The Threads We Weave

Summary

A chance encounter at a wedding leads Jack Morrison--fashion model, war veteran, and a mess in his home life--on a new journey. Even with a successful fashion design business, Jack struggles with anxiety and depression, while trying to stay the course. Thank goodness for his best friend Ana! Along the way he meets a gorgeous makeup artist and fellow veteran, Gabriel Reyes, who may just be what the doctor ordered.

Written for the 2019 R76 Reverse Big Bang, based on beautiful art by Sukuiddo.
Chapter 1

Artwork by Sukuiddo. Created for the 2019 R76 Big Bang. The following story is based entirely on this artwork.

His momma told him once that life was like a spiderweb: hundreds of thousands of threads, intricately woven together in a beautiful pattern that makes up a whole person.

“People aren’t made of silk, momma!” little Jack—sitting their sunny kitchen in Indiana—had pointed out. He’d been busy drawing a picture; of her, actually, in her pretty blue and white gingham dress. He’d always been fascinated by her clothes, and the fact that she made them herself.

She’d laughed, her deep blue eyes shining. “No, of course they aren’t. The silk strands represent lots of different things in our lives, baby. People we love, people that change us, people that teach us, and they can represent our experiences, both good and bad.”
Eight-year-old Jack had scrunched up his face in thought, looking up from his crayon. “Spider webs are pretty easy to break, though.”

“They are. And I guess, so are people. Sometimes we feel sad, or angry, or grief at losing someone we care about, and that’s us breaking a little. But you know what the spider does when her web is broken don’t you? She just builds it back up, stronger and prettier than ever.” She’d dropped a kiss on top of his sunny-blond hair. “Remember, Jackie, no matter how much something hurts, you can always rebuild your web.”

She’d died three years later. It took a long time for Jack and his father to rebuild their webs.

A dress is also made of hundreds of thousands of intricately-woven threads.

Like the dress the Snow Bride is wearing right now. She’d been so worried about the fact that she was ‘short and fat’ (her words, he would never describe her that way) and that nothing would look good on her. He’d proven her wrong. He’d designed an A-line gown with a sweetheart corset bodice in white satin that playfully accented her breasts. Hand-stitched snowflakes in silver glass beads of clear, white, and blue formed the high waist line. From there, the skirt in white see-through tulle drops to the ground. Beneath it there is a blue skirt that hugs her curves. The tulle is split down the middle to better show off the sparkly ice-blue material beneath, and it flutters gently and playfully around her as she walks. When she dances later, the white tulle will swirl around her for extra flair and drama in her wedding photos.

Her silken raven-black hair is held up in an elaborate bun, decorated with small crystal snowflakes. Someone had done an amazing job on her makeup. Her creamy skin was smooth, with just the right colors and shades to accent her sparkling eyes and cherubic cheeks. Her eyeshadow was nothing short of astonishing: perfectly blended shades of white and sky-blue and azure, with a touch of silver sparkle in the corners to suggest frost. Her lips were done in a softer pink and shiny shade.

She’s radiant, Jack thinks. Not because of the dress or makeup but because Mei exudes such light and joy. She holds her head up high, her cheeks flush with a touch of color, and her smile wide and genuine.

Jack is standing in the back of the room, behind the rows and rows of white chairs where all the other guests are seated. So he gets to see Mei first, notice her joy before anyone else does. Then the officiator asks everyone to rise, and the bridal march starts, and Mei sweeps into the room in a rustle of silk and satin. Jack can’t help but cast a critical eye on her gown, automatically searching for imperfections, for ways to improve the design. He’s not being critical of her, of course; but rather of himself, because he had designed the gown entirely, and he has always been his own worst critic, in everything he does.

But she’s flawless. And if he can take but a moment to preen, even to himself, the gown is flawless too.

As Mei crosses in front of him, she looks him straight in the eye and mouths thank you. Jack smiles in response and gives just a slight little bow, which makes the bride giggle. Then she collects herself, looking forward, her eyes instantly drawn to her own bride, waiting for her at the end of the aisle. It’s only then that Jack becomes aware he’s being watched.
Across the aisle, standing with his back to a pillar, is a man in a dark grey suit with a burgundy-red tie, which makes Jack instantly think to himself: holy shit. The stranger could be a fashion model for Ana’s clothing line, he thinks, because he has the most amazing shoulder-to-hip ratio he’s ever seen on a man. Broad-shouldered, muscular chest, slender waist, amazing hips, and astoundingly powerful thighs; he could very well have been carved out of bronze by a classical artist. He has a gorgeous face: high cheek bones, broad nose, and a perfectly-maintained mustache and beard, although there’s a noticeable scar on his cheek that Jack doesn’t think detracts from his beauty at all. Jack’s eyes sweep over him unintentionally, stopping when his own gaze locks with those incredibly warm caramel-brown eyes. There’s a slight twist of a smirk on the man’s luscious lips; he’s well aware that he’s been thoroughly checked out.

Jack feels his own cheeks get warm when those dark eyes slowly rake over him in turn. He silently breathes a prayer of thanks that he let Ana dress him today; Jack is wearing one of her suits, of course. Light grey, with a matching light grey vest beneath the jacket, and a lavender tie. He’d modeled it for her company’s catalog—along with a number of other suits—and this one happened to be one of Ana’s favorites on him.

There’s movement at the handsome stranger’s feet, and both he and Jack look down. Jack had failed to notice in his first pass that there was a dog sitting quietly beside the man. It’s a German Shepherd and absolutely gorgeous. His head is almost entirely black, save for a soft brown around both eyes that makes him look like he is wearing a mask. The dog is wearing a black vest with stitched letters that proclaim it to be a service animal, but there’s also a white bowtie around his throat, making him look quite dapper. The dog’s owner fondly pets him before he looks up again, catching Jack’s eye. Jack is giving him what he thinks might be a dopey smile and again they lock gazes.

“…we are gathered here today…” The ceremony has started. Mei had long since reached the end of the aisle, gazing adoringly at her bride, a tall and muscular pink-haired woman who seems to have eyes for no one else in the room. Jack forces himself to pay attention to the ceremony, much as he wants to continue ogling tall, dark, and gorgeous to his right.

His doctor had told him to acknowledge his emotions, because they were always valid, and to think of them in ways he could understand and visualize. He likes to think of them in terms of colored threads. Strands of yellow intertwined with grey but mixed with scintillating threads of a softer red, flash through his mind. Fear, confusion, and desire.

I’m going to talk to him at the reception, Jack thinks, his heart doing a bit of a flip at the thought and his anxiety levels rising a bit, but he doesn’t remember the last time he had an actual interest in someone and he’s actually excited at the prospect. Ana’s been bugging me to get out there, to date. I can introduce myself at least, find out his name. What’s the worst that could happen?

Jack looks for his handsome stranger at the reception, but can’t find him. How bloody hard can it be to find a perfect Greek god with a dog walking around?

Frustrated (maybe in more ways than one), he ends up standing at the bar, brooding and watching the light dance across the surface of his appletini. He doesn’t really like social situations. He’d hang out with Ana, the only person besides Mei that he knows here, but she’s busy being her usual social butterfly self. People follow her around because she’s a big name in the fashion industry, her line of men’s clothing quite popular and well known, and he doesn’t feel like standing at her elbow
pretending to care about other people’s conversations while he struggles to keep his mind from wandering.

This is how Aleksandra Zaryanova, aka Zarya, finds him. She’s the tall and muscular pink-haired woman that is now happily married to Mei, looking really good in a formal white suit with a bit of a feminine cut. He’s never met her before today, but after all his years working for Ana and talking to her personal assistant Mei, he knows a lot about her. A former Olympian weightlifter—and it shows—she exudes confidence and walks around in such a way that the crowd opens up for her. She’s smiling and pleasant when people congratulate her, but she doesn’t actually stop to talk as she makes a beeline for the bar.

“A shot of your best Russian vodka,” Zarya says to the bartender. She immediately turns and looks at Jack, smiling. She speaks with a Russian accent but he understands her perfectly well. “We have not had the chance to meet before today, but I am very pleased you made it. You are Jack Morrison, no? Mei-Ling, she talks about you all the time.”

Jack, his heart doing that funny sort of jump that comes with the initial wave of anxiety that social situations bring, nods and clears his throat. He holds a hand out, and when she shakes it, he notes what an incredibly powerful grip she has. “Yeah, I work with Ana Amari, so I’ve known Mei for years. She looks lovely today. Congratulations on your marriage.”

“My beautiful Mei, she always look lovely. I try to tell her this for years, but she never happy with her clothes.” The bartender places a shot of vodka in front of her, which Zarya tips back with ease before nodding at him to hit her again. She turns back to Jack. “Until you came along. You are good-looking model, but you are even better designer. Why do you not do this for a living?”

Jack opens his mouth and then closes it. He doesn’t have an answer for her, and he’s quietly stunned. Modeling has been the only thing he’s known since he was sixteen. Well, that and killing, he supposes, but the career prospects for killing people were not to his liking. He’d served his country during the war like a true patriot and all he got was a lousy military pension and greater bouts of anxiety out of it. So he’d gone back to modeling because it was something he was good at doing.

“Me?” he finally says. “A fashion designer? I don’t… I’m not that good.”

Zarya snorts and puts her back against the bar, eyeing the crowd for a long moment until she finds what she’s looking for. “I always thought my lapochka was perfect. But you know how hard it is for a woman that is not of average height and weight to find clothes. She was so frustrated. And then, you make this dress for her too. I have not seen her this happy, ever. She shine like the sun.” She turns back to him, casually. “You help her look in the mirror and see the good in herself. You have a gift. Thank you, for what you have done for my precious. Truly.”

She claps a large hand on his shoulder, and he can’t help but smile because it’s the happiest he’s ever seen her.

“I always thought my lapochka was perfect. But you know how hard it is for a woman that is not of average height and weight to find clothes. She was so frustrated. But you design clothes for her and Ms. Amari had them made. She feel good. And then, you make this dress for her too. I have not seen her this happy, ever. She shine like the sun.” She turns back to him, casually. “You help her look in the mirror and see the good in herself. You have a gift. Thank you, for what you have done for my precious. Truly.”

She claps a large hand on his shoulder, and he can’t help but smile. He’s overwhelmed and his mind is running a thousand miles a minute now. So many threads in shades of sunshine yellows and cheerful oranges.

“I’m glad she’s happy. And she looks beautiful. I’ve been telling her for years she’s beautiful,” he says finally.
But no matter how many times you tell someone they are perfect just the way they are, they still have to see it for themselves.

“Enjoy the party, Jack Morrison,” Zarya says, and starts to walk away.

“Mrs. Zhou?” he calls after her.

“That is my legal name now, yes, but everyone call me Zarya still. You have question?”

“There was a man at the ceremony. He had a service dog with him? I haven’t seen him at the party. You wouldn’t happen to know--?”

“Ahh, Mr. Reyes, yes! He do Mei’s makeup and hair. Gorgeous, no? Your dress and his makeup make my wife an Ice Queen! He only stay for ceremony. He… not so good with crowds and loud noises,” Zarya replies.


He’s disappointed, but doesn’t dwell on the matter much. His thoughts are whirling, considering Zarya’s words, thinking about how his mother—a larger woman herself—had had to make her own dresses because it was so hard to find clothes for her body type, and the way Mei’s eyes had lit up when she saw the various pieces of clothing he designed specifically for her petite and plump form. You have a gift.

Shame about Mr. Reyes, whoever he was. Perhaps it was simply not meant to be. Another thread that could have been in his life and might have been a shining golden opportunity snipped short and turned sullenly brassy with disappointment.

Ana had been delighted when he talked to her about the possibility of designing a line of women’s clothing for plus sizes. She invested a hefty amount in Boudica Beauty to get him started, and was there every step of the way to ensure his success. She knew all the right people to get him in touch with, all the best resources, and who he needed to hire to make sure it all ran smoothly. She never once lamented the loss of her best model.

“Zarya was right,” she had told him. “You have a gift, Jack.”

He doesn’t know about that. But he does like the idea. Within a year, he was up and running and already invited to his first fashion show. His line of clothing is still small, but with Ana’s not-inconsiderable influence, his clothes are going to be on the runway.

Jack is a nervous wreck and he is pacing backstage when one of his models comes strutting out from behind a curtain, laughing. She’s a growing name in Hollywood, originally a tv actress who had recently hit it big on the silver screen. And she’s a plus size woman. Ana had waved that magic wand of hers and called up connections and the starlet had agreed to be the showcase model for Boudica. Mostly because she loves the name, she said.

“You look gorgeous, darling!” a deep voice says from behind the curtain. A moment later the red curtain is swept aside, and he is there. The gorgeous bronze-skinned man from Mei’s wedding. Made even more gorgeous by the fact that he is smiling.
Jack almost falls over. *Christ, it should be illegal for that man to smile without warning. He’s intensely beautiful,* he thinks to himself. Had Ana told Jack this man was going to be here? She had made most of the arrangements for this show because he didn’t know anyone in the industry very well.

“Only cuz you made me this way, Gabe!” the model says with a smile over her shoulder.

“I had a lovely canvas to work with. Now get the fuck out of here and go wow those posers out there with that hot ass of yours.”

“Biggest ass on the runway!” the starlet replies with a chuckle.

“Best ass on the runway,” the makeup artist counters.

The actress laughs. They clearly know each other and she doesn’t mind the somewhat rough language. She seems delighted, pausing in front of a full length mirror to check herself out, adjusting her dress—one of Jack’s designs—and peering at her flawless makeup. She’s a woman of average height but heavy, with full breasts and broad shoulders and impressive hips. She’s in halter top A-line dress in crimson and black color and thigh-high platform boots in shiny black leather. The makeup artist had gone with a heavy smoky-eye goth look for her, because she’s also wearing a thick leather and gold choker and matching leather bracelets on each bicep and on each wrist. She looks like a modern club-hopping warrior, perfectly invoking the brand name.

Jack looks at the makeup artist, and just like at the wedding, they lock gazes with one another. He’s wearing a dark green hoodie and a dark-grey beanie, Jack idly notices.

“Mr. Morrison!” the actress says, noticing him in the reflection of the mirror. She spins around to face him.

Pulled away from his bronze Adonis, he turns to her and can’t help but cast a critical eye over her outfit, but there’s nothing wrong with it. “You look great, Cassandra,” he says, smiling. “And please, call me Jack.”

“It’s your dress and accessories! Of course I look great! I feel like I’m about to go out there and kick everyone’s ass and then rave on top of their corpses!” she says. Jack gives a startled laugh. “It’s a pleasure working for someone whose clothes I would actually wear outside of work. Thank you, Jack, on behalf of all the fat chicks out there. We need clothes like this!”

He beams with pleasure, but just then Ana appears, calling out for him. He glances in the direction of the makeup artist, but he’s already gone behind his curtain, another model having appeared.

Jack sighs. *After the show,* he thinks.

But after the show, people want to talk to him, and despite the spike of anxiety that courses through him, he not only makes it through the evening but he shines like a star, because Ana is right there, smiling and nodding and holding onto his arm, grounding him. It was a successful show for him; Cassandra and the other plus size models had wowed in several of his outfits, and people are impressed with the potential for his line. A couple of fashion magazine reporters vie for his attention.

By the time Jack gets backstage again, it’s empty, the makeup artist long gone and that thread settles frayed and disappointed once more in his chest in a dull grey bundle.
Jack has asked around a bit, learning that the man is called Gabriel Reyes, and that he’s one of LA’s better-known makeup artists. He’s worked for all the big names and done the makeup for all the big shows. He has also worked for big name photographers and magazines and the occasional movie studio. But no one seems to know a great deal about the man himself. He keeps to himself, and because he’s a freelancer who works when he wants and turns down jobs at a whim, no one seems to have any personal details. He shows up for a show or a commercial or a photo shoot, gets the models ready, sticks around long enough to ensure success, and then he leaves. He’s like a wraith, disappearing in a puff of smoke, after every job.

It's not like Jack has time for dating anyway. Who knows if the guy would even want to date him. They have never said a single word to each other, just checked each other out from a distance.

Jack is busy. His success selling clothes online and then his first fashion show scored him a meeting with both of the big two plus-size retail clothing stores in the US. He ended up signing a contract with one of them, and that means his schedule is insane these days. Thank god Ana has been there with him every step of the way, helping him navigate the business side of things.

Ana is always there. She’s been there since he got out of the army and looked for modeling work again. She’s seen him at his best—the smiling blonde bombshell that she hired immediately the moment his portfolio and résumé crossed her desk—and at his absolute worst—having a panic attack because he wakes up sometimes with a crippling belief in being a complete and utter failure. She’s seen him in tears and curled up in a tight ball because Vincent left to ‘empower’ his modeling career in Europe. She’s seen him be utterly incapable of dressing himself. She’s picked up in his apartment because even though a chaotic environment is bad for his brain, he is mostly incapable of not leaving things lying around.

Mostly, Ana Amari has been his rock and he can’t begin to repay her kindness and love in just one lifetime. He really has no idea why she sticks around and stays his friend. He’s such a goddamn mess of a human being.

And, dammit she knows everyone.

“Yes of course I know Gabriel Reyes,” she says when Jack gets the nerve up to ask her. “He’s one of the best makeup artists in the business. I arranged to have him do Mei’s makeup for her wedding.” Yes, that much he’d figured out, but it had taken him this long to even ask her about the man. He’s beet red and one second from running out the door.

She’s behind her desk at Akerii, Inc., frowning at her computer screen. Jack is sprawled on the fancy leather couch that he knows few people on the planet are allowed to sit on. He gets away with murder when it comes to Ana, honestly. “Why? Are you in need of a makeup artist?”

“Well…. Maybe,” he says noncommittally. “I mean. I’ve got that line of wedding gowns in the works—”

Ana looks up from her screen, her brow furrowed a bit. “Jack, you’re still in the design stage. It will be… at least two years before you are putting those on a live model.”

Jack looks away from her, staring up at a particularly interesting spot on the wall. “Never too early to plan, is it?”

There’s a momentary silence and he can feel her dark eyes on him. He expects her to laugh at him. Any minute now…
“Hmm,” she says instead and turns back to her computer screen. “Don’t you have that photo shoot with Cassandra Landry for your new line in a few weeks?”

Jack frowns at the sudden change in subject. “Yeah?”

“Well, then.” And that’s all Ana says, busy typing away at her keyboard. Then Mei buzzes through the intercom and says there’s an important phone call from so-and-so and Jack slinks out of her office, confused and a little hurt by her apparent lack of interest. Frayed threads of grey and dark blue in his heart.

He doesn’t bring up Mr. Reyes again to her over the following weeks.

When Cassandra Landry, Hollywood star and plus size model, calls him up and tells him that she’s bringing her own makeup artist to the photo shoot, Jack is annoyed at first. But he has bigger concerns and anyway he needs to keep Cassandra happy, because she’s become the face of his clothing line and it’s working out well. Besides, for an actress of growing fame, she’s remarkably easy to get along with.

So he humors her and doesn’t even bother asking who she’s bringing. She shows up at his world headquarters the next day her usual vivacious self, making his entire office and all his employees instantly brighter.

“Weren’t you bringing your own makeup artist?” Jack asks when he greets her.

“Oh, he’ll be along shortly. He works on his own schedule,” she replies with a huge grin. She’s a blonde-haired pale-skinned beauty who saunters in like she owns the place, which he doesn’t mind because he likes her. She’s cracking jokes and making everyone in the office laugh when he excuses himself to return to his own private office.

He’s in the middle of ignoring the work he should be focusing on in favor of coloring in a new wedding gown design he’s been working on for a while now, when his assistant Lena buzzes him through the intercom.

“Oiy, Jack, Mr. Reyes is here.”

Jack is so busy concentrating on the scrap paper and watercolor pencil that he doesn’t immediately register the words. “Who?” he says.

“Cassandra’s makeup artist is here, sir.”

“Well, send him over to the photographer, Lena,” he replies absently, and cuts the line.

It takes a solid twenty seconds before Lena’s call slams full force into his brain with any meaning. He drops the pencil like it’s hot and runs for the door. His anxiety has spiked and yet instead of sitting frozen in his chair like he normally would at a time like this, he’s outside in the lobby. Lena is just pulling the door open for their guest and she gives Jack a confused look as he hustles out of his office.
It’s definitely *him*. The man’s back is to him, but Jack can tell anyway. Plus the service dog turns towards Jack with a sort of questioning whuffle, black ears pulled back a bit. Jack lets out a deep breath and tells himself to calm down before the dog decides he’s a threat to its master.

“Mr. Reyes?” he says, taking a few steps forward.

The dog emits a very low sort of warning growl. Jack stops in his tracks.

“Reaper, no,” the makeup artist snaps. “Sit.”

The German Shepherd sits on its haunches obediently, ears back up and staring at Jack inquisitively.

“Sorry about that,” Mr. Gorgeous says as he turns to Jack. “He’s well trained but I think you startled him. You came out kind of fast.” He’d been pulling a small cart with several cases of what are probably his work tools, and he lets go of it now to let it sit upright. He’s wearing black slacks and a grey hoodie, along with the familiar dark-grey beanie.

“I apologize for that, Mr. Reyes,” Jack says, sounding genuinely abashed. “I’m Jack. Morrison.” He takes a few steps closer, holding his hand out.

“I know,” the man replies, smiling slightly. “Cassandra talks about you all the time. So does Ana. And Mei-Ling.” He takes Jack’s hand; he’s warm to the touch and Jack can feel the callouses on his fingers that don’t seem to correspond to the work he does. They are more like the callouses Jack has on his own hands from his military days. “You can call me Gabriel.”

*I would call you Daddy if you asked me to.* Shit! He… didn’t say that out loud did he?

Mr. Reyes’ expression doesn’t change, he’s still got that slight smile, except now he’s looking down at their hands, brow furrowed just a little, and Jack realizes he’s still holding onto the man’s hand. And he’s pretty sure he’s got a stupid grin on his face.

Jack retracts his hand as if he’d been burned. “Ahh, let me walk you down to the studio!” he says quickly, and heads for the door, hoping no one notices the flush creeping across his cheeks. Damn his fair skin.

“Thank you,” the makeup artist says, sounding faintly amused. “Sooo… she didn’t want to keep her dress?”

He hadn’t followed Jack, and the blonde turns toward the glass display case just to the right of the door. There’s a mannequin within, wearing the Snow Bride gown he’d made for Mei, with a pair of small spotlights set up in the corner of the case pointing up and emphasizing the sparkly blue material of the skirt under the tulle. This is the gown that had started it all, after all. It’s why Boudica Beauty even exists.

“Oh,” Jack says. “Well, when I opened this office, Mei suggested I have the original gown that founded my company on display here. I told her it was hers, I made it for her, but she insisted that she’d rather other people get to see it. If she kept it, it would just be in a box in her closet. It still belongs to her, she can take it back anytime she wants, but… I admit, it’s rather nice to have it here. Sometimes… I need a reminder of what I can do.” He says this last part a little sheepishly, running a hand over his blonde hair and down his neck.

Gabriel, who has been standing in front of the glass case admiring the gown, turns to him and smiles. “I understand,” he replies. “Shall we?” Cart handle in one hand, and the other resting on the dog’s nape, Gabriel steps through the door Lena is still holding open.
Jack gives his assistant a warning glare, because she’s giving him a huge grin and he’s pretty sure the entirety of the building is going to know by the end of the day what an ass he’s made of himself because of a pretty man. Lena just gives him a wink and zips back to her desk. Jack inwardly sighs.

As they walk down the hall in silence Jack’s anxiety spikes, because he feels like he ought to say something. The man is a guest in his building, the burden of conversation ought to be on Jack. But he doesn’t know what to say; small talk has never been his forte. So they say nothing to each other, and by the time they reach the photo studio, Jack has the feeling he’s blown his only chance.

Then Cassandra flits out of the studio, all sunshine and cheekiness, and the chance is gone with the wind. At the very least, before she drags her personal makeup artist away, he turns to Jack with a slight smile and says, “Thank you, Mr. Morrison.”

And he realizes he never told him he could call him Jack.

A dark cloud hanging over him, solid blue melancholy threads, Jack returns to his office and proceeds to stare at nothing for a while. He doesn’t even know how much time passes before Lena comes in with a cup of fresh coffee. By then, Jack had at least switched from staring into space to going back to coloring his design, taking some comfort in the act.

“Thanks, Lena,” he says glumly, not looking up.

“You got it, Jack!” The small British woman zips towards the door but pauses and comes back to his desk. “Oh, I almost forgot! Mr. Reyes asked me to give this to you. He stopped by on his way out.”

She places a business card on his desk and then she’s gone.

Jack spends a long time staring blankly again. This time, it’s at the business card. Which has his cell phone number on it. In red ink and very neat handwriting, he had written beneath the number: call me sometime.

It leaves a warm tangle of reds and blacks; want, disappointment and hope. It should sign danger in such boldly contrasting colors, but Jack thinks this bundle of threads might at least leave him feeling less grey.
Chapter 2

Jack thinks he’s going to blow it again, because he’s tense and nervous when the hostess sits them down at a nice intimate candlelit table at the back of a quaint little Italian restaurant. Gabriel seems perfectly at ease, however, and the calm he radiates makes Jack start to relax a little. Thank god, he doesn’t seem to mind starting the conversation, and once Jack has something to talk about, he finds it easier to keep going. But he worries, still, that he’s talking too much or that he’s focusing too much on himself or that he’s not asking Gabriel the right things to get to know him.

There’s still enough tension in Jack’s shoulders to start to hurt after a time and he silently tries to will his anxiety away. That’s about when the hostess brings a much older couple to a nearby table, and the elderly white woman makes a disapproving sort of *hmmph* noise in their direction.

“Back in my day, they wouldn’t allow such a display in a public place. Especially not a nice place like this,” she says to her companion rather loudly.

A dark cloud crosses over Gabriel’s gorgeous features. Jack turns around, stares the scowling woman right in the eye and calmly says, “Are you referring to the service dog or the gays, ma’am? You do rather pre-date the legality of both, I think.”

Reaper, laying quietly by Gabriel’s chair, looks up with an inquisitive sound. Gabriel covers his mouth with his napkin, but the shining of his dark eyes suggests he’s trying very hard not to laugh. The hostess is clutching the menus against her chest and biting her lip.

The unpleasant woman, for her part, turns an unsightly shade of pink, grabs her handbag, and storms away. Her white-haired companion, at least, has the decency to look embarrassed and he tosses a nervous, “Sorry!” at them before he chases after her.

Jack sniffs indignantly and looks at the hostess. “I’m really sorry about the loss of business. But I wasn’t going to have her glare at us the entire night because she disapproves of… whatever it is that got her panties in a bunch.”

“Oh no, sir, you are fine,” the hostess says, giggling. “That was amazing. Imagine being in California and getting upset about a gay couple.”

“It is rather silly. I’ll leave an extra-large tip, to make up for it,” Jack replies, with an easy smile. He sits back in his chair, crossing one knee over the other, and takes a sip of wine. All the tension has drained from his shoulders.

Stupid people he can handle easily enough. They ignite in him a deep red of passionate anger perfectly balanced with gold like the scales of justice. His inability to remain silent in the face of bigotry has certainly gotten him in trouble before.

“Sorry,” he says to his own date.

Gabriel lowers his napkin and reaches for his glass of wine. “For what?”

“For making a scene,” Jack says, blushing a little. Vincent used to get so embarrassed when Jack did stuff like this in public. He’d chide Jack later when they were in the car or back home.

The other man considers him for a moment over his glass. Then he chuckles. “Actually, I thought it
was kind of hot. I like a man who isn’t afraid to stand up for what’s right.” He takes a sip and then sets his glass down. “Like I really enjoyed when you threw shade at Christian Verucci in an interview for being a jackass about women who aren’t a size 4. What was it that asshole said? ‘It’s simply not the right canvas for my style of art.’” The last he says in a passable Italian accent, which makes Jack laugh. “Verucci is a big name in the fashion world. It was really brave of you.”

Jack blushes harder and sits confused for a moment, but he shakes his head after a moment. “It’s not really bravery. I’m a good-looking white man who makes decent money. I’ve got literally all the privilege in the world. What sort of asshole would I be if I didn’t use the pedestal I didn’t earn to amplify the voices of people who are regularly ignored and forgotten? It’s why I do what I do anyway. I like making women of all shapes and sizes feel good about themselves. I have the means to do that, so why wouldn’t I?”

*You’re so fucking full of yourself,* he can hear Vincent saying, rolling his dark eyes.

Gabriel just smiles at him and Jack thinks his heart might stop beating from the soft and fond look the other man is giving him. He doesn’t tell Jack that he’s pompous or a fool. Instead, this gorgeous man talks about how his mom and a couple of his sisters are larger women and that clothing was so hard to find for them. One of his sisters had actually screamed when Boudica Beauty first became known, because she loved the clothes so much.

Jack can only sit there and smile, soft steady greens and blues of pride welling in his chest.

The conversation flows so much easier after that and Jack is actually relaxed and enjoying himself.

They end up closing down the restaurant, and Jack remembers to leave a giant tip.

It leaves a glossy silver thread full of bright laughter and warm conversation wrapped around his heart.

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Ana heaves a sigh and walks into the kitchen to start cleaning up.

Jack feels sorry for her because he thinks she must be very tired of picking up after him like he’s a goddamn child. She has a teenager at home that’s probably not even this high maintenance.

He’d been feeling surprisingly stable and had managed to keep himself disciplined enough to keep his flat in some kind of marginal order, for the past three months. In fact, Ana had just commented a couple of weeks ago how much better he seemed to be doing. And his doctor had congratulated him, with the added note that Jack shouldn’t feel bad if he has an off day again.

Well he feels bad. Really bad.

He’s curled up on his prim white couch, as small as he can make himself, still wearing his pajama pants. He can’t actually remember the last time he wore real clothes. There are sheets of white paper all over the coffee table and scattered on the floor, full of clothing designs he’d manically been working on for days. There are also old newspapers and fashion magazines everywhere. He’d called out of the office on Monday due to waking up feeling a panic attack coming on. It was… what day was it? Wednesday? Thursday? He frantically sweeps aside designs on the table until he finds his phone, and notices he has a ton of notifications.
Including several text messages and calls from Gabriel. They originally had a date scheduled for Tuesday, but when the cloud descended on Jack on Monday, he’d cancelled the date with a mere “something came up, let’s reschedule for later” text message. Then he’d dropped his phone on the coffee table and forgotten it. Apparently, Gabriel had been trying to reschedule, or at least find out if he was okay. For the last three days.

Shit. Shit.

Jack stumbles from the living room into the bathroom, staring at his unshaven face and the deep bags under his eyes. He looks like crap. He decides it’s high time to brush his teeth and take a shower.

When he comes back into the bedroom, Ana is sitting on his bed, and she gives him an appraising look. “Normally I have to coax you to shower and shave. You did it today on your own,” she notes calmly. “That’s definite progress. Make sure you tell Dr. Ziegler.”

Jack sits down next to her and starts to cry. “Why am I such a mess, Ana? I am dating this wonderful man and I’m doing something I love for my career. I thought things started going well with Gabriel and with Boudica’s success, this would stop.”

Ana has her arm wrapped around his bare, still-wet shoulders. “Jack, romance doesn’t magically fix everything in our lives. Nor does a good career,” she says softly. “But you are doing so much better than before. I can tell you’re happy, and most of the time you feel good about yourself. Gabriel can’t fix everything, but he has been good for you. Boudica has been good for you too.”

“Well, now I’ve gone and fucked it up, like I always do. I haven’t told Gabriel about my problems, and I cancelled our date this week without telling him why, and and—”

“Jack,” she interrupts sternly. “Jack, you haven’t fucked anything up. He’s worried about you. He called me yesterday because you wouldn’t answer your phone or messages. You’ve been dating for what… two months now? You like him, right? You want to be serious with him? Why don’t you just tell him the truth? Sometimes you have bad days and need time off.”

“What if he leaves me? What if he walks away like Vincent!” Jack wails, pulling on his blonde hair. “And I’ve been gone from the office all week and I have a bajillion phone calls and I probablyucked up my business too—”

“If he leaves because you have depression and anxiety that you are being treated for, then he was never going to be good match for you,” she interrupts patiently. She has the decency to not comment on Vincent. Who wasn’t a good match. At all. “As for Boudica Beauty, it’s fine. Lena knows how to handle things and put out the worst fires, and you have good people in the right places. This is why I helped you structure the company the way I did. Yes, they need you, but it’s okay for you to take time off on occasion. Nothing has been fucked, Jack.”

“Especially not me,” Jack grumbles. He drops his hands into his lap and glares at them.

Ana gives a startled laugh. “You really must be feeling better already. You never crack jokes when you’re in a mood.” She stands up. “Why don’t you finish getting dressed? I’ve started on some lunch for us. And I noticed you missed taking your medication Tuesday and Wednesday. But you did take it Monday.”

“I… I didn’t even know three days had passed. I’ll get dressed. Thanks, Ana.”

He sits a few moments longer on his unmade bed, listening to the sounds of her working in the
kitchen. Thinking about her words. Yes, he did want to get serious with Gabriel. They hadn’t really
talked about that. They’d gone on a handful of dates in the past two months, dinners and movies
and one time they went hiking on a gorgeous Saturday morning, but hadn’t discussed where to go
from there. Jack wanted very much to get serious with him, and that included… intimacy. But he
thinks Ana is right and before any of that happens, Gabriel needs to know the truth about how
messed up he is and what kind of baggage Jack is dragging along. It was only fair to give the man
the opportunity to leave and do better for himself. Much as that would deeply hurt.

There are delicious smells in the kitchen when he goes out and sits on one of the stools at the island
counter. The kitchen is clean and she’s picked up the living room as well: magazines and
newspapers stacked neatly off to the side of the tv, and his work gathered on the coffee table.

She’s cooking up grilled cheese sandwiches and his stomach growls all of a sudden. He can’t
remember the last time he ate, in fact.

Ana pushes a notebook towards him to which a pen is attached, as well as a glass of water and his
pills. He obediently takes his medication and then picks up the pen with a sigh and starts writing.
He’s supposed to write things down to tell Dr. Ziegler during his sessions, like any breakthroughs
or breakdowns he has, or strong emotions, accomplishments and colorful thoughts.

“Thanks for cleaning up in here. And making lunch,” he says when he’s done.

“Of course, Jack,” she replies calmly, smiling at him. “I’ll always be here for you.”

They settle down to eat grilled cheese sandwiches and talk about work, her teenage daughter, and
other mundane things.

It’s a soft orange, something sunshine toned he thinks, not quite gold but not yellow. Like perfectly
melted grilled cheese and tucked around his heart more gently with the same kind of warmth he
recalls in his mother’s hugs.

Jack is a nervous wreck as he stands in front of the door, looking down at the sheet of paper with
the overly messy handwriting where he’d written down Gabriel’s address. He absently rubs his
tired eyes and triple checks, again, the apartment number, anxiety fluttering through him at the
thought of accidentally ringing a total stranger’s doorbell.

Restless, he hadn’t slept the previous night and had baked furiously until well past midnight before
he even tried to get into bed. But sleep simply refused to happen, so he’d gone to his office at three
in the morning just to start catching up on all the things he’d missed earlier in the week. Not for the
first time, he thinks he doesn’t pay Lena Oxton enough. Not only is she pleasant and full of energy,
but she knows Boudica Beauty and she knows what to do when he’s out of commission. She keeps
meticulous notes during his absences so that he can leap right back into things when he is on his
feet again.

He’d worked right up until it was time to drive here.

Gabriel had invited him to a homemade dinner. It’s the first time Jack will see his date’s home, and
it both thrills him and frightens him. Gabriel hadn’t been angry when they finally talked on
Thursday night; he’d sounded genuinely relieved to hear Jack’s voice and know he was alright.
Vincent used to get angry and impatient with Jack when he had his ‘episodes’ as Vince called it. Nothing upset him more than broken plans.

So Jack still harbors the expectation that Gabriel will be angry now.

He shifts his weight nervously from one foot to the other after he rings the doorbell, one hand holding a container full of the cookies he’d baked the previous night. The other hand holds a bottle of wine that Lena had graciously picked up for him earlier in the day at his request.

When Gabriel opens the door, he’s not scowling at all. He’s smiling. It crinkles his eyes and makes them light up, and Jack’s heart does a weird little flip. He feels the tension drain from him, and he can’t help but smile back. As with all their dates, Gabriel has exchanged his usual comfy hoodie and beanie for dressier dark jeans and a button-down shirt, this one red, with a black tshirt underneath, which Jack can see because the buttons aren’t latched. The crimson looks lovely against Gabriel’s warm bronze skin, and the tshirt seems to struggling to contain his muscular chest. He’s beautiful.

“Hey,” Jack says softly.

“Hey yourself, good-looking,” Gabriel replies. “Come on in. Glad you could make it.” He steps aside, holding out a hand to motion Jack inside.

Jack steps gingerly within, not sure what to expect. If it was his place, it would probably be a mess unless Ana had just left.

But it’s not like that at all here. Gabriel’s apartment is spotless, and very tastefully decorated. It’s smaller than Jack’s flat, but it’s a good size for a single man living alone with a dog. There’s a short hallway from the front door and then one enters the living room, which has a comfy-looking couch in a dark green microfiber, a coffee table with a glass top and black base, and an entertainment center with a decently-sized tv. In the back corner there’s a folded-up weight and exercise machine. There’s what looks like a painting in a classical style on the nearby wall of King Arthur accepting a sword from a hand in a lake. The open kitchen, with an island counter, is off to the right. Tantalizing smells waft through the apartment, making his stomach growl. Off to Jack’s left is a hallway that leads to the bedroom, no doubt.

Reaper is laying down on his belly over by the living room window, but the dog gets up and comes over to Jack. He’s not wearing his vest. After two months he knows Jack, but he’s still surprised when the dog wags his tail and headbumps his hand.

“Is it… okay to pet him?” Jack asks cautiously. He’s never asked to do so because anytime he’s seen Reaper, it’s been when he has his service dog vest on.

“Yeah, he’s at home,” Gabriel says, coming out of the foyer to join them. He gives Jack a tender smile. “Thank you for not bugging him when he’s working.”

“Oh, yeah. I know you’re not supposed to distract service dogs when they’re on duty,” Jack replies, smiling back. He kneels down to get on eye level with Reaper, setting down the Tupperware and the bottle of wine. The dog whines softly and pushes his head against Jack’s chest, tail wagging happily. “I’ve never been able to tell you, Reaper, but you’re so handsome!” He pets and hugs the dog, and laughs in delight when Reaper licks at his face.

“You like dogs, I see,” Gabriel says, watching them with shining eyes.

“Oh, I grew up on a farm, so you know, we had a lot of dogs!” Jack says. “Dogs are the best. And
Reaper is awesome. Such a good boy, yes you are! You do good work, buddy.” Reaper licks his face again, producing another soft laugh from him.

Gabriel chuckles. “Well, you two keep yourself entertained, I’m just finishing up dinner. It won’t be long. Do you want me to take that?” He motions to the bottle.

“Oh, yeah! It’s for you! Or us, if you want to open it tonight. And… I made these last night. They’re for you too. Dinner smells delicious, Gabe!” Jack says cheerfully. “Thank you for having me.”

“Yeah, well… I love to cook. And I’ve been wanting to cook for you for a while.” Gabriel takes the offered wine and container and heads into the kitchen. “Cooking is therapeutic for me. Something I have full control over when I otherwise feel completely out of control of my own life, you know?”

Jack blinks at that. “Yeah,” he says softly. He did know. That’s where all the cookies came from last night. What he hadn’t known before this moment was that they shared that in common.

Gabriel opens the oven briefly, filling the kitchen with more wonderful smells, and then turns to the island counter, where a variety of fresh vegetables are waiting to be chopped.

“Can I help you with something?” Jack says, standing up.

“Nope, I got it,” the other man replies. “Make yourself comfortable. Feel free to take your shoes off, but leave them over by the door next to mine. Reaper knows those are off limit, but anything that’s left on the ground anywhere else is a doggy toy.” He opens the container Jack had handed him, and gives a low soft whistle. “Cookies? Are these… homemade?”

“Yup,” Jack replies. “I… umm… hope you like chocolate chip cookies.”

“Like them? Fuck, Jack. They are my weakness.” Gabriel bites into a cookie and his eyes widen and he stands there for a moment with a cookie in his mouth. Jack isn’t sure how to interpret that. After a moment, however, Gabriel swallows. “Jack Morrison. My fucking god. Marry me. These cookies are… holy shit?” He takes another one and gives a low moan of appreciation when he bites into it.

Jack turns beet red, both at the marriage proposal—he knows it is a joke, but still—and at the ensuing moan of pleasure. *God, that should be illegal for him to do without warning a man.* Oh, the places his mind suddenly goes at that sound.

Gabriel shuts the container. “Welp, those will be gone in a day or two. There goes my perfect figure,” he says with a laugh, not noticing Jack’s state. He reaches for a knife and gets to chopping tomatoes. Jack clears his throat and stands on the other side of the kitchen counter from him, willing himself to calm down. Gabriel is very chatty and cheerful tonight.

Jack had long since stopped feeling anxious about the fact that Gabriel tends to carry conversations. It’s not that Gabe talked over him—he never did; if Jack talked, he listened intently. But he also didn’t seem to expect Jack to speak when he didn’t want to or had nothing to say, for which the blonde was incredibly grateful.

Gabriel does not ask him about this week. Instead, he talks about a few jobs he did, one for a big Hollywood studio whose makeup artist had fallen sick quite suddenly in the middle of filming, and another for a photo shoot in Santa Monica for a fashion magazine.
Jack is genuinely interested, but he’s also a little distracted by his own stupid brain. He keeps anticipating Gabriel’s anger or at least a demand for answers, but it doesn’t come.

*Is he... is he really not upset?*

That is a brilliant ice blue of open skies and potential. Unfolding like flower petals to entangle his heart with red and black and silver.

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Dinner is amazing and after a week of not eating, Jack is hungry. He is glad Ana and Lena had made him eat between Thursday and Friday, because Gabriel’s dinner—secret recipes from his Abuela’s kitchen, he says—is heavy and spicy and flavorful and might have killed Jack if he truly hadn’t eaten since Monday.

But he doesn’t even care if he feels sick later. He digs in, because it’s not only delicious but it fills him with a sort of warmth that has nothing to do with temperature. No one since Jack’s mother had made him a home-cooked meal like this. Even Ana, when she’d invited him over for meals with her and Fareeha, had usually ordered take-out or pizza. And she made sandwiches and easy things sometimes too. But a full-blown homecooked meal like this? Holy hell.

By then Jack is feeling comfortable and calm enough to hold an actual conversation. He can’t help but compliment the chef more than once. It makes Gabriel smile, doing that crinkling and shining thing around his eyes that Jack loves so much.

With bellies full, and Reaper sitting next to Gabriel with his head resting on one of those muscular thighs, and the men sipping at their wine, there’s a moment of silence between them, during which Jack senses a shift in Gabriel’s demeanor. He’s never known the man to be anything but self-confident, even at his quietest moments. But he recognizes the slight tension, and the way the hand petting Reaper’s head hesitates and speeds up at intervals.

He’s anxious. And that only seems to be confirmed when Reaper looks up, whining a little and gently headbutting his thigh.

“I’m okay, bud,” Gabriel says softly to the dog. He continues petting him gently. “Jack... can we talk? About us?"

Jack’s shoulders immediately tense. “Yes, of course,” he says calmly. His heart begins thudding in his chest. Reaper looks at him and gives another little whine, but doesn’t leave Gabriel’s side. “What did you want to talk about?"

“Well... I...” Gabriel runs a hand through his own hair. “We’ve been seeing each other for two months. Which granted, isn’t a long time, it’s only been a handful of dates, thanks to our jobs and schedules. I really like you, Jack. And I don’t know how you feel about me, but... I was kind of hoping we could talk about becoming something more?”

Jack opens his mouth, then closes it. He sits for a long moment staring stupidly at him, blinking. *Say something, dumbass.* He clears his throat. Reaper whines again, and he wonders if the dog can hear his heart almost thudding through his ribcage. Almost certainly. “Gabe, I... I would really like that. But before we do, I think it would be fair for you to know more about me.”

“Well, that’s part of becoming something more, right? Getting to really know my boyfriend?”
Gabriel replies, smiling a little. “I mean, you should know more about me too.”

_Boyfriend._ The word rolls around in his head for a bit. It has a nice ring to it.

“Like, you’ve never asked me why I have Reaper,” Gabriel says finally, since it looks like Jack isn’t going to contribute first.

“You were military!” Jack blurts out. He blushes furiously. “I mean… I think you were?”

Gabriel blinks at him for a moment. “How did you know that?” he says finally, sounding faintly awed. They had never talked about _before_… before Boudica, before his makeup career.

“Oh… the first time we shook hands at my office, you had callouses on your hands that are similar to mine,” Jack says. He holds out his hands, palm up, on the table. “I got them during the war. You know, guns. Anyway, after that I remembered Zarya telling me at their wedding that you didn’t stay for the reception because you didn’t do so well with crowds. Whenever we go out, you like to sit with your back to a wall at the restaurant, or the back-center row of the theater. So no one can sneak up on you, I’m guessing. You prefer to go see movies that have been out for a while and later at night so there aren’t as many people there. So I kind of just… put all that together and guessed PTSD?”

“I didn’t realize you had spent so much time observing me. And thinking about me,” Gabriel says with a lopsided grin. He seems a little embarrassed.

“I think about you all the time,” Jack replies softly.

For a moment they stare at one another, Jack feeling his cheeks warm even more, but he has the satisfaction of noting that there seems to be more color to the other man’s dark cheeks.

“Yeah,” Gabriel says finally. “I have PTSD and Reaper helps me deal. Crowds can make me… well, lose my shit. I… had a pretty awful experience in the war involving a crowd of people, and… I get very anxious and hypervigilant.” He stops, swallows, his hand gripping Reaper’s scruff a bit tighter.

“You don’t have to talk about it,” Jack says quietly. He offers his hand, and Gabriel places his own palm over his. Some of the tension seems to drain from the other man’s shoulders. “Not until you’re ready. Why don’t you tell me something else? Like… how did you get into makeup and hair?”

“Well, you already know I went to school for it, but if you mean why did it interest me… it was my four sisters,” Gabriel replies, making an attempt at smiling. “I was the middle child. I ended up having to learn to do hair and makeup for them. I grumbled about it a lot but… I actually liked it. I’ve always liked art… drawing and the like. I thought I would become an artist of some kind. What I love about makeup is the canvas is always different. Every person and their skin is unique, and requires a special touch. That means no two jobs that I do will ever be the same. I’m always creating something completely original, and I’m making people look good and feel good. That really appealed to me.”

When he talks about his job, Gabriel leans forward, his dark eyes shining, lit up with an inner fire. Jack’s heart skips a beat because he thinks Gabriel looks so fucking beautiful in that moment.

“When I walk around with people, strangers? I tend to think about every individual as a canvas, and I like to imagine what I would put on that canvas if they let me.” Gabriel shakes his head a little. “Maybe that’s a little fucked up, thinking of people that way. But it helps me deal with my
anxiety, I guess. The first time I saw you? At Mei’s wedding? I… noticed you had the most beautiful skin, and I couldn’t help but think, ‘What a perfect canvas. The things I could do with a face that gorgeous and pure.’"

Jack sits back in his seat, startled, the existing flush on his cheeks spreading down his throat and probably his upper chest by now. “Me?” Threads of grey confusion tangle up with warm crimson that make him think instantly of Gabriel’s shirt. Jack is completely flustered. Somewhere in the back of the whirling mess that is his mind he also can’t help but think, *he has anxiety too? He always seems so confident!* He’s a tangled knot of confusion, embarrassment, and disbelief.

“You’re… you’re wrong. There’s nothing perfect or pure or gorgeous about me,” he blurts out before his brain can catch up to his mouth. “I’m a mess, Gabriel. That’s what you need to know about me. I’m a mess of a human being. I just spent the week having some form of an anxiety attack, at home in my pajamas, manically drawing and coloring, and losing three days before Ana came over and pulled me out of it. I hadn’t eaten or slept, and I ignored all my calls, including yours. I’m really sorry, okay? I didn’t mean to ignore your calls, I really didn’t, and I didn’t want to break our date on Tuesday but—” He’s talking so damn fast now that he’s not even sure the words are even making sense.

A confusing litany of colors tear through him, flashes of cowardly yellow and dark orange psychosis and deep blue sadness and dark gray confusion and now he’s having trouble catching his breath, his heart slamming in his chest almost painfully. *Goddammit why is he having a panic attack now?*

Something soft and warm touches the hand he hadn’t even realized was clutching at his own pants just to have something to grab onto. The thing nudges him until his hand opens of its own volition and accepts the nuzzling. There’s a furry solid weight against his leg now and helps bring his spiraling thoughts back down to earth.

Jack looks down, surprised to find Reaper is pressing against him, looking up at him with those soulful brown eyes, big triangular ears upright. The coming anxiety attack slides away as quickly as it had started. He’s petting Reaper without even realizing it and the motion is soothing. He lets out a deep breath, his heart already slowing back down. Slowly he raises his eyes.

Instead of the anger he expected, Jack watches genuine concern cross Gabriel’s features. “Jack. This is… maybe not really my business, but… are you seeing a doctor at all? That was pretty serious.”

“Yeah,” Jack says. He lets out a deep breath. His voice is shaky. “Yeah, I am. I see my doctor every month and more often if I have to, I take medication, and I have coping mechanisms that I use almost daily. I think it is your business, if you want us to keep dating. I told you, I’m a mess. I guess I’m not really over my episode from earlier in the week. I’m… I’m sorry, Gabriel. I would completely understand if you didn’t want to see me anymore.”

“Hey, you don’t have to apologize, and cut that out, okay? You’re not a mess. I’m glad you are seeing a doctor… and I totally get having a bad day or week or whatever. I have them too. This doesn’t change how I feel about you,” Gabriel says, placing his hand gently atop Jack’s on the table. “Look… we don’t have to change anything about what we’re doing if you don’t want to. If you need to take things slow, we’ll do that. If you need space or time off, then I’ll back off.” He pauses while Jack sits in genuine confusion. “Is this… is this because of the war?”

“My anxiety and depression?” Jack says absently. He’s still trying to wrap his brain around the idea that Gabriel still wants to date him. “No. I mean, the war didn’t do me any favors, that’s for sure. But I’ve been like this since puberty… I just never told my dad about it or got it treated at the
time. I hid it pretty well. But after the war, it got pretty bad, and Ana convinced me to go see a
doctor. I’ve been working on it for years.” He’s still petting Reaper, who hasn’t left his side. “Hey, umm… is Reaper supposed to do that?”

Gabriel gives him a curious look. “Anxiety is what he’s trained to deal with. I can’t avoid crowds or loud noises or civilization one hundred percent of the time in life if I ever want to leave my house, so that’s why he’s here. He keeps me grounded so that I can have a somewhat normal life. And he recognizes a panic attack in someone else. Plus, he likes you and knows you by now.”

“I feel like I don’t have a right to him taking care of me. He’s your dog,” Jack murmurs softly.

“Don’t be silly. You’re my boyfriend. Being with you makes me happy,” Gabriel replies just as softly. “He recognizes you as friend. I’m really glad he was able to pull you out of it.”

Boyfriend. And a boyfriend who… isn’t angry or impatient with him for having an episode.

There’s a new color of thread wrapping its way around Jack’s heart, one he has never really experienced before. The soft pink of happiness.

“What do you want to do, Jack?” Gabriel asks him softly.

“I…” Jack swallows past the lump of emotion in his throat. Vincent had never asked him what he wanted. The expected anxiety at telling someone, especially this beautiful man, what he wants, isn’t there. “I don’t know if you mean now or the future, but… I’d like… I’d like for us to keep dating, and get closer, and be more. Just… maybe take it day by day?”

“That sounds perfect,” Gabriel replies. “We’ll take it as slow as you need to.” His hand is still over Jack’s on the table and he squeezes gently. “How about right now? What do you want?”

“Umm… maybe we can just watch a movie here? Something lowkey? And cuddle a little?” Jack says a little shyly, dropping his gaze.

The other man gives him a tender smile. “I like that plan a lot. I have popcorn we can make. And ice cream. Reaper loves vanilla ice cream.” Gabriel stands up, and holds out a hand. Reaper excitedly runs over to his side, tail wagging, giving a short soft bark. He must know what ice cream means.

Swirling ribbons of pinks and rose and light red and the soft blue of serenity wrap their way through Jack as he takes what Gabriel is offering.
Chapter 3

It’s around the five month mark that Jack finally stirs up the courage to invite Gabriel over to his flat for the first time. Gabriel keeps his own home so spotless—he’d explained that he needed to, because a chaotic environment aggravated him and sometimes fostered confusion or feelings of frustration, which was exactly Jack’s problem as well—that the blonde was embarrassed at not being able to keep his own home environment as neat.

But it was time to grow up, he thinks. And he refuses to ask Ana for help cleaning up. She’s not his mother. He takes a whole weekend to do it, but he goes through his flat and cleans and tidies up and tries to make the place presentable. He realizes for the first time while doing this just how much of Vincent is still in this place. Vincent had made a lot of the décor decisions, and Jack finds himself wrinkling his nose distastefully. Why hadn’t he ever redecorated? He supposes it was just easier this way.

Cleaning and dealing with Vincent’s presence is exhausting and by Sunday night he is flopping uselessly onto the couch and ignoring some documentary on Irish castles on tv while he thinks
about nothing.

To his own eye, it doesn’t look as good as Gabriel’s place. But he does finally text his boyfriend and suggest they have dinner, at Jack’s place, on Monday night. Gabriel’s response is immediate: *hell yes I’ll be there.*

Then it is time to panic because he doesn’t know what to do about dinner. He calls Ana, frantically babbling, until she cuts him off with a single word: lasagna. His phone pings with a text message. She’d sent him a recipe.

As usual, she is a savior. Lasagna is a fairly foolproof recipe to follow. It calls for a bottle of store-bought pasta sauce, but Jack remembers Gabriel making absolutely everything from scratch, so he calls Ana again, who patiently emails him a recipe for a tomato-based sauce. Except it uses canned tomatoes.

“Don’t go all Gordon Ramsey on your first outing, Jack,” she says when he calls her yet a third time. Honestly, she has a saint’s patience. “Even if you’re dating the Latino version of him.” Jack gives an astonished laugh at that. He’d told her many times just how deliciously Gabriel cooks. “Canned tomatoes are fine but make sure you buy the San Marzanos like I told you in the email. They are the best.”

The biggest problem with making his own marinara sauce, he finds, is the mess it makes on the stove top. Uggh. He is frantically wiping red from all over the white range when his doorbell rings. Thankfully dinner is already in the oven and he tosses the murder-colored paper towel evidence in the trash and hurries to answer, forgetting he is wearing an apron still.

Gabriel looks fine, as usual, in black jeans that hug his every goddamn curve, and a dark green shirt beneath a black leather jacket.

_Goddamn._ Jack stands in the doorway staring, while he himself is in a dorky bright-blue apron that says _Raise the Steaks_ and has tomato sauce stains on it. Gabriel blinks at him and laughs.

“That’s adorable,” he says, grinning. “You look really cute in an apron.” Reaper is sitting next to him, but he’s facing away from the door, looking up and down the hallway.

Jack’s pale skin flushes at the compliment and he opens the door wider, stepping aside and hurriedly untying the apron. “Uhh, thanks,” he says, grinning sheepishly. Underneath the apron, at least, he is better dressed. Nice black pants and a sky-blue collared shirt that Ana likes on him and says make his eyes pop. “Please come in.”

Gabriel steps inside and pauses to give him a soft, sweet kiss. It makes Jack brighten into what he knows is a dopey grin, but he can’t help it. Gabriel makes him melt.

“Whatever you’re making smells good,” Gabriel says as he walks all the way inside. Reaper follows him, wags his tail at Jack, but doesn’t come to him. Right. He’s wearing his vest. As far as he’s concerned, he’s working. Gabriel is dragging his work cart behind him, which makes Jack give him a questioning look.

“I came here from a job. Don’t like to leave my tools in a hot car. The lip colors are especially prone to getting melty,” Gabriel explains. He kneels down to take the vest off Reaper, and the minute he does, the dog gives a soft bark and runs over to Jack, bumping his leg, tail wagging excitedly. Jack laughs and kneels down to properly greet him, including getting licked in the face.

Gabriel gives a low whistle. He’s standing in the living room now, looking around. “Wow. This
place is huge. And it’s really nice, Jack. Your kitchen is a dream, honestly.” He walks into said kitchen, with Jack following.

“I guess yeah, it’s pretty nice,” the blonde says, a little embarrassed. It’s kind of ridiculously expensive for one person, and he’d thought about downgrading. He’d lived here with Vincent, and when he left he’d made a bit of a snide comment about Jack having to get a smaller place. Like Jack didn’t have a fucking job that paid well (he’d made good money as a model for Ana’s company), and Vincent had been his goddamn sugar daddy. Merely as a point of pride, both because he could afford it and to prove to himself that he could survive Vincent walking out on him even in the same home and same bed they’d shared, he’d kept the place. Which maybe hadn’t been the best decision in terms of his mental health and recovery from a broken relationship initially, but…

Jack looks around, at the cherry wood dining table and the expensive white couch and the abstract art on the walls. As with his cleaning spree, he’s struck again by how much of Vincent is still here and it bothers him all of a sudden. He vaguely recalls Ana suggesting he completely refurnish and redecorate the place, but he’d never gotten around to it.

Gabriel has a good sense of interior design, and of course he has an amazing sense for color theory. Maybe Jack should get his advice on redecorating sometime. It would be nice to completely cut out the lingering rotten-brown thread that was Vincent in Jack’s life.

“Jack? The oven’s beeping,” Gabriel says, bringing him back from his deep thoughts.

“Oh, hell,” Jack replies, hurrying into the kitchen.

“Can I help with anything?” Gabriel asks as he backs away from the oven. There’s already a bowl of salad waiting on the dining table (just to save time, Jack had admittedly just grabbed a pre-chopped bagged salad), and there’s crusty bread cut in half, buttered, and waiting to go into the oven for a warming once the lasagna comes out.

“Nah, I think I’ve got it under control,” Jack says, grinning. He’s pleased with himself, because the lasagna looks amazing. He silently says yet another prayer of thanks to Ana Amari as the bread goes in.

“Christ, that looks so good,” Gabriel says with a happy sigh. “I love Italian.”

Score.

Jack is insatiably pleased with himself because dinner is a hit. Successfully managing to adult and do something for his boyfriend gives him a confidence high he hasn’t felt since Boudica’s first successful showing on the runway. He’s flushed with happiness in shades of pinks and sunshine yellows and as a result he’s chatty.

“What are you grinning about?” he asks at one point as he takes a sip of wine.

Gabriel has been sitting quietly for the past ten minutes at least, smiling at him with those soulful, sparkling dark eyes. “Just… you, baby. You’re gorgeous. Especially when you’re happy. You have this glow to your skin and this light in your eyes.”

Jack blushes a little, but he leans towards the other man, furrowing his brow slightly. “A good canvas?”

“Show me.”

Surprise crosses Gabriel’s features, brow furrowing just a bit. “Are you serious, Jack?”

“You have your tools, no?” Jack hooks a thumb in the direction of the front door, where Gabriel had left his cart. “I mean if you don’t want to, that’s fine. I just thought it would be fun. I’ve never really had makeup on before. Like I mean, of course powder and stuff during photo shoots, when I was a model. But not like, full on makeup with eyeshadow and lip color and stuff.”

Gabriel sits stunned for a moment. He’s staring into Jack’s eyes, until slowly his dark eyes begin to roam over Jack’s sharp features. Jack notices his change in demeanor. Like he’s very focused and kind of far away. A dark, calloused hand reaches up to touch his cheek. “Perfect canvas,” he murmurs finally. Then he stands up. “Take your shirt off and go sit at the counter.” His voice has changed, more commanding. It reminds Jack of bootcamp. A shiver of excitement runs through him.

Still he can’t help a bit of mischief. He grins slyly. “Do you tell all your clients to take their shirts off, Mr. Reyes?”

Gabriel tosses him a smirk. “Only the ones I want to see topless. Which, up until today, has been precisely none of them. Take your shirt off so we don’t get powder on it, smartass. I left the styling cape in the car.”

“Yes, sir,” Jack says with a jaunty little salute.

With a laugh, the darker man strides across the room and Jack, a thrilling ribbon of red-orange anticipation coursing through him, does as he’s told, sitting bare-chested on the stool at the island counter. He watches Gabriel open up what look like toolboxes, except inside are specialized compartments that each hold something unique: cremes and pencils and lipstick tubes and a variety of other little tubs and things that Jack can’t begin to name. One of the toolboxes appears to be all about eyes: it contains eyeshadow palettes of various kinds. A smaller toolbox opens up to reveal a plastic tray that has many small holes, and into these Gabriel sticks brushes so they are standing upright and are easy to get to. His tools take over Jack’s island counter.

Jack’s heart is pounding by the time Gabriel turns back to him, but he manages to sit without fidgeting as the artist begins. Watching him work is breath-taking: Gabriel is intense and focused, and he actually looks a little grumpy because he has resting bitch face (his own words) when he’s concentrating. But when he gives direction—“close your eyes” or “lift your chin a bit” or “turn to your left”—his voice is soft and soothing. His fingers are gentle when he spreads some kind of crème over Jack’s face, almost caressing. Jack giggles a little when soft brushes kiss over his skin, a touch ticklish at times, but he does his best to sit still.

His reaction to brushes makes Gabriel chuckle softly, causing Jack to open his eyes. “You have… the most responsive skin,” the artist murmurs. “Close your eyes, beautiful, I’m almost done.”

“Okay!”

He even works with his hair a bit. Jack’s hair is trimmed short in the back, but longish on top, and after wetting it with water from the sink, Gabe runs a comb through it, splitting it down the middle instead of sweeping it back like Jack normally does.

“You can open your eyes now, gorgeous,” Gabriel says finally.

Jack has no idea how much time has passed. He’s just been enjoying having Gabriel’s attention and
hands on him. But now he’s holding up a hand mirror, and Jack… stares.

“Now that’s a blonde bombshell,” Gabriel says softly. “You could be a pin-up model, Jackie.”

Jack’s been a model before, so he’s accustomed to the airbrush look—on photos that have been altered digitally before an ad or magazine goes to print. He knows it’s possible to get that airbrush look with just makeup, but he’s never seen it on himself, until now. Gabriel has made his skin creamy perfection, with golden touches in his T-zone so he looks gently sun-kissed. Highlighter has been used to make Jack’s cheekbones sharper and higher and more defined. There’s a lovely blush to his cheeks.

But most startling of all are his eyes and lips. For the eyes Gabriel had gone with jewel tone glittery blue on his eyelids, accented by gentle pink peaches along his browbone. Black eyeliner defines the shape of his eyes all around. Jack’s own cornflower blue irises pop beautifully as a result.

His lips are a startling shiny candy cherry red. Jack thinks they look delicious.

He moves the hand mirror this way and that, glad for the ample California sun streaming into his living room, staring at himself from every angle possible.

“Gabe,” he says finally, breathlessly, “this… is… awesome.” No wonder women (and some men and nonbinary folks) loved makeup so much. It’s not a look he’d want to wear every day himself, but… damn.

Gabriel has been putting away some of his things, but he’d been surreptitiously watching Jack admire himself in the mirror, and he’s grinning when he looks up.

“Perfect canvas,” he says softly. “Absolute perfection. You’re fucking gorgeous, baby. Can I take a few pictures? No one has to see them if you don’t want to.”

“Please do take pictures!” Jack exclaims, setting down the mirror.

Gabriel uses his phone to take pictures, asking Jack to pose at times or to look a certain way, or smile, or not smile. It’s all familiar enough to Jack, what with being a model his whole life. But having Gabriel give him direction is way more fun than modeling work ever was.

“Did you get enough pictures?” Jack asks with a laugh after a while, because he’s pretty sure every possible angle has been covered by then.

“I just wanted to be sure I was thorough,” Gabriel replies with a chuckle, setting his phone down. As soon as he does, however, Jack rushes him, throwing his arms around Gabriel and kissing him many times, forgetting about the lipstick entirely until he backs off and realizes he’s left his mark all over Gabriel’s face.

Gabriel is laughing by now and he wraps his arms around Jack’s waist and pulls him closer.

“Where do you think you’re going, gorgeous? I’m not finished with you.”

“Oh yeah? Well that’s good, because I’m not finished with you either.”

When they kiss this time, it’s deep, passionate. And breathtaking. They stand in the kitchen making out until they are forced to come up for air.

“Gabi… will you stay with me tonight?” Jack whispers.

“I would love to, sunshine,” Gabriel murmurs in response.
Those now-familiar ribbons of pink and red of happiness and love wrap warmly around Jack’s heart as he pulls Gabriel towards his bedroom.

It’s the week of July 4th and the short week means Jack is hellishly busy at work. This year, Independence Day has the audacity to fall on a Thursday and Jack thinks it’s dumb to make all his employees come back to work on Friday, so he’s giving them both days paid. But that means Monday through Wednesday is a crunch week.

He’d told Gabriel work would be batshit for him until the holiday and to please excuse the distance, and Gabriel had said that was fine and he understood. After eight months of dating, they’ve long since become comfortable with the nature of each other’s work, the ebbs and flows of busy times, and Jack no longer expects Gabriel to be angry with him. He never is.

Gabriel himself hadn’t scheduled any work at all and had said he was going to spend the time off hiking with Reaper ‘because he needed to get the fuck away from LA this week.’

Jack didn’t think much about Gabriel’s words or his tone at the time; too busy thinking about work. But he does remember to text Gabriel on Monday evening to ask how the hiking went. He receives an uncharacteristically short ‘it was good,’ and nothing else. Even when he responds with, ‘hope tomorrow is good too.’

If Vincent had ever responded to him that way (or not responded, as it were) Jack would have had a panic attack and called him with frantic apologies for angering him.

With Gabriel, Jack remains calm.

On Tuesday Jack works until almost 2200, and by the time he drags himself home, he is exhausted. He doesn’t have any messages and he doesn’t want to bother Gabriel after he’d probably sweat all day in the July sun. He is mildly annoyed because some of the neighborhood kids near his flat have fireworks already and are setting them off. He couldn’t go to sleep because of it until after midnight.

Wednesday his personal phone rings when he is in the middle of a very important phone call with a potential sponsor for an event he’s been planning for months, so he can’t attend to the message immediately. His conference call lasts longer than he would like and he is irritable by the time he’s able to check his call log. No message had been left, but at least the log—

Gabriel. Gabriel had called him? Gabriel never called. He preferred to text. Anxiety shoots through him. Gabriel was supposed to be hiking today, no? What if something had gone wrong and he needed help? What if he was hurt and—

Stop it! He tells himself firmly. Call him back, stupid, find out if he’s hurt, instead of panicking.

“Gabriel?” he says when the other end of the call is picked up. “I’m really sorry, I was on a conference call. Honey, are you okay?”

There’s a pause, but he can hear the other man breathing. Kind of roughly, too. “Jack, if you’re busy that’s okay, but can you please come over when you can tonight?” he says finally. His voice sounds… strained. He doesn’t sound like himself.
Jack stands up so fast he bangs his knee on the underside of his desk. “I’m coming over right now. Do you need anything?”

“Just you.”

“Okay. Okay! I’m coming straight there! Are you safe?”

“I’m safe. Just get here. Please.”

Jack doesn’t know what’s wrong but he knows asking a bunch of questions would be a waste of time when he could be on his way instead. He shuts down his computer—startled to see the time, what the hell—and runs out of his office. Lena is still typing away at her computer, and she looks up in surprise when he hurries past her.

“Jack! I thought we were staying tonight until—” she starts.

“I can’t, something came up. Just email me all the details, Lena. And then go home, it’s late! I have to go.” And without looking back he’s gone.

It’s the longest drive of his life, filled with dark orange anxiety and yellow fear. It’s dark out when he gets to Gabriel’s apartment and he parks his car on the street and heads for the building. He shoots an irritated look towards the middle of the residential street, where a bunch of neighborhood kids are gathered, laughing and shouting and setting off fireworks.

He’s almost to Gabriel’s floor when he suddenly stops, hearing another set of popping, muted but undeniably loud, from outside the building. He stands very still for half a second.

Shit. SHIT.

And then he’s running. How could be so careless and forget what this week was? He hadn’t even thought about it because fireworks didn’t really bug him other than he found the sound annoying. And this hadn’t been an issue Jack has dealt with before with Gabriel, because over New Year’s he’d gone home to Indiana to visit his dad and Gabe spent the holidays with his own parents and sisters. He hadn’t mentioned fireworks, ever.

He almost makes the mistake of knocking and stops himself just in time. The doorbell might startle him too, so he grabs his phone from his pocket and realizes he’d received a text while driving. Front door open. That’s all it says. He turns the knob and finds it is indeed unlocked.

Almost immediately Reaper is there, and Jack comes to a screeching halt because the dog’s ears are back, flat against his head, and at first he thinks he’s going to be attacked as an intruder. German Shepherds are intimidating as hell and very protective of their owners. But Reaper whuffles at him, turns around, and starts back up the hallway, seems to realize Jack isn’t following, and turns back to him with a whine. The dog grabs at his sleeve with his jaw but lets go instantly and runs back down the hall. Jack gets the message; he follows.

Gabriel is sitting in total darkness on the floor of the hallway bathroom, his back against the wall, his knees drawn up to his chest, head bowed forward, hands pressed over his ears. His entire body is a knot of tension, and when there’s a particularly loud explosion from outside, he seems to shrink even more.

“I’m not there. I’m not there. I’m in LA. I’m not there anymore…” He keeps whispering this over and over again under his breath. He’s breathing way too fast.
Reaper whines, nudging his arm, trying to ground him and pull him back out of his hellish memories. He starts licking at Gabriel’s hand.

“Gabriel,” Jack says quietly. “I’m going to turn on the hallway light, okay?” He waits a few seconds and then flicks the switch just outside the bathroom. He doesn’t turn the bathroom light on just yet. Not without making sure Gabriel is present. “Hey, I’m here. It’s Jack. You’re in LA, at home.” He approaches slowly, talking the entire time. “I’m here, and so is Reaper. You’re going to be fine.” He kneels carefully down beside him. “I’m going to touch you now. It’s Jack, okay?”

“Jack,” Gabriel repeats. When the blonde touches his arm, he shudders, but one hand comes loose and reaches for him. “Jack, I’m sorry, I—” There’s another explosion and he makes a ducking motion. He would have grabbed his head again, but Jack has already slid up next to him.

“Gabi, you’re in LA, with me. You’re not back in the war. You’re home and safe, and I’ve got your back.” He kisses Gabriel’s cheek tenderly, touches him all over his chest and cups his cheek gently. Although he’s never dealt with Gabriel having a panic attack before, he knows that his boyfriend is very tactile and finds touch to be soothing.

Gabriel begins to unclench, slowly, and his breathing slows somewhat. Jack takes out his phone, his one hand caressing Gabriel’s back gently.

“Lena, are you still in the office or at a computer? Good. I need you to do something for me right away,” Jack says quietly when she picks up.

Later, the fireworks have eased somewhat, with only the occasional popping or booming. Christ, how many goddamn fireworks did those kids have? And it was July 3rd, for god’s sake, what kind of stash did they have for the next day? Jack thinks about calling the police. But he knows from past experience in his own neighborhood about this that nothing will be done. Besides, he has more important things to worry about at the moment.

Jack had managed to pull Gabriel into the bedroom, and the blonde is throwing some tshirts and sweatpants and a few other things into a duffle bag he’d found in the closet. Gabriel is sitting quietly on the bed, watching him, while Reaper rests his head on his thigh and accepts gentle strokes from his human.

“You don’t have to do this, you know. I’ve survived many years of Independence Days. July 4th isn’t usually a problem, I just… wasn’t expecting it today and so much of it,” Gabriel says softly. “Reaper and I make do every year.”

Jack looks up with a smile. “I want to do this. It’ll be good for both of us,” he says cheerfully. He slings the duffle bag over a shoulder and grabs his hand. “Come on. You have to tell me what to take for Reaper.”

“Okay, but, you could have at least properly folded my clothes,” Gabriel grumbles a little. He’s fussy about wrinkles.

Jack just laughs.

A little while later they are pulling up in front of Jack’s building, and Ana is standing outside with a black bag in hand, and a cooler at her feet, leaning against the back of her car casually. She waves at Gabriel as she walks around to the driver side, which Jack rolls down.

“Thanks, Ana,” he says with a tender smile. “I really appreciate this. What’s in the cooler?”
“A kidney to sell,” she replies as she opens the back and sets down the bag with Jack’s clothes, and settles the cooler on the floor behind the driver seat. She reaches further and gives Reaper a gentle pat on the head before she closes the car again.

Gabriel chuckles at her smartass reply while Jack can only sigh. “It’s water and a few other things, Jack, what do you think it is! Now go, you have a long drive tonight, from what Lena told me. You three have fun!” Ana says. She waves them off cheerfully.

Not for the first time, Jack is grateful that Ana lives near him and that she has a key to his apartment and that she’s such a goddamn good friend. He’s grateful to Lena for being an amazing assistant and graciously doing him the favor of miraculously tracking down a cabin rental in a California forest on the goddamn 4th of July weekend.

He’s grateful for the tranquil beauty they find and the well-maintained hiking trails they traverse, because he can tell Gabriel is genuinely happy all weekend. Getting out of LA during a very noisy holiday was good for him, and for Reaper, for whom it’s definitely a happy vacation.

Most all, Jack is grateful that he has Gabriel. Gabriel, who turns to him when they are standing at the top of a mountain they’ve just spent three hours hiking up to, and takes Jack’s sweaty face gently in hand until they are face to face, forehead to forehead, and quietly breathes the words, “I love you, Jack Morrison.”

He’s grateful that for once in his adult life, he’s got the light-blue of calm wrapped around his heart and his brain is actually working at normal person’s pace, because it allows him to respond with, “I think I’ve loved you since I saw you at the wedding, Gabriel Reyes.”

Blushing pinks and heart-colored reds and stable black threads twist around him as they kiss deeply.

Jack thinks he must have missed the signs earlier, just because his life is a whirlwind, a cacophony of colors, excitement and fear and anticipation and happiness all rolled into one. Distracted by work and home, distracted by planning for Boudica’s big show, distracted by the fact that his boyfriend is moving in with him!

They’ve been dating a year and a half, and Gabriel’s lease is expiring. They’d spent the last few months clearing signs of Vincent out of Jack’s apartment. They’d even repainted the walls in the bedroom and bathroom, since Vincent had picked those. Gabriel had gone through the kitchen and tossed some things, and brought in some of his own cooking utensils and tools, because by now he spent a fair amount of time at Jack’s place. And of course the abstract art was one of the first things to go.

“There are certain kind of people who ‘like’ this kind of art just because they seem more sophisticated for it. It’s not like they understand all the goopy lines and circles. I get the feeling your ex is one of these,” Gabriel had said when they were collecting it all and preparing to take them down to the thrift store.

Jack had laughed. “I think you’re right.”

The couch was next. “Can Reaper pee on the couch?”
Gabriel had given an astonished laugh. “What the fuck, why would you want that?”

“Because Vincent loved that couch more than he loved me. He couldn’t take it with him, much as he wanted to. But I’m pretty sure if the dog pees on it, somewhere in Europe he will wake up screaming from a terrible dream.”

Gabriel had laughed so hard he almost fell over. In the end, Reaper did not pee on the couch. He is too well trained for that.

Gabriel had helped him pick out new furniture and décor, even before they had talked about him moving in. Maybe Gabriel had already been thinking about it, because he seemed pleased with a lot of Jack’s choices, although he never said so out loud. But now that they were officially moving in together, they did intentionally shop together for the final room: their bedroom. Vincent had picked the expensive mattress Jack has now, and it is too soft even for Jack, and definitely for Gabriel, who preferred something firmer. When they finally find a mattress they are both content with, it was time to shop for a suitable set with bed frame, drawers and nightstands.

They were entering their fifth furniture store when Jack saw it. Saw him. He freezes in his tracks, eyes wide, staring. Gabriel had been holding the door open for him, but he notices Jack’s state and follows his gaze to a giant billboard on the other side of the street. It’s an ad for a man’s fragrance from Christian Vespucci, Jack’s old fashion rival who is no longer a rival despite the best attempts of fashion magazines to draw it out again. They had publicly made up last year at a fashion show, shaking hands and generally being pleasant, with Vespucci telling Jack that he admired the work he was doing for an underserved market. And Vespucci was one of Boudica’s Warrior Summit Fashion Show sponsors, donating handbags and accessories and door gifts for attendees.

The billboard features a beautiful couple; the perfect blonde woman is easily recognizable as Vespucci’s daughter and heir apparent, Alana. But it is the man with his hands around her waist that has Jack’s attention. He’s a classically beautiful man with sharp features and a cut jaw, clean-shaven and dark brown hair perfectly trimmed and styled. He’s staring at the camera with smoldering dark eyes while Alana Vespucci curls against his chest.

“Jack?” Gabriel says softly. Reaper is sitting next to him, panting in the hot California sun.

“Ahh,” Jack says intelligently. He clears his throat, mentally shaking himself and making an effort to get his shit together. But seeing gorgeous Vincent without warning, on that huge billboard, has shaken him to his core. How could he not have known that Vincent was modeling for Vespucci? That should have been big fashion industry news! He must have missed it!

He turns away from the billboard and walks into the store. “Let’s... uhh... let’s shop.”

Gabriel says nothing as he follows him in with Reaper. He knows Jack will talk to him when he’s ready. But Gabe has to take point when the salesperson approaches, because Jack has gone silent and pale, and is obviously not okay.

“We can go home, you know,” Gabriel says quietly. He doesn’t know why Jack is reacting this way—he doesn’t recognize the man on the billboard, although he recognizes Alana Vespucci.

“No,” Jack says firmly. “No. We’re doing this.”

They do it. They manage to pick out furniture and arrange for delivery. Most importantly to Jack, the new bed is going to arrive the next day. He’d paid extra to rush the frame there (the mattress they had purchased days ago and would arrive on the same day). He suddenly very desperately needs to snip every rotten thread of Vincent’s out of his life. Now.
He is silent on the way home, and mostly silent as Gabriel makes dinner that evening. And he’s thankful that Gabe leaves him with his thoughts, seemingly content with the fact that Jack is playing ball with Reaper down the long hallway in the apartment, which is good for both man and dog.

Jack thanks him for dinner and they watch tv on their comfy couch until Gabriel starts to nod off.

“Let’s go to bed, sweetie. We have a lot of work to do tomorrow,” he says.

Jack doesn’t move from the couch, his knees drawn up to his chest. “I’ll join you soon, baby,” he says. “You go ahead.”

Gabriel nods and takes Reaper into the bedroom with him.

Jack sits in the silent living room, gazing around the flat, which looks significantly different now that they’ve redecorated together. This place is definitely **theirs**, not Vincent’s. Comforted somewhat, Jack picks up a couple of fashion magazines that had been left in the mailbox earlier that day, and absentmindedly flips through them. He likes to keep track of what’s going on in the fashion world, even though most of it doesn’t pertain to him or his company, since most fashion magazines don’t really cater to plus size women.

And he’s pleased to see the full page color ad for Boudica’s Warrior Summit in the first magazine, announcing the grand charity event, listing all its well-known sponsors and with a big star splash in the corner that says that the international DJ and singer Lúcio would be MCing the event. He grins to himself because he remembers how much Gabriel had flailed when he found out that Jack had actually managed to secure the Brazilian star. Jack planned to secure a backstage photo shoot and signed autograph for Gabriel with Lúcio as an early birthday present. He’d already been assured by Lúcio’s manager that it would absolutely be possible to do.

Much of his earlier tension gone by then, Jack sets the first magazine aside and opens the second. He’s starting to get a little sleepy by the time he’s halfway through when he stumbles across it. The ad. The same one from the billboard, with Alana Vespucci and Vincent. All the old tension and stress roil through his stomach again, and he drops the magazine on the floor like it’s hot to the touch, and suddenly he very much needs to find his pencils and blank paper. He always just used to have them on top of the old coffee table, in case he needed them immediately, but Gabriel had put them away inside one of the drawers at the bottom of their new coffee table. His vision is almost blind with a dissonance of dark yellows and angry dark reds and orange psychosis that he can barely see enough to find them in the semi darkness of the room. His heart is pounding in his chest as he drops to the floor between the coffee table and the couch, and starts to draw, seeking comfort in familiar lines and softer colors.

At 0300 hours Gabriel wakes up to the smell of baking cookies, and finds Jack calmly taking out a fourth batch of cookies and preparing to put in a fifth. Gabriel notices the open magazine on the coffee table, notices the ad, and goes to grab it. It’s surrounded by pages and pages of new designs Jack had been working on all night.

“Please don’t touch anything, honey,” Jack says quietly.

Gabriel freezes, then backs away. “Are you okay?”

Jack puts in the fifth tray of cookies. “I… I’m gonna be okay. I promise.”

Gabriel gazes at him a long moment before he nods, takes Reaper out to pee, and then goes back to
bed. He doesn’t ask Jack to join him this time, and Jack doesn’t. He can’t bring himself to sleep in that bed one more night. He’d never really thought about it before, but he’d slept in that bed with Gabriel. Made love to him there. But it’s still Vincent’s. It stinks too much, in a spiritual way, of Vincent. So when his last batch of cookies is done, he sleeps on the navy-blue couch instead, his head on the throw pillow that Gabriel usually leans against when they watch tv. It smells faintly of him, his after shave and his unique scent. Jack manages to get a few hours of sleep.

In the morning Ana shows up to help them move the old bedroom furniture out. She notices the neatly-stacked pages of designs, and the containers of cookies in the kitchen, and she definitely notices the open magazine with a face she recognizes. She scowls with distaste and looks at Gabriel, who just shakes his head at her.

“I think he’s going to be fine,” Gabriel replies to her unasked question.

When the old furniture and bed are finally moved out, picked up by some charity thrift store driver, and the new furniture is brought in, Jack also thinks he’s going to be fine. He offers all the delivery drivers cookies and walks around the building giving them away to neighbors and laughs at Gabriel pouting about it.

“Gabriel, you can’t eat five dozen cookies on your own,” Ana says.

“Watch me,” Gabriel growls back.

Jack chuckles and kisses him on the cheek.

When everything is in its place and while they wait for their pizza to arrive for dinner, Gabriel picks up the magazine from the coffee table, still open to the ad. This time Jack doesn’t stop him.

“Do you still need this?” Gabriel asks.

Ana is sitting on one of the stools by the island counter, and her dark eyes flicker between the two of them. Silent, but ever watchful, looking for signs of Jack starting to have an anxiety attack.

Jack considers him, and then the magazine for a moment before he finally shakes his head. He doesn’t even flinch when Gabriel rips the ad out of the magazine, and then digs through a kitchen drawer until he finds a lighter.

Jack thinks his heart might burst out of his chest with love while the three of them silently watch the page burn inside the sink.

*I am going to marry this man,* Jack thinks to himself.

Then he remembers to grab his notebook and pen from the kitchen counter and jot down some notes for Dr. Ziegler.

It’s the night of the big show and Jack is afraid he might have his first real panic attack in a very long time.

Except he doesn’t have *time* for that.

This is the most important event of his goddamn career and for his company, and he *needs*
everything to go off without a hitch. He woke up early and spent the entire day making last minute phone calls and checking on deliveries and now he’s at the theater and it’s very nearly showtime.

Ana is there, being her usual socialite self, chatting with special guests as they come in, keeping them out of Jack’s hair, and generally making sure the front end is going smoothly.

Gabriel is there, too, of course, but when Jack goes backstage to see how preparations are going, the place is in chaos, tons of people moving this way and that, lots of shouting and chatter. He has a moment of real worry that it’s going to be too much.

But in the middle of the storm, Gabriel, in his trusty hoodie and grey beanie, seems to be perfectly calm. Reaper is sitting beside him, looking in every direction, and at times the German Shepherd gets up of his own accord and does a patrol in a set perimeter around Gabriel, his rather intimidating size and presence causing people who crowd too close to his human to go around instead. They are so busy running around they sometimes don’t even realize they are being herded by the service dog to a safe distance. They just move around him accordingly. Gabriel doesn’t even seem to be aware of Reaper doing his job. He’s too busy focusing on what needs doing, focused on a notebook full of pages and pages of notes that he’s carrying around. When Gabriel moves, walking swiftly down the line of brightly-lit mirrors where various models are seated, Reaper moves with him. Watching them for a moment, Jack is, not for the first time, struck with how much of a blessing Reaper is.

Gabriel took on the job of wrangling the backstage area, and more to the point, of supervising the handful of makeup and hair artists… most of which he’d handpicked for the show himself. He and Jack had spent an enormous amount of time planning what kind of makeup and hair would go with the various Boudica outfits on the runway tonight, and now he is making sure their vision comes to fruition.

Lena is zipping around backstage, talking to models and a variety of handlers they’d hired to help the girls into their outfits (especially for the wedding portion of the show). When she notices Jack appear, she cuts off whatever she is saying to a handler and races over to him.

“Heya! Hiya, boss!” she says with entirely too much cheer and energy. “You doin’ alright there, love? All the girls are here, and we’re really getting this going! It’s going to be a right amazing show!”

It takes Jack a few moments to decipher this, because when Lena is overly excited her Cockney accent kicks in on top of her talking a mile a minute. He smiles and shakes his head at her.

“You need to slow down, Lena.” He says it jokingly and in his most stern voice possible, making her chuckle.

“Okay, dad,” she says jokingly, rolling her eyes. “But really… how are you doing, Jack?”

“I’m doing fine, surprisingly. I’m glad everyone is here. Things do seem to be going smoothly. I just got to greet Lúcio, and his people are just about done setting up on stage,” Jack replies.

“You’re going to introduce me, aren’t you, Jack? Huh? Pretty please!” Lena says, almost bouncing up and down.

“We’ll see. Now, get back to work,” Jack growls at her.

“I’m on it, love!” she says in good humor, giving him a jaunty salute.

He chuckles after her, and is rather surprised to discover he really is quite calm. Things are falling
into place. The Warrior Summit is going to be a great success, his clothes are going to wow on the runway, and three great charities supporting women in tough situations around the world are going to benefit from it.

He turns, searching for Gabriel, and notices he’s now sitting on a stool in front of a tall, broad-shouldered dark-skinned model, his brushes sweeping across her face. He looks grumpy, but Jack knows by now that’s just how he works, of course. Jack watches him for a long moment, and as if feeling his gaze, Gabriel looks up, his brush pausing.

Just like at Mei’s wedding, and their first show together, and subsequent events, they lock gazes. For several long seconds, the chaotic backstage and the chattering models and the sounds of Lúcio’s team testing things out on the stage all seem to fade into quiet. There’s nothing but Jack and Gabriel in that one pink and red moment.

Jack breaks the spell by touching his palm to his lips in a kiss and then making a flinging motion in his direction. Gabriel grins and ‘catches’ the invisible kiss in his palm, like he’s catching a butterfly, and brings it to his lips.

The dark-skinned model he’s working on laughs softly and makes a comment that makes Gabriel smile at her, accepting her good-natured teasing. He knows almost all the models personally, because he’d recommended most of them for the show. He knows a surprising amount of plus size and larger women, and happily… he knows a diverse amount of them. Black models, Latina models, white models, trans models; and he’d recommended they bring in Mei-Ling and Zarya even, because although Zarya may not be what most people would consider to be plus size, she can’t shop in regular women’s sizes. She’s too bulky and muscular and tall, and on top of that she prefers pantsuits of a slightly more masculine nature, but still in feminine colors. Ultimately, she is a perfect model for the suits Jack had designed for his new wedding line. She would be escorting her wife Mei—who would be in an astonishing Rose Bride dress—at the finale of the show. After all, Mei and Zarya were the reason Boudica existed.

All of that had been Gabriel’s idea. And Jack had once again counted his blessings for this wonderful man coming into his life.

Jack leaves him alone to work, lest he be tempted to continue distracting his beloved. He spends the next while pacing back and forth in a relatively quiet area behind the main curtain, quietly reciting his introduction speech. He’s nervous but not in panic mode, although his stomach becomes more and more queasy the closer the time ticks. He can hear the roar of the crowd out in the theater growing.

Pacing like this is where Ana finds him. “Jack, stop wearing yourself out. You’re going to do fine. The show is going to be fabulous,” she says, smiling. “Anyone who’s anyone in the fashion industry is here, and there’s a lot of excitement.”

“I can still fuck this up, you know,” he says grimly to her. “I’m still Jack Morrison.” There’s a very tiny, faint, niggling voice still in the back of his head. A familiar one, a voice he’s been working on silencing, with Dr. Ziegler’s and Ana’s and Gabriel’s help. The voice that wants to convince him he can and will fail, even in this pinnacle moment of his career.

“You’re Jack Morrison. And that means you’re talented, and kind-hearted, and very special. You’re Jack Morrison. Sometimes a giant pain in my ass. And my dearest friend.” Her brown eyes are warm, and maybe a touch shiny. Still, she chuckles as he laughs at her words. “I’ve watched you blossom into an amazing businessman and fashion designer… and work on rising above the challenges of your own brain. And all while making a lot of women feel good about themselves. You have never been a failure, Jack. Never. You’ve always trudged through the worst heartbreaks
and come out stronger on the other side.” Her brows rise a little. “Your spider web, it’s been broken a few times, hasn’t it? A lot of painful threads have snapped. But you’ve rebuilt it, time and time again, and it’s gorgeous. You are gorgeous.”

Jack swallows, his own eyes suddenly bright. He’d told Ana about his mom, and about how she’d inspired him, and the wisdom she’d tried to impart on a young boy. But to hear the words spoken out loud again, after all this time…

Warm swaths of white and blue wrap around him as he gazes at her, and he’s momentarily transported back to his mother’s kitchen on a bright Indiana summer day, gazing up into her blue eyes and smiling as she cups his cheek with her warm hand. She’s wearing her white and blue gingham dress, the one she’d made herself, and his favorite on her.

“Jack?”

He blinks out of his memories and turns. Gabriel is there, Reaper calmly following him. “Jack, Lena’s been looking for you. It’s almost showtime. You ready, babe?” He’d changed out of his usual hoodie and beanie from before into a dark suit with a dark red tie. Much like at Mei’s wedding, Jack’s heart nearly pumps out of his chest at how beautiful this man looks. And he can’t help but glance down at the golden band Gabriel is wearing on his ring finger. *This is the man I am going to marry… and he said yes.*

“Yeah… I’m… I’m ready,” Jack says softly.

Gabriel smiles at him, lifting his chin gently and dropping a tender kiss on his lips. “You go out there and wow them, baby. I’ve got your back. Tonight and forever.”

Loud bass rave music has started up out on the stage, making the waiting crowd cheer. Lúcio has started working the audience in preparation for Jack’s appearance on stage. The nerves slide away as Jack searches Gabriel’s face for signs of discomfort, more concerned about his fiancé now than himself. But Gabe is calm and smiling.

“I love you,” Jack says quietly.

“And I love you, Jack,” Gabriel replies softly. He absently reaches up to smooth down Jack’s blonde hair, attempting, in vain, to get that stubborn little cowlick in the back to settle. Jack knows it’s a lost cause, so he grabs Gabriel’s hand and kisses his palm.

“I’m ready,” Jack says again, to himself more than anyone else.

When he walks out onto the stage in front of all those people and cameras, he’s steady and confident and golden and smiling. His heart warmly wrapped in shades of pink and passion red and calm white and blue thread, woven together to form a web of sweet and good feelings.
Reaper blep! Thank you, Sukuiddo! You're the best!
This is the most difficult thing I've ever written.

Back in late April when I was assigned Sukuiddo's beautiful fashion AU artwork and had the chance to discuss ideas with her, I did a flurry of worldbuilding and background creation for Jack and Gabriel. I was super enthused and ready to go! This was going to be cute and adorable and sweet!

Three days after that, I received a call from my sister. My mother was in the hospital. I flew out immediately across the country, and a few days later a doctor sat my siblings and I down and told us she had brain cancer, it was inoperable, and she had anywhere from 6 months to 2 years to live. A couple of weeks later, my mother made the decision to not pursue treatment, and her time was downgraded from 2 weeks to 2 months.

Maybe I should have dropped out of the event. I would never expect anyone else out there to work through--especially a volunteer event--something like this. It's truly world-shattering. But I felt like I couldn't abandon Sukuiddo, especially not after exciting her with all the worldbuilding I did. How hard could it be to write at least 10k words in a fashion AU?

Turns out, with Depression Brain... very freaking hard.

There is a lot of emotion wrapped into this piece because of my state of mind. When i wrote the intro scene with Jack's mom, I was in tears, literally. I even originally mentioned why she passed away, and then I had to delete it. I literally couldn't handle having those words staring back at me, while my own web is slowly breaking apart, strand by strand.

But I didn't want this piece to be sad and full of angst the entire way through. Sukuiddo's art doesn't lend itself to that. It's not about sadness and tragedy and heartache. Yes those things are there, because they are a part of life. But Jack has a journey to make, mostly an internal one, and one that managed to end on a hopeful and bright note for his future.

Special thanks to Sukuiddo for her understanding when I had to travel a lot and struggled to write this piece. Your artwork is beautiful and I am proud to have been assigned your partner, and I hope this piece manages to fit the vision you had when you made that art. Hugs and kisses for the extra artwork you did after the writing was done.

Thank you to the RBB Admins, Kerrigore, Cyan, and Ghostmod, for their understanding of my circumstances and their kindness and good wishes.

And this story would never have existed without the direction, help, and most of all the support and kindness of my beta readers, who are both also very dear friends. Rhys and Rosie, I love you both so fucking much. I also had AMPLE support from the RBB Discord server writer's channel, and so much love from my own R76 Creators Club discord. I love you all, truly.

P.S. PTSD service dogs are fucking amazing in the work they do. Reaper is the breakout star of this piece and don't you forget it!

P.P.S. Fireworks are illegal in LA County and yet LAPD and other local police forces are unwilling or incapable of enforcing the laws on July 4th and New Year's. If you live in a place where fireworks are illegal, please be considerate of your neighbors. Even if fireworks ARE legal...
please make sure you have some awareness. Pets and war veterans suffer greatly, the latter mostly on days where fireworks aren't expected (ie July 2-3 and July 5, for example). War vets don't want to ruin your fun, most of the time they just ask that you warn them before you start setting them off, so they can prepare with things like noise-cancelling headphones and other coping mechanisms. Please be a good neighbor.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!