woman when I was very young. The Leash got me before I’d had much time to develop my sexuality, but I know she would have loved me no matter what. I can’t imagine coming from a family where that wasn’t the case.”

“My mother would have stood by me,” I tell him, my voice barely more than a whisper. Even after all these years, the pain cuts like a knife. “I would have still had to keep my secret from others, but I think having just one person to confide in would have made all the difference.”

“She wasn’t around?”

“She died when I was young.”

“I’m so sorry. There wasn’t anyone else you could talk to?”

“No. My brothers and I weren’t close. My father ensured that our relationship was more adversarial than familial. And we were discouraged from making friends outside the family or beneath our station.”

“It must have been lonely.”

“Yes. Although, I have to admit that my temperament didn’t help matters. It might be hard to believe, but I’ve mellowed over the years.”

He laughs and says, “You must have been a spitfire.”

“My students called me the dragon for my temper. Even as a trainer for Ellaine, I had a reputation for my ire.”

“A lot of people don’t understand the kind of pressure that trainers are put under,” Kip says, and it reminds me that he was - and still is - a trainer in his discipline as well. “We take responsibility for our students. Their failure is our failure. If they aren’t good enough, it’s because we weren’t good enough. And if they die…”
“...it’s our fault,” I finish for him, knowing that same pain.

“Yes. It’s more difficult, I think, than just being an asset. Trainers get perks, but the toll it takes on us is hardly worth it.”

“It’s easier here, with Zeke.”


“I…”

“No, it’s okay,” Kip interrupts. “I get the appeal, you know? He’s kind and gentle. Even tempered. Attractive. And he genuinely seems to care. But don’t forget, he also owns us. He’s not our savior, he’s our captor.”

There’s nothing I can say to that without breaking Zeke’s trust, so I take a sip of tea as cover. Damn. It’s hard to remember that Kip, out of all the assets, is still the most rigid in his assessment of Zeke, and the least able to see past the “Owner” label. Maybe it’s because Kip has been here so long and had such bad experiences with owners. Maybe he’ll never be able to forgive that title, as little as Zeke does to live up to it.

“I’m just saying,” Kip continues, perhaps sensing my uncertainty, “that you need to protect yourself. You and Zero both put a lot of trust in Zeke. I’m not telling you not to cooperate - that would be stupid. Just don’t forget what he is.”

“Okay,” I reply, because I don’t have anything else I can say. Thankfully, Kip nods and lets it drop.

“Speaking of Zero, he was with you today, wasn’t he?”

“Yes,” I admit, and I feel my face heat just remembering Zero’s… involvement. I can quite push the memory of his lips on my cock out of my mind.

“Are you two okay with each other? You’re not competing against each other, are you?”

“No. I-... We-...” I respond, stumbling over my words. “You could say that we’re cooperating.”

“Ah. Zeke does tend to bring in more than one asset at a time. Is it… you know. Going okay?”

“It…” My face flames as I recall only a few hours ago. I bury my face in my hands. “Ancestors.”

“What?”

“I… bowed to him. And thanked him. For fellatio! He’s going to think I’m mental.”

Kip laughs outright, a full-bodied sound much different than the small, polite chuckles from rest of the conversation.

“It’s not the most traditional response to oral sex,” he responds, “but if you looked as shell-shocked as you did when you got here, I think Zero will overlook it.”

“By the ancients, what is wrong with me?”

“Nothing. You’re learning, not just about sex, but about letting people get close to you. You’re adapting. You make mistakes.” He grins at me mischievously. “Admittedly hilarious mistakes.” I glare at him. “But it’s all part of the process.”
“And how long does this process take?”

“I don’t know that it’s ever really finished. Relationships are always in a constant state of change.”

“Do you-…”

My sentence trails as the door opens and Zeke enters, followed closely by two contrite-looking teenagers.

“I stumbled upon these two in the cargo bay mid-coitus while I was looking for Lee,” Zeke says. “I thought perhaps you’d lost them.”

“The-…” Kip snaps are hard glare at the pair. “Really?”

And because I know that Kip had planned for this, I’m also aware that he’s more irritated about the “where” than the “what.”

“Sorry, sir,” Red says. “I… We just wanted to grab a moment alone. Didn’t mean any harm.”

“Why there?”

It’s Ruby who shrugs and says, “Jump ships are cool.” He seems to have a fascination with Zeke’s small craft.

“It’s probably fortuitous,” Zeke interrupts before Kip can get himself worked into a rage. “I wanted to ask if I could borrow them for a couple hours.”

Ruby’s head snaps up, his expression wary, but he manages to stay silent.

“For what?” Kip asks, his tone even but his shoulders straighten. He’s concerned as well.

“I thought…” Zeke hesitates, glancing between Kip and me. “I mean, I was thinking it might be nice to have some activity this afternoon. Perhaps a sport of some kind? But with Zero’s hip, there’s no way he could play. I thought it might be a nice change of pace for Ruby and Red. If they’re not too busy.”

Another instance of Zeke asking for permission where another owner might command it. Still, Kip doesn’t question it, just smiles and says, “Of course. They’re always complaining to me that they don’t get enough time for entertainment.”

“Good. Are you two finished?”

“Yes,” I respond, pushing myself from the table. “I’m sorry, I don’t seem to have much of an appetite. But thank you, the gesture and the advice were both appreciated.”

Kip picks up a cookie makes a dismissive gesture before popping it into his mouth.

“Go on, I’ll take care of things here.”

Zeke turns and moves out the door, followed closely by Red. I move to follow them, but notice Ruby hanging back, giving Kip a baleful look.

“Go,” Kip commands softly. “It’s okay. Red and Lee will be with you.”

I hesitate, realizing that there’s still bad blood between Ruby and Zeke, wondering if there’s anything I can do to help. After a moment, Ruby looks away from Kip and stuffs his hands in his pockets,
shuffling toward the door.

“I’ll keep an eye on them,” I assure Kip.

He gives me a sad smile and nods.

In a matter of minutes, we’re back at the gym. Ruby and Red have changed into cotton shirts and shorts, while I’m still in my scrubs and Zeke is in jeans and a t-shirt. I prepare myself for the embarrassment of a tidal wave of memories associated with this location, but they don’t surface. The room is changed, and my mind focuses on the unfamiliar. My mats from earlier have been folded up and moved aside, stacked neatly against a back wall. The large space they occupied is now cordoned off by sheer walls, which seem to have dropped from the ceiling. The exposed floor beneath is metal, but covered in a layer of rubber for better grip. Hovering near either end of the space is a round hoop turned on its side, so that the opening is perpendicular to the floor.

“Gravity ball?” Ruby says, for the first time seeming a bit excited.

“You play?” Zeke asks.

“No.”

“There wasn’t a room for it at the center,” Red chimes in. “But we’ve seen it on the vids.”

“Now’s your chance to try,” Zeke says, smiling.

We enter the area and I feel the abrupt shift in gravity that gives the game its title. Gravity ball is played in a reduced-gravity area, giving the sport its signature. All six sides of the room are playable areas. The rules are fairly straight-forward, especially playing two-on-two, as we are, instead of teams of four, as it’s played traditionally. Zeke pulls out a ball roughly the size of a melon, rubber but covered with a layer of padding. The goal is to get it through the opposing team’s hoop.

We start off slowly, especially with three of us just learning the game. Although I don’t admit it, I’ve only ever seen vids of the game as well. Gravity is low, but not entirely shut off. While we’re able to make much higher leaps than we could in full gravity, it still takes a lot of effort, and we’re countered by the fact that our opponents have the same advantage.

It’s… fun. I find myself letting go of everything else and just playing the game. Ruby gets especially into it, and near the end begins to play aggressively, shoving and blocking with his body. It brings out the competitive side in me, which leaves Zeke and Red to play backup. They don’t seem to mind, letting Ruby and myself monopolize the game. Perhaps we both need to work out some aggression.

Zeke only calls a halt when we’re both thoroughly exhausted and sweating. I think Ruby would rather continue, but I find myself feeling a bit shaky and have to agree with Zeke’s assessment. It hasn’t been so long that I’ve been recovering myself, and this game, while enjoyable, probably pushed close to overdoing it.

With the game finished, we part ways to shower and change clothes. Zeke stays with me, waiting casually in the hall while I bathe and redress. It’s enough space that I don’t feel crowded, don’t get the impression that he’s hovering over me. Having him near keeps me from retreating into myself or getting too distracted by my own thoughts and concerns. Although, I’m not sure I have the energy to get too worked up about it. Perhaps his presence merely keeps me from skipping dinner in favor of tossing myself down on my bed. Either way, he waits until I’m delivered back to the professional kitchen on the top floor to retreat for his own cleanup.
We eat dinner in the professional kitchen, although there is a formal dining room off to the side. Zeke joins us for the whole meal, although he typically eats quickly and returns to his social calls and responsibilities. Zero trails Zeke in, rubbing his eyes and obviously still half asleep. Recovering from his injuries - now without the added help of pain meds - means that he sleeps a lot. Our earlier activities likely exhausted him.

After dinner, Kip leaves the teens to cleanup. I’m feeling the after-effects of so much exercise and stumble as I leave my chair. Exhaustion hits me, and I don’t even think to protest when Zeke leads me back to the Master suite and offers me a spare set of toiletries.

It’s not until I’m led back to the main bedroom that I balk. I’m clad in borrowed shorts and a soft shirt, both far too small for Zeke, so likely belonging to Zero. Kip and Zero are already ensconced at the center of Zeke’s monstrous bed. Zeke is at the edge, holding the covers aside for me.

I hesitate, looking at the welcoming setup. Feeling the lethargy settling into my bones.

And:

“You planned this.”

It’s not a question or an accusation, but Zeke nods anyway.

“You need to become accustomed to touch, to having people near you. This is a good way to desensitize you. I knew I’d need you completely exhausted before you would let yourself fully relax and sleep, though, which prompted the earlier game.”

I sigh, hesitating still. It’s in me to be irritated about such blatant manipulation, but…

“Just get in here already,” Kip says with a yawn. Zero huffs a sleepy laugh, already curled up around Kip.

Without really thinking about it, I find myself sliding into the bed. I settle a careful distance from Zero, but Zeke getting in on my other side pushes us until I’m brushing against his back. Kip smiles at me over Zero’s shoulder, then lays down himself. I can feel Zeke pressed along the length of my other side. It makes me feel a bit trapped. I usually prefer to have the outside so that I can set my own comfort level of space. But then, I guess that’s the point of this. Pushing my comfort level. Shrinking my boundaries. As far as anxiousness goes, this level is at least manageable.

And maybe it’s my physical exhaustion or the mental strain of today - or perhaps it’s simply that I find myself surrounded by people that I trust, in a too-close embrace that I find fulfilling at the same time that I find it terrifying.

Perhaps that’s why I find myself almost immediately taken by a deep and dreamless sleep.
It is still Sunday for an hour here, so I'm technically not late. (Technically.)

This chapter literally just got done right now. Almost all of it got written today, because I originally had it in Zeke's POV, then I swapped it to Lee's and the whole chapter went a different (better?) way. So there were several instances today where I didn't think I'd manage to post at all. But here it is!!! :)

As I have literally just finished this chapter, it is un-betaed. I will repost once my awesome betas get a chance to look over it.

I can't believe it's almost Monday already. :0 What happened to my weekend?!!! Lol!

“Can I assume that this is the next step in your plan to seduce me?” I ask.

Zeke smirks, half submerged in water. The half that I can see if nude, and I’ve no reason to think that the rest doesn’t follow suit.

He’s somehow transformed the master bathroom into a pool. Like everything else in this ship, it must have been hidden away. I guess, given the lack of area in a spacecraft, the designers decided to put every available surface to a double use. First the gravity ball court in the gym. Now a monstrous, recessed bath under the floor of in the master suite. Next I’ll find out that the kitchen doubles as a tennis court, or something equally ridiculous.

I kneel by the edge of the pool. It’s shallow, barely covering the top of Zeke’s hips. The waterfall in the shower is running, with the water flowing in a steady stream down the wall, across the shower floor, until it empties into the crystal clear pool. The air in the room is warm and humid. The water in the pool, when I run my fingers through it, is just a bit too heated to be comfortable.

I roll my shoulders, thinking that the heat would feel good on my aching joints. Last night’s game was enjoyable, but it pushed the limits of my still-recovering endurance - as Zeke likely hoped it would. I imagine that’s why he pitted us against an energetic pair of teenagers, instead of matching us against each other.

“Well?” I prompt, having gotten no reply to my initial question.

“Don’t you think you’ve already been seduced?” he asks. “Now it’s just a matter of winning your virtue.”

I give a derisive snort, flicking water in his direction.

“A bit full of yourself, aren’t you?” I ask.

He responds with a lustful smile, leaning his arms on the edge of the pool. He settles, and he must have his legs curled beneath him, because his shoulders are now close to the water’s surface. He’s at eye-level with my knees, but it doesn’t seem to bother him.
“Just confident in my skills.”

“How long were you going to keep this particular trick up your sleeve?” I ask, making a vague gesture toward the pool.

“Until I needed it,” he responds, a bit too easily. “Desperate times and all that.”

“Uh-huh. Kip showed you?”

“Yes,” he admits with a grin. “What gave it away?”

“Just a feeling,” I respond, not wanting to tell him that Kip had all but winked when he’d come down to deliver Zeke’s request for my presence. When asked, he’d said it was nothing important, and that I should finish my morning calisthenics first. It had been too casual not to be suspicious.

“You weren’t at breakfast,” I point out.

“Kip brought me something up later - that’s when I found out about this,” he says, waving his hand through the water. “I was on a call with Ellaine and couldn’t get away. I needed to make sure she’d be home this weekend for Carter’s party, in case… Well. Just in case.”

“In case things go badly with me.”

“Yes.”

“You know that it probably will. There’s a very slim chance that I’ll be ready for anything close to what they’re anticipating.”

“It’s still early. We’ve only had one practice. I wouldn’t worry prematurely.”

“I am worried - I’ve been worried since we started!”

He smiles lazily and leans his head on his arms.

“Let me worry,” he instructs, and reaches out with wet fingers to brush against my ankle, pushing my cloth pant-leg aside in the process. “If at all possibly, I’m hoping that you attempt to enjoy yourself.”

“Be serious,” I grouse, pulling my foot away and scowling at him. “After yesterday’s disaster-...”

“I’d hardly call it a disaster.”

“...you can see why I’m worried.”

“It was one time,” Zeke says, picking up his head. He frowns, possibly in annoyance at my lack of cooperation. “I think you’re expecting too much.”

“Given this timetable?” I question. “You’re deluded if you think we’re not in trouble.”

“I don’t think panicking will help at this point.”

“I’m not-...”

“Lee,” he cuts in sharply, his face serious. “Just tell me.”

As though his command opened the floodgates, I find the words pouring out of me. Words that I
haven’t been able to admit, even to myself, for fear that uttering them will solidify them into truth.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” I admit.

“I know,” he responds. Easy. Nonchalant. Like he’s known the entire time. “It’s okay.”

“How is this okay?” I snarl, but it doesn’t wipe the calm expression from his face.

“Do you think I would set you up for failure?” he asks me. He waits until I shake my head to continue. “I know that we’re far outside of your comfort zone. I know that you don’t have the experience or the skillset to deal with this. I’m doing everything in my power to prepare for any eventuality. I will have contingency plans in case things go wrong. If the evening takes a bad turn, I will be ready.”

“Contingencies? Like what?”

“I’m not sure yet,” he says, and his face is calm still, but there’s an underlying seriousness there. “It might be something as simple as having Zero push you aside - physically. He’ll take the attention.”

“Take a punishment, you mean,” I snap. “I won’t have him-...”

“He’s done it before,” Zeke cuts in. “For Kip, in a similar, if lower-stakes situation. Zero can handle pain. He would rather hurt himself than watch me break you.”

I give that a moment to settle in. The idea of someone else protecting me rankles, even if it’s a relief to know that two people are looking for ways to protect me.

“I don’t want it to come to that,” I tell him. “I’d rather just do what they’re asking.”

“If you can manage,” he replies, “we’ll do that. If not, we’ll have a plan.”

“I can take whatever you do to me,” I tell him. “Even if… if I don’t want to at the time.”

It’s the closest we’ve come to talking about this possibility. That even if I’m too panicked to properly participate, Zeke could still… perform. It would likely satisfy the crowd more than anything I could submit to… voluntarily.

“I’d rather avoid that,” he says somberly.

“I’d be okay,” I assure him. “I’ve survived other things. I would survive this.”

“Physically, you would. Psychologically, it’s harder to tell. And, besides,” he says, his gaze moving to the water beside him. “It’s not always about you.”

Oh.

Right.

I suppose being on the other side of that scenario would be pretty damaging for him, as well.

“So what do we do?”

“We get you in the damn water,” he says, his tone wry. “I wasn’t expecting an hour-long debriefing.”

“You might choose to let your superiors keep you blind, but I do better when fully informed.”
Zeke flinches and… Damn. That was uncalled for.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him softly, glancing away from him. “I didn’t mean…”

“It’s okay,” he says, although it really isn’t. “This is hard for you. I understand that.”

“Talking about it is helping,” I admit, turning back to him. He’s still leaning against the edge of the pool, bent enough that his hair swirls with the movement of the water, glistening and gold. I reach down and touch it, feeling the heated strands dance between my fingers.

“Well, I’ve finally got you to reach out and touch me,” he says sardonically, his gaze falling on the golden strands between my fingers. “I guess that’s something.”

I laugh and move my hand to his shoulder, then his cheek. He tilts his face to look at me, and it’s too perfect of an opportunity. I brush my lips against his, feeling the softness of his skin against my palm, the feel of his breath on my face. The gentleness of his lips against mine.

I pull back before it can deepen, not wanting to spoil the purity of the gesture. Not ready to let it become anything deeper. He’s still smiling softly, though, and he lets me go without protest, so I assume it’s okay. That the kiss wasn’t part of today’s exercises, that it’s a piece of the relationship that we’re still so desperately trying to keep intact despite the stresses of the roles we both play.

“What else do you want to know?” he asks, and I pull my hand away with a sigh.

“Is there any point to all of this?” I ask. “I’m never going to be on Zero’s level in a week.” Let alone Zeke’s.

“This isn’t just about you learning how to handle sex,” he points out. “This is about me learning how to handle you. You have so little experience, it’s hard to even predict what will traumatize you. And I’d like to do as little of that as possible.” He grins, then continues with, “I need to know about what you like and what you don’t, what gets a positive reactions and what gets negative. What pushes you, what triggers you, and what surprising things are perfectly okay.”

“I can’t imagine there are many of those,” I respond dryly. “I’ve hardly been okay with anything so far. It seems like everything makes me…” afraid “…anxious.”

“Not everything. There’s been at least one positive surprise.”

“What?”

“Zero.”

“What about him?”

“You’re perfectly at ease with him,” Zeke points about. “Sexually. I thought you’d just observe us when Zero and I had sex. I wasn’t even certain if you’d be okay with that, to be honest. There was a strong possibility that you’d get jealous or upset - a normal reaction for most people. But you didn’t - you were excited to watch us together. And when Zero pushed it a step further, you were fine with that, too.”

I remember the flutter of excitement when Zero had turned steely-gray eyes on me, his gaze lustful and intense. It had overwhelmed any sense of unease that I’d still felt. And it was only compounded by the knowledge that Zeke could see us both, his watchful gaze taking in our interaction with no hint of anger or rebuke. If anything, he’d seemed to encourage us, although he’d also been acting in a supervisory capacity, keeping Zero from pushing too far. That had been a relief, too. I don’t know
if I could have allowed Zero such liberties, if Zeke hadn’t been there to act as a buffer between us.

“I don’t see the relevancy.”

“No? You don’t think it could be a benefit? That it doesn’t open up a realm of possibilities about having the two of you interact, or even just keeping him close by?”

I hadn’t thought of that.

“I don’t know-…”

“Neither of us knows,” he says, and there’s a hint of frustration in his voice. “Because you’re questioning my every move instead of cooperating.”

I feel my face heat and I duck my head.

“My apologies, I-…”


I give a laugh, relieved for the change in atmosphere.

“That’s probably the least of my worries,” I respond, but I’m already removing my shoes.

I get to my feet, and my fingers hesitate when I reach for my pants, before I shove them down roughly. I am not afraid of Zeke, damn it! I yank my shirt off roughly, angry at myself for my own uncertainty. Zeke is doing his best to help me. I know that.

I trust him. As hard as it is, as high as the stakes are. I still trust him.

He offers his hand as I step down into the water. The heat sinks into my body immediately, and I sag against the seat with a sigh. I let my head tip back and listen to the quiet gurgle of the waterfall. My eye close, enjoying the heat and the calm.

“If I’d just managed to get you in the water straight away,” Zeke muses, “I wouldn’t have had to answer any questions.”

I chuckle, opening my eyes and glancing at him. He’s in the next seat over, a polite distance away. And, like me, he is quite obviously naked.

“I’m glad you did. I feel better about… everything.”

“Mm. I could make you feel better still,” he says. I grin as he slides closer, until our sides are touching and he’s leaning over me. I tilt my head back when he leans down, and our lips meet in a second kiss. This one is less gentle, less fraught than the last one. This one is lips and tongues and salacious intention. His tongue darts past my lips to taste me, and I’m emboldened to return the gesture. Everything is heat and energy, and I find myself panting in the muggy air. My cock is hard under the water’s surface, cradled in warmth but lacking in friction.

“You’re a drug,” I accuse when Zeke moves to spread kisses along my jaw and shoulder. “You’ve infected me.”

“In all the best ways,” he agrees, his hands touching my chest, my hips, then-

“Gods!” I gasp as his fingers wrap around my cock beneath the water and give it a slow, sensuous
“That’s the face I wanted to see tonight,” he whispers next to my ear, and I can hear the satisfaction in his voice. I gasp as he teases me with talented fingers, the only reply I can coherently give him at this point. I lean against him, panting, feeling almost dizzily hot.

“Well would you let me taste you, little dragon?” Zeke asks, his voice a deep purr against my skin. “I was jealous of Zero, you know. That he got to drink from you first. Would you give me my turn?”

I can’t find the words, so I nod against him. He shifts us, easily carrying my weight through the water until we’re at one of the side edges of the pool. There’s a shorter ledge here between the edge of the pool and the room’s wall, and Zeke helps me up until I’m sitting out of the pool, my feet still danging in the water, my back supported by the wall.

Zeke kneels between my legs, my cock pointing directly at his chin. I’m fully erect, so my foreskin has already retracted, revealing the pink glans beneath. Unlike many of the other assets I’ve seen, my cock is intact, as my culture does not routinely circumcise. If Zeke finds the other version more aesthetically pleasing, he certainly gives no indication as he leans down and licks the sensitive, exposed head of my cock. I groan, bracing myself on his shoulders as he swallows my cock to the base. Compared to the air, Zeke’s mouth is like fire around my shaft, and I find myself giving helpless thrusts into his mouth. He moves with me, careful to keep my thrusts from choking him. His hand kneads the base of my cock, and the fingers of his other hand cradle and roll my testicles. Here again I’m more natural than other assets, with a light dusting of dark hair still covering the base of my cock and testicles. And again, if the differences bother him, Zeke doesn’t comment or show it.

Pleasure builds in me. I’d just orgasmed the previous day, so it’s not over embarrassingly quickly, but certainly a shorter timeframe than I’d prefer. Still, my body is no match for Zeke’s skills, with my cock so unused to anyone’s attention, let alone someone as talented as Zeke. I feel my balls tighten, and Zeke must feel it, too, because he bends his head with renewed vigor. When the pleasure overwhelms me, Zeke swallows my cock to the base, and my seed hits him in the back of the throat. I feel him swallow it, and the constriction of his throat makes pleasure burst behind my eyes, and I almost double over from the intensity of it.

I’m almost dizzy when he pulls away, a pleased smirk on his face as he licks his lips. It’s only a moment later, when sense starts to return to me, that I realize how one-sided this has been. Guilt makes me sit up straighter, my face pinched with concern. I’ve never been a lover before, but I never anticipated being a selfish one.

“Can I…? Should I…?” I gesture at him, unsure of how to say, “Return the favor,” without being quite so blunt.

“Do you want to?” he asks. I nod, and he pushes himself out of the water and sits next to me. “Then go ahead.”

His cock is large - certainly larger than my own by several inches - but not obscenely so. It’s erect, and with a pinker color than my own, due to Zeke’s lighter skin. It’s certainly an intimidating implement, but not an unreasonable one. I lap experimentally at the head, tasting salt mixed with the chemical tang of the ship’s water. I wrap my lips around the head, giving a few shallow bobs before trying to engulf it. I don’t even manage half way before it threatens to choke me. Tears spring to my eyes as I jerk back, although not pulling off completely.


“Bolting from the room feels natural,” I think, but am thankfully prevented from verbalizing due to
Zeke’s cock in my mouth.

I bob my head, eventually finding a shallow rhythm that Zeke seems to enjoy. His appreciative noises spur me to wrap a hand around his cock, trying to stroke it in time with my mouth. My motions are hesitant and stilted, alternately too slow or too fast, and it throws off the overall rhythm. I seem to be getting him close several times, only to speed up or slow down, accidentally throwing him off. After several failed repetitions, he says, “Let me help?” and wraps his hand around mine.

It’s strange to feel Zeke’s hand wrapped around mine, and both of them wrapped around his cock. Unlike my hesitant strokes, Zeke is firm and confident handling himself. His hand rubs along his length, his thumb flicking up occasionally to run along the edge of his crown, usually touching my lips in the process. My saliva drips down his length and it joins with my skin, lubricating our strokes.

“Hold yourself still,” Zeke says, his voice taut. I can tell that he’s getting close, and it only takes a few more strokes before he arches against the wall, his cock shooting hot seed into my mouth and pulsing in my grip.

The taste is salty and bitter, with an underlying hint of protein. I hold still as he finishes in my mouth, and when he sags against the wall I spit his seed into my hand, unable to swallow. It leaves me with a handful of semen, though, and I eye it distastefully. Zeke notices a moment later and chuckles, then pulls the both of us back into the pool. The pearly liquid dissipates in the warm water, as does the sticky feeling on my thighs. I try not to think about it now being in the water with us, instead leaning against Zeke’s side and basking in the afterglow.

“Well,” Zeke says as I curl against him in the water, enjoying the warmth and the lethargy. “I’d call that a success. Wouldn’t you?”

I give a sleepy hum against his side and don’t dignify the comment with a reply.
Chapter Notes

Okay, so I am later this week than I was last week. *Sigh. I have no excuses. :(

Once again, this is unbetaed because I haven't been giving my poor betas enough time to look it over for me. I promise, I will be working hard for next week, and hopefully I won't be late again. :) Optimism!

*This chapter is finally beta-ed. Can't thank my betas enough!

“Is it always going to be water with you?” I ask tersely. “Is this some kind of fetish?”

He’s in the pool - the swimming pool next to the gym, this time. He’s naked again. Of course. I suppose I’m lucky he’s kept his clothes on during our introductory period, given how much he seems to enjoy being without them.

I’m at the far end of the pool, the deeper side. I had to walk around the outside of the pool and kneel at edge to get his attention, despite him asking me to be here. He smiles and pushes away from the edge of the pool, floating on his back and giving me a full view of his golden skin, his lithe body.

His flaccid, but still nicely shaped cock.

“It seems like the easiest way to get you out of those clothes,” he says, turning to his stomach as he glides through the pool. It gives me a view of his muscular shoulders and the line of his back. His taut ass and powerful thighs, descending into those long, athletic legs.

Gods be damned, I’m too old for this.

I sigh and toe off my shoes, then pull off my shirt and toss it aside. I drop to the edge of the pool, dangling my feet in the water. The ledge is close to the water, and the bottoms of my pants soak, too. I ignore it, knowing that I’m likely to discard them soon enough. Zeke finishes his lap and stops in front of me, pushing himself against the wall between my knees and grinning up at me.

“You know, I’m not a young buck like Zero,” I inform him. “There’s a limit to my endurance.”

“You need practice,” he says, his hands wetting my pants where they settle on my thighs. “It’s the only way to build up your stamina.”

It hasn’t been that long since this morning, when we’d fooled around in the master bath, bringing each other pleasure with our mouths and our hands. Now it’s evening, and he’s already asking for another session.

“You’re pushing,” I tell him softly. “This is a lot for me.”

“I know,” he says, and his voice is more serious. “But we’ve precious little time.”

I don’t need to be reminded of the rush, already feeling the pressure of it pulsing like a heartbeat under my skin. Still, it does no good if I’m too stressed and panicked to cooperate.
“If I do this,” I bargain, “then you give me the rest of night to myself. No more lessons or training. No more interaction. You give me time to meditate and center myself.”

“If you do this,” he returns, countering my offer, “then I’ll keep everyone away from you for the rest of the evening. But,” he stipulates, “you still sleep with us.”

I contemplate that for a moment. It’s not as much as I was hoping for. Will it be enough? I was able to rest well in Zeke’s bed last night, will I manage two nights in a row? With so many people so close, and with myself in such a vulnerable position?

Sensing my hesitancy, Zeke moves his hand to cover mine. His damp flesh is cool from the water, but his strength is still a welcome presence. I lace our fingers, returning his grip

“I know this is hard,” he says, “but I need to desensitize you to physical contact. You can’t flinch away when Zero or I touch you, and this is the best way I know to make that happen. Besides… it’s not that bad to sleep in a bed full of handsome men.”

The expression I give him must be bleak, because he laughs and says, “Okay, how about I promise to keep everyone from talking to you when you come in?”

“You mean you’ll shut up for once?” I retort. “You’re the worst offender.”

“You have my word of honor,” he responds, his tone grave, his eyes gleeful. “Now get in here.”

I pull back and stand to remove my damp pants. They stick to my skin, rolling as I push them down. I huff with distaste as I toss them into a sloppy pile in the corner. Zeke has been a bad influence on my discipline in more ways than one.

Standing there, I have a stab of self-consciousness that was absent earlier today, despite the setup being practically the same. Maybe it’s the bigger room, or the less-intimate setting. Maybe it’s the way Zeke is staring up at me, his head level with my feet. Either way, I have to suppress the urge to cover myself, understanding how foolish that would be. Zeke has seen me naked before, and he’ll see me naked again. I want him to see me naked. Or… I want to want that. It’s a difficult tangle of emotions. I both want his gaze on me at the same time I fear it. I desire his attention, at the same time that it makes me uncomfortable. I feel caught between two extremes of emotion, unable to control the ebb and flow between them.

To hide my uncertainty, I slide quickly into the water. It’s deeper than I expect at this end, and I find myself completely submerged. I kick off the bottom, quickly surfacing and taking hold of the ledge. It’s only then I realize that Zeke is treading water when not holding onto the ledge, not merely standing as I assumed. I wipe the water from my eyes, only to be greeted by the sight of Zeke grinning.

“I hadn’t expected so much enthusiasm,” he teases.

“Shut up,” I growl, and send a splash of water into that perfectly smug face. He laughs, turning his face away so that only part of the wave hits its intended target. He blinks and moves closer to me.

“Wounded pride is a good look on you,” he says, his tone both sultry and still teasing. “Very attractive.”

“Half-drowned is a good look on you,” I return with a glare. “Very tempting.”

The laugh he gives is loud, and it echoes in the large room. He moves toward me then - not quite a lunge, but certainly a quick move. He wraps his arms around me, and I hold back my instinctual urge
to shove him off.

“Let’s see,” he says, his grin sly, and then he pushes off the edge of the pool, taking me with him.

He doesn’t submerge us - a move that would cause me to break his hold, regardless of his intention. He instead floats, gliding along the pool’s surface, pulling me with him. He holds some of my weight, proving aquatic skills that I’d already guessed at, but I’m also an adept swimmer. Large bodies of water were not uncommon on my home satellite, both agricultural and residential reservoirs. Swimming was a matter of safety, although I have a score of pleasant memories associated with the activity.

Still, I never would have dared anything like this in my homeland. Beyond the inherent social constrictions, the water would have been too exposed and too cold. The water we’re gliding through now is tepid. Certainly cooler than the bath earlier, but not so cold as to be uncomfortable.

“Did you heat the pool?” I ask, suspicion plain in my voice as we move into shallower water.

“It’s temperature controlled, although I admit that I usually swim in a temperature that’s more brisk. It didn’t seem conducive to our activities, though.”

Meaning, “I can’t ravish you in the cold.”

We come to the point where I can stand, but he keeps us moving toward the other end of the pool. It’s shallower, ending in a wide staircase that leads out of the water. He continues until we’re leaning against the steps, both half in the water. I remember with a pang that it had been Zero in almost this exact position only a handful of days ago. I wonder, if that scene had played out differently, would we be in this situation now? If I’d taken Zeke’s hand when he’d extended the offer, would we have found a better way to ease me into this? Or was it already too late, and a few days wouldn’t have made a difference anyway?

But I think, regretfully, that coming of my own volition would have made all the difference in the world to Zeke. That if I’d been brave and determined, if I’d been strong enough to reach for what I wanted, it would have saved him from having to ask me. He’d given me the choice, of course, but we’d both know which one I would make. My own well-being against the safety of the mission? It had been no contest. A fact that Zeke knew. A fact that weighs on him, even now.

“What are you thinking about?” he asks, his tone curious. “You seem so far away.”

“Sorry. I’m not. I just…” I wave my hand through the water. “Just thinking about possibilities, I guess.”

I see the moment that it clicks for him, see the flash of pain as his mind takes the same trail as mine. He gives me a smile, but it’s bitter and brittle around the edges.

“Sometimes I think that our choices don’t really matter, and we up in the same place no matter what.”

“That’s pessimistic,” I chide, laying a wet palm against his cheek. I have my back against the stairs, facing him, while he kneels on the stair below me. “We have to believe that our actions make a difference.”

“You’re right,” he says softly, but it seems more because he doesn’t want to argue than that he agrees with me. He lays a hand over mine on his cheek, then pulls it away as he leans in to kiss me. It’s a gentle kiss, nothing heavy or wet, but it promises more. He moves close to me, and I slide up another couple of steps so that I’m mostly out of the water. He follows, wrapping his arms around me and
smiling at me. On his knees while I’m sitting, we’re about the same height.

So I can see the moment his fingers brush something he doesn’t expect - something other than smooth skin. I can see the confusion on his face, and the way he shifts his gaze lower, like he can see right through me.

“What-...?” he questions, but is cut off when I shove myself up the stairs, pulling away from his grip.

It’s a gut reaction, and I halt at the top of the steps, already feeling foolish for it. Still in the water, Zeke is looking confused and concerned.

“I should have mentioned that,” I tell him, already feeling a blush on my face.

“What is it?” he asks, his tone confused. Not upset, as I’d worried he would be.

“It’s a tattoo.”

“It doesn’t feel like a tattoo,” he points out.

“Not… that kind of tattoo,” I respond awkwardly. “It’s… ritual scarification. It’s traditional for upper-class males where I come from. I’ve had it since I was a teen.”

“Can I see?”

Instead of answering, I force myself to turn, putting my back to him. I hear him coming up the stairs, moving until he settles directly behind me. I can feel the ghost of his fingers moving along my skin.

“You can touch it,” I tell him, pushing the words past reluctant lips. “It doesn’t hurt.”

And then there are actual fingers on my skin, hot against the cooling water. The touch is feather-light, tracing the design etched there. I know what he’s seeing. Hundreds of tiny white lines, hardly visible to the eye, but raised enough to be easily felt. Each line is small - perhaps the width of my smallest finger - but they’re closely spaced. Together, they form the image of a dragon in my skin, its long serpentine body making two loops at the small of my back. Its tail dangles near my left hip, the lines at the edge giving it a feathered look. Its angry, dog-like face points toward my right shoulder with a snarl. Its claws are extended, its body poised like it’s about to fly off of my skin and attack.

“It’s beautiful,” Zeke whispers, his fingers brushing the length of the beast. “It must have hurt at the time.”

Even now, I can remember every strike of the heated, scalpel-like blade that made the crisp, surgical scars. I can remember thinking that it would never end, and knowing that I had no one to blame but myself. I’d picked the image and the size. But it had ended, and I’d survived the three-day fever that had raged through me afterwards, even though my mother hadn’t been there to comfort me. I remembered waking up after the fever had broken, still cold and clammy, and realizing that it had all been for nothing. The pain from my back hadn’t washed away my mother’s death or the empty, hollow ache in my chest. It had only compounded my pain, momentarily overshadowing one with the other. Nothing changed.

“Yes,” I confirm. “It’s an outdated, backwards tradition. It should be abolished.”

“You seem passionate.”

“It’s barbaric to put children through something like this. Not to mention cruel, dangerous, and pointless.”
Zeke is quiet for several moments, deep in thought.

Finally, he asks, “Did you think I’d judge you?”

“What?”

“Is that why…” He hesitates, then, “Did you hide this from me?”

“No,” I respond, then hesitate. Had I hidden it? “And yes.”

“Oh?”

“I didn’t think you would judge me based on an outdated cultural tradition. I just…” I hesitate, sighing. “I got very used to keeping attention away from this image. I suppose it’s a habit that never really faded.”

“Why?”

“It’s traditional for young boys in my culture to undergo this rite of passage. That enduring the tattoo would prove our strength and courage, but the process was extremely painful. We were allowed to choose the image and its size - usually some type of guardian beast. Dragons and tigers were popular, but so were birds and rabbits. All the animals had a different symbolic meaning, which was supposed to transmit good luck to the wearer. The size never mattered as much as the image itself, so most boys chose to have the picture no larger than the palm of their hand. They also chose to have their lines less densely spaced.”

I hadn’t been finished growing when the image had been etched. As my body had expanded, the lines on my back had pulled apart slightly, making the image more obscure. When it was first laid, the image had been almost solidly white, with the lines dangerously close to touching.

“An overachiever even then?” Zeke asks, his words gently teasing.

“I suppose,” I respond, but I can’t bring my tone to match his. The subject is too painful for me. “It was a dangerous decision. My father had been very angry at the time, but there was no way to change my request after I’d submitted it without losing face and showing cowardice. Undergoing this ritual all at once and without modern medical practices very nearly killed me.”

“Surely parents have some sway over practice,” Zeke responds, his voice alarmed.

“Yes,” I confirm, “but only before the image is submitted. Once it was given to the elders and shown to the community, it would have been humiliating to alter it. It would have been the equivalent of failing the right of passage - I don’t even know if they would have allowed it. Unfortunately, there had been no one interested in supervising me prior to the ceremony, and it had been out of my father’s hands afterwards.”

Had it been a cry for attention? I wonder, after all these years, had I simply been a child looking for someone, anyone to show interest? Concern? Or was it an attempt to show my strength, that my mother’s passing hadn’t broken me? Or had it just been a reckless, foolhardy attempt by a child barely on the cusp of manhood to drown out internal pain with external?

The answer probably lies in a combination of reasons, and probably a dozen more that I don’t remember.

“I managed to survive,” I continue. “Obviously. When I returned to school after a much longer convalescent period than the rest of my peers, I found that I’d earned my classmates ire by showing
them up on such a grand scale. I’d unintentionally humiliated them, and they’d decided to return the favor. They chose to believe that I’d chosen such a grand image to distract from other… natural inadequacies.”

Zeke huffs a laugh and says, “Juvenile.”

“It was certainly age-appropriate. As we grew, the taunting shifted and became part of the background noise of my life. It became a habit to cover my back, keeping as much attention away from it as possible. There wasn’t any point in hiding it, not when everyone already knew, but I tried to keep from reminding them, so as not to spur further ridicule.”

“That must have been difficult.”

“It was, but for a myriad of reasons including the fact that I was a young teen. Children at that age always see things as larger and more important than they are.”

“I suppose,” he says, still kneeling behind me. I can feel his breath against my shoulder. “Still, it sounds lonely.”

“I’m not lonely now,” I respond, using the words as a shield against those memories, against the still-present pain of them. I make myself turn to face him. “And I don’t want to think about this anymore.”

“Okay,” he agrees easily, wrapping his arms around me. “What do you want to think about?”

“Give me ideas,” I tease, and he pulls me close and proceeds to do just that.
Chapter Notes

I'm less late this week!!! Yay?

My betas are still sticking with it, despite me being chronically late right now. I have to give them credit for not giving up on me! Ygrainne, Akira, NarrowDoorways, and EathSorceress, are just the best for helping me out.

His lips touch mine in a gentle kiss that quickly deepens. His tongue brushes my lower lip, seeking entrance. I part my lips and he tastes me. His tongue teases the inside of my mouth, bringing with it a lingering taste of citrus - oranges, perhaps. He reaches between us and his hand finds my burgeoning erection. His fingers tease and I pull back with a gasp, feeling the heat building between my legs.

“Would you like to try something new?” he asks, and I glance at him suspiciously.

“What did you have in mind?”

“Trust me?”

“With this? Not a chance,” I respond, and he gives a bark of laughter.

“Don’t be like that,” he chides, still grinning as he flicks his thumb over the now-exposed head of my cock. I gasp, my hips bucking with pleasure. “You know you like it.”

“You’re too cocky,” I growl.

“Can’t help it - it’s genetic.”

I groan, this time not in pleasure. He laughs, then shifts and stands, pulling me to my feet. I follow him, despite my better judgement. And despite that terrible pun.

Beside the pool, he’s laid out a towel almost the size of a comforter. He pulls me down with him, the soft fabric acting as a barrier against the granite floor. There’s more kissing, with him leaning over me, his thigh twined between my legs. The friction against my cock is almost enough to drive me mad - hardly enough to tease, but too much to be ignored. When I arch against him, he pulls away, confirming my suspicion that he knows what he’s doing to me.

“Do you want my mouth on your cock?” he whispers against my ear.

“Yes. Please,” I respond breathlessly, surprising even myself. It might be the first time I’ve asked for this - and my tone borders on begging. But my cock aches, and I know now how good his mouth can be.

“Would you return the favor?”

“Yes!” Anything to stop this torment. And having his manhood in my mouth is no great sacrifice.

“You sound eager,” he says with a sly smile. “Would you do it now?”
“You mean-...”

“Together,” he confirms, kissing the corner of my mouth, then nipping at my earlobe. “It’s called a sixty-nine.”

“No, it’s not,” I grumble. “Enough of the stupid puns.”

“What?” he asks, blinking at me in surprise.

“I’m not gullible,” I remind him. “I’ve been speaking this language long enough to understand what a six and a nine look like.”

He laughs and says, “You got me.”

Then he’s shifting us so that he’s laying on his back and I’m kneeling above him. It doesn’t take a lot to figure out where I should be, but it’s a damn awkward transition. There’s a moment where I almost can’t bring myself to put my leg over his head, despite the incentive aching between my legs. He must notice my hesitation, because he puts his hands on my hips and helps guide me, until I’m on all fours and straddling his face. His cock bobs in front of me, just inches from my mouth. I give in to the temptation to lick the red, bulbous head and am gratified to hear Zeke gasp behind me. He returns the gesture, sucking the head of my cock into his mouth. It makes me give a startled yelp that turns into a moan as he bobs his head eagerly, giving me the friction that I’m beginning to covet.

Not to be outdone, I take his cock into my mouth. My only hope is to make up for my lack of experience with my meticulous and thorough nature. I explore the smooth skin with my tongue, investigating every crease and crevice. In a moment of daring, I run the tip of my tongue along the slit in his cock, and the unexpected jerk of his hips beneath me is gratifying. It seems that even Zeke’s coveted control can be tested with the right amount of patience and care.

It’s an odd feeling, to both be focused on and distracted from my own pleasure. The dual sensations are somewhat overwhelming. I struggle to keep pace and find a rhythm with Zeke, although he seems to have no issue with the process. I have to wonder if this act is leading toward orgasm, or if it’s simply another form of foreplay. I don’t know if I have the concentration to both give and receive an orgasm at the same time, although I certainly plan to give it my best.

Zeke is no help to my focus. His mouth retains sole responsibility for my cock, leaving his hands free to wander my body. They move distractingly across my thighs, over my hips, down my sides, then return using the same path. The dip between my legs and cup my testicles, rolling and stroking them intermittently. His hands move to my back, his fingers stroking little lines down the small of my back. He touches the crease of my ass and follows it down, his fingers teasing at the entrance there. He uses no real pressure; just the lightest, exploring touch.

An icy wave a panic hits me. I let Zeke’s cock fall from my mouth, but am otherwise frozen in place. Zeke hesitates, sensing my tension. His fingers retreat, his mouth releasing my cock. It frees me, and I surge forward, tumbling in my desperation and rolling to the side. My heart is pounding in my chest, and I’m unable to stop moving until I hit the far wall, putting my back to it and facing my opponent.

Zeke, for his part, doesn’t give chase. Other than pushing himself up on his elbow, he doesn’t move. It helps a bit to quell my fight-or-flight response, that he’s not coming after me.

“Well,” he says wryly. “That could have gone better.”

I swallow hard, unable to find a response. I’m a bit alarmed to find that I’m panting.
“I’m not going to move,” Zeke assures me. “So I want you to take your time and calm down. Focus on your breathing. You are safe here.”

“I know that!” I snarl, but it sounds panicked and uncertain even to my own ears.

“Just calm down,” Zeke says, without reacting to my words. He keeps talking, saying soothing nothings in a calm tone, his voice soft. I could easily block him out, but I find myself focusing on him, his tone and cadence more than his words. It gives me a sense of calm and safety.

Somehow, his words help to ground me. I take unsteady breaths until they begin to even out and lose their panting quality. I shift to my knees and let myself double over, pressing my forehead against the ground. I take deep breaths, blocking out everything except Zeke’s calm, even tone and the sound of my slowing heartbeat.

When I push myself back up, the flow of words stops. Zeke hesitates, then says, “When you’re ready, I want you to go get a drink, then come back and sit by me. If you don’t want to come back, then I want you to go down to your room and call Kip to come sit with you.”

“I’m okay,” I tell him, but my voice is unsteady and I’m shaky as I push myself to my feet. “I’ll come back.”

The gym is the next room over, and I force myself to walk to it. In the locker room, I cup my hands and drink straight from the faucet. The panic has faded, leaving in its wake only lethargy and humiliation.

Gods, he hardly touched me! And where did I think this was all leading? Did I expect to continue exchanging blowjobs until the performance? Did I think the other owners would be satisfied with that?

I curse myself for a fool as I return to the pool. Zeke is where I left him, although fully sitting now. I kneel at the edge of the oversized blanket, feeling my face flame.

“I’m-...”

“Don’t you dare apologize to me,” he cuts me off. “You didn’t do anything wrong. You’ve been doing very well, and I got overconfident. I’m sorry. I pushed too hard and too fast, and you’re the one who suffered for it.”

Did he? Certainly some warning would have been nice. But then, a normal lover would have simply said, “No,” or, “Slow down” instead of making a scene.

“We both knew that it was going there, eventually,” I point out.

“That doesn’t give me the right to jump straight to it.”

“Would you have done anything different with the others? With Kip or Zero?” I ask, and Zeke remains dammingly silent. “No, you wouldn’t have. You would have pushed them, too, assuming that they could handle it.”

“Zero and Kip aren’t you. It isn’t fair to hold yourself to the same standard.”

“Because they’re normal? Because they don’t have a psychotic break when someone touches their ass?”

“I don’t think any of us qualifies as remotely normal,” Zeke teases. Then his voice becomes more
serious as he says, “We’re all broken in different ways.”

“And mine is about to get us killed!” I respond sharply. “If I can’t-...”

“We’ll work on it,” he cuts me off. “Now that we know it’s an issue.”

It springs to mind, “How would this not be an issue?” but I don’t say it. In my mind, penetration had always loomed as a terrifying milestone, an unreachable goal. In Zeke’s, it was likely a non-issue up until this point, a natural part of the progression that we were making. I can’t fault him for not knowing the inner workings of my mind. I hardly understand it myself.

“You make it sound so easy,” I tell him tiredly, feeling my shoulders sag.

“And you are so uncharacteristically defeatist about this,” he says, shifting to move closer to me, until our sides are touching. “It’s just a setback, not a roadblock.”

“It’s a big problem.”

“We can fix it. We have time.”

“Precious little left.”

“You’ve come a long way already.”

I sigh and say, “It doesn’t feel like it,” as I let myself lean against his shoulder. He wraps an arm around me in a loose, comforting embrace.

“Can I ask,” Zeke says, and his words are slow, his voice hesitant, “if there’s something motivating this reaction? Something you haven’t told me?”

“No,” I respond. “There’s nothing. I have no experience with penetration - positive or negative. I have no reason for such a strong reaction. There’s no excuse for my hysteria.”

Zeke makes a noise - not quite a sigh, but it definitely speaks of exasperation.

“You do yourself a disservice by holding to such impossible standards. I wasn’t asking for an excuse, and I wouldn’t call that hysteria. I’m just trying to find out why you had such a strong reaction. I’m afraid I’ll cause harm instead of help if I don’t know all the variables.”

I shrug in response to the question. I don’t know why I’m acting like this.

My father’s voice surfaces in my consciousness. He’d caught me, once, gazing for too long at a half-dressed servant boy working in gardens. His sharp, contemptuous words - “Deviant child!” - had caused the same reaction as Zeke’s wandering hands. The sudden freeze and the sharp, almost cutting panic. He hadn’t noticed my reaction. I doubt he’d had any actual inkling of my sexual proclivities; my father could be cruel on a whim. Still, the words had stayed with me. Even now, I can hear them sharp and clear.

Am I letting them define me? Do the callous, cruel words of a bigot count more than those of the man beside me? A man who’s trying his best to help me, despite all the barriers I throw in his way?

I’m better than that. Stronger. My past built me, but it does not define me.

“It always seemed like the epitome of what I shouldn’t want,” I admit in a whisper. “If my sexual orientation was an aberration, then allowing myself to submit to that act would be a total admission of my own perverted nature. I would become a dirty thing, unable to be clean again.”
Zeke shifts and brushes a strand of hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear. It must have come loose while we were in the water. The rest remains restrained, as I typically keep it. I take a wet, overwrought breath and scrub my hand over my face, realizing that I’m on the verge of tears. If I started weeping now, I would likely die of humiliation.

Zeke doesn’t comment, just pulls up of the edge of the blanket behind us and wraps it around us. It makes me feel a bit calmer, a bit less exposed. We’re both still naked, and I hadn’t been consciously aware of the affect it was having on me.

“Okay,” Zeke says, once I’m tucked against his side, the blanket-size terry-cloth cocooned around me.

“Okay?”

“Okay, we can work on this.” He kisses my temple. “I’m glad you told me. I know it was hard.”

I laugh, but it’s a choked sound, with a bit of a panicked edge. I have to shut it down before asking, “How? By the ancients, how do you plan to fix this in just a couple days?”

“So defeatist,” he says with a wry grin. “Don’t you trust me?”

“Zeke,” I growl in warning, unable to rise to his teasing.

He lets the smile fade and says, “I thought that sex was the main issue, so I worked to desensitize you to it. Now that I know there’s another issue, I can work on that, too.”

“In the time allotted?”

“It’ll be tight,” he says, and there’s a tenseness to his expression that lets me know he’s worried, “but we’ll manage.”

“If we don’t-…”

“We will,” he cuts off, and holds me tighter. His grip is a bit too tight, but I don’t complain. I can feel his concern in that grip, can feel the strain this is putting on him as well.

“I’m sorry this didn’t go as you’d planned,” I tell him softly. He lays his cheek against my head.

“It’s not always going to be easy. Challenges are to be expected.” He sighs, and I can feel his breath against my hair. I let myself relax into his embrace.

“I bring a lot of challenges,” I comment softly, letting my eyes fall closed. He chuckles, and I can feel the rumble of his chest against my back.

“You’re more than worth it.”
“Zero and I are going to play, and you’re going to watch. Just like we did in the gym earlier this week. If you want to participate, let me know and we’ll work it in. If you just want to observe, that’s fine, too.”

We’re in the playroom - the sexual dungeon where Zero and I practice bondage and submission. Lee looks tense, standing by the door, his arms folded, his back straight. Zero is here as well, but his body language is calm and relaxed. We’ve practiced enough in here that Zero is used to this space, and being here prompts no anxiety.

“I’m not totally comfortable with this,” Lee says, his voice tight and controlled. “I don’t like the idea of Zero being sacrificed for my education.”

Zero makes a scoffing sound and pulls his shirt off, tossing it toward a darkened corner.

“I don’t remember asking for your protection.”

“I wasn’t-...” Lee tries, then cuts himself off. His gaze switches to me and he says, “Zero’s hip still hasn’t fully healed yet. Strain like this could aggravate the injury.”

“I’ve planned to compensate for that,” I respond with a frown. “I wouldn’t risk hurting him.”

“It’s not so simple to predict. If you-...”

“It’s fine,” Zero cuts in. “Run if you’re scared. I’m staying.”

Lee’s eyes flash with anger at the slight - as Zero likely knew they would - and Lee spreads his stance, emphasizing his unwillingness to move. I let the two of them interact without my intervention, understanding the complex and competitive relationship between them. Zero sends a smirk at Lee before fully undressing.

Then Zero is naked and standing in front of me, his eyes showing a hint of excitement despite his neutral expression. It’s been a while since we’ve done this. Previously, I tried to make time at least once a week for Zero to practice, and to keep my own skills sharp. But with Kip’s illness, the routine slipped as priorities shifted. After Kip recovered, Zero’s hip require surgery, so our lessons were forgone again as he recovered. This is the first opportunity we’ve had to play in weeks.

I need to start slowly, setting the tone and putting Zero in the right headspace. I reach out and cup his chin, forcing him to look up at me. His body relaxes in my grip, and I feel him lean into my hand.

“What do you say if you can’t take any more?” I ask him.
“Please Master, I beg you to stop,” he repeats, the same way he does any time we’re going to practice serious play. He has no safeword - that would be too obvious a clue that I’m only pretending as an owner. But he does have a mantra, a series of words that fit into almost any situation, said in the same order, that let me know he’s in trouble. It’s the best I can do for him, given the circumstances.

“We’re not going to do any impact play today,” I tell him, and his expression dims a bit. I wonder if he’d wanted to do something more serious? Or if he just wanted to show off for Lee? Either way, that’s too big of a risk, given that he’s still healing and he has to attend an event this weekend.

“However, that doesn’t mean that our lesson won’t be difficult.”

“I’m ready,” he says, and I let my grip fall away.

The piece I’ve chosen for today is a bondage bench. It’s a metal structure, lightweight but sturdy. The bench is at hip height, with dark leather covering a thick layer of padding. The metal legs are angled away from the seat, making the shape look a bit like a triangle with the top cut off. Attached to each leg is a shelf running parallel to the main bench. The two in the front of the structure are higher than the two at the back, functioning as support and restraint for the arms and legs. The front, near the arm rests, has an adjustable headrest, although given Zero’s height I don’t think I’ll need to extend it. The top, the arm and leg rests, and the headrest are all padded with a thick, smooth leather. The arm and leg rests each include two sets of restraining straps, and there’s another pair of straps that attach to the center piece. I don’t doubt Zero’s ability to free himself if he truly wanted to. However, that doesn’t diminish the mental impact the restraints have, nor does it diminish the body’s reaction to being restrained.

The headrest itself is a simple, padded loop. It holds the edges of the face without blocking the front or impeding respiration. There’s a single strap around the back that holds the head in place. It’s the one downside of this setup - I’d have preferred to have Zero looking at me, so I could gauge his expression at all times. In this structure, I’ve had to make adjustments to compensate for the fact that he’s looking away from me.

I had originally considered putting Zero in a sling of some kind so that I could see his expression, but I’d dismissed that idea. A sling - or even rope-bondage - is more difficult to control than traditional furniture. The submissive has the option to move somewhat, and even the action of pulling can be harmful. Having to keep my eye on Lee as well, I need to put Zero in a position where I can trust him to be safe even if I am momentarily distracted. The kneeling bench is the best option for that - a piece that puts him in a comfortable, restrained position that can be held for a long period of time without being dangerous or causing injury. And the position - laying on his stomach, with most of his weight held by his chest and with his limbs supported - should keep his hip from feeling any unnecessary strain.

I watch Lee’s face when he sees the piece. I can tell from his expression that he immediately grasps its use. And then I see his frustration when he can’t find any reason that this would be medically inadvisable. I have to smother a grin, knowing that it would not set the correct tone.

“Go on,” I instruct Zero, nodding my head at the structure. Zero doesn’t hesitate to step forward, although I do have to help him as he mounts. His leg still gives him some trouble during transitions, and he has to step up onto the leg rest in order to situate the rest of his body. I have him hold on to my shoulder as he gets on, levering his weight against me to support his left side.

Once he’s on the bench, things go more smoothly. As I expected, it’s a good length for him. There’s a way to extended the center section for a taller submissive, but it isn’t needed for Zero. His chest rests against the padded seat, and he places his face in the headrest. I help to adjust his legs and arms,
then position his hips where I want them. The bench’s top actually ends at his pelvis, with his legs running parallel to the bench’s rear legs. His knees bend at the supporting shelf halfway down, which runs parallel to the top bench but extends further. His cock hangs behind the top bench so that it isn’t crushed by his weight. Fully erect, it will tuck itself against the metal underside of the bench seat. For now, it hangs limply between Zero’s thighs, hiding behind his plump, hairless testicles.

I strap Zero down, and he flexes his arms to test the strength of the restraints, but doesn’t complain. The straps around his back are tight enough that they move when he breathes, but they aren’t tight enough to restrict respiration. That’s a level of play that we’re not going to attempt, given Zero’s injuries and Lee’s observation.

“One more piece before we start,” I tell him.

This is a multifunctional unit, and there’s a flexible metal arm at the back and the front, tucked up under the bench. I reach for the one nearest Zero’s head and pull it out. There are multiple attachment options for this piece, but today I select one with a clip at the end. I retrieve a small screen from my table of tools and slide it into the holder, pointed so that Zero can see the darkened glass.

“Is he going to need something to distract him?” Lee asks, reminding me that he’s still watching us. His arms are folded over his chest, I notice as I look up, but his posture has lost some of its wariness. He looks curious, at least.

“Not quite,” I respond, and move to pull the second arm from under the back of the bench. It comes out from the side, the flexible arm wrapping around Zero’s right hip. I position the end and slip the second screen into its holder, so that it hovers over Zero’s back at just below eye-level.

I press a button on the side, and both screens light up. The one in front of me shows an image of Zero’s face as reflected in the front camera of that screen. The one in front of Zero shows an image of his body - restrained lower back, thighs, and his exposed ass - as shown from the rear camera of the second screen.

I reach out my hand, watching Zero’s face as his eyes fixate on my movement on the screen in front of him. The camera above him captures the slow progression as I move my arm toward him, and I see his thigh tense just a moment before my fingers brush his skin.

“This training isn’t about surprise or about testing your trust. I want you to know everything that’s coming, to see it as it happens, and to let me know if anything is too much. Do you understand?”

“Yes master,” he responds, his voice tight. I see his cock twitch between his legs, excited already.

“Then we’ll begin,” I tell him.

I pull over a rolling cart and a small stool. I don’t know how long this will take, nor am I totally sure what the goal of today’s session is. Exposing Lee to anal sex is the main priority, but to what point? Would he be willing to get on the bench after Zero? Would he be willing to touch Zero? Or is it enough for him to simply watch, learning that this act is enjoyable to both parties and nothing to be ashamed of? Given our limited time constraints, can I give him the option of only observing today? Or will that leave us too tight for time? But pushing him too hard could set us back even further.

I set thoughts of Lee and the Leash aside as I settle on the stool. I keep myself from even glancing at Lee, although I can feel his presence hovering just behind me. For the moment, my focus needs to be on Zero.

I pull on a pair of medical gloves and pick up a tube of lubricant. I’m not squeamish about touching
Zero - I’ve had my bare fingers in him more times than I can count, and I know his body is kept clean with techniques that I’ve taught him. Today, though, I want the impersonal distance that the gloves give. I want him to feel the smooth slide of silicon, instead of skin against skin. I want to do something he hasn’t experienced before, even if it’s something small.

I can see him watching me, can see his expression in the small screen above his back. When I bring my lube covered fingers to touch him, his ass clenches just before I touch it. I give him a moment to relax, then press my finger against the pink rim of his entrance. His body opens for me easily, with hardly any pressure from my fingers. He’s used to this, and knows how to relax himself and accept the intrusion. His cock begins to swell, proving that he enjoys it. I press a single finger into him, and then a second. His expression on the screen is rapt, like he’s fascinated by seeing what I’m doing to cause such sensations in his body.

I dare a glance at Lee to find that he’s dropped his arms. He’s leaning forward now, his eyes jumping between my hands and Zero’s expression on the screen. He seems openly curious. There’s a telling tent to the front of his pants that shows the effect this display is having on him.

A few more thrusts of my fingers, and then I pull them away completely and strip off the gloves. Zero shifts in his bindings - I’ve come to understand that he doesn’t like that empty feeling, especially before he’s orgasmed. That’s not the kind of discomfort I want to inflict on him tonight, so I quickly lube up the first toy and press it against his entrance.

It’s a black piece of silicon, long and smooth. There’s a curve at the tip, but otherwise it’s straight. It’s a bit shorter than my forearm and a bit wider than my thumb. The bottom has a grip with a thick edge, so that it can’t get lost inside. It’s really only designed for the tip and some of the length to be used. It’s not the kind of toy you would take fully inside.

I press the toy against Zero’s entrance and watch as his body absorbs the curved tip, then continues to pull in the length. I have the curve aimed down, so that it’s pointed toward Zero’s cock and the front of his body. When he’s taken in about half the length, I stop the forward movement and pause entirely. I give it several seconds, until I can see confusion starting to seep into Zero’s expression.

Then I press a button at the hilt of the toy, causing it to give a low hum as the tip starts to vibrate against Zero’s prostate. His eyes go impossibly wide and he bucks against his restraints.

“Wait!” he gasps, then, “Stop."

I turn the vibrations off, a little disappointed. I’ve used vibrators on Zero before - once, in a limited fashion, with an egg-style vibrator instead of a wand. I feared that this one might be too much stimulation, given his issues with pleasure in the past and the way that this toy focuses the vibrations directly on the prostate. I had hoped that he’d adjusted enough to accept this one, but… apparently not.

I begin the pull the toy from his body, but he clenches down on the curved tip, refusing to release it to me.

“Don’t,” he says, and I can see him try to turn his head to look at me, before remembering that it’s restrained. He turns his expression to the screen in front of him and says, “Just… again.”

I smirk and turn the vibrator back on. A second time, Zero jerks against his bindings, and I see his hands clench around the edge of the arm rest. He gasps; a quick, hesitant breath that tells me his body isn’t really sure how to react to this new stimulus. I don’t react, neither moving the vibrator or turning off the vibrations. After a moment, I see Zero’s eyes slip closed as he moans, his hips jerking ineffectually. His cock is fully hard now, disappearing from my view behind his testicles.
I move the vibrator slowly, pulling it out by small increments before pushing it back in. Zero moans and tries to thrash his head, but he’s fully pinned down.

“Have you decided that you like this one?” I ask, tilting the vibrator to press more firmly against his prostate, and inviting another full-body flinch from Zero.

“Oh-huh,” he says, his eyes glazed with pleasure. “It’s.. It’s almost too much. But in a good way.”

“Do you think you could come from this alone?” I ask, knowing that he probably can’t. Orgasm from anal stimulation alone takes practice and commitment. Zero has trouble reaching orgasm even at the best of times.

He hesitates, though, before shaking his head as much as he’s able within his bindings.

“I could try,” he says, “but… No, I don’t think so.”

“I appreciate the honesty.”

This had only been a warm-up anyway. I might have saved it for later, when Zero was more likely to be able to come from this alone, but I didn’t want to end on a sour note if Zero had reacted badly to this toy. I have less concern about the other two.

“I’m sorry, Master.”

“Don’t apologize,” I tell him sternly, then kiss the back of his thigh to soften it, knowing that he’s watching me do it. “I would never set a task that I thought you couldn’t reach. If I ask you, then I want to know the honest answer. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Then let’s try another toy.”

I set aside the vibrator and pick up the second toy. It’s a set of anal beads, although not the traditional beads on a cord. This toy is long - a full twelve inches, although part of that is taken up by the loop at the end, which allows me to pull them back out. The smallest bead is the size of a marble, and then they grow in size until the largest, which is a bit smaller than a golf ball. There are ten beads, each connected by a small piece of plastic. They form a flexible chain, although still rigid enough that I can hold them up and they’ll form a bow, not hang straight down against my arm. The piece is a light blue color, and the flexible plastic is semi-translucent.

I see Zero eyeing the object as I coat it in a thick layer of lubricant. I cast a glance at Lee, who is standing like a statue over my right shoulder. He has one hand covering his groin, and I think it’s likely that his cock has become painfully erect. Which was, of course, my whole intention with this exercise. Get him so aroused and engrossed that he no longer thinks about his prejudices, and then reinforce that lesson with pleasure. I only have to hope that he’s able to stave off orgasming until I’m finished with Zero.

I set the first bead against Zero’s entrance and give it pressure, just enough to get it through the ring of muscle. Zero’s body pulls it in, and it disappears inside. The first one going in pulls the second bead tight against Zero’s dusky pucker, and it hardly takes any pressure to convince it to accept the second. The same is true for the third and the fourth, although I give him a break after the fifth, as he’s started to squirm. For someone as new to this as Zero, the sensation is not quite pain, but there’s certainly some discomfort associated with accepting so many so quickly. I touch his thighs and then his testicles, pulling them tight and then rolling them in my fingers. When he settles, his body accepting the intrusion, I push in three more beads at longer intervals than the first.
Then we’re down to the last two, the largest of the group. I take a moment to stroke his cock, as his
errection has been flagging with this new toy. I see him clench his ass, likely testing the feel of them
inside his body. I keep stroking as I press the ninth bead inside, and I see Zero flinch at the sensation.
It is pushing the other beads deeper into his body, into untried parts of his channel. But his erection
has not completely flagged, so I assume that the reaction is from how new and strange the sensation
is.

When I apply pressure to the last bead, Zero gasps and clenches his fists. His body doesn’t
immediately pull this one inside, and it’s the first time I’ve had to apply real pressure to this toy.
There’s a moment where I think Zero might protest, that perhaps this is too much for him, and then
his body suddenly relaxes and the last bead slips inside.

I remove my hand, knowing the loop at the bottom will keep the tail from slipping totally inside. I
take a moment to let Zero adjust, but his breathing is deep and even, his eyes half-lidded on my
screen. I toy idly with the end of the toy, giving some small tugs to the loop. Zero gasps an shivers as
the beads shift inside him.

“What do you think?” I ask.

It takes a moment for Zero to respond, “I don’t know. It’s… strange.”

“Painful?”

“Not… entirely.”

“Are you ready for me to pull it out?”

“Is it going to feel as weird as it did going in?”

“Oh,” I tell him with a smirk, “weirder.”

I stand for this part, putting my left hand in the small of Zero’s back and giving him some weight.
Then I take the loop at the end of the beads with my right hand and grasp it firmly.

I don’t yank the beads out. That would be painful and dangerous. Instead, I pull them at a rapid,
steady pace, not letting Zero’s hole fully close between each bead. By the last bead, his hole is
gaping, and it only fully closes a few seconds after the last bead has left his body.

Zero gives a strangled yelp as the beads are removed, but it tapers into a moan by the end. There’s a
shine of sweat to his skin and he’s panting, but his cock is still hard between his legs. He shivers
when his hole finally closes up, and I assume that the empty feeling has only worsened this time.

“Are you ready for the last toy?” I ask.

“Yes, Master,” he says, and his voice is tight. He’s likely nearing the edge of his endurance. I set the
anal beads aside and reach for the last toy.
Hi everyone,

You probably noticed that I was unable to post last week, and I also wasn't able to respond to comments. I will hopefully be rectifying that today. Nothing dramatic happened. A couple issues I've been having kind of collided at the same time. I know I mentioned that I'm out of pre-written chapters, and that writing 8+ pages a week has been difficult. I've also mentioned that I was getting a house, and then that house was tied up in a legal circus, and now that particular house is no longer happening. However, we're primed on the edge of moving, so it's been a bit of a mad dash to find the house we're actually going to settle in, as the location we're in now is a bit of a money pit. Plus with the holiday season hitting - ugh! It has just been crazy.

Which brings me to my unfortunate news: I will probably be taking a mini-hiatus until closer to Christmas to get these last few chapters written. I contemplated going down to bi-weekly updates, but it just seems kind of terrible. So I am hoping to get several chapters written and then post them all in a row near the holiday.

I am so sorry about having to put this delay in, and I apologize to anyone I worried with my abrupt disappearance. It's just been a rough, stressful couple of weeks!

The final toy is a plug. It’s teardrop shaped, with a small, round post connecting it to a wide, disc-shaped base. The teardrop goes inside of Zero, and the base keeps it from being lost inside of him. It’s large; bigger than a golf ball, although smaller than a fist. It’s white, as with any toys that poses a risk of tearing. Black would hide blood, and any toy causing an unintentional bleed means a full stop to the play.

I let Zero see the toy in the camera, watch his face as he sees the size. His expression becomes determined and I see his breathing pick up with excitement.

“I’m going to put this one in slowly,” I tell him. “You let me know if you need to stop.”

Then I add a thick layer of lubricant and set it against Zero’s hole. The tip goes in easily, given that Zero is already stretched from the other toys. He makes it about halfway before I start to feel resistance. I take my time, giving the toy steady pressure. Zero shifts with discomfort, a sheen of sweat glistening on his tense back.

“How are you doing?” I ask him, watching for any sudden flinches or signs of distress.

“I’m okay,” he responds. “It’s just… big.”

“It is,” I acknowledge. “If you can’t-...”

“I can,” he cuts in.

“Okay,” I concede, and continue pushing. The white silicon continues to slip slowly inside. We’re nearing the widest section of the toy. Zero shifts uncomfortably, his breath coming in small, ragged
gasps. I can see Zero’s rim stretching to encompass it, can see as it nears the crest of the object. His toes curl, and on the screen I can see him biting his lips.

“Zeke,” Lee says warningly, but I ignore him. I watch Zero’s expression, watching the discomfort turn to pain. He makes a low, keening sound, his eyes opening again and focusing on the screen in front of him.

And then the biggest part is inside of him, and his body is pulling the rest from my grip. His hole closes over the rounded back side, and then all that’s left is the flat base nestled tight against his closed rim.

Zero lets out a breath, his body sagging against the bench. His eyes slip closed and his hands release their grip on the supports. I give him several minutes to adjust and recover, until his breathing rate has slowed back to normal.

“Zero,” I call softly, knowing that he’s in a very submissive state. I can see it in the line of his body, the way he’s totally relaxed. He’s no longer restrained by the straps, but instead being held by them, as his form is so limp that his limb would likely slip to the floor if they weren’t secured.

“Mm?” he says, and shifts as he blinks his eyes open. His expression is lax and content, his pupils dilated with pleasure.

“How do you feel?”

“Good,” he responds, and blinks slowly. I brush my fingers along his erection - still hard although flagging slightly - and he gasps.

“How do you feel?”

“Do you want to come?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to keep the toy in while you come?”

“Yes. Please.”

“Do you want Lee to suck you off?”

“Yessss,” he says, and turns it into a hiss at the end, pulling against his bindings with excitement.

“Ask him.”

“Lee,” he says immediately. “Please?”

“Please what?” I prompt.

“Please give me pleasure with your mouth. Please!”

I cast a glance at Lee, who looks startled but not opposed. He licks his lips, his focus going to Zero’s cock.

“I can’t… Like that, I won’t be able to...”

I turn back to Zero and tell him, “I’m going to release your bonds.” Not wanting to startle him, I wait until I see his eyes and focus on the screen before moving. I slide my hand long his leg and he shivers, his cock jumping. I quickly unstrap his arms and then his legs, keeping a hand on him as he tries to push himself up.
“Slowly,” I caution as I help him sit up. He gasps and clings to me as the movement makes the plug shift within him.

“Damn,” he curses under his breath.

“Are you okay?” I ask in response.

“Yeah, just... It feels so big.”

It isn’t that large, really. I have to remind myself that Zero is more inexperienced than I like to acknowledge. I wrack my brain, trying to think if he’s taken anything this large before. He’s had other plugs, certainly, but this is probably the largest.

“Come on,” I tell him, and then pull him against me, shifting him into my arms instead of trying to help him down. He makes a noise of surprise and wraps his arms around me, but doesn’t protest. He’s heavy, although I try not to show that it’s a struggle to move him across the short distance from the bench to the couches. I’ve already moved the low center table out of the way, assuming it likely that we’d end the night here, so I’m able to deposit Zero onto the leather couches without maneuvering around them.

Zero’s cock is bobbing between his legs, his breath coming in excited gasps. Uncharacteristically bold, he reaches up and cups the back of my head, pulling me down for a kiss. In front of another owner, it would be a show of dominance that I couldn’t allow to go unpunished. Here, in the privacy of my own ship, I find myself unable to do more than meet his hungry lips with my own. His tongue darts out, and I open my mouth to allow him entrance. He tastes of honey and mint - sweet and rich and intoxicating. I have to push him away before I get drunk from him.

“What were you asking for?” I whisper against his face. His head turns immediately, his eyes finding Lee standing beside us.

“Lee,” he says breathlessly, reaching out a hand even as I vacate the seat in front of him. “Please?”

“Yes. Of course,” Lee responds, although he seems uncertain still. Almost shaken. Whatever he envisioned for tonight, we’re likely turning his expectations on their side and he’s having a hard time keeping up.

Lee settles between Zero’s knees and stops. Zero makes a low whine, his hands clenched into fists at his hips. His cock is rock hard, with liquid beading at the tip. I’ve teased him long enough that his erection is probably becoming painful. Not that the teasing has actually stopped. From where I’m standing, I can just see the white base of the plug between his legs. The stimulation from the plug is likely adding to his desperation.

“Lee,” I call, and he glances up at me. “He would enjoy it more if you played with the plug. Not pull it out,” I caution, “but toy with it.”

He hesitates, looking back at Zero, who is wrecked and panting on the couch. Zero grins and thrusts his pelvis, making his cock bob in the air. I see Lee slowly reach out with both hands; the left disappearing between Zero’s legs as the right takes a hold at the base of Zero’s cock. The noise that Zero makes as Lee swallows his erection makes me think that Lee is taking my advice, playing with both parts at once.

It doesn’t last long. With how much teasing I put him through, I’d almost expected Zero to come just from Lee’s mouth on his cock. But Zero manages to let Lee suck him off for a couple minutes, writhing on the couch as Lee toys with the plug inside him. It seems particularly difficult for Zero to
keep his hips still, and after only a few seconds I lean over the arm of the couch and pin Zero’s hips, keeping him from accidentally choking Lee. Once Zero is pinned, Lee is able to safely pick up his pace, sucking Zero’s cock in earnest.

It only takes a dozen or so more strokes, and I can see the pleasure building in Zero. Just before he comes, I tap Lee on the shoulder in warning, giving him just enough time to pull his mouth away. Zero comes with a scream, shooting hot, pearly liquid all over his chest and stomach. His cock pumps three streams of the mess in long strings across his body, making him look gorgeous and debauched. He’s panting when he sags against the couch, his entire body going lax and shaking in the aftershocks. Lee pulls back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and then stands. His hair is coming out of its traditional tail, making Lee look a bit disheveled. It looks nice on him, making him look more casual and relaxed, when his look is often clean-cut and severe.

I move behind Lee, wrapping my arms around him. I’m wearing the silk button-down, and it’s open in the front. I can feel the fabric of Lee’s shift against my chest, can feel the warmth of his body. I cross my arms over his chest, laying casual fingers at this throat. I can feel the beat of his pulse against my hand.

“How does he look?” I ask him. He swallows hard, and I can both feel and hear the movement.

“Beautiful,” Lee says. Then, with the hint of a smile in his voice, “Like he’s just had a very good time.”

Zero peeks an eye open, a smirk forming on his lips. I doubt he’d contest Lee’s assessment.

“Do you want to look like that?” I ask Lee. I feel his pulse increase and his back tenses. Still, he doesn’t push me away.

“I…” he says uncertainly. His hands clench and relax, like his body needs movement. Any movement. I can feel the tension in him as he admits, “Yes.” He licks his lips. “Of course I do.” And the longing in his voice is an almost tangible thing.

“Would you let me help you?”

He looks over his shoulder at me, the question written on his frowning face even before he asks, “How?”

“Let me touch you. Let me show you how good it can feel.”

He pulls away and turns to face me. It doesn’t feel like a rejection, more like he wants to see my face. His expression is anxious, and he looks at my face like he’s searching for something. I try to keep my emotions under control, to show him only a placid demeanor. I don’t want to pressure him too hard and make him balk.

“What…” he says, but his voice cracks. He has to clear his throat and try again. “What did you have in mind?”

I step forward. He holds his ground as I move into his space. I can almost feel the tension in him, the way his heart is pounding under his skin. I move slowly, knowing anything could spook him into retreating. My hand dips under the fabric of his shirt and settles along the curve of his hip. I feel him take a startled, gasping breath. His skin is almost fever-hot beneath my fingers.

“Undress,” I tell him, my thumb drawing soothing circles on his hip. “And get on the couch next to Zero. Let me touch you. Let me show you how good it can be.”
There’s a war in his eyes, a battle raging on the inside that I have no influence over. My only option is to await the outcome.

“Yes,” he says in a whispered breath. “Show me.”

Permission granted, I push his shirt up, helping him pull it over his head. His hands hesitate when returning for his pants, but I see him swallow hard before shoving them down. The tangle with his shoes, and he has to perch on the arm of the couch to slip everything off. Then he stands in front of me, naked and nervous, practically shaking with fear and excitement.

“Nice,” Zero comments, eyeing Lee from the couch. It breaks some of the tension in the room. “The katas have really been paying off.”

He’s right, of course, although I hadn’t consciously noticed it. Lee has fully recovered from his self-imposed starvation. He’s still lithe trim, but he’s putting on muscle and mass at a steady rate. His body is starting to resemble Zero’s more than Kip’s, with his form losing all signs of frailty. He looks more like a fighter than a scholar.

Lee blushes, and I don’t want to add to his embarrassment, so I gesture toward the couch instead of commenting. Lee nods once and moves, settling on the other side of Zero. Lee sits properly, his back straight as a rod, his body perched on the edge of the couch. I’m about to say something when Zero sits up, then lists to the side and leans hard against Lee’s shoulder. Lee falls back against the couch under Zero’s weight, and Zero puts his head on Lee’s shoulder.

“Relax,” Zero says, and then reaches across to cup Lee’s chin and pull him in for a kiss. I smile at the gesture - Zero must still be feeling the effects of his orgasm. He seems almost drunk with pleasure.

I take advantage of Zero’s distraction and snag the lube from earlier, then kneel in front of the couch. Lee’s respiration is rapid, and his cock stands at full attention. He’s leaned back against the couch now, with his legs splayed wide. I kneel on the floor between his knees, ghosting my fingers along the inside of his thighs. He gasps against Zero’s mouth, his body jerking, but he doesn’t look at me. He lets Zero hold his focus as my fingers trace the length of his cock, teasing the retracted foreskin, running my thumb across the slit. I lick my fingers, letting him feel the slide of slick digits. I close my fist around his shaft and pump him, making him moan against Zero’s mouth.

“Shift your feet up,” I tell him softly, tapping on his knee.

He doesn’t look at me, but he moves, putting his bare feet on the edge of the couch. There’s a lip at the front edge and he hooks his heels behind it, bracing himself. I put my hands on his hips and guide him to move forward, so that he in more of a slouch. Then I let him settle a moment, running my hands over his legs, teasing his cock with a few more strokes.

It’s only when he relaxes again that I begin to touch him in earnest, cupping and pulling his balls, then moving my fingers lower. His body goes tense again as I touch the sensitive skin of his inner thighs, but I press forward, slowly moving my hand between his legs. At the first touch of my bare fingers against his entrance he gasps, arching his back. Zero takes his hand, lacing their fingers in an iron grip. I know that Lee’s heart must be pounding, panic-induced adrenaline pulsing through his veins. He grips Zero’s hand like a lifeline, but he doesn’t push me away or protest.

I circle my dry fingers around his pucker, getting him used to sensation of someone touching him so intimately. The muscles in his legs are coiled tight, like he might shove himself over the back of the couch to get away from me. I try to let the tension bleed out of him, keeping my touches light and superficial. He relaxes in tiny increments, much more slowly than I’d hoped. I glance up to find that he’s stopped making out with Zero and now how his face buried in Zero’s throat. Zero is still
holding Lee’s hand in a tight grip, his other arm pinned against the couch.

When he Lee has relaxed as much as I think he’s going to - but not nearly as much as I’d hoped - I give his cock a few more strokes and then pull both my hands away. The lubricant is sitting on the floor next to my knee. I pick it up and place a generous dollop on my index finger, then press my finger against Lee’s hole. He hisses as the cool gel touches him, his body tensing even further than it was before. Still, he remains in place as I circle the gel around the tight right of muscle. I feel it clench uncertainly as I prod at it, his entire body unsure of how to react to this development. I wait until he’s settled a bit, then I begin to tease his entrance, running my finger across his pucker and teasing at the opening there.

Eventually, I still my hand over his opening and give my finger the barest amount of pressure. Lee’s tight hole remains firmly closed for a moment, then gives just the smallest but. The tip of my finger slips inside, surrounded by Lee’s tight, hot body. The squeeze is almost impossibly tight.

And then:

“Stop!”

I find my wrist in a bruising grip, as Lee’s unrestrained hand moves to intercept me.

“I’m sorry,” he says in the next breath. “I’m sorry, I can’t.”

I try not to feel the sting of disappointment. I’d known this was a long shot from the start, but I had to try.

“It’s okay,” I tell him, pulling my hand back. He lets it go, then pulls away from Zero and snaps his legs closed. He folds his hands together and places them over his lap, hiding his cock from view as well.

“Sorry,” he says, and his expression is pained, his voice filled with loathing. “I’m sorry. I just…”

“Shhh,” I soothe, moving to lay a hand on his knee, but at the last second I think better and abort the gesture. His body-language is screaming not to be touched, although I know he’s still feeling arousal. The way his hands are cupped is a bit of a tell-tale sign. “You’ve nothing to be sorry for.”

“Right,” Lee says, and his voice is flat and disbelieving. “I should… I should go.”

“Go?” Zero chimes in, confused by the very idea.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t... I can’t continue this.”

“I’m not angry,” I assure him, “and you’re not being punished. If you want, you can leave. But if you’d prefer, you can stay and finish without... that part.”

Lee hesitates, and I can tell from the way he remains seated despite his tension that he wants this very badly.

“I don’t have to…” he trails.

Zero leans over then, shoving his cupped hands aside. Lee’s cock springs free, still fully erect and an angry red color, probably due to too much stimulation without release.

“Quit being stupid,” Zero says, then leans over and licks the head of Lee’s cock. Lee makes a strangled noise, his legs falling open. His cock jumps with excitement.
“Do you want to finish with us?” I ask Lee, although at this point it’s more of a courtesy, as he obviously wants to stay.

“Yes,” he says breathlessly, “I do.”

“Zero,” I call, changing my focus. “Kneel up, but don’t stop.”

Zero goes to his knees, so he’s leaning over Lee’s lap, still lapping at his cock. I move to the side of the couch, leaning over arm. My fingers find the base of the plug still buried inside him. I twist it first, making sure the lub hasn’t dried up, causing it to stick. It moves freely, so I begin tugging on it, not actually trying to pull it out, but getting Zero’s body ready. A few more minutes, and I begin to give the toy steady pressure, slowly easing it from Zero’s body. It takes a bit for it to slowly ease its way out, but when the toy crests its widest part Zero’s body quickly pushes it the rest of the way out.

“Master,” Zero whines, pulling back from Lee’s cock. “Please!”

“Do you want me to replace the toy with my cock?” I ask him, tossing the toy to the far end of the couch. “Do you want me to fuck you while you suck Lee off?”

“Yes!” he growls, and I glance to Lee and wait for his nod of agreement.

“Then come over here,” I tell Zero. He grins as he moves.

Positions swap and change around. We end with Zero leaning over the arm of the couch and me standing behind him. Lee is laying on the couch, his legs bent so that Zero can reach his cock despite being bent over the arm of the couch. I step behind Zero so that we’re touching almost consistently from hip to ankle. My cock is already lubricated, and I line the head up with Zero’s stretched and slicked hole, then I push inside. I don’t need to worry about being careful or delicate with Zero, whose body has been stretched multiple ways tonight. Zero lets out a moan at the rough treatment, but it sounds more appreciative than complaining.

Zero returns his mouth to Lee’s cock, sucking him in earnest. Lee groans, his hands clenching at his sides. We’re both so close, I know it won’t take long to finish. Still, Zero seems bent on drawing it out, pulling back from Lee’s cock any time the scholar seems to be getting too close.

At the same time, I’ve set a strong, consistent pace. My cock disappears into Zero’s body almost without resistance, he’s so loose and relaxed. I find myself running my hands down his body, finally settling my grip at his shoulders so that I can better snap my hips against him. He seems to enjoy it, pushing back against me as I pound into his body.

Lee comes first, in an unsurprising turn of events. Zero must grow bored of teasing him, because he swallows Lee down to the root. Lee yells in surprise, his fingers buying in Zero’s hair, his hips thrusting helplessly. I stall my thrusts so that Zero can focus on riding out Lee’s orgasm. Zero doesn’t pull back until Lee has sagged, exhausted and boneless, against the couch. And when Zero lifts his head, Lee’s cock is completely clean.

With Lee finished, I pull my cock out, then grab Zero’s arm and guide him to sit up. I pull him into a bruising kiss, plundering his mouth with my tongue to get a taste of Lee’s lingering seed. Zero allows it, even wrapping his arms around me. I hike his legs up over my arms, perching him on the arm of the couch with most of his weight being held on his lower back. Then push my cock back into his hole and begin bouncing him on my cock, the new position giving me better leverage over him. He holds on to my neck and groans - it’s that groan of pleasure that really puts me over, causing me to give a scream of my own as the pleasure surges through me. I sink my cock into Zero ass and fill him with my seed, feeling it drip down his crevice and onto my leg almost immediately.
Then the pleasure drops me, and I’m left boneless and panting, standing over an equally wrecked Zero and a semi-catatonic Lee.

“Okay,” I tell them when my breathing has calmed enough to speak. “Time for a bath.”

It takes a while to get the two of them moving. I have to attempt to pick Zero up before he huffs and shoves me away, getting to his feet. Lee follows a bit more docile when Zero gets up. I take them straight to the bath in the Master suite, and they show no hesitation in getting into the warm water, although Zero still needs help stepping down due to his hip. With the two of them settled, I snag a robe and let them know that I’m going to go back to the playroom for a moment. I hate leaving my toys in such a state of disarray, and cleaning up is a good excuse to give the two of them a quiet moment. Lee probably needs some time to meditate and unwind, but Zero needs aftercare after a scene like that, whether or not he’ll admit it. This seems to be the best way to aim for a happy medium.

Once the toys are cleaned with an antibacterial solution and put back into their cases, I return to the master suite. Hushed voices from the bathroom make me pause in the doorway, and I just catch Zero saying, “Zeke told me that you don’t like anal sex.”

There’s a pause, then, “Yes. I suppose that’s why we’re doing all of this. I’m sorry you got dragged into it”

I hear a slosh and can only imagine Zero shrugging - it’s not like he minds. I move a bit more through the doorway, so that I can just see Lee’s profile and the back of Zero’s head.

“When Zeke first started using me as a pleasure asset, I didn’t like to come,” Zero says.

Lee blinks.

“You didn’t like orgasming?”

Zero shakes his head.

“I’d been on suppressants before, and I found the stimulation overwhelming.”

“Oh. Of course.”

“Zeke had to work to desensitize my body to the stimulation. It took a long time, but it was worth it.”

“I see.”

Zero sighs and it sounds exasperated.

“What I’m trying to say is that it’s the same. Zeke had to work through stuff with me just like he’s having to work through issues with you.”

“Your inability to physically respond seems a lot less humiliating than my psychotic episodes.”

“Not really. And Kip had issues with penetration, too.”

“Yes, he… he told me.”

“What I’m saying is that we’ve all had issues with sex. Zeke is really good at this. Trust him.”

“The time frame…”
“...sucks,” Zero finishes, “but we all knew that. There’s still a couple days left. Don’t give up, okay?”

“Okay,” Lee agrees, his voice sounding a bit lighter.

I lean against the doorway, feeling suddenly heavy and tired. I’m unable to make myself go into the room and care for my two assets. Wishing I had Zero’s endless supply of confidence in me. I’m running out of time, out of options, and out of ideas. In all honesty, I don’t know what I’m going to do next.

And if I can’t figure it out, Lee will be the one who takes the consequences.

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