All Cal wanted out of life was to run a good, solid team of artefact hunters and make a lot of money doing it. He was happy when that was his life.

When he started sleeping with both his teammates, that was a nice plus.

He didn't sign up for what might be the end of the world, or at least the end of his.

Notes

Starting the adventures of some new characters with some self-indulgent porn, as is (apparently) usual. This is now A Thing That I Do, it seems.

Have fun.
“It’s wet.” Cal declared.

“Yes.” Mick answered, wiggling his fingers as if practicing magic spells. Which Cal thought he probably was. He was dark-skinned and long limbed, and Cal liked watching his hands move. “That usually happens when it rains.”

“Good observation, though.” Wes, blonde and pale, put in from Cal’s other side. “This is why we trust you to read the maps.”

“You both suck.” Cal informed them.

“You wish.”

“Anyway.” It was Cal’s turn to sleep in the middle and Cal hated sleeping in the middle. Even though he thought it was kind of cool how his colouring seemed to fall right in between his two friends, Wes and Mick were both bigger than him and it made him feel tiny. “As I was saying, it’s wet. Our stuff is wet, we’re wet, our clothes are wet and it sucks.”

Their tent wasn’t too wet, though an air of damp did permeate everything despite their best efforts. They had set it up in the shade of a tree on top of a hill, so they were spared the worst of the rain that had been falling incessantly for two days. The three of them were ready for bed, kept awake only by Cal’s complaining.

“That’s why we took our clothes off, genius.” Mick told him. “So they would dry overnight.”

“Some of our clothes.” Cal corrected. He was still wearing his loincloth, Wes was in smallclothes and Mick, modest Mick, was in an undershirt and his shorts. “Which brings me to my point.”

“Oh, he has a point.” Wes said, leaning in with apparent interest.

“My point.” Cal repeated. “Which is fuck the rules.”

“Which rules are we fucking?” Mick asked, his mask of disinterest not quite as solid as he thought it was.

“The big one. The first one. The stupid one.” Cal said. “I can’t wear this to sleep. It will still be wet when we wake up and it will be awful. I have to hang it up with the rest of the clothes.”

The very first rule they’d made when they’d started their little business venture was no sleeping naked when they were sharing a tent (which was always, since they only had one tent). It was a stupid rule that was apparently because the first night together, before the rule, Cal had woken both of them up playing with himself in his sleep. Which was crap, and Cal was pretty sure the rule was because his friends were just way too attracted to him and were afraid of what they would do if there weren’t some layers of clothes between them.

Saying that always got things thrown at him and disparaging remarks made about his size, but Cal stood by it.

Wes got up on one elbow and looked over Cal. He was the biggest of the three of them and it was only that Cal knew he was literally harmless outside of battles that he never got worried about that.
Sometimes the thought that he might roll over and suffocate Cal did occur to him, though. He and Mick shared a long look as though Cal wasn’t even there. “Fine.” Mick finally said, with an exaggerated sigh.

“Woo!” Cal reached down and untied his loincloth before anyone could change their mind, freeing himself from the confines of clothing and tossing the cloth up on the string they’d strung across the tent to hang their clothes before flopping back down on top of the blankets to air himself out. “About time you stopped acting so stupid. Like you’ve never seen it before anyway.”

“You say that like we can see it now.” Mick said, apparently bored. One day Cal was going to tell him that he wasn’t as good at concealing his emotions as he thought he was. “It’s so small how do we know it’s even there?”

“Fuck you.” Cal said conversationally.

“With what, exactly?”

“Like yours is any bigger.” Cal muttered, colouring. He knew Mick was joking, but still. It was a perfectly good size relative to the rest of his body. “Not that we’d know if you even have one.”

“We have been in baths together.” Wes reminded him.

“Anyway.” Mick said, before Cal could reply. He wasn’t as broad as Wes, but was definitely more muscular than Cal thought a mage needed to be. And he was a full foot taller than Cal, which was fortunately not apparent laying down. “You can sleep like that, but on a condition.”

“Wait, what?” Cal asked, looking between Mick and Wes, who was nodding. “When was there a condition?”

“When we agreed to let you flaunt your junk everywhere.” Wes said.

Cal’s eyes narrowed. Had the two of them somehow agreed to this in advance? They couldn’t have known he was going to want to do this tonight, but maybe they had some standing agreement on the subject that Cal wasn’t aware of. “What’s the condition? Wait, let me guess. You want me to not touch myself?”

“Yeah.” Mick said.

“Look, you guys can project your wet dreams onto me all you want, but you’re both full of it and you know it!”

“Cal, you woke up with your hand still down there.”

“That doesn’t mean anything! Maybe I just grabbed it.”

“You were sticky.” Wes told him. “You started almost as soon as you fell asleep and then did it again just before sunrise.”

“Pf.” Cal tried to look away, but they had him surrounded so he ended up glaring down at his traitorous cock, and then glared harder when he realized that the subject of conversation had got him chubbing up. “Even if that’s true, it’s not like I can control what I do in my sleep. What do you expect me to do, tie my hands up?”

“Don’t be stupid.” Wes said. “Just do it before you go to sleep, while we’re still awake. That way you won’t need to do anything in your sleep and you won’t wake us up.”
“What?” Cal actually sat up, to look down at both of them. “Are you nuts? You want me to toss off right here?”

“Yes.” Mick said, giving him a look. “What, we’ve all done it and it’s not like we haven’t seen you do it before.”

“I told you…”

“The river last week.”

“That.” Cal’s face heated up and he pointed a finger in Wes’s face. “I told you that was an accident. I was washing myself.”

“Uh-huh.” Mick said. “The inn we stayed at last month.”

“Not my fault you two can’t knock!”

“Sitting at our campfire a while back just after we’d found that amulet.”

“I was drunk!” Cal protested, glaring at them both in turn. “And so were both of you. You told me you didn’t remember anything.”

“We lied.” Wes confessed. “To avoid embarrassing you.”

“You could go outside and do it.” Mick suggested. “Then it would be just like every single morning. When we can hear you.”

“Fuck that, it’s raining. And anyway, whatever.” Cal muttered, looking at his feet. He wasn’t nearly as loud as they made him sound. “Not like I’ve never seen you two jerk off.”

“Exactly, so who cares?” Mick asked. “What was it you said about sleeping naked the first time we said no? ‘Perfectly normal boy thing, calm down.’”

“It’s just weird.” Cal said. “That’s all. Besides, what are you going to do if I say no? Forcibly dress me again?”

Wes and Mick shared another look and Wes shrugged. “Either make you sleep outside or do it for you, I guess.”

“Do it for me.” Cal’s hands came up into his lap to cover himself, though by now both of them had to have noticed that he was mostly hard. There was something weird about the way Wes had said that, but Cal didn’t have time to unpack it. “And have your freakishly large hands snap me in half. No thanks, I can do it myself.”

“Then get to it, buddy.” Mick waved a hand at him to hurry him up. “Some of us want to go to sleep.”

“Yeah, I’ll get right on it.” Cal grumbled, looking at the two of them. They looked back. “What, are you going to watch?”

“Yeah.”

“Why not?”

Cal didn’t usually get embarrassed about what he regarded as the perfectly normal bodily functions of guys their age, but sitting there in between them felt weird. “Well, I want you guys to get naked
too, then. Otherwise it’s just creepy.” And, well, it would give him something to look at while he did it.

Another glance between the two of them. “Okay.” Wes reached down without a second thought and shoved his smallclothes down, his own erection popping out to slap against his belly. He slid them off and tossed them up onto the line.

“Perverts.” Cal accused, looking from Wes’s stiffie to the tent that Mick was obviously pitching in his shorts. They had both gotten hard just from talking about this. And fine, he had too, but that was a little different, since he was the one expected to…perform. “Mick.”

“Yeah.” Mick sat up, lifted his shirt over his head slowly and hung it on the line with care. For a minute it looked like that was all of his dark skin that he was going to be showing despite what they’d agreed. Modest Mick. He was always reserved about his body (though he had no reason to be, in Cal’s opinion). Cal had just opened his mouth to say that it was okay, and he could keep the shorts on if he really needed to, when Mick finally did reach down and pull the shorts off, slowly and deliberately exposing himself to the other two.

When his shorts were hung, Mick sat there, clearly making an effort not to cover himself with his hands. “Well? You going to get on with it?”

“Yeah.” Cal said, moving his eyes back to himself and reminding himself very firmly that size was relative, both his friends were bigger guys than him, people grew at different speeds and quality was more important than quantity anyway. He stopped covering himself and, trying to project the confidence he usually felt about his body, grabbed his shaft firmly in one hand and his balls in the other.

Cal couldn’t decide if it was a good thing or not that he’d snuck off to do this after dinner earlier. One the one hand, if he hadn’t, this wouldn’t have lasted long and it would have been over with. On the other, then his friends would make fun of him for having no stamina. He wasn’t sure which was worse.

Fuck it. Cal decided. He wasn’t going to rush though it and be all embarrassed. If his friends wanted to watch him jerk himself, he was going to do it properly. He rolled his balls in one hand for a bit before letting go, spitting on his hand for a little lubrication and using it to rub the head against that hand while he worked the shaft with his other. Since they were right in front of him, he imagined Wes and Mick doing it for him like they’d threatened, their big hands all over him.

Cal wasn’t aware of it, but he started making little desperate-sounding noises as he got deeper into it and slowly forgot he was being watched. He wasn’t even close to being finished, but the noises started to pick up in speed in time with his hands, getting louder as he went. There was a reason why Wes and Mick always knew when he was doing this.

His eyes were closed and Cal pictured Wes and Mick doing this along with him. Wes would groan loudly as he jacked himself with one hand, the other propping his head up so he could watch himself. Mick would bite his lip, squinting as he worked himself with both hands. It helped that, like him, both of them were occasionally too concerned with themselves to lock a door or make sure nobody was using the same tree as them. Cal had seen enough that he knew his fantasies were at least somewhat accurate.

A hand on his shoulder drew Cal out of his fantasy and though he didn’t stop jerking, he did open his eyes to see Wes right there. Mick was on the other side of him, and both were transfixed. “We’re going to help you after all, Cal.”
What? “What?” Cal asked, as Wes gently pulled one hand away and Mick pulled the other. “What the fuck?”

“Shh.” Mick said, one hand wrapping around Cal’s cock and the other on the back of his neck. “Lay down, buddy.” Wes pushed him from the front and Cal let them lay him down.

“You guys…” Cal panted. “You guys planned to do this from the start.” He accused. “Ugh.” Mick had replaced his jerking hand and Wes his head-rubbing hand, and it made it hard for him to think. Cal’s noises started up again, more pleading now.

“Yeah.” Wes told him, rubbing Cal’s belly with his free hand. “It’s okay, we got you.”

“Okay.” At the moment Cal couldn’t think of any possible objection to this situation. Wes brought him thumb up and rubbed circles around Cal’s head and Mick had a very firm grip, jerking him slowly, just a little too slowly.

Cal didn’t close his eyes this time, watching the two hands that were not his, two big, warm hands, devote so much attention to him. Wes rubbed his belly and Mick his thigh, comforting him. This wasn’t about making sure he didn’t wake them up. If someone had told Cal that he’d feel this much tenderness from a two-way hand job, he’d have laughed and offered to prove them wrong. But here he was, feeling warm and more comfortable than he ever had been.

And then Mick, modest Mick, leaned down and took the head of Cal’s cock in his mouth as if it were something he did every day, sucking gently on the tip. “Oh my God…”

“Hey.” Wes said gently, and he was down there too, and Cal could feel his breath on his shaft. Mick let Cal out of his mouth with a small pop. “Me too.” Wes’s mouth replaced Mick’s, and rather than sucking he ran his tongue around the head, tasting the whole thing. Cal let out a sound that was half yelp, half cry.

Wes pulled off as well, letting open air hit Cal’s swelling head, but both of their mouths stayed on him, licking and kissing all the way up and down his shaft. Wes was holding him in place at the base and Mick had his balls in a feather-light grip, massaging them gently. They both came back up to the head and paid it enough attention that they may as well have been making up for some deficit, lavishing with their tongues and lips, kissing it and kissing each other around it.

It was the sight of Wes and Mick kissing with his cock in the middle that did Cal in. “Ahh…guys!” He came in two thick globs that fell onto his stomach, and then three hard spurts, the first of which got into his hair, with the other two hitting his face, and several more spurts after that, splattering his chest. Wes and Mick moved back a little to avoid being hit but never stopped moving on his cock, not until he was completely done and spent.

“God…” Cal panted. “Fuck…guys.” The two of them moved up, laying on either side of him. “What the hell. Was that.”

“A declaration.” Wes told him, kissing him on one cheek.

“Of what?”

“Our intentions towards you.” Mick said, kissing the other.

“Oh.” Cal tried to think about that. Vaguely, he thought this should be surprising. “I didn’t know.”

“That’s why we took the direct approach. For a smart guy you can be a little dense.”
“Okay.” Cal’s brain was spinning but thoughts weren’t coming to him the way they were supposed to. “I want to do you guys too. I want…”

“You’re too tired.” Mick told him.

“We can do it ourselves tonight, don’t worry.”

“No.” That wasn’t fair. “I want to declare too.”

“You can barely move, Cal.” Wes said, stroking his hair.

“Yeah, but…” Cal thought about it. “Okay that’s true. You’ll have to just rub your cocks on my hands and pretend I’m doing it.”

“How about we try something else instead?” Mick asked, reaching up and scooping as much of the cum from Cal’s face as he could.

“Okay.” Cal said, losing track of Mick’s hand as it left his vision. Wes was doing the same for the cum on his chest and then suddenly both of their hands were between his legs, smearing it all over his thighs. When they were done they came back and gathered more of his spunk and did it again. “What’re you doing?”

“Helping you help us, buddy.” Mick said, rolling Cal on his side so he was facing Wes.

“Wait.” Cal said, trying to turn around. “You’re not going to…”

“No, we’re not.” Mick assured him, rubbing his shoulder. “Not tonight, anyway. Don’t worry. Just relax, okay?”

“Okay.” Cal couldn’t help but feel reassured and safe with them both there, so he did as he was asked. There was some rustling of blankets as Wes and Mick moved, and he felt a stiffness insert itself between his slicked thighs from the front. “Oh.” He said, as Wes slid his cock the rest of the way between Cal’s legs. “I get it.”

“Good.” Mick said, sliding himself in underneath Wes, so tightly they must have been rubbing against each other. “Just lay there and let us do the work, okay?” Cal nodded and at the same time, both his friends started thrusting back and forth.

It felt a little weird at first. They were both just sort of rubbing themselves against his body, and he wanted to protest that he wasn’t some pair of old shorts for them to jerk off into. But sandwiched in between them, Mick breathing heavily into his neck and his own face buried in Wes’s shoulder as Wes inhaled the scent of Cal’s hair, he realized that wasn’t what was happening. Their arms were around him, hands still touching him everywhere they could reach. He could hear Mick’s grunts and Wes’s moaning, and smell nothing but the two of them. They could have used their own hands for this and instead they had chosen him. They were going to get off because of him, the wanted him.

Realizing that made Cal hard again and he added his own noises to the mix, thrusting upwards against Wes’s belly. Immediately two hands wrapped around him, jerking him roughly, faster than before, in sync with their thrusts. Even though Cal had just come a few minutes ago he could feel it building up again. His entire body, slick with sweat from exertion and being in between these two, started to feel hot and he started shaking as he felt it coming.

Wes came before him, his free hand tightening on Cal’s hip. Cal could feel heat spreading up the inside and back of his thighs as Wes went rigid and let out a sustained straining noise until he was done. Before he was finished Mick went silent, hand on Cal’s shoulder flexing rhythmically as he
coated Cal’s thighs with more spunk, jacking in and out like a rabbit as he did. Both of them lay there on either side of Cal, panting, their hands still working on Cal’s second orgasm.

It came quickly and Cal cried out, trying to curl into a ball from the sensitivity but not able to because he was stuck between them. He coated both of their hands before collapsing into a panting mess with them.

How long they lay there just breathing, recovering, Cal had no idea. It was clear that none of them were going to be moving soon, and Wes just reached out and pulled a blanked over all three of them. “How long were you planning that for?” Cal asked, his voice barely able to rise above a whisper.

“Since we were drunk at the campfire.” Wes said, and Cal couldn’t help but laugh a little. “After you put on your little show and passed out, we agreed we wanted an encore.”

“We agreed we wanted a sequel.” Mick corrected sleepily. “With us as supporting cast.”

Cal found himself trying to reassess everything that had happened in the last month or so, trying to pick up on some hint that this had been going on. It was funny how, despite how unexpected it was, it also seemed so obvious now. “So, this whole time, have you two been…with each other, I mean?”

“No.” Mick told him.

“We wanted to. But it didn’t feel right if it wasn’t all three of us. We agreed to wait for you.”

“Well wait no longer.” Cal told them. “Because if we don’t do that again I’m going to be disappointed.”

“So will we, buddy.”

“I guess we can get rid of rule number one now, right?” Cal asked, smirking. Seemed kind of silly to have a dress code for shared sleeping space now.

“I suppose.” Mick yawned. “And rule number two.” That one was no sex with anyone in the shared sleeping space without permission.

“And rule number three.” Wes added, drawing both of them in closer. No relationships among members of the team.

Cal just giggled. “Rules are made to be broken.” He wondered vaguely if they should clean up, but at the same time he really, really didn’t want to move.

“Funny.” Wes told him. “Go to sleep now.”

“Yeah.” Mick nodded into Cal’s shoulder. “Sleep now. Talk tomorrow.”

“Okay.” Cal yawned, shifting a little and enjoying how slippery his legs felt. “Thanks, guys.”

“Thanks, Cal.”

“Goodnight.”
“I hate this disguise.” Cal declared, once they were alone in their room. “It sucks.”

“I think it’s pretty wicked.” Wes was reclining on the bed, which Cal judged as being just big enough for the three of them, though he might have to sleep on top of one of them.

“You would.” Cal grumbled, tossing their bags in a corner. “We should have come up with something else.”

“You’re the one who said this keep was too well-defended to break into.” Mick reminded him. He was sitting at the little writing desk in the corner, fiddling with a stout dagger.

“And I was right about that.” Cal started going through his bag, looking for the clothes he’d stashed at the bottom. “Lady Redwater must be really worried about her safety if she’s got this much security. We never would have got in. A wandering knight and his vassals were the best bet.”

“So, what’s the problem?” Wes asked as Cal found what he was looking for and came to sit on the bed beside him.

“I’m not your squire!” Cal insisted. “We’re the same damn age. If you weren’t absurdly large this would never have worked.”

“And if you weren’t absurdly small.” Mick said from the corner.

“Shut up.” Cal lifted his tunic over his head and tossed it on Wes’s face before starting on the laces of the stiff breeches he was wearing.

“I’ll remind you that it was your idea.” Wes pointed out.

“Yeah, well.” That was true. “It made sense at the time. I should have thought of something better. Besides, how was I supposed to know you were going to be so… ‘he doesn’t need a bed, I’ll find somewhere to sleep him?’ Really, Wes?”

“It’s not like they didn’t assume that anyway.”

“You didn’t have to help them along.”

“It’s also not like it isn’t true.” Mick put in.

“Shut up.”

“So, young squire.” Wes said, reaching up and working a finger underneath the back of Cal’s loincloth. “Since you’re in uniform anyway, don’t you think it’s time you carried out your squirely duties? I’ve got a sword that I need you to polish.”

“I am working now.” Cal huffed, pulling on the darker clothing he’d retrieved. “And I polished your sword this morning.”

“And your own.” Wes reminded him.

“Twice.”

“I have a high libido.” Cal said defensively, pulling on his shirt and reaching for the soft moccasins
he wore when working. “You almost done with that dummy, Mick?”

“I’m done now.” Mick stood while Cal finished with his feet and handed him the dagger. “You know the drill, touch it to the real thing and they’ll feel the same to anyone looking.”

“For long enough that we’ll be out of here, anyway.” Cal nodded, strapped the dagger to his belt. “It’s below us?”

“Yeah. Underground, if I did the spell right.” Mick held up a hand. “Which I did, thank you. On the other side of the castle.”

“Okay. Thanks, Mick.” Cal got up on his toes and kissed Mick on the side of the mouth.

“Hey, how come I don’t get a kiss?”

“Because you’re a jerk and I don’t like you.” Cal told Wes, but he sighed, crawled back on the bed and on top of Wes to give him one on the nose. “When I get back we’ll see about that sword polish you wanted. Maybe Mick can start it for you while I’m gone?” He asked, with a sly smile up at their friend.

“I could do that.” Mick said, sitting beside them and rubbing Wes’s leg idly. “Just don’t take forever or we’ll finish and be asleep before you get back, and then what would you do?”

“Well I have it on good authority that when I’m left to my own devices I wake you two up, so I expect I’d be fine.” Cal didn’t really want to move from his position here, but there wasn’t any point in them having gone through this whole charade if he didn’t actually go steal the relic they were here for.

He sighed and crawled off Wes with great effort. Being a successful relic hunting team meant a lot more sacrifice than Cal had realized when he’d decided to get into the field. “Hey!” He yelped, when Wes pulled him back up by the armpits and met his mouth for a fast kiss.

“Good luck.” Wes said, letting him go.

As he sat Mick leaned in and did the same. “Good luck, Cal.”

“You two.” Cal said, flushing a little as he stood and pulled on his hat and mask. “Are insufferable.” But certainly not in a way that he hoped would stop anytime soon. “I don’t need luck, you know that.”

“Come back early and we’ll help you get lucky, though.” Wes said, grabbing Mick’s waist and pulling him down lay beside him on the bed. Mick laughed and kissed Wes on the cheek.

“Funny.” Cal shook his head. And they accused him of always being on. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Careful.”

“I’m always careful.” Cal rolled his shoulders, stretched and headed for the door, inching it open to make sure there was nobody in the hallway outside. “You kids behave while I’m gone.”

“That seems unlikely.” Mick said, hands starting wander downwards from Wes’s chest.

“That’s the way I like it.” Cal gave them one last look before slipping out into the dark hallway, taking a deep breath as he shut the door behind him. Don’t think about them. He commanded himself. You’ll just distract yourself.
That was harder to do than to think about doing, but Cal did his level best and made his way down to where the Lady Redwater was keeping her dangerous relic. And if he moved a little faster than usual, well, it was going to be a long night. He still had that sword to polish after this.
“Cal.”

“Mick.”

“You could work faster.”

“Believe me when I say I’m trying.” Cal was buried in a mess of tripwires, false switches and levers that would activate several traps in the floor leading to the pedestal at the back of the room. To the naked eye it looked perfectly safe to walk up there and just take the metal orb sitting on it, but Cal had been at this long enough to know better. He’d be killed six different ways before he got within ten feet of what they were here for.

Too bad the traps were all controlled through this one stupid panel and whoever had built it hadn’t thought to make it friendly to anyone trying to steal their treasure.

Cal chanced a glance up as he worked to dismantle the triggers. Wes, in full armour and axe in hand, was engaged in a shoving match the golem who’d woken up and attacked them as soon as they’d walked in the room. Mick was supporting him as best he could, though combat magic wasn’t his strong suit.

“Golems.” He grumbled to himself as he worked. “Who even has golems in this day and age?”

“Now is not the time to be disappointed with the state of the world.”

“I’m almost done.” Cal said, cutting a tripwire. A panel in the stone ceiling between him and the pedestal grew spikes and then fell to the floor, which triggered a volley of hidden arrows to fly from the walls. Cal blinked. “Okay. How you doing, Wes?”

“I’d be doing better if there were an end in sight, shortstack.” Wes grunted as the golem slammed into him, but he kept his feet.

“Well, that was uncalled for.” Cal muttered, digging deeper into the mechanism that worked all the traps. Why couldn’t they have just used magic like normal people? Then Mick would be the one dealing with this.

He heard Wes shout and looked up to see the golem throw him back, into the wall. “Wes!” Cal really didn’t like the way Wes’s head hit the rock.

“Do your job, Cal!” Mick did something with his hands and the golem was lifted from its feet and thrown into the back wall. Panting, he ran over to see to Wes.

“Right.” Getting distracted wasn’t going to help. He went back to work, trying to make his hands not shake. “Is he okay?”

“He’s fine.”

“Okay.” Cal pulled out a little gear and tossed it aside. “I’m done. I’m going in.”

“Speed would be appreciated.” The golem was advancing on them again, and Mick was wiggling his fingers and had begun chanting under his breath.
Cal nodded and ran towards the pedestal, keeping an eye on his surroundings. It didn’t look like any of the traps were going to kill him, thankfully. The orb was just sitting on the pedestal and after a cursory glance around Cal snatched it.

He heard a click and threw himself backwards, in time to avoid the metal cage that fell from the ceiling, the walls barbed on the inside. A trap in the pedestal itself. He should have seen that coming. “I’ve got it!” He called, scrambling to his feet and trying to calm himself and pretending he hadn’t almost died just then.

Cal turned just in time to see the golem start to crumble, and Wes stood to deliver a blow with his axe that broke it into pieces. Quickly, he hurried over to join his friends. “You guys okay?”

“Yeah.” Wes said, wiping blood from his eye. “Think I broke my skull, but Mick healed me up nicely.”

“You’re welcome.” Mick said, sweating and bent over in exhaustion. “Can we go?”

“Yeah.” Cal just stood there for a second, struck by how close they’d both come to getting killed. “God, you guys. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“We’re fine.” Wes told him.

“I know, but…” Cal just shook his head and hugged Wes, and then Mick in turn. “I was worried.”

“Don’t think we didn’t notice that you almost got crushed at the end there.” Mick pointed out, when Cal let him go.

“That was no big deal.” Cal waved his hand at the cage. “Just let me worry about you two for a while, okay? I swear, you two are going to be the death of me.” He said, looking at Wes. “You especially, you big rhinoceros. You’re bleeding all over the place, you know.”

“The way I see it you’re going to be the death of us.”

“Nobody’s allowed to die.” Mick said firmly. “No dying allowed. I expect you two to still be bugging me when I’m eighty, you got it?”

“Yeah.” Cal smiled, not able to imagine it any other way. He led the way out of the room, checking for any traps he might have missed coming in. “Are you two okay to get to the surface?”

“No, you’ll have to carry us up the ladder.” Mick panted.

“Well.” Cal said, holding himself as tall as he could. “I guess we’re living underground now. This is what our life will be from now on.”

“Wimp.” Wes said, enunciating clearly.

“Normal-sized human being, thank you very much. Not all of us can have the constitution of an oak tree.”

“No, you’re just short.” Mick assured him. “Honestly, that’s all it is.”

“Fuck off.” Cal grunted, hoping there was a trap they hadn’t found so he could set it off and shove the two of them into it. “Nobody asked you. Besides, you should be nice to me.” He showed them both the orb. “Or else I’ll smite you with the…” What did this thing do again? “I don’t know, the Orb of Some Sort of Magical Bullshit.”
“Your knowledge of this field is truly inspiring, Cal.”

“Yeah, well.” Cal flipped the finger over his shoulder and kept walking.

Cal walked in front because otherwise they would see the grateful tears rimming his eyes. Every once in a while he was reminded of how dangerous what they did was, and he couldn’t bear to lose either of them. He needed Wes and Mick.

When they got back to their camp, he was going to show them exactly how important they were to him.
Sometimes It's Nice to Reassure Your Friends of How Much You Appreciate Them

“Going to go check the perimeter.”

“Okay.” Cal said, not bothering to remind Wes that Mick had put up all kinds of magical something or other to prevent people from sneaking into their camp unannounced. It made Wes feel better to take a look himself, just in case. Cal continued burying the fire and cleaning up the general disruption they’d made in nature by camping here, watching idly as Wes to go look at hiding places and strategic cover.

Mick had already disappeared into the tent after doing his magic thing and when Cal was finished putting everything away he went in as well. He stuck his head under the tent flap and paused, smiling as he watched Mick carefully fold the clothes he’d been wearing earlier and pack them away in his bag. “You know, I’m really glad that you changed your mind about the whole nudity thing.”

“I didn’t.” Mick said, buttoning his bag shut and turning to watch Cal. “Our circumstances changed a little bit. What have I told you about wearing your boots in the tent?”

“I’m taking them off.” Cal said defensively, sitting to do just that but not taking his eyes off of Mick. “What does that mean? You didn’t change your mind.”

“In my family we don’t really do casual nudity. You get naked in front of the people you’re going to have sex with and that’s it.”

“Huh.” Cal hadn’t known that. It upset him a little bit, actually. “Where I’m from you can barely say you’re friends with someone if you haven’t been naked together. It’s like a symbol of equality or something. ‘Everyone’s the same with their pants off.’ Is what my dad said to me once.”

Mick smiled at him as Cal finished with his boots. “I suspect our parents wouldn’t be friends if they knew each other.”

“Yeah, probably not.” Cal crawled forward and kissed Mick, aiming for the mouth but hitting his chin instead. “I’m glad.” He said. “That you picked us, then.”

“I don’t know who else you think I would have picked.”

“You could have had your pick of anyone, probably.” Cal said, kissing Mick’s throat now. “The other thing is, I’m a little bit annoyed.”

“Annoyed?” Mick asked, and Cal smiled as he felt the vibration in Mick’s throat. “What, at me?”

“Yeah, at you.” Cal said, kissing between Mick’s collarbones. “I like your body a whole lot, you know. I wish you hadn’t spent so long hiding it from me.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Cal kissed a line down Mick’s chest. “I wouldn’t have wanted to pressure you into doing something you weren’t comfortable with.”

“But…”

“Shh.” The kisses moved below the diaphragm, onto Mick’s belly. Cal hovered above the navel for a
second and looked back up. “It’s okay. Don’t feel bad. But now that I can I’m going to show you how much I like your body.”

“God, Cal. You say shit like that and…”

“I know.” Cal kept kissing downwards until he got to his destination. He pressed a kiss to the head of Mick’s quickly growing erection before taking the entire rod in his mouth, sucking back two thirds of it in one go.

“Fuck, Cal.” Mick grunted. “You’re…”

Cal lifted his head and let Mick fall from his mouth for a second. “We’re not talking about me right now.” He went back down on Mick, taking even more of him in this time, and concentrating on not gagging until he could move the rest of the way down in one motion, letting Mick slide into his throat.

Being able to do this had become a point of pride for Cal. Mick fell back, letting out a sort of sustained hum as Cal sucked on him. He didn’t hear the tent flap rustle behind him. “Well, I get a show before bed, isn’t that nice?”

Cal pulled off of Mick again, enjoying the needy gasp that Mick let out as the air hit him, and liking the look of Mick’s cock covered in his saliva. “I’m explaining to Mick how happy it’s made me that we get to see what he really looks like now.”

“You seem to be in the middle of a fairly compelling point.” Wes said, sitting beside Mick and stripping in one fluid movement. “Don’t let me interrupt.”

Wes leaned down and kissed Mick deeply, his hands running up and down Mick’s chest. Cal smiled and took Mick back in his mouth, all the way down to the root in one motion this time. Mick resumed humming, now into Wes’s mouth.

Cal reached up and started to massage Mick’s inner thigh because he knew Mick liked that, and within a few seconds the humming had become more desperate. He didn’t notice that, but he did notice Mick tapping the top of his head frantically and pulled up but not off, keeping the head in his mouth for a moment longer, teasing the little hole with his tongue until he felt Mick tense under him. Cal let Mick pop out of his mouth just in time for him to shoot hot streamers up into the air. Wes moved back as well and let them all land on Mick’s belly, only breaking their kiss when he was spent.

Cal leaned back and observed his handiwork. Mick was laying there sweaty and sticky and dazed. Yeah, he liked this. “I swear I could shoot just looking at you like this.”

“Yeah, me too.” Wes agreed, and he and Cal shared a look. They looked down at Mick at the same time, who looked up at them, smiled and nodded vaguely. Cal undressed as quickly as he could, though his belt got tangled around his ankles, and didn’t pay much attention to where his clothes landed.

Wes was already stroking himself and Cal followed suit, making himself go slowly so he didn’t finish right away. Mick was still hard to Cal grabbed him gently, and Wes’s hand joined his almost immediately.

The tent was filled with their sounds for a while, Cal’s little gulps and Wes’s grunts and Mick’s humming. Cal came first despite his best efforts, splattering all over Mick’s belly. Wes followed, adding his cum to the puddle and then the two of them eased Mick into his second orgasm. He cried
out their names in succession until he was finished, looking entirely satisfied.

Cal crawled up on Mick’s left side and curled up beside him, head on Mick’s shoulder. Wes lay down on his other side, their arms wrapped around one another. “We really are glad, Mick.”

“Thanks, you guys. That makes me really happy, you know.”

“Do me a favour.” Cal said, before Mick could drift off. “In the morning I want you to let me wash you off in the river, okay?”

“Okay.” Cal wasn’t entirely certain that Mick had heard him and he smiled over at Wes, who looked just as pleased as Cal felt. He snuggled in beside Mick and went to sleep, more grateful for these two than he’d ever been for anything.
“Fucker.”

“I can’t decide if we should buy him more drinks or stop letting him have drinks.” Wes said, looking at Mick and shrugging.

“Definitely that first thing.” Cal muttered, finishing his drink. “Stupid fucker. We should kill him.”

“That would be awfully bad for our reputation.” Mick pointed out.

“It would definitely send our future clients a message that you don’t hire us to get something and then decide not to pay us.”

“At least he decided that before we gave him the orb.” Wes pointed out. Cal glared at him and then for good measure glared at the Orb of Some Sort of Magical Bullshit, which was sitting innocuously on the table in between the three of them. Unpaid for and not likely to ever be paid for. “We almost died getting this stupid thing.”

“We almost die all the time.” Mick sighed. “We’ll find someone else who wants it, Cal.”

“I don’t even know what it does.” Cal whinged, still looking at it. “How are we going to fence something when we don’t know what it is or why it’s important? Tell people it’s a nice accent piece for their sitting rooms?”

“I’ll try to find out what it does.” Mick told him, flagging down someone to bring more drinks for them. Cal was drinking twice as much as either of them, which was a bad idea, but he was pissed off and Cal made bad decisions when he was pissed off. “I’m pretty sure that if we’re going to try to sell something of vague magical usage, we’re at least in the best place for that.”

“I guess.” Cal sighed. Merket was the kind of city where someone might want something like this. About two days inland from White Cape, which was the nearest port, it happened to be positioned on a major trading road and so lots of people came through here all the time. It was a hub for the adventurer trade, and also for the black market on magical relics, which was why the three of them were here.

“Cal.” Wes said, quite reasonably. “Tomorrow, when you’re done pouting, and being hung over, you’ll sit down and find a way to work this out. That’s what you do.”

“Fuck you.”

“Not with that attitude.” Wes smirked.

“Piss off.” Cal grumbled, putting his head down on the table. Wes being right was making him angry. “I’m trying to be mad.”

“We got paid for all of our other jobs.” Mick pointed out.

“I don’t care. I’m being mad about the one we didn’t get paid for. Just let me sit here and be mad, God.”

“You know, it’s when you behave like this that I’m reminded of the fact that it was your charm that first convinced me to follow you.”
“Charm is for people who got paid today.”

“Evening, boys.” Cal jumped at the voice and clumsily grabbed the Orb of Some Sort of Magical Bullshit from the table, making it disappear into his sleeve. He didn’t need it being stolen from them on top of that. “Well, that’s a charming reception, Cal.” The speaker was a shortish woman with shaggy blonde hair falling in her eyes, wearing plate armour and a sword even indoors.

“Go away, Beatrice.” Cal said, glaring at her. He didn’t need to see a competitor on top of everything else. “I don’t want to talk to you. There’s a list of people I don’t want to talk to and you’re on it.”

“Your don’t want to talk to anyone right now.” Wes pointed out. “Even us.”

“She’s on the usual list!” Cal glared at Wes. “And you’re supposed to be on my side.”

“Yeah, well.” Wes shrugged. “You’re supposed to be nice to me.”

“I’m hardly ever nice to you anyway!”

“Bad day?” Beatrice asked, pulling over a chair and sitting way too close to Wes. Cal glared at her, but she affected not to notice.

“We got stiffed on a job.” Wes offered, and then Cal glared at him instead because Hello, this is the competition.

“That sucks.” Beatrice took Wes’s glass and drank. “Kill the guy.”

“That was my suggestion.”

“Oh.” She looked at Cal. “Obviously it was a bad idea, then. Don’t know what I was thinking with that one. Do you still have the thing?” Someone must have nodded to her, because Cal didn’t and she kept talking. “Well, that’s good at least. You’re in the right place to try and sell it.”

“That’s what I said.” Wes told her.

“That’s because you’re the brains of the outfit.” Beatrice said promptly. “Not to mention the muscle and the looks.”

“Stop hitting on Wes.” Cal grumbled. “He’s like a quarter of your age and he doesn’t like you.” Beatrice was only a little older than they were, but that didn’t matter.

“You’re just jealous because girls don’t hit on you, Cal.” She told him. “Don’t feel bad, it’s only because they can’t see you.”

“Wow, I’ve never heard a short joke before.” Cal shot back, taking a long drink. “You must have had a lot of help to come up with that one. Besides, I don’t want girls to hit on me.”

“Well, I think someday you’ll understand what boys and girls do when they’re alone with each other and then you’ll change your mind.”

Mick must have seen something on Cal’s face because he leaned forward. “Cal…”

“What do boys and girls do when they’re alone with each other, Beatrice?” Cal asked, alcohol making him brazen. “I asked Wes last night but he wouldn’t take my cock out of his mouth to answer me.”
Mick put a hand on his forehead and sighed. Wes held back a smile and fixed Cal with an almost amused look. Cal glared at Beatrice, who was silent, looking between Wes and Cal. After a moment she smiled. “The two of you, huh? I can’t say I’m surprised. How does your third wheel feel about this?” She asked Mick.

Lifting his head, Mick looked at Cal in a very unimpressed way before turning to Beatrice. “This cart was built with three wheels.”

Beatrice just laughed. “Of course it was. I don’t suppose I can count on it’s just that you’re together too often and are just blowing off steam until you meet the right girl?”

“Nope.”

“Sorry.”

“Screw off.”

“Okay.” She raised her hand to signal the server. “Let me buy you some drinks in congratulations. Frankly, the three of you are perfect for each other and I couldn’t be happier for you.”

“You’re lying.” Cal accused.

“Are you going to turn down free drinks?”

“No.”

“Then shut up.” Beatrice put in the order and waited until the drinks came to the table. “To you guys.” She toasted. “So what are you trying to sell?”

“It’s a secret.” Cal grumbled, drinking.

Beatrice rolled her eyes and looked at Mick. “Magical?” Mick nodded. Cal kicked him under the table.

“Stop sharing secrets with the enemy.”

“She’s not the enemy.”

“Remember when she tied us to that tree and stole the thing?”

“That was business.” Beatrice told him.

“There were wolves!”

“Anyway. There’s a man here in town named Theodore. Don’t know a last name but he shouldn’t be hard to find. He likes magical shit. He can’t use any of it because he’s not magical, but he’s got too much money so he collects. You should talk to him.”

“I’m not going to talk to him, that’s a terrible idea.” Cal said, glaring down into the alcohol. He liked alcohol. It never tried to make him feel better when he was mad.

“He’s trying to be mad right now. We’ll talk to him.” Wes said. “Thank you.”

“I make those decisions.” Cal reminded him.

“He’ll have changed his mind in the morning, plus he’ll probably think it was his idea.”
“I can hear you.” Cal kicked Wes now. “Stop talking about me like I’m not here.”

“Be quiet and drink, Cal.”

“Okay.”

Cal stayed quiet and drank while the other two sat and had a great time with Beatrice. Eventually he broke his silence and ended up having a pretty good night himself. He went to bed very lightheaded and a little miffed with Wes and Mick because honestly, why did they have to make it so hard for him to be in a bad mood?
“A pleasure doing business with you.” Theodore said, and he smiled in a very attractive way that oozed insincerity to Cal. Theodore had, as Beatrice had said, been interested in purchasing a magical orb of unknown usage, but she hadn’t mentioned that he was one of those handsome people who knew they were handsome and knew that other people knew as well. He was smarmy in a way that Cal was too hung over to deal with even though his whole drinking escapade had been two days ago now.

“And you as well, sir.” Cal said, as cordially as he could. Slavery was legal here in Merket and it wasn’t hard to notice that most of Theodore’s slaves seemed to be not a whole lot older than Cal himself was. He’d made the right call not bringing Mick or Wes, he thought, even if they’d been unhappy about it. “I hope you have more success figuring out what it does than I did.”

Theodore smiled. “I have resources in that area. And if not, I’m sure it will make a nice piece of jewelry.” Cal internally shrugged. It wasn’t up to him what Theodore did with the thing; he’d been paid (more than he’d expected) and that was all that mattered to him.

“I wonder.” Theodore said, and Cal refocused his attention. “How does someone as young as you get into such a dangerous business?”

“Curiosity.” Cal didn’t like it when clients asked him about his own life. But Theodore had already paid him, so there was that at least. “I wanted to see the world and everything in it. I’ve always enjoyed the idea of magical relics, so I decided to go find some.”

“All by yourself?” Theodore raised perfectly shaped eyebrows and Cal thought that people only had perfectly shaped eyebrows if they spent time making sure they were that way. “Surely you must have a team? Companions?”

“I do, sir.” Cal said, and Theodore smiled. “They regret that they couldn’t be here today.”

“Perhaps I shall meet them another time. Would you like something to drink?”

“No, thank you.” Cal’s creep-sense was starting to go off even more loudly than it had been before. “I really shouldn’t take up any more of your time, sir.”

“Nonsense, we’ve hardly begun to speak.” Theodore gestured for Cal to follow him into another part of the unnecessarily opulent house. Marble wasn’t even mined anywhere near here but he’d found enough to do all his floors in. Theodore showed him into a sitting room, where another slave was pouring wine. “Please, sit down.”

“I’m sure you’re very busy.” Cal insisted as he sat down, wishing that social niceties hadn’t been drilled into him quite so thoroughly. He wasn’t sure what Theodore did, but surely one didn’t get this rich without at least a little work. “Really, there’s no need for you to waste any more of your time on me.” The slaves were all fairly modestly dressed, but some of them had a look about them that Cal knew to associate with bedslaves.

“I hardly think talking to an industrious young man like yourself is a waste of time.” Theodore smiled, took a cup of wine and gestured for Cal to take the other. “Do you know what it is that I do, Cal?”

“No, sir.” Cal admitted. “But you seem to have done it very well.”
Theodore laughed. “I won’t bore you with the details, but suffice it to say I’m a merchant of sorts.”

‘Of sorts’ made it sound to Cal like he was a smuggler, but he decided sipping the wine would be better than saying that. “I’ve never seen a merchant with a gold fountain in his entry hall.” He commented instead.

“As you said, I’ve done it very well.” Theodore wasn’t actually drinking, Cal noticed, which was okay because he wasn’t really either, just lifting the cup to his lips and pretending. He didn’t deal with clients drunk, even just a little. “I suspect that you and I are similar.”

“How so?”

“When you decided to become a relic hunter, surely there were people who told you it was a bad idea? You’re too young, you’ll get hurt, that sort of thing?” Cal nodded, thinking that he should really write a letter to his parents and his brothers, and Theodore kept talking. “But you did it anyway. You found something you wanted and you figured out a way to do it.”

“I suppose you could put it that way.”

“I’m the same way. When I want something, I figure out a way to get it.”

“And what is it that you want at the moment, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Theodore smiled again, and Cal thought that he smiled altogether too much. “At the moment I want you.”

“I’m not for sale.” Cal said, a little more sharply than he’d intended.

All it got him was a chuckle. “A pity, though maybe you’ll change your mind someday. What I actually meant was that I’d like to hire you. You and your team.”

“Oh.” Cal sat back, looked at Theodore over the wine cup because that was something he’d always wanted to do. The chair made him look tiny, though, so that sucked. “Well, our services are certainly for sale. You’re looking for a relic?”

“Several, as a matter of fact, but one to start with. There was once a family to the east of here called the Faran family.”

“There’s not anymore, though?”

“No, they’ve all died, sadly.” Theodore didn’t sound that sad. “In their possession was a powerful relic that looks like an ordinary stone. Because it looked ordinary, it wasn’t taken care of with the rest of their estate and it’s gone missing. I would like it found, and I would like to own it.”

Cal nodded, thinking about that. ‘To the east of here’ was a pretty big place seeing as how they were two days from the west coast. And a lot of things looked like ordinary stones, including actual ordinary stones, of which there were millions. “Is there anything else you can tell me about this stone? Otherwise I’m just looking for a rock in a world that’s literally made of them.”

Theodore acknowledged that with a tilt of his head. “True. This one will appear somewhat distinctive. It may be…coloured. If you’ve any magic practitioners in your team, they will be able to detect great power emanating from the stone.”

“Still, that’s a lot of ground to cover.”
“There is a chance that the stone may also have the power to raise the dead.”

Cal blinked, straightening. “Well. That’s certainly a much bigger hint. Now we’ve got a chance of finding it.” He went through everything he’d heard lately, trying to remember if any of it pertained to the dead being raised. Not off the top of his head, that was for sure.

“Good.” Theodore gestured to the slave, who retreated to the far end of the room and came back with a wooden box, which he opened for Cal. It was full of gold, nearly twice what he’d been paid for the orb. “Will this be sufficient for a first payment? With a promise for twice that when you bring me the stone?”

Cal pretended to consider it calmly, but was internally singing a song. That was a lot of money. Beatrice hadn’t been kidding when she’d said Theodore had more money than he knew what to do with. “Yes, I’d say that’s…sufficient.”

Theodore nodded, and the slave placed the box in Cal’s lap before moving away quietly. “Good. Now, I don’t need it this week or even this year, but I would appreciate as much speed as you can manage in this.”

“It will take a while.” Cal mused, thinking. If they could find out where the Faran family’s estate had been, that would be the best starting place. “But you have my promise that all of our attention will be directed on this, sir.”

“Very good.” Theodore stood. “Now, I’m sure you want to get back to your teammates and get started. I shall not waste anymore of your time. Unless you’d like to stay the night?”

“No.” Cal said quickly. Theodore was still creepy, no matter how wealthy he was. “I’ll be back when we’ve found the stone.”

“Bring your teammates. I’d like to meet them.”

“I’m sure they’d like to meet you too.” Cal lied, shaking Theodore’s hand before gathering up far more gold than he’d expected to make coming here and leaving. He resisted doing a little dance until he was well out of sight of the manor that the man lived in. But he only danced for a second, because he had to go back and show Wes and Mick why he was the one with all the good ideas.
“This is a terrible idea.”

“It is not.”

“I didn’t mean this.” Mick said, gesturing at the street they were walking on. “I meant this.” Now he waved all around them at the city of Two Oaks, where the Faran family had once held a seat. “Cal, there’s no way we’re going to be able to find a stone in the entire world.”

“First of all, you’ve had nearly two weeks to process that we were doing this, and second of course we’re going to be able to find it. It raises the dead, how hard can it be?”

“Maybe if the Faran family hadn’t all died a hundred years ago, Cal. Nobody knows what happened to them because nobody was even there.”

“He makes a good point, Cal.” Wes said, frowning around at the steadily shadier neighbourhoods they were walking through to get where Cal was leading them. “All the stories that we’ve heard have all been rumours and folk tales about a massacre and a demon.”

“Yes, thank you for conveniently summarizing the last three days to me, since I just suddenly started paying attention to what we were doing in the last few minutes.” Cal said irritably. Normally Wes didn’t say much during the information-gathering phase of an operation. “And yes, a hundred years is a long time.” He admitted, thinking that Theodore might have mentioned that to him back in Merket. “That’s why we’re going to see a hundred and nine-year-old lady.”

“A claim which is highly suspect.” Mick reminded him. “And even if she is somehow magically that old, she’s likely senile and even if she’s not, how much is she going to remember about something that happened when she was a child?”

“Let’s find out.” Cal said, pointing to a little shack on the side of the road with an emaciated old cat sitting on the roof, which was exactly what had been described to him when he’d been told about this person.

“Cal…”

“Look.” He turned to Wes and Mick. “If she can’t help us, then we’ll talk about giving it up, okay?” Though he would still try to convince them to keep at it—at least listen around for rumours of the dead walking. “I’ll give Theodore back his money and we’ll go on another job. But can we at least exhaust what leads we do have before we give up?”

“I’m not saying we should give up.” Mick told him. “I’m just saying that I find all of this very suspicious. This Theodore doesn’t know you from anyone and he gives us all this money to find something that nobody can find—and how does he even know it exists in the first place? You’re the one who usually gets upset when a client doesn’t tell us the whole story, what’s going on?”

Cal didn’t answer immediately, thinking about that. “You’re right. But, Mick, he just handed me a lot of money. I get that he’s rich and stupid, but you don’t throw away that kind of gold unless you really believe it’s worth it. We’re going to find this thing.”

“That’s your answer?” Mick was almost smiling. “Money?”
“What? I like money.” Cal wasn’t sure that was the entire answer, but whatever else there was to it was something he couldn’t quite articulate.

“You’re such an idiot.” Mick shook his head. “You’re lucky I love you. Let’s go, then.”

“What, just like that?”

“Yes, just like that. I trust your judgement, terrible as it is at times.”

“Most of the time.” Wes added, helpfully.

“Shut up…wait, you love me?” Cal asked, only now hearing what Mick had said.


“Okay.” Cal wasn’t sure what to say to that. “Um. We’re going in now.” He sighed, turning back to the shack and headed determinedly for the door. The cat hissed at him as he approached, but Cal knocked on the door anyway. Nobody answered and he eased it open. “Hello? Sorry to intrude.”

“No, you aren’t.” A cracked and papery voice said from the gloom inside the shack. There was no light except what was coming from holes in the walls or ceiling and the low fire that was burning in the centre of the singular room. It was cluttered and dirty and the whole thing smelled like frogs, and Cal could just make out a huddled form sitting against the back wall. “I’ve been waiting for you three, for Armageddon’s Vanguard.”

“What?” That sounded…ominous.

“Come in, come in, you’re letting the air out.” Cal stepped inside and Wes and Mick followed him in. Together they crowded up more than half the shack, and Wes’s head brushed the roof. The woman seemed to be sitting, so Cal sat opposite her. “You’re here to ask me about the Faran family, about what happened to their crown jewel. Your friends question the wisdom of asking a woman older than dust about anything, but I know, I know. I was there.”

“Ma’am, were you watching us earlier?” Mick asked. He was wiggling his fingers just a little bit in that way that meant he was doing magic.

“Of course!” The woman declared. “I’ve been waiting for you, I just said. You needn’t worry about your spells of protection, Gatekeeper of Shadow, they are intact. When you get to be my age, you just know these things.”

“Gatekeeper of Shadow?” Cal asked.

“I’m sure you’ve heard many tales of the Faran family and their demise.” The woman went on, as if she hadn’t heard Cal. “They were murdered by the Olarks when they took over, or perhaps by a demon they’d summoned with dark magic. Foolishness. I’ve no time for foolishness at my age. The Farans weren’t killed for politics or by demons.”

“Then who were they killed by?”

“A human, a man. He wanted their jewel, so he butchered them, starting with the children. They used to say he drank their blood, but that’s foolish. He did bathe in it, though.”

“What was his name?” Wes asked, glancing at Cal.

“I’m getting to that part, Child of Misfortune.” The woman said irritably, still looking at Cal. Wes fell
oddly silent at that. Cal was starting to think this had been a bad idea. “He had to kill the whole family, you see. He wanted the stone, the Jewel of Undeath, it was called at the time, though it’s no more than a painted rock. And if a Faran was still living, he could never use its power.”

“He could have just killed them.” Cal said vaguely. “He didn’t have to torture them.”

The woman cackled. “Yes, perhaps. But you would think that because you are a good person, now wouldn’t you? I hope you stay that way, or it would be a bad omen for the world. He was an evil man with an evil purpose.”

“What was his purpose?”

“He sought to resurrect the ancient gods.” Beside Cal, Mick shifted suddenly. “But he never succeeded—and a good thing, the ancient gods were vicious things, better off dead. He was killed by a child, they say, in a swamp out east.”

Thinking about a map, Cal tried to figure out where that had been. There was a swamp down near the border, he thought, before wondering if a hundred years might have changed the landscape enough that where a swamp had been before was now a lake or something.

“It’s time for you to retrieve the Jewel of Undeath.” The woman said. “Its siblings are waking again—one has been stolen, one is bound, one is in the hands of the Architect and the fifth is imperiled. You must find it and bring it to the Oligarch.”

“We’re trying.” Cal said, though he had no idea who that was or what she was talking about anymore. “This man. What was his name?”

“The Gatekeeper knows, doesn’t he?” The woman said, still not looking away from Cal.

“It was Matthias, wasn’t it?” Mick asked quietly.

“That was it, yes. Not an impressive man in body, but to look at him, you knew he was dangerous.”

“Ohay.” Mick said, and Cal thought he sounded shaken. “I know where we need to go. Thank you.”

“It isn’t your job to open the gate.” The woman said to Mick, as he stood. “But be sure you step aside when the Keyholder approaches.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Mick turned, pulled the door open. Cal and Wes stood as well, though Cal couldn’t take his eyes off the woman’s form. She looked like a wraith wrapped in skin.

Wes put a hand on Cal’s shoulder. “Come on. Thank you.” He said to the woman.

“Some things are better off broken, Child of Misfortune.” Wes just grimaced and turned to the door, pulling Cal behind him.

“Hold on.” Cal said, after they had stepped outside. The woman was still looking at him. “What’s my name?”

“Cal, it doesn’t matter, come on.”

“No, I want to know.” It did matter, though Cal wasn’t sure why. “If Mick is the Gatekeeper of Shadow and Wes is the Child of Misfortune, what’s my name? Who am I?”

The small beam of light that was illuminating the woman’s crooked and wrinkled mouth showed a lopsided smile. “You don’t know your own name? You’re the Doomed One, aren’t you?”
For just a moment, Cal felt like he’d missed step coming down the stairs. “Okay.” He said, not sure how else to answer. “Thank you.”

“Vicious things, they were.” The woman said. “Vicious, terrible things.” Cal let Wes pull him backwards and close the door. The cat hissed at them again.

“I learned about Matthias the Mad at the academy.” Mick said, but Cal wasn’t really listening. “If she was telling the truth, I think I know where we need to go.”

“Okay.” Cal’s mind was still in the shack.

“I wouldn’t read too much in to most of what she said.” Wes put a hand on Cal’s shoulder and led him away, the three of them turning up the street back towards the more kept up parts of Two Oaks. “She may have known a few things, but she was obviously mad. I don’t trust people who speak in riddles.”

“Yeah, she was nuts.” Cal agreed, though he wasn’t sure. He couldn’t shake the feeling of... something. “Okay, let’s go strategize, plan our next move.”

_You’re the Doomed One, aren’t you?_
“This is the best thing that’s ever happened to us.” Cal declared, sinking a little deeper into the hot water.

“I want to disagree, but I can’t think of why at the moment.” Mick muttered, not opening his eyes.

“Because it’s cold, that’s why. It’s cold and we found something warm.”

“Warm?” Wes asked, in between him and Mick. “Hot, you mean.”

“Whatever.”

Cal was counting it as a minor miracle that they’d found this cave, naturally warmed by whatever was underneath it, with hot pools of water that rose up from underground. He hadn’t counted on a hot bath until they were well past the mountains and was wondering if he could convince Wes and Mick to just sort of…live here, forever.

Cal didn’t do well in the cold.

“Alright.” Wes stood and climbed out of the pool, and Cal took a moment to appreciate the sight of water dripping down his body. “You two can sit in here and boil, but some of us are not meant to be a turnip.”

Cal shared a quick glance with Mick and realized he wasn’t the only one enjoying the view. Without a word, Cal got out of the water as well. “You don’t have to get out, Cal. Go soak.”

“But I’m worried you’ll get cold by yourself.” Cal pressed up close to Wes and licked a rivulet of water from his chest. He made sure his erection was pressed against Wes’s leg. “I’ll help you stay warm.”

“I don’t really need help staying warm.” Wes teased, pulling away from Cal. “I’m plenty warm as it is.”

Cal narrowed his eyes, reached down and grabbed Wes. “No you aren’t. You’re all shrunken down here; that’s a sign of cold.”

“Cute.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll help you.” Cal slid down onto his knees and licked a drop of water off Wes’s cock as well. Mick had gotten out of the water and behind Wes, and wrapped his arms around Wes’s torso, kissing him quietly on the neck.

Cal took Wes in his mouth while Wes was still mostly soft, which certainly wasn’t going to last long at this rate. Not if Cal had his way, anyway. And Cal often got his way in these situations.
Sure enough, soon Cal had more of Wes in his mouth than he had room for, and he relaxed his throat to give Wes more space to grow into. “God, Cal…” Wes panted. “I wish I knew how you did that…” Cal just hummed in answer and got another groan in reply.

Once Wes was completely hard, Cal pulled back until just the tip was between his lips, and then plunged back down again, working his tongue up and down Wes as he did.

“Mick…God…” Cal didn’t stop, but he did try to look up at Wes and with an eyebrow raised. Not that he was jealous or anything, but Mick wasn’t the one with his mouth on Wes’s cock.

Wes made a sound that seemed like one of discomfort and suddenly Mick’s hand on was the back of Cal’s head, gently pushing him all the way down and keeping him there. “Focus on Cal, Wes. Just think about Cal for a minute.”

What the hell? Cal thought, but he kept his tongue going anyway.

“Here, okay.” Mick’s hand was removed from Cal’s head after a second. “Cal, get off for a second.”

Frowning, Cal pulled back. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Here, Wes, let’s lay down.”

As Mick and Wes lay down on the stone floor together, Cal caught sight of what had been going on without him—Mick had three of his fingers buried inside Wes. “What the…”

“Wes wants you to fuck him, Cal.” Mick said, making eye contact with Cal.

Cal was struck and didn’t say anything for a second. “He does?”

“I do.” Wes nodded, waved Cal down. “We talked about it already.”

“When was this?” When in the world had they had time to talk about something like that, and why had they done it without him. “Where was I when you did this?”

“It was this morning when you were scouting.” Mick said. “Surprising you with things has worked well for us in the past so we thought we’d give it a try. Come on, we already did all the work.”

“We’re going to talk about your habit of keeping things from me.” Cal told them, but even as he did he was moving in between Wes’s legs, not able to take his eyes off of Mick’s long fingers.

Those fingers pulled out all of the sudden and Cal kept looking at the spot where they’d been, reaching out as if to replace Mick’s hand with his. “Come on, Cal.” Wes was panting, and he grabbed Cal’s arm to pull him closer.

“Right.” Cal had thought about this—rather more than he was willing to admit even to Wes and Mick. Clumsily he climbed forward, one hand on Wes’s thigh to steady himself, and guided himself inside Wes.

Cal let out a little choked noise as he entered Wes, not expecting the warmth. He forced himself to go in slowly because he didn’t want to hurt Wes, who had his eyes closed and was breathing heavily.

Mick helped by leaning down and tonguing Wes’s swollen and red shaft.

Wes came just a Cal made it the whole way in, filling the cavern with a loud groan. Mick pulled away while Wes was shooting, only to resume licking once Wes had finished. “Keep going, Cal.” Wes panted.
Cal nodded and started to experimentally thrust in and out, scraping his knees on the floor and not caring. His whole body was shaking with the sensations from what was happening, and he knew he wasn’t going to last very long like this. “I’m not going to…Wes…”

“Go, Cal.” Wes whispered, and Cal went, the breath leaving him as his orgasm came, his body stiffening and tightening as he shot inside Wes.

Cal nearly collapsed when he was done, and he teetered to one side when he pulled out, supported by Mick. “Here.” Mick said, guiding him back to lay beside Wes, head near Wes’s waist. “Switch with me. Wes, I’m going to go in now, okay?”

Wes nodded, his breathing short. “Yes. Yes, Mick.”

Lifting his head and feeling hot, Cal watched Mick slide inside of Wes and whinged just a little. He probably could have come just from watching that if he hadn’t just a few seconds ago. Instead, he lowered his head and, staring down Wes’s erection again, took it back in his mouth.

He could still taste Wes’s previous emission on the tip and Cal resisted his urge to avoid it, instead making the decision that this time he would try to swallow. Mick’s thrusting was making Wes move his hips up and down, pushing himself right into Cal’s mouth.

After a minute or so Mick let out a cry and pressed in as far as he could go, and Cal redoubled his efforts, rewarded a second later when Wes started to tap his head, their usual signal to pull off.

Cal didn’t pull off, listening at Wes groan again and feeling the first splatter of cum in his mouth. It was hot and he swallowed, and more filled his mouth and Cal gagged, pulling off and coughing, letting Wes finish on his chest.

“You okay?” Wes asked. “I didn’t mean to…”

“No, I did it on purpose.” Wes’s semen was dribbling down Cal’s chin but he didn’t make any effort to wipe it off. “Are you okay? You’re the one who…”

“It was great.” Wes looked half-asleep and he waved Cal up to rest on his shoulder. Mick joined them on the other side. “It was amazing.”

“You were amazing.” Cal muttered, and Mick made a noise of agreement. “We need another bath.”

“Later.” Wes held them both tighter and Cal reached across Wes’s chest to grab Mick’s hand as well.

“Yeah.” Cal could feel himself drifting off as well. “You guys are the best.”

“We know.” Mick sounded as satisfied as Cal felt and Wes looked.

Cal didn’t bother to reply. Wes had already fallen asleep so Cal followed his lead, thinking that staying here in this place forever might just be the best idea he’d ever had.
“I think we’re being followed.”

“That’s because you’re paranoid.” Mick said, counting out coins without looking up at Cal. He passed them over to the man they were buying meat from with a nod.

“That is true, but I don’t think that’s what it is.” Cal looked around at the crowd in the marketplace, but he didn’t see anyone who looked suspicious or anything. “I just have a feeling.” He’d had it for a day or so before they’d arrived here in Thorndale, which was the closest town to where they were going.

“You being famously intuitive.” Mick muttered, packing away the meat in their bag. “You’re just nervous.”

“I don’t get nervous.”

“You do when we’re following information other than yours.” Mick said calmly. “We’re going into the swamp based on what I said and you’re not sure what’s going to happen, so you’re nervous.”

“That’s…” Cal turned away from the crowd. “No, that isn’t true. Mick, I trust you, why would you think I don’t?”

“I didn’t say you didn’t. You’re just a paranoid control freak, that’s all.” Mick smiled.

“Sorry to butt in, boys. Did you say you were headed into the swamp?” The meat seller asked, and Cal found himself oddly surprised that the man had been listening—even though they’d been having their conversation right in front of him.

Cal nodded. “Yes, sir. We’re looking for an artefact in there.” Mick insisted that Matthias the Mad had disappeared into this nameless swamp and never been heard from again. If he’d truly had this stone that he’d taken from Two Oaks, it was in the swamp somewhere.

And boy was Cal looking forward to spending God knew how long hunting for a rock in a swamp that went on for miles. They’d seen huge centipedes that seemed to live under the town, probably coming from the swamp. Cal’s excitement to see what else lived there could have been measured in a thimble.

“Pardon for sticking my nose into your lives, but I wouldn’t.” The man said. “It’s dangerous in there. It doesn’t have a name, but we call that place the Swamp of Death. Hardly anyone ever comes out alive.”

“Hardly anyone?” Cal asked. “So some people do?” He had planned to go searching for information just as soon as they were done stocking up on supplies, but now was as good a time to start as any.

“Sure, and what they tell the rest of us convinces us not to try it ourselves. It’s full of snakes and hornets and pockets of gas.”

“Joy.” Cal sighed. “Don’t worry—we’re professionals, we’ll be careful.”

“That’s not the problem, boys. Snakes and gas can be avoided easily enough. It’s everything else you should be worried about. Those who come out say that those who don’t, they get up and try to
“Stop you from leaving—after they’ve died.”

Cal’s attention perked at that. “Wait. The dead are walking in there? Like, is that just a story people tell or are there actually dead people moving around?”

The vendor shrugged. “I’ve never been in there myself—because I’m not insane. But everyone who comes out of there says dead people get up and attack. There’s also supposed to be an abandoned house there somewhere, though why someone would live in there is beyond me.”

“Yes!” Cal whooped, leaping into an impromptu hug with Mick and drawing a few eyes on the street. “We found it! Told you.”

“Yeah, you did. Get off me.”

“Right.” Cal cleared his throat and stepped away, trying to contain his excitement. “Thank you for your concern, sir.” He said to the vendor, who was now looking at them both in clear confusion. “But my team and I will be quite fine. The item we’re looking for is in that swamp somewhere.”

“Maybe, and excuse me for saying so, but anyone who goes in that place is doomed.”

Doomed.

The word choice gave Cal pause even if the warning itself didn’t. “Doomed?” He shook his head, smiled again. “We’ll be fine. If we can get that stone out of there, it might even stop the dead from rising.”

“We don’t know that.” Mick said immediately.

“We don’t, but there’s a chance.” Cal turned back to the merchant. “Thank you very much, sir.” He put an extra coin on the counter. “For your information and your concern.” He turned away from the counter before the man could warn them off anymore, and Mick followed him away and into the crowd. “We need to find Wes.”

As Cal spoke the crowd seemed to part and they saw him, approaching them with a wave. “Guys.” He said, when they were a little closer. “I was filling the canteens at a well and I heard someone say that dead people are walking around inside that swamp.”

“I know, it’s great, isn’t it?” Cal grinned, bouncing a little on the balls of his feet.

Wes frowned, looked from Cal to Mick. “Does ‘great’ have another meaning that I don’t know about?”

Mick just shook his head and Cal punched both of them. “Come on, we’re going to find the thing and be rich. It’s great.”

“You heard the part about zombies, right?” Mick asked.

“Yeah, yeah, the living dead, unholy horrors, whatever. We found the thing.” Even if they hadn’t laid hands on it yet, Cal could feel the thrill that came after a particularly hard search already.

Followed by a chill on the back of his neck.

He turned, looking out at the crowd suspiciously. Nobody looked out of place and the only one who seemed to be paying attention to them was a scrawny alley cat that turned away as soon as Cal laid eyes on it. “Cal?”
“I still think someone’s following us.”

“And I still think you’re paranoid.”

“Yeah…” Cal scanned the crowd again and didn’t see anything again.

“I’ll check, just in case.” Mick said, putting a hand on Cal’s shoulder.

Wes nodded. “Me too. You two get going to the inn and start planning. I’ll double back and make sure we’re alone.”


“We know.” Wes broke away from them and he and Mick headed back to the inn where they were staying.

Cal wasn’t exactly sure how to plan a retrieval while not getting killed by zombies, but he knew they’d pull it off. He had the best team there was, after all.
Sometimes You Only Get to Know the End of the Story

Chapter Notes

This chapter is longer than my usual fare and I thought about splitting it in two or something, but honestly I’m so happy with how it turned out that I just couldn’t. I write every day and this is my favourite thing that I’ve written in ages. So I hope everyone enjoys it. :)

“This is really boring.” Cal grumbled.

“You find the death swamp boring?” Mick asked, from behind Cal. “I’m pretty sure we’ve discovered fifteen new species of horrifically venomous snakes, we spent three hours yesterday hiding from a swarm of hornets the size of small mice, and Wes got high when he stepped into that pocket of gas and thought we were his kids for most of a day.”

“For the record I did not appreciate you trying to rock me to sleep.” Cal said, for the fourth or fifth time. He was never, ever, ever going to admit that Wes singing to him had been kind of nice.

“You made a cute toddler, Cal.”

“Shut up.” Cal threw the finger over his shoulder and kept walking, cautiously moving aside low-hanging vines as they moved forward. “Yes, it’s boring. It’s all this mundane swamp bullshit. I came here for zombies. Where are the zombies, guys?”

“I’m sure we’ll find them soon.” Mick said in a clearly unimpressed tone.

“Or they’ll find us.” Wes deadpanned.

“Yeah, yeah. Ominous music and sinister shadows. I came here to find the living dead, and all we’ve found is snakes and bugs.” Cal sighed. “Screw this. I’m giving up treasure hunting and I’m going to run a ranch instead.”

“You hate cows.”

“That’s because they’re creepy. I’ll have goats instead. They don’t taste as good, but they’re a lot more…”

“Cal!” Cal choked a little as he was yanked backwards by the collar, but any thought he had of reprimanding Wes for manhandling him quickly vanished when he saw the hand, now in front of him, that had darted out from the greenery to grab him. It was rotting and half-skeletal, and as Cal recognized this the arm came after it, followed by the body, shambling out from the vines.

Cal smiled. “Found you, you fucker.” The zombie was in bad shape as zombies (Cal assumed) tended to be, missing its jaw and eyes, most of its skin rotted away. Mick lifted it from the ground with his magic and the zombie rattled in an agitated way. “They’re supposed to moan.” Cal said, a little disappointed but mostly not.

“I’m sure it would if it had lungs.” Mick’s voice was hard like ice and he made a gesture, and the zombie contorted as is pressed upon by great weights on all sides, rattling as it was crushed to a pile
of glop and bone fragments.

“Gross.” Cal declared, short sword out and looking carefully around. He didn’t detect any other movement in the plants. “Alright, we’re on the right track. It can’t be much farther.”

It wasn’t. He pushed through the rest of the trees on the path they were on and came into a wide clearing that was gloomy from swamp gas even if it was open to the sky. In the centre of the clearing was an obviously abandoned house that looked structurally sound to Cal aside from the broken windows, surrounded by a boggy pond that had only one path crossing it. No more zombies were in sight, but… “They’re in the mud.” Wes sounded a little faint. “They’re in the mud waiting for us to cross the path.”

Cal nodded, glanced back at Wes. “You okay?”

Wes smiled weakly. “I guess I was expecting it to be like in plays when it’s just a guy in a loincloth and stupid makeup.”

“Yeah, I don’t think anyone is harbouring secret sexual fantasies about Bones back there.” Cal muttered, only to be on the receiving end of two rather judgemental looks. “Oh come on, like I’m the only one!”

“You definitely are.” Mick said, and Wes nodded.

“Whatever.” Cal grumbled, and set for to the path, sword out.

True to Wes’s prediction, the bog started to roil and bubble as they approached and before Cal had even set foot on the path to the house, hands and heads and torsos were lifting out of the mud in ghastly alarm.

These ones, Cal noted as he stepped onto the path, trusting Mick to magic the worst of them away but slicing at stray hands with his sword as he kept moving, were much better preserved than their sentry in the trees. The mud seemed to have mummified them to an extent, skin stretched over bones and taut muscle like leather. Cal wondered distractedly if the magic that was animating them had helped in that; some of them had clearly been dead much longer than others, with levels of desiccation varying.

All of this he noticed in the few seconds before the undead were swarming the path. They weren’t moaning like they should have been—zombies, it turned out, hissed, like gas escaping from a vent. “There are a lot of them.” Cal muttered, trying to look everywhere at once, striking out at anything that got too close. Most of them were repelled by an invisible force, but Mick didn’t have time to destroy them like he had before because of their numbers.

Wes was grunting with exertion and Cal glanced over his shoulder to see him swinging his axe in wide arcs, removing limbs and heads and cleaving torsos, leaving a path of fallen zombies in his wake.

Cal knew he should have been more concerned for their safety but he wasn’t—for all the horror stories associated with them, nothing had indicated that the undead were actually that dangerous against well-armed and magically protected people.

But then, Cal wondered how many of the zombies had thought similar things back when they were alive. “They’re protecting the house.” Cal called, realizing belatedly that his being in the front was silly when he was doing the least damage to the creatures. He slashed at the hand of one that reached for his leg and took off some fingers, then kicked it in the face, sending it sprawling back into the
mud. “The stone must be in there.”

A zombie grabbed Cal’s ankle and pulled him to the ground, several hands grabbing him at once as if to tear him apart or pull him into the mud and Cal shouted in instinctive fear, but a sound like a tree being felled filled his ears and all the hands vanished. Wes dragged Cal to his feet with one hand, splitting skulls with the other, and Cal noticed that the zombies around them were now armless. Mick snarled and waved a hand towards the house and a glut of fire shot in a long bar that seared everything, clearing a path for them. “Go.”

They went, Cal letting Wes lead the way this time until they got to the door of the house. “At least inside there will be walls and hallways.” Cal muttered as he found the door locked and, unperturbed, pulled a lockpick from his sleeve. “Easier to fight.”

“Assuming we can get in.” Wes was now blocking Cal bodily from any more zombies that might try to approach.

“Of course we can get in.” Cal grinned as he heard the lock click and opened the door cheekily. “Easy.”

The three of them rushed inside and slammed the door shut behind them, panting. The hissing sounds were blocked off but the zombies immediately started scratching at the doors. Mick laid his hands flat on the wood and concentrated. Cal just assumed he was casting a barrier around the door and didn’t waste time asking.

“You shouldn’t have come in.”

Cal started and looked around to identify the source of the quiet voice. They were in an entrance hall, dark and musty but kept up pretty well considering. There was no evidence that plants had grown through the walls or foundation, which Cal would have expected in an abandoned building in a swamp, and even less sign that any animals used the house.

There was a curved staircase leading up to a second level on one side of the hall and there was a young boy in white standing at the base of the stairs. He was wearing a mottled helmet that would cover half if face if he hadn’t tilted it back and had an empty scabbard at his hip, and he watched Cal, Wes and Mick with sorrow in his eyes. “Sorry to intrude.” Cal said. “Is this your house?” Obviously it wasn’t, though stranger things had happened.

The boy shook his head. “There are monsters in here.”

“There are monsters out there too.”

“The ones in here are worse.” The boy said sadly. “There are two that are really bad. You’re doomed.”

Cal’s expression tightened. “We’ve been in danger before, we’re good at it.”

The boy shook his head. “You’re going to die.” He said, tears streaking his face. “I’m so sorry, it’s all my fault.”

“I’m sure it’s not…”

“Cal.” Wes put a hand on his shoulder, drawing Cal’s attention for a second. “Who are you talking to?”

“What do you mean? Wes, there’s a kid right there.” Cal indicated the stairs, which were now empty.
Faintly, he could hear the sound of footsteps and Cal moved to follow after them.

This time it was Mick who grabbed him, by the wrist. “Don’t.”

“I need to find him—he’s in danger!” The need to follow after that child had just burrowed into Cal’s chest. He needed to go after him, follow those footsteps.

“You’re being compelled.” Mick said softly, putting a hand on Cal’s forehead. Suddenly the desire to follow the boy was gone and Cal felt dizzy. “I’m guessing you were talking to a ghost.”

Shaking his head to clear it, Cal frowned. He didn’t like people using magic on him. Especially that insidious sort of mind-magic that could work without anyone seeing it. “A ghost? So this place is haunted too.” Of course it was, Cal figured.

“Just a guess.” Mick nodded. “You said it was a kid, a young boy? I’m guessing it was Tobias.”

Making the connection, Cal nodded. Mick had told them about Matthias the Mad and his killing spree across the country, culminating with his disappearance into this swamp a hundred years ago. The story went that a boy named Tobias had followed him into the swamp with a rusty sword, and though neither of them had ever been seen again, all the spells Matthias had wrought were suddenly unravelled three weeks later and so it was assumed he’d been killed.

It looked like Tobias had been killed too. “He’s younger than we are.” Cal muttered, upset at a hundred-year-old crime.

“Yeah.” Mick sighed. “The necromancy that’s keeping all the zombies animate must have disrupted his soul as well.”

“I thought ghosts stuck around because of unfinished business or some bullshit.” Cal said, looking around the hall.

“I’m not an expert.” Mick admitted. “They do, but that’s not the only reason.”

“And this stone.” Wes said. “It’s got so much power that just being here in the house is causing all of this?”

From somewhere they heard sounds of shuffling, and hissing. Mick glanced down a hallway before heading for the stairs. “They’ve gotten into the house.” He said. “And it must. We have to find it to stop all of this—there’s so much necromancy in the air I can’t sense it at all.”

“Be careful.” Cal warned. “Tobias said there are some in the house too. He said there are two who are worse than the rest. He seemed afraid.” Mick nodded, and Cal, keeping an eye on the bottom of the stairs as they climbed, continued. “Can you undo all of this, though?” He asked, voicing a concern he’d had for a while. “You aren’t a necromancer.”

Mick nodded. “Necromancers are unusual among magic practitioners.” He said after a minute. “As a mage I use threads of power called the Pillars to do magic. Wizards do something similar by manipulating what they call the Base Elements and sorcerers’ power comes from Order and Chaos, which are the Primal Forces. Witches draw their power from the earth itself.” Cal nodded along. Some of this he’d already heard, but some of it was new. Hopefully it eventually led to what he cared about at the moment, though, which was dead people walking around and hissing at them.

“The point is we all use foundational powers of the world to do magic. Necromancy harnesses the power of those forces as they’re present in a living body—usually they’re expelled in death. In theory, though, anyone who does magic could do that.”
“Meaning anyone who does magic can become a necromancer.”

“Yes. It’s the only type of magic you have to choose to manipulate.” Mick paused. “Though I think some people are born with just that power, but anyway. The majority of necromancers can also use regular magic like I can. Matthias was a mage, but he must have been a necromancer as well. That’s not in the stories.” That last part was quiet, and Cal wasn’t sure it was for either of them.

“This is the long way of telling us you can do necromancy, isn’t it?” Wes asked.

“It’s the long way of explaining that I can probably cancel all of this out if we find the stone.” Mick muttered quietly.

Cal nodded. “It’s okay, Mick. Don’t worry too much about it, it will be fine.” He didn’t just mean about getting rid of the zombies—necromancy was illegal as far as Cal knew.

Mick, seeming to get what Cal had said, smiled at him.

“So how come we couldn’t see Cal’s ghost?” Wes asked as they came to the top of the stairs. They were in a hallway that intersected with another hallway after about twenty paces. Two closed doors were on one side and stained wallpaper was peeling on both walls. “I mean fine, I can’t see it, but how come you couldn’t?”

“Not sure.” Mick admitted. “Ghosts are fickle. My guess would be that…” He stopped, staring ahead. There was someone standing in the hallway’s intersection, holding a sword and wearing armour.

And hissing slightly.

*The ones in here are worse.* Cal thought, watching the zombie. It had been a woman, tall and broad. “She’s better preserved than the ones outside.” Mick muttered. “The necromantic magic is stronger in here.”

“I feel like that’s less important than why she has a sword.” Wes hissed.

“Because she had one when she died.” Cal kept his voice low. There was a logic to this, he thought. “You don’t get inside this place if you aren’t armed, right?”

“And the ones who die in here get to be the household guards.” Wes said, catching on. “Great.”

“She’s not moving.” Mick’s voice was quiet, and as he spoke Cal could hear shuffling in the hall beyond. And then the clear sound of metal scraping against something.

“She’s not alone. She wants us to come to her, into a trap.”

“They can’t be that smart.” Wes insisted.

“Someone’s organizing them.” Cal agreed. Suddenly he could hear hissing and scrabbling from behind them. “They’re coming up the stairs. We can’t stand here all day.”

“The stone isn’t going to be in a drawer somewhere.” Mick said, glancing at the two doors before returning his gaze to the armed zombie and raising a hand. She raised from the ground with a louder hiss. “Whoever’s in charge of all this is going to have it.”

“You think it’s Matthias, don’t you?” Cal asked as Mick made a fist and the zombie startled them all by howling like a wounded animal. Another one appeared behind her with a bow, already strung,
and an arrow nocked.

Aimed at Mick.

“Shit.” Cal had only a second to react and if he shoved Mick aside the arrow would hit Wes instead, so he grabbed Mick and spun them around so that his own back was to the archer. A fiery pain in his left shoulder told him a moment later that the archer had hit his mark.

“Cal!” Mick turned Cal to the side and struck out a hand, a brilliant wave of scarlet flame searing the hallway as it engulfed the two zombies. Looking up, Cal heard the grinding of metal against the floor and the flames dispersed. There were now five zombies standing in the hallway’s intersection, four taller forms in armour in surrounding a smaller one.

The short zombie was wearing stained linen that had once been white, a dented helmet that covered half his face, and holding a rusty sword.

“Tobias.” Cal whispered, just as the boy raised his sword and pointed it at them, sending a wave of rippling light down the hall. Mick made a startled sound and threw his hands out, and Tobias’s magic collided with a barrier that left the hallway smelling of ashes. The sounds of hissing got louder and Cal glanced over his shoulder to see the monsters from outside approaching them at a shamble. The armed creatures were moving now too, clearly directed by the wave of Tobias’s rusty weapon. “The room, there.” He said, and all three of them hurried for the closest door, forcing it open and slamming it shut behind them.

The room had been a display room for antiques at some point and contained all sorts of shelves and tables, though there was nothing of any value on them. The ceiling was sagging and there was mould on the carpet, and the room smelled like mildew. Cal pointed towards a heavy looking armoire and Wes nodded, moving over to slide it in front of the door with a series of grunts while Mick waved his hands, placing a barrier. “None of that will keep them out for long.” Mick muttered, turning Cal around and unceremoniously yanking the arrow out from his shoulder. “You need to start wearing chainmail.”

Cal shouted in pain, but it faded quickly as Mick cast healing magic on him. “Why can Tobias use magic?” He demanded.

“He shouldn’t be able to. I don’t understand it, only the living can touch the Pillars, but that’s what he did, I saw him pull on Dark.”

“Maybe it wasn’t him.” Wes suggested, looking around the room and not finding another exit. The walls were covered in faded oil paintings of noble-looking people. “He seemed to be controlling the others, but maybe he’s being controlled too.”

“Two monsters.” Cal muttered, remembering what the ghost had told him before. “We need to get out of here. Wes, pull back the carpet there and hack a hole in the floor.” He could hear the sound of metal scraping just outside the door. “Quickly.”

Wes nodded and went to do as Cal had said, pulling back the grimy carpet in one corner and having at the old wood floors with his axe. Cal pointed to the ceiling in the opposite corner. “Mick. Make a hole there, and then smear some of the blood from my cut near it. We’ll make it look like we went that way. Hopefully we can fool them for a few minutes at least.”

The crashing on either side of the room as his friends broke holes for them to escape through almost disguised the banging that he could hear against the door, and the heavy shaking of the armoire, which Cal could only attribute to Tobias trying to get through Mick’s shield. He wondered how long
it would hold up and reflected that the zombies or whoever was controlling them would know the layout of the house perfectly, which would make them hard to escape.


Cal nodded, his shoulder still throbbing from the attack earlier. Mick used a faster but less effective type of healing when they were in the middle of an operation, one that let him move but didn’t totally heal the wound. It was a way of saving energy and given what they were up against, Cal thought it was prudent. He glanced down through the hole and saw what looked like a kitchen, with a stone counter in the centre. He didn’t hear anything and nodded, leaping into Wes’s hole without hesitation. “Make sure you pull the carpet back when you come down.” He called up, sliding down from the counter and looking around.

There was a little bit of light coming in from two grimy windows on one wall that weren’t big enough to escape through. It was definitely a kitchen, with counters and cupboards all around and an oven attached to the wall in one corner. There were two exits, one leading to the front of the house and one leading into what would be a back courtyard. Both of them showed evidence of having been barricaded at some point, and of those barricades having been breached. Pots and pans and broken furniture were scattered in piles in front of both doors, and there was, Cal saw, old blood dried onto the stone floor and walls in a clear spray pattern.

There was a walk-in pantry on the other side of the room with the door closed, and Cal headed towards it with his sword out. “Some of our friends upstairs tried to hide in here at some point.” He said to Wes, who had just come down from the hole. Mick was pulling himself down as he spoke.

Wes looked around the mess of the kitchen and nodded. “It didn’t work.”

“No.” Cal eased the pantry door open, wincing when it squeaked, and peered inside. Empty shelves and casks and crates, but nothing else. More blood, too. “It didn’t.”

Mick landed awkwardly on the counter and Wes caught him as he started to tumble. He looked back up at the hole, which Cal saw was now covered again, and wiggled a finger. “A small illusion.” He explained. “They probably won’t even look but if they do hopefully they’ll see whole floor.”

Cal wasn’t sure that was a good idea. “Unless Tobias can sense the magic.”

“That’s why it’s small. And Cal, you can’t do that—that isn’t Tobias. It’s just something using his body as a weapon.”

“Yeah, I get that.” It was hard not to see their attacker and the ghost who’d warned them as the same person, though. “Matthias.”

“I don’t see how he could still be alive after all this time.” Mick said, but in a tone that suggested that was exactly what he thought. “But I don’t care what kind of power that stone has, there’s no way an inanimate object has this kind of power without someone using it.”

A huge crash from up above silenced all of them and they all looked up at the ceiling expectantly. Cal jerked his head towards the door that would take them towards the front of the house and all three of them headed for it. If their ruse didn’t work, there was no point in standing around waiting to get caught.

Someone, at least, had known where they were. “It worked.” The ghost of Tobias said, sounding surprised. “They’re all going up to the third floor to look for you. He’s going to split them up to
cover both staircases so that you won’t escape again, but you’re down here.”

“Good, we have some time.” Cal said, aware this time that Mick and Wes could only hear his side of the conversation. “Is there an attic? If we’re lucky they’ll even look up there; we may have bought as much as half an hour.”

Tobias nodded slowly. “You have to leave.” He said. “You can leave before he realizes you tricked him. He’s going to be really mad.”

So it wasn’t just a mindless puppet, Cal thought. Unless Tobias wasn’t talking about his body. “We’re not going to leave.” He told the ghost, who flinched. “We’re looking for something and we can’t leave until we find it.”

“You have to!” Tobias insisted, face full of worry. “You’re going to die if you stay here.”

“No, we aren’t.”

“Yes, you are! Everyone who stays here dies!”

“Tobias.” Cal said calmly, and the ghost started at the use of his name and looked at Cal as if he’d grown a second head. “We aren’t going to die, I promise. But I need you to help us, okay? I know there’s a person controlling them all. Where is he?”

“No.” Tobias took a step back as if Cal might hurt him. “No, you can’t. He’ll kill you. Why would you want to go to him? He’ll kill you. You’re safe up here, you can leave. He never comes up. He’ll kill you if you go to him. I’m not telling you where he is, you’ll die and then your bodies will wake up and you’ll spend all of time hunting after me with him and…no. I’m not telling you. You have to leave.”

“Does he know where Matthias is or not?” Mick asked, into what to him must have seemed like a long silence.

Tobias flinched at that name and Cal reached out as if to pat him. “He’s not going to hurt us, I promise. We aren’t going to die.”

“Living people always make that promise.” Tobias said in a small voice. “And they always break it.”

“We…”

“No!” Tobias turned and fled, fading into the darkness with the words “Get out” floating in the air behind him. He moved towards the front of the house and the sound of footsteps echoed again in Cal’s head, trailing in that direction, making him want to follow. He took a step that way instinctively before forcing himself to turn around and face his friends.

“He’s doing it again.” Mick nodded and put his palm on Cal’s forehead, and the sensation faded.

“Did he tell you where Matthias was?”

“Yeah. He didn’t mean to, but he did. He said we’re safe up here, and that he never comes up. We’re on the main floor right now, so there must be a cellar or a basement.” Cal felt a little bad, like he had somehow tricked the poor ghost or something.

“The cellar entrance would be in the back of the house.” Wes said. “Probably outside. I bet if we went back through the kitchen and out the other door it would be there.”
Cal nodded, smiling at Wes. “See, and you say you’re just the muscle.” Wes scowled at him and they retraced their steps, going through the kitchen and into the back courtyard, where sure enough there was a heavy cellar door that covered a staircase leading underground. Cal didn’t open it just yet. “Mick, you’re going to be the main guy down here. You know how useful the rest of us are when there’s magic.”

He didn’t need to actually voice the question of whether Mick was okay. Mick nodded at him, taking a breath and moving his hands. “Give me a minute, I’m setting up some spells now, just in case.” After a pause of a minute, he said, “it might not surprise you to learn that I’m not the most powerful mage in the world.”

“It does surprise me, actually.” Cal said, trying not to get too tense as he kept an eye on their surroundings. “I only allow the best on this team. How did you sneak by the screening process?”

“The screening process was you spitting on my hand and declaring yourself my best friend.”

“Right, that’s fair.” Cal conceded.

“Anyway. He’s going to be stronger than me. I’m hoping that he’ll be thrown off by me like other people are.”

“How so?”

“Most people who can touch two pillars use Shadow in conjunction with either Light or Dark. I can’t touch Shadow but I use Light and Dark just fine. It’s unusual, and when mages see me use my powers they start to form assumptions about what I can do.”

“Only to have you defy them.” Cal said, seeing how that could throw someone off. He’d known that there was something peculiar about Mick’s powers because that was why he’d left the academy instead of staying to peruse higher levels of training—he hadn’t wanted a lifetime of people poking at him to figure out the anomaly, which Cal thought was fair.

“Yeah. Hopefully he’ll hesitate. I’m ready.”

Cal nodded, and he and Wes opened the double doors, and let Mick take point as they moved down the cellar stairs. The stairs were slick with moss and condensation, which dripped from the ceiling and walls. The cellar wasn’t that deep, but it smelled like rot.

They could hear something moving in the darkness. Mick glanced at the two of them and nodded, heading down.

Halfway down the steps the cellar lit up with a bright light that had Cal squinting. “Visitors.” A harsh, rasping voice said. “So rare these days. So rare for anyone to see me of their own accord. Suicidal, I wonder? Or just stupid?”

Weapons out, they came down into the cellar. Mick’s head just brushed the low roof, and Wes had to crouch a little. Not optimal for fighting. There was a man in the very centre of the room, sitting on the floor in the centre of what looked to Cal like a magic circle. It was ornate and spread across most of the cellar, and it looked to have been etched in dry old blood. The man was wearing black velvet and leaning on a dapper walking stick. He was lean and hawkish and mean-looking.

And he was dead, a zombie. Even better preserved than Tobias and the others in the house, but pallid and sunken in a way that living people weren’t. “Guess we know how he survived all this time.” Cal muttered. “He didn’t.”
“You turned yourself into the undead.” Mick whispered, as if hoping the corpse somehow wouldn’t hear him. “That’s not even possible, but…why?”

“It was rather more complicated than that, boy.” Matthias the Mad rasped with a chuckle. “A long story, and an old one. Have you come to aid me? News of my efforts has finally spread and you’ve realized I’m not as mad as they claim? It’s about time.”

“No.” Mick shook his head resolutely, even though Cal thought it would be better to play along. “No. Nobody is coming to your aid, Matthias. Your writings were destroyed, your disciples were arrested. You’ve become a cautionary tale for all mages in training. Nobody is ever going to help you. We’re here for the stone.”

“Hah!” Matthias’s voice seemed to crack in a bad imitation of a laugh. “Is that so? Fools. They never understood the nobility in my work. The importance.”

“You call this noble?” Wes demanded, waving around and everything.

“You’re too narrow-minded to see it. Well, I’m not like to waste time explaining. You’ll aid me after you’ve died, just like the rest. The stone is mine. You wouldn’t know what to do with it if you had it.” Matthias’s sunken eyes seemed to glint. “Unless you think to fight me, boy?”

“I do.” Mick declared, seeming to stand taller than Cal had ever seen even with the low ceiling. “I’ll finish what Tobias started.”

Now Matthias’s laugh held anger. “Stupid hick child. A stableboy, he was. He thought he could outsmart me. He didn’t understand intelligence. He thinks he can wait me out. He doesn’t understand patience. I even offered him power and he didn’t understand that either. And neither do you if you think to kill me. I’m stronger than you’ve ever dreamed of.”

And, Cal thought vaguely, far less original as well.

“Maybe.” Mick said, raising his hand. “But only as long as that spell you’re sitting in is intact.”

Matthias jerked and the air around them seemed to erupt in screaming, sending Cal and Wes to the ground, hands covering their ears to blot it out. Mick snarled, a loud bang echoing through the cramped cellar, and lines of light snaked towards Matthias, and when those were broken, a wave like what Tobias had thrown at them before.

A startling display of lights filled the room and then coalesced into three long spears. “What.” Mick said, taking a step back. “All three…”

“Turns out you can learn a lot when you’ve nothing to do but practice for decades.” Matthias sneered, and the lights speared out at the three of them. Mick shouted, waved a hand, and Cal felt engulfed by a flowing cold that carried him away, sunk the world in a pit of nothing and…

They were standing in the house’s entrance hall. Mick fell to his knees and Cal, nauseous, moved to help him. “I didn’t know you could teleport.” He muttered, glancing to make sure Wes was okay.

“Neither did I, to be honest.” Mick sounded sick. “He didn’t hesitate. And…he was touching all three Pillars. That’s supposed to be impossible—only the chosen one can do that, and that’s just a stupid story.”

“I told you.” Cal looked up to see Tobias sitting at the base of the stairs. He was wide eyed and clearly afraid. “I told you not to go to him. I don’t know how he didn’t kill you, but he knows you’re here now and…” He looked up. “He’s told them you’re here. They’re coming down. He’s coming
down. You’re doomed if you don’t leave, right now. Please.”

“I think we should leave, Cal.” Mick said quietly, grabbing Wes’s hand to help himself stand. Obviously he didn’t realize Cal was getting that same advice from somewhere else.

“Why?” Cal asked. “We haven’t found the stone yet, we can’t leave.”

“Why do you want the stone?” Tobias asked, standing shakily. Ghosts shouldn’t shake, Cal thought.

“It’s not down there.” Mick said, shaking his head. “Everything we know about it says it’s a powerful necromantic artefact. But he’s only alive because he’s in that circle, drawing energy from somewhere else. If he were to leave, he’d die in a few minutes. There’s no way he has the stone. We have to go, regroup, figure out what to do next.”

“Don’t come back.” Tobias begged. “They’ll be waiting for you. You’ll die.”

“He doesn’t have it?” Cal asked, mind working. If Matthias didn’t have it, then… He looked up. Turned to the ghost. “Tobias. I need you to give us the stone, please.”

“I…” Tobias backed up a step, again glancing upwards. “I don’t have it. I don’t.”

“Yes, you do.” Cal said, taking a step towards the boy. “That’s why they spend all their time hunting you. Because he needs it and you have it.” His expression softened. “You’ve been protecting it from him this whole time, haven’t you? Hiding it, so that he had to stay here. So that they all had to stay here.”

Tears welled up in Tobias’s eyes. “They die if they move too far from it, or from him. That’s why they need to be in the same place. If you take it they’ll be able to follow you. Into the world and they’ll kill everyone. Even if you hide it they’ll know it’s gone, and…”

Cal dug into his pocket and found a stone he’d picked up earlier, tossed it to Mick over his shoulder. “They won’t know it’s gone.”

“The decoy spell?” Mick asked, and Cal nodded. “That could work. If you’re worried they’d sense us taking it and follow, if they thought it was still here, at least for long enough for us to get away…”

“Toby.” Cal said, and Tobias’s expression got even more surprised. “Please, can you give us the stone? You don’t need to protect it anymore. We can do that for you now. You don’t have to stay here with them anymore.”

“Is…” Tobias was visibly shaking, hands clutched in front of himself. “Is it you? Are you… I’m supposed to wait for you. Who are you?”

“My name’s Cal, we’re…” Cal paused, something tugging at his mind. He spoke without really thinking. “We’re Armageddon’s Vanguard.”

“Cal…”

“Shh…” Cal held up a hand to silence Wes, keeping his gaze on Tobias.

Who was looking at him in awe, crying openly now. “You are? Really? I’ve… she told me, the old lady told me to wait for you. To give you the Jewel. I’ve been waiting for you. I’ve been waiting for such a long time.” He ran forward, bawling, and threw himself on Cal, who was surprised to find out that ghosts weren’t entirely ethereal. Tobias didn’t weigh much and touching him was like holding something filled with air, but he was definitely there and Cal reached around to pat him on the back.
“It’s okay.” He said, as reassuring as he could be. “You’re okay now. I’m sorry it took us so long, Toby. You must have been so scared. You must have been so lonely, Toby. I’m so sorry.” He felt tears running down his own cheeks as well.

“I knew you were coming.” Tobias insisted. “I knew. I knew I just had to wait. But it was so hard…”

“What’s going on?” Mick asked, looking up the stairs. Cal could hear the faint sound of people approaching. And the faintest sound of metal scraping against something.

“You’re very brave, Toby. You did such a good job. I need you to give us the Jewel now, okay?”

Tobias nodded, stepping back and wiping at his ghostly face. “Are you going to kill them? You are, right?”

There was no question who they were. Cal nodded. “Yes, we are.”

Tobias nodded again and, with a deep breath that he didn’t need, clasped his hands together in front of him. “I hid it.” He said. “I knew that they would find it if I hid it here in the house. But… sometimes I can see a bridge, between here and…somewhere else. And I thought…I hid it there.”

“That’s very clever.” Cal said quietly. They never would have found it since it sounded like Tobias had removed it from the physical world altogether. “That’s why they were hunting you.”

Another nod. “Because they wanted me to tell them where it was. They…” Tobias shook his head, not willing to finish. “They’re evil.” He said instead. “They chase me all day and all night. The one…the one in my body, he never sleeps. I can’t ever sleep or he would find me.”

“You’ll be able to sleep now, I promise.” Tobias talked as if his body was host to something more than just Matthias’s will. Cal was inclined to believe him.

A light was glowing between Tobias’s hands, and from Mick and Wes’s reactions Cal thought they could see it too. A moment later Tobias opened his hands to reveal a small purple stone that fit neatly into his palm. He handed it to Cal. Mick hissed behind him. “That thing’s really powerful.” He muttered with a curse.

A sharp sound of metal grating against the wall got their attention. Tobias’s body was at the top of the stairs, and all but leapt down them. Of the zombies with him there was no sign, but Cal guessed he’d run ahead of them to get the stone. He could hear them all now, shuffling and shambling their way down the hall.

Tobias looked at his body with a defiant, if still fearful expression. “You’re too late.” He said, not a waver in his voice.

_Time will tell, little thing._ Cal started at the voice, which had clearly come from the corpse despite its mouth not moving. And then Tobias’s body launched at Cal, sword aimed to remove his head.

Wes intercepted the monster, knocking it off course with a shoulder blow before chasing after him with his axe. Mick grabbed Cal’s hand. “You have to go.” He said. “Wes and I will hold him off while you run.”

“No.” Cal said, one hand still on Tobias’s shoulder. “We’re going to kill him.”

“Cal!”
“Mick.”

The look on his face must have convinced Mick, who just shook his head. “Okay. Give me the stone, I bet I can use it to break the animation spell.” Some of the other zombies had appeared at the head of the steps, hissing as they approached.

Cal nodded, and moved to hand it off. The very second he did, though, a howl seemed to rend the air and the house shook. “Oh, no.” Mick muttered, watching the top of the stairs.

All the undead gathered up there had collapsed as one, looking like the corpses they were. “No.” Tobias echoed. “He’s coming. But…he never leaves the cellar.”

“Matthias?”

Tobias and Mick both nodded. “He can’t survive for long outside of that circle, but he’s taken all the power from the zombies for himself. Ten, fifteen minutes…but if he gets the stone…”

“He’ll waste a few of those minutes getting here from the cellar.” Cal said, grabbing Tobias’s wrist and heading for the stairs. “Come on, Toby, come with us. We just need to outrun him until he…”

A loud snap cracked through the entrance hall and Matthias was standing there suddenly, eyes glowing with power, watching Cal and Mick. “Unless he teleports right into the middle of the room.” Cal finished. “Hide, Toby.”

“But…”

“Hide!” Cal repeated, raising his blade. “You didn’t spend all that time waiting so we could get killed in front of you.”

Tobias nodded and moved back a ways, though he remained in sight. The room filled with crackling smoke, which vanished after a moment. “I’ll deal with him.” Mick muttered. “Help Wes.” Cal nodded and moved off, pausing to press the purple stone into Mick’s hand. Mick grimaced but took it.

“You think you can do anything to stop me, boy?” Matthias asked, derision high in his croaked voice. “You don’t understand power.”

“I understand that it’s not worth whatever the hell that you’ve done to yourself.” Mick moved his hand, showed Matthias the stone. “And I understand how to undo that.”

Cal tried to listen to the two of them as he moved to help Wes, but the creature that looked like Tobias got in a heavy kick that had to have been backed by magic and lifted Wes from the ground, slamming him into the staircase. “Shit.” He rushed at the zombie, sword out, and slashed its left shoulder from behind, dancing around to avoid the counter attack and putting himself between Tobias’s body and Wes.

He remembered what Mick had said earlier about how people were often thrown by the way he used magic. Cal knew that his presence in a fight could often throw people off for a moment as well. It was easy to look at Wes’s size and Mick’s magic and realize who the heavy hitters of this team were, and which member wasn’t the biggest threat.

But Cal could hit pretty heavy when he needed to as well. Sword twirling in his right hand, Cal parried all of Tobias’s blows and kicked him in the knee before moving, forward and backward, fluid and unceasing. If zombies bled, Tobias’s forearms and hands would have been covered in red after the first few seconds. You think skill with a sword impresses me, child?
“Who are you?” Cal demanded as he moved. “You’re not human.” And never had been, he was pretty sure.

I owe you no explanation. The zombie gestured and Cal saw the motion for what it was, leapt quickly to one side to avoid the wave of power that was tossed at him. The wound in his left shoulder had opened up again at some point and he could feel blood flowing down his back. Unconnected, he felt a tingling in the back of his mind, as if there were something there trying to assert itself.

Cal moved back to avoid a fierce kick, but the momentum left him unable to dodge the cascade of lights that blinked into existence all around him. They exploded in a flash and that tingling covered Cal’s entire body for just a moment before he was thrown back, breath failing him for pain as he struck a wall and slumped to the ground. Tobias’s body moved, too quickly, and Cal couldn’t get up fast enough.

You’re the Doomed One, aren’t you? The memory crashed through his consciousness, freezing him in place. Maybe that was what that meant. He was meant to die here. He was…

With a roar, Wes appeared and slammed Tobias’s body aside, following through with a swing of his axe that nearly took an arm off. He quickly yanked Cal to his feet. “What are you doing? You’re lucky it hesitated--you weren’t even trying to move, Cal!” He looked angry, something Cal didn’t see often.

“Sorry, I…” Cal shook his head, not really sure what to say. He had been fully prepared to die in that moment.

A loud crash from the other side of the room drew Cal’s attention. Mick was on his knees, one hand held out in a fist, bleeding from his forehead. His gaze was locked on Matthias. “I can give you power beyond measure.” Matthias grated, the floor under him cracking. “Give me that stone and you will become a god.”

“Go to hell.” Mick grunted, clenching his fist tighter. The waves of magic coming from both of them were practically visible and maybe it was just Cal’s imagination, but he thought he could see them in a sort of tug-of-war.

“Cal.” Wes called, and Cal turned in time to block a strike from Tobias’s body, only to be hit with a wave of power that sent both him and Wes crashing into the ground, pinned by an invisible hand. The creature approached them slowly, scraping the rusty sword against the ground as it walked.

And was suddenly beset, arms wrapping around its neck and torso from behind. Tobias’s ghost made as if to choke his own body, a fierce look on his face. A flash of white light separated the two of them with a stagger, and Tobias put himself in between Cal, Wes and the zombie. “Give me back my sword.” He snarled. Cal wanted to get up and help, but he was still struggling to unpin himself, feeling like he was losing more blood from his shoulder than he should be.

The voice that belonged to the creature laughed, lifted the blade. Better you had stayed hidden, little thing. Now I shall be rid of you.

“I’m not afraid of you!” Tobias threw himself at the monster, grappling with it and clearly trying to take the weapon from its hands.

They both tumbled to the ground and struggled for just a moment, and as they did Cal was able to stand. “Toby!”
He had just gotten to his feet when a brilliant flash lit the room, coming from both of them, and the ghost disappeared, leaving only the corpse. Which stood, silently turning to look at the two of them with blade raised. *My victims are rarely granted reprieves, even of seconds.* It said. *Be grateful for the little thing.*

“FUCK you.” Cal said, defiantly moving into a fighting stance even though he knew he couldn’t win. He controlled his shaking at Tobias’s disappearance. This thing—this monster… “His name is Tobias. You’re going to pay for what you did to him.”

*I think*... The monster lurched around, as if drawn by the sudden spike in intensity of the magic battle behind them. The waves of magic had taken on a screaming quality, Mick looked as if he were being crushed by something, and Matthias was on the ground as well.

“To me!” Matthias shouted, his hand out towards the monster. “Your power, now!”

The monster snarled, but swung away from Cal and Wes to head towards Matthias. Cal moved to intercept but was tossed aside like a doll. *Be patient.* It told him. *I will return to end you soon.*

“You’re just a servant.” Cal realized, tasting blood in his mouth.

The creature didn’t answer, moving towards Matthias with movements less fluid than before, as if their fight had injured it, though Cal didn’t remember that happening. Matthias had his hand out, calling the monster closer, but it halted just out of reach, suddenly frozen. Tense, it raised a hand shakily, as if being restrained by something.

And then the monster was enveloped in a while light from inside and it screamed, a sound that shook Cal’s bones, and a dark stain of something was pushed out from the corpse, and fled, darting up through the ceiling and away. Standing straight, Tobias looked down at Matthias, and raised his sword. “I’m not afraid of you, either.” He said, bringing the blade down.

“No!” Was all Matthias had time to shout before his head was taken off with one heavy stroke. At the same time, Mick made a hard pulling gesture and with another echoing holler of pain, Matthias collapsed in a pile, a pillar of light expanding around him, crashing through the ceiling and steadily destroying everything around him as it grew.

Cal surged to his feet and raced forward. He grabbed Mick’s belt in one hand and Tobias’s collar in the other, and pulled them both back, aided by Wes’s arm around his middle, and all four of them fell away from that pillar as it expanded and disintegrated everything it touched... until it vanished, leaving a broken corpse in the centre. Sheaves of rubble fell from around the area of the house that had been destroyed. The roof of the entrance hall was now open sky.

In a pile with Wes behind him, Mick beside him and Tobias in his lap, Cal panted. “Mick? You okay?”

“Yeah.” Was the answer. “He was strong. Really, really strong. Turns out I’m not very good at necromancy.”

“Wes?”

“Fine. A little annoyed at your tendency to run towards danger, but fine.”

“Toby?”

“He’s dead.” Tobias said in a quiet voice. Cal sat up a little straighter and pulled the boy into his lap. “He’s dead.” Tobias was shaking, hand still gripped on the rusty sword. He looked up at Cal with
the wide, sunken eyes of a corpse. Cal suspected he’d have been crying if his tear ducts had been functioning. “They’re both dead.”

“You did it, Toby.” Tobias couldn’t cry, but Cal could and he felt ears coming to his eyes now. “Neither of them can hurt anyone now. You did it.”

“I…” Tobias’s voice hitched. “I did it. Do…you think they’re proud of me?” He was starting to sound faint, and the light that still covered him was fading. “Ophelia and Adrian? And Monty and Lord and Lady Faran, and…do you think they’re happy?”

“I think they are.” Cal said. “They’re all so proud of you, Toby.” He hugged the boy tightly, felt Wes and Mick touching him, their heat comforting. “You were so brave for such a long time. Of course they’re proud of you.”

“Are they waiting for me? Do you think they waited for me, Cal?”

“I do.” Cal said, tears falling now. “I do, Toby. They love you, so they waited. I promise they’re waiting.”

“Okay.” Tobias smiled, light fading and his eyes fluttering closed. “I’m tired, Cal. I’m so tired. I haven’t slept in such a long time.”

“You can go to sleep now, Toby. It’s okay. We’re all safe now. You kept us all safe. It’s okay to sleep now.”


Cal hugged Toby’s body tighter. “I’m sorry.” He said softly. “I wish I could have helped you.”

“Cal…” Mick moved himself into a sitting position, leaning in against Cal. Wes was hugging him from behind.

“A hundred years.” Cal cried. “He waited for a hundred years. They chased him day and night and he had to run and hide. For a hundred years. It would have been so easy for him to just give up, give them the stone but he hid it from them for a hundred years. He must have been so scared, and so lonely, and…he was waiting for us.”

“There’s nothing we could have done, Cal.” Wes said, a deep rumble that Cal felt in his chest.

Cal nodded. “I know. I know we couldn’t. I just…why is it always people like him the world is cruel to?”

“I don’t know.”

“I want to take him back with us.” Cal said. “Bury him properly. He shouldn’t have to stay here.” Bodies were just bodies, it didn’t matter what happened to them after they died. Cal had always thought that and he still did. But it didn’t seem fair, after everything, to leave Toby here.

“We will.” Mick promised. “Let’s stay here for the night. It’s creepy but it should be safe without all the undead.”

Cal nodded. “I’m sorry.” He said, still crying. “I’m sorry. We got what we came for. I dragged us all the way here, I know I should be happy, but…”
“It’s okay.” Wes said, and Mick nodded. “It’s okay, Cal.”

“I love you both so much.” He sobbed. “I don’t know…I just love you, both of you.”

“We love you too, Cal.” Wes told him, and Cal nodded at the answer because he knew. If there was one thing he knew it was that.

“I couldn’t have held on.” Cal wasn’t totally sure of what he was saying, if he were honest with himself. “Not for a hundred years. Not by myself. With you guys I could. I could forever if I had to. I don’t know how he did it by himself.”

“People are strong when they need to be.” Wes said quietly.

“Cry, Cal.” Mick said, rubbing his leg. “You should cry for him.” His own eyes were damp as well. “Somebody has to.”

Cal nodded and clutched Tobias tight to his chest, his tears landing on withered skin. The two of them held him for a long time as he sat there and cried over the body of a hero.
Tobias’s funeral was quiet. Cal had convinced a priest in Thorndale to come and say rites and paid a gravedigger to dig the hole, but neither of them stayed beyond their assigned task, because of course neither of them cared all that much about a hundred-year-dead kid. A few people from the town came by the little hill that housed the cemetery, but they hung back and wandered off once it was clear that it was just someone being buried.

Cal had paid quite a bit of money for a nice plot near the top of the hill and a sturdy coffin, and neither Wes nor Mick had complained about the drain on their funds. They had more in the banks anyway; they would just have to stop by one on the way to Merket was all.

Unbeknownst to him until this morning, Mick had devised a little spell to put on the coffin, which he said would ensure that the body would never be animated again. There was little danger of that happening, but Cal thought Toby would have appreciated that. Wes had commissioned a stonecutter to make Tobias a grave stone that had his name, the title “Hundred-Year Guardian” and a simple epitaph that read “He waited.”

Sometimes Cal just didn’t have any words to express how much he loved those two.

When the priest had finished saying all the usual prayers he left, and Cal, Mick and Wes stood in the graveyard by themselves. Snow crunched underfoot as they shifted. “Theodore has a lot of explaining to do.” Cal muttered after several minutes. Both of them looked up at him. “I mean—this wasn’t his fault or anything. But I want to know how he knew about this stone, and what it is. And why it’s so valuable.”

“A stone that can raise the dead.” Mick said, shrugging. “Seems like it’d be inherently valuable.”

“He can’t use it though.” Wes shook his head. “I’m with Cal—I don’t believe he wants to stick it on a shelf and admire it.”

“We’ll ask him.” Cal promised. “And the old lady in Two Oaks. Toby said an old lady told him to guard the stone and give it to Armageddon’s Vanguard. Us.”

“That’s a terrible name.” Mick said. “I don’t like it.”

“Still. I want to talk to her again. I want to know what she knew.”

*You’re the Doomed One, aren’t you?*

“And that dark thing that was possessing Tobias.” Wes added. “It ran away. But what the hell was it?”

“What did Matthias mean when he said we didn’t understand the stone’s power?” Mick asked. But then he shook his head. “But guys, not all questions have answers.”

“Yeah.” Cal looked down at Toby’s grave and sighed. “We should get going.” He moved to head back, but paused, and got down on his knees, hands flat together with his thumbs hooked together to pray.

Cal didn’t pray very often, but he knew the prayers that he was supposed to say over the dead. None of them came to mind just then, and he made both hands into fists and held them together instead.

“Run long and free.” He muttered. “And may your name ring hallowed in the halls of gods.”
The ambush was quick, efficient and effective. One minute they were alone on the road and the next they were surrounded back and front by people who Cal recognized. “Dammit.” He muttered, drawing his sword and turning around.

Beatrice was standing right behind him, sword pointed right at his throat. “You bitch.” He said.

“I haven’t even done anything yet.”

“Yeah, but what you’re about to do is going to make me want to call you a bitch, so I’m getting it out of the way early.”

“Just business, Cal.” Beatrice said, smiling. “And Lillian’s already blocked Mick’s magic, so just come quietly.”

Cal glanced over his shoulder and Mick nodded, looking as pissed as Cal felt, and he sighed, dropped his sword arm. “Fine.”

“Let’s take this off the road. We wouldn’t want someone to come by and think it’s a robbery.”

“No, what would that do to your reputation?” Cal sneered. “Actually, not a damn thing, probably.”

“Just be grateful we’re planning to leave you alive.” She said as her people led them off the road and
over a low hill, where they wouldn’t be visible. This area wasn’t swampland, but there was enough vegetation around that it might even dull some of the sound.

“Someday you’ll regret that you keep doing that.”

“I already do, every time we meet.”

Cal gave her the finger as her people circled around them. He glanced at Wes, whose hand was twitching, and shook his head. It was possible they could win, but he didn’t want to risk it when they were outnumbered. Besides, Cal avoided killing people when he could.

“Take their weapons.” Beatrice said, and a tall man with a beard stepped forward to relieve Cal of his sword, quickly patting him down for other weapons and immediately finding the knife in Cal’s sleeve, which was annoying. Cal glared at him and he smiled apologetically. “And their bags. We’re only looking for the stone, though. No need to take anything else.”

“How generous of you.” Mick muttered.

“You’re such a bitch.” Cal added.

“You already said that.”

“It bears repeating.”

It took a few minutes to go through all the bags, scattering their things on the ground, before Beatrice’s people gave up. “There’s stones everywhere.” Cal said. “If you want one so bad just look on the ground.”

“Cute.” She said, looking at Cal. “One of them must have it on him. Their clothes.”

“You’ve been following us since Merket.”

“Yes.”

The bearded man had approached Cal again, who crossed his arms and stared him down. The man quirked an eyebrow. “You can cooperate or I can start cutting things off, kid.”

Cal glared at him for a minute longer before raising his arms. He wasn’t about to undress himself. Cal was quivering with fury as this went on, and he kept an eye on Mick as Beatrice’s people stripped them all to their underclothes. “A little cold for this.” He said conversationally.

“Worried about shrinkage, Cal?”

“Fuck you.”

“As if you’d even know how.”

“As if you’re not getting off on this.” Cal shot back. “This is probably the only way you get to undress anyone.”

“Here we go.” Beard man said, when his shaking of Cal’s left boot moved the stone loose from the lining. It dropped into the palm of his hand and he smiled at Cal before handing it over to Beatrice.

“You guys okay?” Cal asked the other two.

Wes nodded, fury plain in the way he was standing. He was flushed from his face down to his
shoulders and like Cal couldn’t quite stop shaking with it. Mick was a little more restrained, though he just looked miserable in a way that made Cal want to kill people. “Fine.” Mick said.

“It’s going to be okay. I’ve got this.”

“Do you?” Beatrice said, smiling down at the stone in her hand before tossing it into the bushes. “You think I’ve never seen a decoy spell before?” She asked sweetly. “Where’s the real one?”

“You just threw it in the bush.” Cal said, keeping a firm rein on his expression.

“Sure I did.” Her eyes flicked downwards. “There’s only one place left where they could be hiding it.”

Beatrice’s team moved forward again and Cal narrowed his eyes, glancing first at the younger man headed for Mick, then to Wes and back again. Both of them moved at the same time and the man had both of his arms behind his back before he knew what had happened, twisted just short and what would have been the point of no return. “You touch him.” Cal spat. “I’ll break a lot more than an arm, got it?” Weapons were pointed at him now but Cal ignored them, waiting for the man’s pained nod before letting him go. Wes held on for a second longer as if seriously considering just breaking the arm and being done with it, but ultimately let go and the man staggered off, to the laughter of his comrades.

“How very protective of you.” Beatrice said with a mild sneer. “Makes me wonder if you’re protecting more than his virtue.”

Cal rolled his eyes and reached into his loincloth, pulling out another stone and whipping it at her face.

She caught it with a smirk. “Disgusting. But I’m not surprised.” She slipped it into her pocket and nodded at her people. “Tie them up. We don’t need them following us.”

“If you were better at this you wouldn’t need to resort to theft.” Cal said to her as they produced ropes and began tying all of their hands behind their backs.

“If you were better at this you wouldn’t keep being the victim of theft.” Beatrice said, stepping closer and producing a small knife, with which she sliced the material of Cal’s loincloth. The fabric unravelled, fell to the ground. “Just making sure you weren’t hiding anything else in there. Guess you weren’t.”

“You’d better get really far ahead before we start moving again.” Cal warned. “You should know better than to have your backs to us.”

“Somehow I’m not worried.” Beatrice said, giving him a little poke in the chest before leaving, gesturing for her team to follow after her. A couple of them looked back once or twice, but that was it.

“I hate her.” Cal declared, once she’d left. His hands and fingers were already moving about as much as they could behind his back, scrambling at the knots.

“I know you didn’t see because you were too busy breaking someone’s arm like a pair of lunatics, but you nearly got killed with that stunt.” Mick growled.

“And we’d do it again.” Wes said flatly. “You think otherwise you’re crazy.”

Mick sighed, and Cal could almost hear his smile. “You guys…give me twenty minutes or so for
Lillian’s spell to wear off, I can magic us out of this. And thanks. You okay, Cal?”

“I haven’t got anything that I’m not proud of and you know it.” Cal said smugly, the knots coming undone. He stood and stretched. “Twenty minutes. Hah.”

“Shut up.”

“Hold on.” Cal went and retrieved his knife from the pile of their belongings and sliced the bonds on the other two. “Nice rope.” He muttered. “Shame to waste it. You okay, Mick? Really?” He put a hand on Mick’s arm and looked him in the eye.

“Really, I’m okay.”

“Wes?”

“It’s fine.”

“Okay.” Cal sighed, leaned back as they both regrettably started hunting for clothes. Cal didn’t bother yet, heading over to the bushes.

“I think we should talk about the fact that you were keeping an artefact of immense necromantic power in your loincloth.” Mick said, voice stern. “Do I even need to explain why you shouldn’t do that?”

“Seemed like a good hiding place.” Cal said, shrugging one shoulder. “I trust the only two people who ever get their hands in there.”

Wes, meanwhile, was looking out where Beatrice and company had disappeared, as if measuring. “If we start following them quickly, they won’t be expecting us.” He said. “We can catch up pretty fast.”

“We don’t need to do that.” Cal called back, getting down on his hands and knees and crawling into the bush. The stone was sitting right there on the ground. One of Thorndale’s long red centipedes was on it, probably to take it for a nest or something, but Cal smacked it away and snatched the stone, holding it aloft for the others to see. “Let her go, all the way back to Merket.”

“And take the decoy with her.” Mick said, quiet. And then he laughed. “She should have taken both of them. Lillian would have been able to tell the difference in a few minutes. But without the real stone to compare it to…”

“She’ll try to sell off an ordinary pebble.” Cal smiled, sauntered back over to the pile and went about picking his clothes. “And never know the damn difference. Go ahead, tell me how smart I am.”

“Yes, yes.” Mick said, throwing pants at him. “We all worship at your feet, and so on.”

“The way it should be.” Cal sighed, started dressing, deciding against picking out a new loincloth and just going without, though he thought he might regret that later.

“I’m kind of glad this happened.” Wes said after a second. Cal looked up at him. “We were all kind of…” He made a vague gesture. “Especially you. You’re back to normal now.”

Cal smiled, thinking of Tobias. “Life as previously scheduled.” He said. “I’m…I was really upset about what happened in the swamp. I still am. I’m glad I had you two here with me.”

“We’re always here for you, Cal.” Mick said, patting his bare back. “Just like you are for us.”
“And for the record,” Wes added, lifting Cal up suddenly to kiss him on the mouth before setting him gently down. “You’re exactly the right size as far as we’re concerned.”

“I wasn’t worried about that.” Cal asserted, rolling his eyes to hide his smile. “But thanks. Let’s finish here and get moving. I want to get a little further from the town before we camp.” They nodded and went about repacking all of their things, and for just a minute Cal stood there and watched them.

Everything was going to be fine, he thought, because they had each other. Everything was going to be fine, because they were together.
The supposed peak upon which sat Lonely Peak was really more of a small rise in the land than anything else, but that didn’t bother the people who lived here and so Cal didn’t let it bother him either. He had money in his pocket today, so little could bother him, really.

“Do you really think we need that much?” Wes asked him.

“I took it out of my account.” Cal said. “Not our operating funds. Don’t worry about it.”

Between them they had four separate accounts at the institution called Proctor’s Bank. Each of them had an individual account where they kept their cuts from all their jobs, and they shared a team account that they used to fund all their work. Banks, Cal thought, were going to be where everyone kept their money in the future. He knew a lot of people weren’t sold on the idea of someone else holding their money and lending it out to other people to make yet more money, but for Cal the fact that he could put money in a Proctor’s Bank in Merket and then they would send out birds to notify all their other locations of his account balance so that he could take money out in Lonely Peak, halfway across the country, was a convenience that far outweighed the frankly small risk that the bank was going to make off with his money and never give it back. People who worked for the banks had tried to do that on occasion. They usually disappeared and people’s money was returned swiftly.

“You should have taken it out of our operating funds, Cal.” Mick said, giving Cal a light shove. “You don’t need to personally pay for us to get back to Merket.”

“It’s fine.” Cal smiled. “I feel like wasting money and I’d rather waste mine than ours.”

Normally Cal was scrupulous about the inns they stayed at—they all were, not wanting to waste gold on fancy rooms when a small, ordinary one would do just fine. But today Cal led them to a place called the White Lord’s Rest, an inn that looked more like a manor house than a tavern from the outside.

“Cal…”

“My treat.” Cal insisted as he led them inside.
“You say that like you’re not doing it for yourself too.” Wes teased. Cal just smiled.

The Lord’s Suite was empty and Cal bought it without a care, telling the innkeeper as he handed over a small sack of gold that he wanted supper brought up to them as well. “I can’t believe you’re willing to pay a mint for a bed.” Mick muttered as they went up the stairs to the room.

Cal unlocked the door and led them inside. “You’re the one who said we need a vacation. We can’t get that now, but one night of luxury is a good start, don’t you think?” The room was lavishly furnished, came with its own bathtub and a balcony overlooking the inn’s back garden. The bed in the centre of the room could easily have slept six or seven people. Cal was happy to have it sleep three without them having to be on top of each other. The amount of times they’d ended up just sleeping on the floor since they’d started thinking of each other differently really wasn’t funny.

Cal set up the small screen that blocked the bathtub from the rest of the room, which got him two confused looks while he was doing it, but he just smiled. They all stripped down at got into the tub, scrubbing off the mud and sweat from the trek from Thorndale. As they were doing that there was a knock on the door and Cal called for the inn’s servants to come in. They discretely set up the supper table while the three of them bathed, and when the servants left, Mick gave Cal a kiss on the cheek. There was way too much food for the three of them, but that didn’t stop any of them from trying to finish it all. Cal gave up only with reluctance after three helpings of pheasant, too many clams, less vegetables than he should have had, half a loaf of bread and four eggs, not to mention some pretty nice wine.

“’M done.” Cal said eventually, pushing back from the table and leaning back in the chair. “Can’t eat anymore.” He grabbed a napkin and haphazardly wiped at his face and hands, frowning when he realized he’d dripped some food onto his chest—he hadn’t bothered to put anything but his loincloth on to eat.

Mick and Wes looked at each other and Cal didn’t notice the way they smiled. “Bet you could.”

“Nope.” Cal was as full as he’d ever been and he stood, staggering awkwardly over to the bed and flopping back, nestling into the silk blankets and pillows with a contented sigh. “When we retire we’ll do this every day.”

“You’ll get fat.” Mick said gently.

“I’ve always wanted to be fat. Fat people are happy.” Cal said lazily. He hoped the other two would finish eating soon and come lay with him in the bed. That was the only thing that was missing and it was a nice bed.

It was a moment later before he was joined, and Cal smiled before a metallic coldness on his belly made him try and sit up. Wes held him down, but Cal saw that one of them had put a plate of food on his belly. “What?”

“Bet you can eat more.” Mick said again, sitting beside Cal opposite Wes. He was naked, Cal saw, and Wes was too. He reached out and plucked a mushroom off the plate, prodded at Cal’s mouth with it. Wes was untying Cal’s loincloth.

Cal looked at Mick for a minute, trying to puzzle out what he was planning. He knew it was making him hard, so he guessed that was good. He opened his mouth and let Mick pop the mushroom in, and chewed it dutifully. “Swallow.” Cal did. “There you go.”

“This is another one of those coordinated attacks, isn’t it?” Cal asked. The other two paused in the
act of looking over the food on the plate and glanced at each other.

“No, actually.” Wes said after a second. He had broken off some meat with his fingers and brushed it against Cal’s chest as he brought it up for Cal to eat. “Guess we both decided you needed to spoiled at the same time. Now shhh. You need to finish your supper.”

Cal let Wes put the meat in his mouth, followed by a piece of carrot, and some egg, and some bread with gravy and some more pheasant. After the second or third bite one of them (it was Wes; Cal could tell their hands apart) started gently stroking him off at the same time, slowing down if Cal showed any hesitation in eating.

“Guys…” Cal whinged, trying not to squirm. There was oil and sauce all over his chest from the drippings and he was starting to feel bloated. “I really don’t think I can eat anymore.”

“If you don’t finish, we can’t give you desert.” Mick muttered quietly, scooping up some of the spilled sauce from Cal’s chest with another mushroom and coaxing it into his mouth.

“But I…fuck.” Cal came all of a sudden under Wes’s hand, swallowing the mushroom whole as he did. He nearly choked, but he managed to get it down. They let him have a minute to lay there, panting. “I feel like I just had desert.” He muttered.

“Not yet.” Wes said, taking his hand away. “You’ve only got a little bit left, then you’re done, okay?”

“How much?”

“Four more bites.”

It didn’t pass Cal’s notice that he was being treated like a child, but Cal also found he didn’t mind. He nodded. “Okay.”

Cal closed his eyes and took a breath, and a moment later a piece of meat was put in his mouth. It had a strangely salty flavour that Cal only identified after he’d swallowed. “Did I…”

“Yeah, you gave the rest of your supper a little extra seasoning.” Mick said, and what felt like a piece of egg was being wiped across Cal’s pubic bone, scooping up the mess. Mick slid it into Cal’s mouth.

Cal thought about it for a second and then swallowed.

“You’re doing a good job, Cal.” Wes said. “Only two left.”

“I’m going to finish.” Cal muttered, summoning as much determination as he could.

Wes gave him a piece of bread and Cal chewed it for a good while before mustering the power to swallow, smiling at the pat he got on the shoulder. The last bite was in his mouth almost as soon as he’d swallowed the bread. Cal thought it was a piece of cheese, and he didn’t like cheese, but he chewed and swallowed it as well, resting his head back and panting. “I’m full.” He whinged. “I can’t eat anymore.” His stomach felt distended to twice its usual size. Cal was worried he was going to burst if they tried to give him anything else.

“You’re finished, Cal.” Mick said, wiping Cal’s forehead with something. “Did you leave room for desert?”

“Only if desert is a euphemism for sex.” And if both of them were willing to do all the work; Cal
didn’t think he could move.

“It is.” Wes’s voice seemed a lot closer than before and Cal opened his eyes to see him crawling up the bed, a calming smile on his face. Cal started to get hard again, and did so instantly when Wes lifted up a leg and manoeuvered himself so that he was, very carefully, straddling Cal’s chest, his erection pointed right at Cal’s chin. “We’ve got two more things for you to swallow, if you think you can do it.”

Cal tried to smirk, but he was pretty sure it came out more desperate than anything. “Oh, I can do it.” He’d been practicing his swallowing the last little while.

Mick lifted Cal’s head and propped it on a pillow, to give Wes easier access to Cal’s mouth. “Open wide.” And Cal did, letting Wes into his mouth. Wes was gentle; Wes was always gentle, and he slid in only so far, leaving it to Cal to decide how much to take in.

Cal was greedy and he only let Wes get away with the gentleness for a few seconds before reaching up and putting his hands on Wes’s hips, pulling him closer and making little noises as Wes got further and further in. “Ah…” Wes strained, when Cal moaned more loudly at warmth on his own cock as Mick went down on him.

Wes hit the back of Cal’s throat and Cal relaxed to avoid gagging, to let Wes further in, and just as that happened he felt a slick finger probing around, pressing inside him. He couldn’t help but tense around it even as Wes slid into his throat, and Mick gave him a reassuring pat on the thigh while Cal took a second to adjust.

It wasn’t a long adjustment period before Wes made another sound. “I’ve got your desert for you…” He muttered, and Cal would have admired his dedication to the game if he’d had time around trying not to choke on Wes’s cum as it shot down his throat.

He did gag, just a little bit, and he may not quite have swallowed all of it, but judging by how Wes nearly collapsed on pulling out of his mouth, Cal thought it probably didn’t matter. “Fuck, Cal.”

“I’ll have to learn a new trick someday.” Cal mumbled with a smile. “Before you get bored with that one.”

“I don’t think that’ll ever happen.” Wes tapped Mick on the head and they switched places, with Wes on Cal’s cock and Mick moving to gently sit on Cal’s chest and give Cal the rest of his desert.

Wes’s finger, Cal noted as Mick slid into his mouth, was thicker than Mick’s by a fair bit. But he didn’t mind it too badly. He went to work sucking on him, squirming a little more than before as he did from how sensitive he was.

Mick didn’t take long to cum and when he did, it was with a somewhat uncharacteristic grunt as he pulled nearly all the way out so that he could fill up Cal’s mouth. Cal swallowed, making desperate little noises as he did. If he was honest with himself, he still didn’t like the taste.

Cal came with a pained cry just as Mick was moving off of him, and he arched his back as best he could with Wes holding him in place.

After, he just lay there panting, staring up at the bed’s canopy. He felt them take the plate away and after a minute, Wes helped him sit up. “I want another helping.” Cal said, smiling.

“What’s that?”

“You guys only came once. I want more desert.”
“Cal…”

“Shh…” Cal let himself flop forward a little and his hand found Wes, still hard as he’d expected. He cast around until he found Mick as well, and tugged on the two of them until they came closer together. With both of them on their knees, Cal rubbed their cocks together, and leaned in, putting his tongue and lips all over both of them at once, licking and sucking and kissing.

Wes and Mick put their hands on each other’s shoulders to keep themselves steady, and the steady stream of sounds he got from both of them told Cal he was doing it right. He tried to fit both of them in his mouth at once and found he could only just fit both of their heads in if he stretched his lips out.

With both hands he jerked them both off, doing his best with his mouth until his cheeks were sore. It was some minutes before Mick tensed up, though it felt like less, and Cal tasted that unpleasant saltiness again. Mick seemed to trigger Wes and then both of them were shooting. Some of it went in his mouth but most of it went on his face, and Cal was okay with that.

“God…” Wes panted when he was done. Cal sat up with more effort than he’d planned and got a wet, sloppy kiss right on his dirty mouth as he did. “You’re very greedy, Cal.”

“I know.” Cal smiled as Wes moved away, and he got a similar, though neater, kiss from Mick as well. “Thanks, guys.”

“You’re the one who wanted to live the lap of luxury.” Mick muttered, and together the three of them tried to work out moving away from where they’d made a mess and to a cleaner part of the bed where they could get under the blanket.

“I mostly wanted to spoil you guys.” Cal admitted, smiling again as he snuggled up in between the two of them. He should really get out of bed and clean up, have another bath, probably. Instead he let Wes clean his face off with a wet towel he’d gotten from somewhere. “I love you guys so much I just…”

“We know.” Mick kissed Cal’s forehead. “We love you too.”

“I kind of thought…it would be nice if we could live like this all the time, once we’re retired, but…”

“It’s a bit much.” Wes said quietly.

“Yeah. You guys deserve it, but I’m happy the way we live now.”

“Me too.”

“We all are.” Wes told him, one arm around Cal. “Still, it’s nice to have a fancy room once in a while. Thanks, Cal.”

“I love you guys.”

“You already said that.”

“I want to keep saying it.”

“You’re tired.” Mick told him.

“I know. This bed is super soft.”

“Go to sleep.”
“You too.”

“We are.”

“Good.” Cal mumbled, drifting off. “Me too.” And because it bore repeating one more time, he said “I love you” again.

And that he knew he was loved back made him more comfortable than the soft bed and fancy food ever could.

Chapter End Notes

I'm also posting this series on my Tumblr for those interested. For those not interested, carry on.
Cal and Mick both talk a lot and sometimes I worry that Wes sort of fades into the background as a result. So here's a chapter about Wes.

There're some vague mentions in here of an implied rape, by way of warning.

Cal woke up earlier than usual because he needed to pee. He pulled on what turned out to be Mick’s shirt just because it was still chilly in the mornings and stumbled out of the tent, mentally grumbling to himself.

The ground was cold and damp and Cal winced when he stepped out onto it, squinting in the pre-dawn grey. It took him a second to realize that Wes was sitting there outside the tent, contemplating the ashes of last night’s fire. “Morning.” Cal mumbled. He hadn’t noticed Wes not being there in the tent.

“Morning.” Wes looked up at Cal, fully dressed and properly awake. “It’s early, even for you.”

Cal nodded. “Have to go pee.” He said blearily, setting off to find a tree for that purpose.

He shifted from foot to foot impatiently while he went, wishing that someone had seen fit to give him just a slightly bigger bladder. When he was finished Cal sighed, already more awake than he really wanted to be.

Instead of going back in the tent, when he went back to the camp he sat beside Wes on the oblong rock they’d put their fire in front of last night. “It’s early for you too.” He said. All three of them were morning people by necessity, but even before it had been necessary Cal had always woken up at dawn, and he knew Wes was the same way. He winced as his bare butt touched the cold rock, wishing that he’d thrown on Mick’s shorts or at least his own loincloth.

“You should go back to sleep.” Wes said quietly.

“Don’t want to wake Mick up.” Cal muttered, stretching a little as he yawned. “Why’re you up so early, bud?”

Wes shrugged, looked back down at the ashes. He had a stick in his hand and was twirling it back and forth. “Just thinking.”

“Something bothering you?” It wasn’t like Wes to sit and brood about things and Cal couldn’t help but worry a little bit because of that.

“Not really.”

“You want me to be quiet?” Cal asked.

Wes half-smiled and didn’t say anything for a minute. Cal sat there quietly with him, listened to the first songs of the birds as they woke up.
“It’s the anniversary of my mom’s death today.” Wes said after a minute.

Cal looked up at him. “Shit, I didn’t know that.” How Wes had without having seen a calendar in weeks Cal had no idea, but he didn’t doubt it. “I’m sorry, Wes.” He put his hand on Wes’s arm for comfort.

Wes shook his head. “It’s okay. I’m just thinking about her, is all. She would have liked you guys.”

“I hope so.” Cal said, resting his head against Wes’s shoulder. “I’m sure we would have liked her too.”

“You would have. Everyone liked her.”

“Is it okay if I ask you to tell me about her a little?” Cal asked, watching the horizon where he could just make out the first hints of light.

Wes shifted, put his arm around Cal. “She was…I know everyone says that their mother was beautiful and kind and everything, but she was. She was, um. Radiant. Like a room couldn’t be dark if she was in it. She always had time for everyone and she was so patient. Especially with me. I was clumsy as a kid, and big, and I used to break stuff all the time by accident.”

“I can picture that.” Cal said, smiling as he thought of poor preadolescent Wes, growing too fast and not used to how small everything suddenly was.

“She never got mad at me for it. Just helped me fix it and told me to try and be more careful. I hardly ever saw her get mad at anyone. I used to think she must hate me, hate looking at me, because…because I didn’t look anything like her.”

“Yeah.” Cal said, rubbing Wes’s leg. “I get it.” You don’t need to say the rest.

Wes squeezed Cal a little tighter as if in response to the sentiment. “But she didn’t. I asked her about it once because it was bothering me so much. She…that was the only time she ever got mad at me. She said, ‘It doesn’t matter who you look like, Wesley. You’re your own person and you’re my son and I love you. And besides,’ she said, ‘you don’t look like him at all. You’re kind and strong and you’ve never wanted to hurt anyone.’” Wes paused and took a long breath, tears in his eyes. Cal freed his pinned arm and put it around Wes’s back in his best attempt at a hug.

“She was right.” Cal said quietly.

“I know.” Wes nodded. “And I felt really bad for even trying to compare myself to that fucker. And I thought, I got so upset and I just…why would anyone do that to her? What kind of monster…”

“I don’t know, Wes.” Cal shook his head, wishing he had a better answer. “I don’t know.”

“She baked. Bread and muffins and cakes, to sell at the market every day. But that was only after I was born. Before she…before she got pregnant, she’d been a dancer in a troupe. I used to catch rats when I was a kid to help her with money, and sometimes I would come home and find her dancing. I always wished I could move like that. It was so beautiful.”

“You’d be a good dancer.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

“I’ve seen you move, Wes.” Cal said. “You’re graceful and composed. You’d be good at it.”
Wes looked down at Cal for a long minute before smiling. “Thanks, buddy. I just…I miss her a lot.”

“I know, Wes.” Cal said, squeezing Wes as best he could. The sun was coming up past the horizon now. “I know you do. I’m grateful to her. For making you.” Wes let out a small laugh. “I love you, Wes.”

“I love you too, Cal.”

The tent flap rustled behind them and Cal looked over his shoulder to smile at Mick. He’d found another shirt to wear. “Am I intruding?” He asked, looking at the two of them.

“We’re talking about Wes’s mom.” Cal told him, motioning with his head for Mick to join them.

Mick smiled, came over and hugged Wes from behind, kissing the top of his head. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. Do you think I’d be a good dancer, Mick?”

Mick frowned, obviously confused. But he looked thoughtful for a minute before nodding. “Yeah. You always move confidently. I bet you would be.”

That got him a smile. “Thanks. I should make breakfast.”

“I can do it.” Cal offered, though he didn’t move.

“No, it’ll give me something to do. You need to get dressed. In your own clothes.”

Cal laughed but stood when Wes did, lingering to give him a quick kiss on the chin. He kissed Mick good morning as well before heading back to the tent, where he turned and took one more quick look. Mick was sitting on the rock now, watching Wes go about starting breakfast. Wes worked against a backdrop of the rising sun, which gave him a glowing corona as he moved.

Cal was pretty sure that radiance ran in the family.
One of Cal’s favourite things about his job was that sometimes, they didn’t have to go looking for artefacts—sometimes they were just there.

Really, being a relic hunter was just a case of never growing out of wanting to explore every nook and cranny of the world, and so all three of them were used to looking around for interesting rock formations, trees that might be hollow, anywhere there might be something under the ground and ruins of old buildings.

Today it was a half-buried entrance to a cave that Wes spotted because snow and ice melting had shifted just enough of the rocks hiding it to make visible the enclave behind. The area they were travelling through was getting more and more rocky and hilly as they neared the Amaran Mountains. Since those bisected the country neatly, there was no way to get back to Merket without passing over or through them, unless one wanted to travel through an old iron mine that was long since abandoned by humans, but was populated by giant spiders, ghouls and all manner of other nasty things that Cal wanted less than nothing to do with.

And now he was glad that they hadn’t decided to find a pass farther south than they’d already travelled, because there was a hidden old cave here and in his experience, those usually had good shit buried in them.

“There are wards on the cave entrance.” Mick muttered as Cal and Wes shifted rocks. That just made Cal all the more excited.

“Someone wanted it kept hidden.” He said, grinning. That meant there was something worth hiding inside.

“I’d say so—and they’re decaying, so it’s been a long time.” Mick frowned as he moved his hands around. “I don’t even recognize this style of ward, so I don’t think I can get rid of it. Best I can do is slip us through one of the holes that’s opened up in it.” He was talking mostly to himself, so Cal just went back to moving rocks, though a part of him felt like he shouldn’t be having to do the hard physical labour.

Wes was doing most of the lifting, to be fair. “We should be careful.” He said as he lifted a particularly large rock away. “A lot of caves like this don’t necessarily go anywhere, and they can narrow quickly, or cave in. And we don’t know what’s living in them.”

Cal nodded. “You’re right, but my instinct says you don’t ward a cave that doesn’t go anywhere. It could be a hidey-hole from something like the Flame War, or the Ascension of what’s-her-name.”

“Dorothy the Deathless.” Mick muttered. “And she died, so she wasn’t. But these spells are older than that.”

Cal paused, glancing at Mick. “The Flame War was two thousand years ago.”
“I know.”

“You’re thinking the Apocalypse.” Wes said quietly, also looking at Mick. “The Catechism Wars and the Founding.”

“Yeah.” Mick nodded, still moving his hands. “Or even before that.”

Cal was quiet. The Apocalypse was when God had called on the first saints to rise up and fight against all those who worshipped heathen idols—which at the time had been everyone. The Catechism Wars had followed from that and gone on (though the history was more mythological than historical) for over two hundred years, followed by the Founding of Civilization when they’d been won by the righteous. That had been four thousand years ago and there were no records of the world before that, but it was said to be nothing but turmoil and strife without end. That anything could have survived from that time period was unlikely at best.

And yet Cal was certain that was what they had on their hands. “We’ll be careful.” He said after a time. “But we’re going in. If anything in there has survived, it’s going to be hugely valuable.”

“And probably highly dangerous.” Mick added.

“I said we’d be careful.”

Mick just nodded, though he looked a little worried.

It took them nearly an hour to clear enough rocks to get inside. Cal avoided the obvious comment that if Wes and Mick were normal-sized people they could have shaved twenty minutes easy off their rock-moving time and just went in first. Mick did some magic that let them through the wards that Cal didn’t understand, but it clearly worked since nothing seemed to trigger as they passed into the cave and all he felt was a slight tingle as they moved through the entrance.

The cave was just wide enough for Wes to cram though, though it lowered as they went on until even Cal was crouching a bit. It was quiet and drier than Cal would have thought, though part of him was sure he could hear water rushing nearby. A ball of light illuminated everything from behind, and just when he was starting to worry that they weren’t going to be able to fit any farther, he spotted a dark hole ahead that, when the light hit it, showed a cavern beyond. “There we are.” He said quietly.

The cavern wasn’t enormous, but there was enough room for the three of them to stand straight and move around. The walls were featureless rock and that proved to be covered in dust when he ran a hand along one. The floor was the same way. It had been dry here for a long while. Cal could picture someone hiding out here for a few days or weeks if they had the supplies.

Someone hadn’t had enough supplies, though. There was a skeleton sitting against the back wall of the cavern, so innocuous that Cal didn’t see it at first. He frowned at it and took a step in that direction. “After all this time.” Cal muttered. “You’d think he’d have rotted away.” There were misshapen lumps here and there on the floor, and closer inspection showed that they were probably the skeleton’s possessions, a bag and some clothes, maybe. All long since decayed into nearly nothing.

“It must be fossilizing.” Mick said as he came around Cal to approach the skeleton. Metal scraped as he moved and Mick stopped, crouched to the ground and picked something up.

It looked like a small rust chip to Cal, but Mick held it up so they could see it closely. “It’s a coin.” Wes said, taking it carefully and inspecting it. “Or it was.” Mick patted the ground carefully and came up with a few more.
“We should take them.” Cal said, looking around. The walls had what looked like little holes in them, where someone might hide something. He couldn’t say why, since he saw them often enough, but he didn’t want to approach the skeleton, at least not alone.

Maybe part of him was afraid that it would start moving.

“They’re so degraded they probably aren’t worth anything.” Mick said, though he took a small pouch from his pocket and was carefully wiggling his fingers at it. “We can’t prove that they’re what we think they are.”

“Mick.” Wes said, and he was approaching the skeleton slowly now. “Bring that light closer.”

Mick did. “What is it?” Cal asked, moving closer.

“He has horns.”

He did. The skeleton was completely intact and Cal was pretty sure Mick was right in saying it was turning to stone. In life, he or she had been a little shorter than Mick. There were two curved horns protruding from the frontal bone. “Maybe it’s just a…I don’t know, a sediment deposit or something, from being here so long.” Cal suggested. But he didn’t believe it and he knew they didn’t either.

The skeleton’s spine was too long, as if he’d had a vestigial tail, and its fingers were too long and had an extra joint in them. “They say that before the Apocalypse, demons wandered freely around the earth.” Mick muttered.

“They’ were full of shit, Cal thought vaguely. There was no way to know that. Out loud, he said, “Maybe I was wrong about this being a hidey-hole. Maybe it was a prison.”

Mick shook his head. “The wards were to keep things out, not in.”

“Did she know she was building herself a tomb?” Cal wondered, standing up and looking around the cave.

“She?”

Cal glanced at Wes, realizing what he’d said. He wasn’t sure why he’d said it, so he shrugged. “We don’t know if it was a man or a woman. Just evening out the assumption balance is all.”

Wes snorted, shaking his head fondly. “You’re really cute, Cal.”

“Fuck off.” Cal muttered, something catching his attention. One of the little recesses in the wall ran pretty high and was directly in the skeleton’s gaze. He wandered over, looking at it, thinking that if it had been him…

“Cal, you’re going to get your hand stuck.” Mick warned him as he stuck his hand in.

“I’ll be fine, there’s…” His hand gripped something long and he nodded, shifted it and pulled it free of the recess, a sheaf of dust falling all around him.

It was a sword in a leather sheath. The leather was stained and banded with a tarnished metal that may have been gold. The handle was ornate and heavy, the grip worn. “How did this get in here?” Cal asked, to himself.

“It must have belonged to our friend here.” Mick said, looking up at the weapon with open curiosity.

“No, it didn’t.” Cal muttered, drawing it free from the sheath. The blade was thin and mottled with
what looked like rust, but it was actually dried and crusted blood. “How did she come to have it, I wonder.”

“Cal, that’s way too well-preserved not to be magical.” Mick warned, standing. “You should put it down.”

“No.” Cal said, looking at the blade. It seemed too big for his hand, but… “This is my sword.”

“You’d need to be a little bigger to use it.” Mick told him.

“Mick.” Wes said.

“I know. I don’t feel any power in it, but…”

“My mother and father gave this to me.” Cal said quietly, remembering. “On the day I left the hold.” It had been warm that day, he remembered.

“Your family runs a tannery, Cal.” Wes reminded him.

Cal shook his head. “They told me…my mother told me that I should use it to protect all that was good, and to stand up against all that was evil. And my father said…he said that I mustn’t falter. Because good has to work its hardest every day, but evil just has to wait for good to stumble.” He could hear their voices in his head as he spoke, clear as if they were beside him now.

“Cal…”

“That’s why I killed my brothers.” Cal whispered. “With this sword. Because…”

“Cal, stop.” Mick commanded. “You didn’t kill your brothers. The sword is possessing you.”

“I killed them.” He could remember doing it. Remember watching them fall, one at a time. “All five of them. At the banks of the river where we used to play when we were young. The water was so clear until…now it runs red. It still runs red, even after.”

“Wes, we need to take that from him.” Mick said, and Cal turned so that he had both of them in his sight.

He shifted into a fighting stance. “No. This is mine, I need it. There’s still evil in the world. I need to fight it.” So much, there was so much evil. And he, and his people, were the cause of so much of it.

“You have another sword on your belt, Cal.” Wes said firmly. “You don’t need to use that one.”

“I do!” Cal raised his voice, and it echoed through the small cavern. “I’m not going to let you take it from me, it’s mine, you can’t…” Suddenly he was lifted from the ground and gently pressed back into the wall. “Let me go!”

“Sorry, Cal.” Mick said, and Wes approached him and put a hand on his sword arm, another on his wrist. “Let go. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I don’t want to hurt you either, but I will!” Cal yelled, struggling as best he could. This should have been something he could break out of, these two weren’t enough to keep him pinned like this, it wasn’t…

Wes wrenched his wrist and Cal cried out as the sword dropped to the ground, clattering against the dusty stone with a sharp clang, and then a screech as Wes kicked it away.
Cal dropped from whatever magic was holding him and he immediately moved to grab the sword, only to be restrained firmly by Wes from behind. “Let me go, let me go! I need that! You can’t…”

“We can.” Mick approached Cal carefully and put a hand on his head, frowning. Cal kept struggling as a cool power swept through his body, followed by a flash of heat, and then more cool. Mick frowned. “It isn’t working, hold on.”

“Here, hold him up again.” Wes said, and he sounded angry. Cal could sympathize; he was angry too. If they would just let him have his sword he could go. It wasn’t like he planned to hurt either of them. Only evil people, that was it. Cal floated a few inches above the ground, trying to kick and struggle, and Wes let him go and moved behind Mick.

“Let me go.” Cal pleaded. “You don’t understand. I though you would understand. I need you to let me go so I can…what are you doing?” With his feet, Wes had carefully moved the sword and propped it against the wall. Cal saw what he was going to do and started to panic. “No, you can’t! Don’t! That’s…” Wes lifted his foot and brought it down on the metal, which snapped with a crash in Cal’s head. “No!”

And then it subsided, and Cal realized what he’d been doing, and saying. “Oh, my God.” He said, breathless, looking at the broken sword. “What the…oh, God. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, you guys.”

Gently, Mick set Cal down on the ground and Cal sat, hands shaking, as Mick put a hand to his forehead again. “I’m sorry, I really…”

“It wasn’t your fault.” Mick said quietly. “You were possessed.”

“But I wasn’t.” Cal breathed. “I didn’t…that was me saying that. There wasn’t something else in my mind, I…I threatened you. I would have hurt you.” He didn’t realize he was crying until the first several tears had run down his face. “I’m sorry. I want to say I didn’t mean it…but I did.”

“You didn’t.” Wes insisted. “The sword probably just had a curse on it. It had someone’s memories in it, or something.”

“Or something.” Mick muttered, pulling back from Cal with a frown. “You’re surprisingly susceptible to compulsion spells, Cal. When we get to a city I’m going to make or find you a ward that will protect you from them.”

Cal nodded, looking away. They shouldn’t be forgiving him so easily. “I…I remember. It wasn’t just in the sword—I remember everything I was talking about. My parents giving me that sword, using it to kill my brothers. I remember it like it happened to me.”

“It didn’t.”

“I know.” Cal did know that. “But I remember it happening, Mick.”

“You need a better healer than me.” Mick declared, and he helped Cal stand. “You seem okay for now, and I’ll keep an eye on you. But we’re going to get a real healer to take a look at you, just in case there are after effects from the possession.”

Cal started to protest, but he saw the set of Mick’s jaw, the expression on Wes’s face, and glanced down at the broken sword. And looking at it made him sad. He nodded. “Okay. Let’s get out of here. Can you ward this cave again so that people won’t find it?”

“Yeah, that’s probably for the best. I can patch over the holes in what’s already there.”
“The coins too.” Wes said. “We’ll leave them behind. Don’t want to take any risks.”

“Right.” Cal muttered, and as they prepared to leave, he took one last look at the demon skeleton at the back wall. “She was hiding it.” He said, certain. “The sword.”

“She should have just broken it, then.” Wes grumbled, glancing at the skeleton.

“Yeah.” She couldn’t, Cal thought. Hiding his reluctance and making himself not look back, Cal led the way out of the cave. He couldn’t help one last intrusive thought as they left.

Even if it was broken, it was still *his* sword.
“What the hell’s going on?” Cal muttered, mostly to himself, as he scowled at the squat little building in front of them.

“Looks like it’s been here for a while.” Mick’s tone was neutral, but Cal detected confusion in it.

He wasn’t wrong. The little tailor’s shop in front of them was sagging and boasted faded paint and a lone, dirty window. A barely legible sign advertised what it was. And it definitely wasn’t a dilapidated little shack that a hundred and nine-year-old-lady lived in.

“We must have just gone the wrong way or something.” Wes offered.

“No.” Cal shook his head, still fixing the shop with a death stare. “We didn’t.”

“Well, obviously we did, because we’re clearly in the wrong place, Cal.”

Cal turned to Wes, looked at him. Not with the death stare, but also not impressed. “Wes. Do you really think we went the wrong way?”

Wes looked away. “No.” He admitted. “We took the same route as last time. I’m sure of it.”

“Me too.”

“I knew she was magical.” Mick said, moving his hands in a way that meant he was using his own magic to look at the tailor’s. “But this doesn’t make any sense. I almost…”

When Mick didn’t continue, Cal turned his gaze on him. “What?”

“I’m starting to wonder if she was human.”

Cal felt his mouth tighten. “Toby said he talked to an old lady a hundred years ago too.”

“What else might she have been, then?” Wes asked, fingers moving in a way that meant he wanted his axe.

“Not sure.” Mick sighed. “A ghost, some sort of spirit. A lot of things can look human if they want; sirens, elves…angels.”

“Demons.” Cal added.

“Yeah.” Mick shrugged. He was hiding it, but he looked worried. “I mean, most of those things are practically myths, nobody can really prove they exist. Or at least that they exist anymore. Elves are extinct and there haven’t been any substantiated sightings of angels or demons since the Catechism Wars, but…” He shrugged again.
“Maybe she just died.” Cal said. He felt like he should suggest it, at least, even if it wasn’t true. “And they knocked her house down and did a shitty job of building over it.”

“Maybe.”

“Probably not.”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go.” Wes told them, looking around. “There’s no point standing around here and people are starting to think we’re canvassing to rob the place.”

“Right.” Cal nodded, took one last long look at the shop and turned away, back in the direction they’d come.

“Do you think Beatrice and them have gotten back to Merket yet?” Mick asked as they walked, trying not to appear suspicious. The streets weren’t really full, but there were people here and there and this wasn’t the type of neighbourhood that Cal suspected saw a lot of visitors.

“Possibly.” Cal nodded. “They wouldn’t have detoured to Lonely Peak and they’d have been hurrying because they assume we’re chasing them. But we’re still a ways away, my guess is that they’d be getting there in about a week.”

“So a solid week before us, at least.”

“Yeah. I wonder who they’re selling the decoy to.”

“You don’t think it was Theodore, do you?” Wes asked.

“I didn’t get that vibe from him.” Cal muttered, eyes wandering around the street. “I mean, he was creepy and had a lot of probably bedslaves who were younger than us, but I didn’t feel like he was lying to me, at least. Besides, even if you’re rich, do you give us all that money and then turn around and pay someone else to steal it from us? Even if he’s paying Beatrice less, it’s still a loss for him. They had those in Thorndale too.” He commented, pointing out the long red centipede that was crawling along the wall of a nearby house, before burrowing into the ground.

“Yeah, I assumed they came from the swamp.” Mick muttered.

“Guess not.”

“They’re kind of gross.” Wes grumbled.

“They’re also way too big.” Mick agreed. “There aren’t very many things they could reasonably eat at that size. Someone should probably do something about them.”

“I can’t imagine why nobody has volunteered to be the huge-ass centipede killer.”

A meow from the other side of the street caught Cal’s attention. There was a scrawny alley cat sitting there in the gap between two buildings. Staring at him.

Cal took a step toward it.

“Cal?”

“It’s her cat.” Cal said, pointing at it as he kept walking. “Maybe it’s just a stray, but it was on her house…and I saw it in Thorndale too.”
“Cal, there’s nothing there.”

Cal stopped, looked from the cat to Mick behind him. “Are you sure?” He asked. He could see it clearly. “Right there, in the gap between those two tenements.”

“There’s no gap between them, either.” Wes told him gently.

“Shit.” Cal closed his eyes and sighed. When he looked again, the cat was still there, waiting for him. “It’s happening again, is it?”

“I don’t know.” Mick looked worried again, and put a hand on Cal’s head. “I don’t think you’re being compelled again—you’re listening to reason. You stopped when we told you to. You believed us when we told you there was nothing there.”

“No I didn’t.” Cal said quietly. “I can see it there. I know it’s there. I believe you when you say you can’t see it.” Even though that didn’t make any sense.

“Yeah.” Mick shook his head.

“He could see Tobias and we couldn’t.” Wes reminded them.

“That’s true.” Mick scowled at the place where he couldn’t see a cat, and then looked at Cal uncertainly. “Why don’t you go after it?” He said. “Carefully. I don’t sense anything magical over there, but you never know. We’ll go with you.”

Cal nodded. “If you’re sure.” He wasn’t sure, but he trusted Mick to know what to do in situations like this, so he took a breath and crossed the rest of the street, pausing at the gap. The cat looked up at him before turning around and heading further in. It looked like an ordinary alley to Cal. “I’m going to go in.” He said to them, and took a step forward.

The single step took him flying for just a second, the world passing by Cal in a blur. Before he even had time to shout it stopped, and Cal stumbled forward with inertia that didn’t exist, into what looked like a small cottage. It was cozy and close, with old furniture scattered about and a tidy kitchen. A firepit was in the centre, with a small flame going. An old woman was sitting at the fire on a low stool.

The cat looked at Cal one more time before leaping onto a windowsill and curling up to go to sleep.

“What the hell is this?”

“You were looking for me, Doomed One.” The old woman said. There was light in the cottage and it was easier to make her out than before. She was frail and pockmarked with old scar tissue all down one side of her face. Her eyes were sharp and dangerous, though. “You will always find me when you wish it.”

“I didn’t want you to kidnap me.” Cal growled. “I just had a few questions.”

“No doubt. You’ve always been full of questions. Do not fret, Doomed One. I have never desired your enmity. You may leave whenever you wish.” She raised a bony arm and pointed behind Cal at the door to the cabin. “Two Oaks is no longer a place in which I can stay, alas.”

“Why not?” Cal asked, approaching the woman warily. There was another stool opposite her but he stood for now.

“The Architect has not long to live.” She said, shaking her head. “But it would be a shame if he were
to kill me as his final mortal act.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“All things are answers.” The old lady smiled at him. She was missing most of her teeth. “Many of them are simply answers we do not understand or, perhaps, like.”

“I don’t care about liking things.” Cal said, deciding to sit. “But are you going to give me answers I can understand?”

“That is for you to decide, is it not?” The fire popped in between them. There was a pile of logs beside them, which the woman nodded at. Cal added a log to the fire.

“Fine.” Cal sighed. “Was it you who sent Toby into the swamp, after Matthias?”

“It was.” The woman nodded. “The Guardian was lost. I gave him direction.”

“You sent him to die.” Cal told her. The woman didn’t say anything. “You sent him to be tormented for a hundred years.”

“There is much cruelty in the world.” The woman told him. “If I must be the cause of some of it, then so be it.”

“Tell that to the little boy who couldn’t sleep for a century.” Cal snapped. “You shouldn’t have sent him in there.”

“Had I not, the madman called Matthias would have wrought devastation. He would have opened something not meant to be opened. Began to re-stitch that which was meant to be torn.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The Web, Doomed One.” The woman said to him fiercely. “It must not be restored. The False Prophet walks, the Architect will soon fall to give rise to the King of Nothing. Everything is in danger. You killed Matthias, did you not?”

“No.” Cal said, head spinning. “Toby did. Him and Mick.”

The woman seemed taken aback by that, and she looked at him strangely. And laughed. “Fate is ever vagarious.” She proclaimed in a chuckle. “Very well, such are humans. You have with you the Jewel. May I see it?”

Cal should have said no, but if the woman had wanted to steal the stupid thing, all she had to do was never let Cal leave until he starved to death. A little abashed, he reached into his pants and took it out, showed it to her.

“Yes.” The woman looked at it, obviously apathetic to where it had come from. She gave a long sigh. “Mementos of a sad young man. Relics to the death of innocence. That one was taken from a forest called Beauty. Later they burned it to drive out those using it as cover.”

“Is that why it raises the dead?”

“No, that power is a relic of the Shattering.” The woman looked away from the stone, back up at Cal’s face. “You must take it to the Oligarch.”

“Only if the Oligarch is named Theodore.” Cal told her. “I have a responsibility to my client, not to you.”
The woman cackled at that, though Cal thought it turned sad at the end. “You are correct, Doomed One. You must follow your own truth, always.”

“Who is the Doomed One?” Cal asked, uncertain whether he wanted an answer. “What does that mean? I don’t… who is it that you think I am?”

“Can you not remember?” The woman asked him. “Your vendetta? Your quest to rid the world of evil? The war you sparked, the deaths that you caused. Your own death, at the fall of thunder, the cataclysm that followed, the Shattering? Do you not remember the end of the world, Nathen Jerrel De’Kerken?” Her voice became a hiss at the end, and the cat perked up on the windowsill.

Cal stood abruptly, shaking. “No.” He said, and it was true. “I don’t. I have no idea what you’re talking about. My name’s Calvin. My family are tanners in Kyaine. They’re all still alive—I didn’t start a war and I didn’t kill my brothers.”

The woman was smiling up at him now and Cal realized that he may have responded to more than she’d said. “No doubt.” She said with a nod. “A word of advice, then, Calvin the Innocent. You would best be to go back to your tannery in the south if you wish to remain such. The Dragon bares its Fang, the Star Knight has found his Aegis. The False Prophet walks and the Traitor kneels before the Saintkiller, the Chain of the World awaits the Covenant Bearer and Warden awaits fear. The Puppeteer and the Lady of Fear reunite. The Storyteller has fled, the Bard is chained to futility, the Scorpion hides its tail and the Lion prowls. A petty evil rises from the sea and Lord of Truth conceals it, while the Anchor rejoices and the Queen of Crows invites fire. The Mantis prepares, the Viper cries, the Caretaker plots, the Oligarch doubts and the Raptor cannot fly. Armageddon’s Vanguard rides, the Desperate Soul waits and the Horned Owl watches everything. The Architect has built a throne for the King of Nothing and there are centipedes everywhere, Doomed One.”

During her tirade, Cal had backed up until his back was against the door. His hand found the handle and grasped it. “You’re crazy.” He whispered. “You’re just talking nonsense.”

“Perhaps.” The woman gave him a crooked smile. “The Guardian was not meant to kill the madman, so perhaps. The world of humans has always been beyond us in truth. They proved that well enough. Perhaps I am simply mad myself.”

“Who are you?”

“Just a tired old woman who has seen too much of the world, Calvin the Innocent. I can no longer dance as I used to, so now I must sit and wait, wait and see if others can correct the mistake that was once made because in the end, Doomed One, you were right.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“As I said, not all answers are those we can understand, or those we like. You asked me who it was that I thought you were. Everything is an answer, Nathen, including the right question. You might have asked who it was that you think you are.”

Cal stared her down for a second before his nerve broke and he turned the handle, letting the door open. “I know who I am.”

“Good.” The woman smiled one last time. “I could not bear to watch you die again, but allowing the world to fall to ruin would be worse. I shall be here, when you wish to speak with me again.”

“I don’t think that will happen.”

“Nonetheless, I will continue to wait.”
Cal shook his head and backed out, reaching to shut the door behind him.

And he stumbled back onto a street in Two Oaks, right into Wes’s arms. “God, Cal!” He said. “What happened?”

“I…” Cal shook his head, looking around. A few people were looking their way curiously, but nobody seemed that interested. The sunlight was very bright in Cal’s eyes. “I’m not sure.”

“Was she in there?” Mick asked, coming forward and running his hands in front of Cal. “We couldn’t follow you, or pull you out.”

“Yeah. She...didn’t really say much that was useful.” Cal muttered, straightening and patting Wes on the arm in thanks. “Which I guess I should have expected. Let’s go back to the inn? I’ll tell you about it where there aren’t people who might overhear and think I’m crazy.” The last part had been a swirl of names and Cal wasn’t sure how much of it he could specifically remember, but he would try. Just in case she wasn’t totally insane. Maybe Wes or Mick would know something he didn’t.

“Yeah, okay. I want you to lay down, Cal.” Wes said, taking his arm and guiding him back up the street. “You look like you’ve been hit by an ox.”

“There’s nothing here.” Mick said quietly, a clear frustration in his voice. “Yeah, I agree. I want to check you out, thoroughly, to make sure nothing’s happened to you.”

“Can I be naked for the thorough checkup?” Cal asked with a smile.

“He’s fine.” Wes grumbled, and Mick laughed.

Cal let them lead him back to the inn, to their room, where they could be alone. Armageddon’s Vanguard, Cal thought, even as he tried not to dwell on it. Sounded like something from scripture. Angels and demons were gone, but…

Even when they were alone and safe, and Cal had told them everything, he couldn’t dismiss his unease. He couldn’t shake the feeling that something dangerous was happening in the world.
“He’s fine.”

“As nice as that is to hear, I’m not sure I believe it.”

The healer smiled at Mick. She was only a little older than them, and her name was Belle. “I promise. There are no signs of residual possession, no indications that he’s mentally unstable, no damage to his brain or memory, nothing. He’s fine.” She shrugged, her pink coat jingling with whatever was in her pockets. “He doesn’t sleep enough, if you ask me, but he’s healthy.”

She’d been talking to Mick the whole time instead of Cal, which was annoying Cal. He also couldn’t place her accent, which shouldn’t have been annoying him but was. She must have been from the far west somewhere. “But I remember things that didn’t happen.” He told her. “Not a lot, but enough. The things I saw when I was holding that sword—I remember them happening.”

“Ah.” She pointed at him. “But are you remembering things that didn’t happen, or are you remembering things that didn’t happen to you?”

“It’s the same thing.” Mick said, exasperated. “That sword put memories in his head that don’t belong there. There’s clearly something wrong.”

“Take him to another healer if you don’t like my answer.” Belle suggested. “There’s no hint his memory’s been tampered with either. It’s possible that those were memories you had already, and the sword just…reminded you of them.”

_Do you remember the end of the world, Nathen Jerell De’Kerken?

“I think I’d remember killing my family.” Cal growled, trying to ignore that memory.

Belle nodded. “You’d think. Assuming it happened to you in this lifetime, anyway.”

Cal blinked. “What?”

“Well, some people get more than one go-round in the world. Maybe it’s something from your last visit.”

All three of them looked at her for a second. “That’s heresy.” Wes said quietly.

Belle shrugged. “Lots of things are heresy. We don’t worry about it that much where I’m from.”

“And where is that exactly?” Mick asked, looking at her in that way he did when he was about to magic someone.

Belle just smiled at them. “Not here. I’m not obligated to tell my life story to random customers.”

“Do people come back from the dead a lot where you’re from, then?” Cal asked, not sure if he was being serious and not sure if he wanted a serious answer.

“Oh, no. That doesn’t happen. But sometimes people do get reincarnated, yes. The world’s not done with them, you know?”

“And you think that happened to me?”
She shrugged again. “It would explain your symptoms.”

“So would possession.”

She turned that smile on Mick. “Yes.” She agreed. “If there was any evidence of possession. Do you poke all healers you meet with your Pillars or am I special?”

Mick didn’t even look abashed. “Whatever magic was surrounding that cave was so sophisticated I couldn’t even recognize it. Is it possible that there’s something that’s beyond the normal possession magicks touching him?”

Belle made a face as she thought about it. “I don’t think so.”

“The cave was sealed during the Catechism Wars.” Cal said, and she looked surprised. “If that helps.”

“Well.” Belle appeared to be thinking more seriously now. “That opens up a whole other bag of cats. Assuming the myths are true, you had angels and demons in the mix back then. And magic didn’t work the same way, or so they say.”

“I’ve never heard that.” Mick said with a frown. “Who is ‘they?’”

“Oh, you know.” Belle waved a hand. “My teacher and some people. Might be bullshit. But…hm.” She looked at Cal again, and raised her hands at him, wiggling her fingers in a way that was not at all similar to the spells she’d used on him so far.

“What are you doing?”

“I know a spell that’s pretty much foolproof when it comes to detecting magic touching a person.” She said. “Didn’t use it before it because it didn’t seem necessary—also he’s going to be really hungry after I use it, so take him out somewhere nice to eat.”

“I can get behind this.” Cal said, though he didn’t like the idea of a spell that had that kind of effect on him.

“Hold still.”

Cal did, and Belle continued to magic at him. She was a wizard, which meant that Mick couldn’t see what kind of spells she was doing, but Cal didn’t have any reason to distrust her.

A minute passed and Cal was suddenly starving, and Belle shook her head. “He’s been touched by magic recently.” She said. “A kind I don’t recognize.” Her tone suggested that was a personal affront.

“The old lady.” Cal muttered, digging in his bag and pulling out some bread. “She teleported me somewhere and back.”

“This was after the sword in the cave?” Belle asked, eyebrows rising. “Wow, you guys must have a lot of fun, maybe I should have gone into whatever it is that you do. That’s the only magic I sense, though. Nothing that resembles possession, memory altering, compulsion. He’s fine, honest.”

“But he’s not.” Mick insisted.

“My best guess is memory inherited from a prior life.” Belle said, clearly exasperated. “I’m sorry, but that’s all I’ve got. If it was possession or memory alteration, there’s no sign of it now, which means it
can’t do anything more to you. My advice is to live with it.”

Cal almost laughed. “That’s your professional opinion, is it?” She nodded.

“That’s not…”

“Okay.” Cal said, standing. “If you’re certain there’s nothing wrong.”

“I am.”

“How much do we owe you, then?”

Even as Mick glowered beside him, Cal paid Belle and thanked her. “I’ll always feel bad saying come back next time.” Belle told them as they left. “Try not to need healing again, but if you do I’ll be here.”

Once they were out on the street, Mick openly glared at her little shop. “Like we’d come back to her. Charlatan.”

“She wasn’t lying.” Wes said, waving them off down the road.


“What do you mean, okay?” Mick demanded. “Cal, this is serious.”

“I know it is, Mick.” Cal said, nodding. His stomach growled. “But if she says I’m not possessed, or compelled and that my memory’s not altered, then that’s something to take into consideration at least. We can go to another healer.” He suspected they’d hear the same thing, though.

“But you want to consider reincarnation as a possibility?” Mick asked, incredulous.

“How does it make any less sense than anything else?” Cal challenged.

“Well…” Mick trailed off, thinking of an answer, and deflated a little. “I guess it’s no more impossible than anything else.” He said, a little nervous.

“I’m not saying it’s the answer—but like you said back in Thorndale, not all questions have answers either.” Everything is an answer, even the right question. “If we can be sure that this isn’t going to hurt me, I’m sure I can live with it.” It would bug Cal forever, he knew, but if he had no choice then he had no choice.

Besides, he had a feeling there was more to come. This wasn’t the end of whatever was happening.

Wes put a hand on Mick’s shoulder, and Mick sighed. “Yeah. I just…I hate that this happened to you and I don’t even know what to call it.”

“I know. I want to know too, Mick, but in the meantime I swear I’m okay.” Cal said, and his stomach growled again, loudly. “Can we keep talking with lunch?” He asked. “She wasn’t lying about the hungry.”

“I saw a place with a sign that said they had seafood on the way here.” Wes said, pointing in that direction. “Let’s head there.”

“I’m suspicious of seafood this far inland.” Mick muttered, but he followed along. “After lunch we’re going to get you that compulsion ward.”
“And we’ll visit another healer.” Wes added. “Just in case. Maybe a sorcerer, just for another opinion.” Mick nodded, though Cal knew he would prefer a mage.

“At any point during our stay in Merket will we be making time to take the promised item to our client?” Cal asked.

“Theodore waited the whole winter, he can wait another few days.” Wes told him. “You matter to us a lot more than he does.”

“Fine, fine.” Cal sighed dramatically, but he was smiling. “I love you guys.”

“We love you too, now come eat before you pass out.”

If he was honest with himself, that right there was the reason why he wasn’t worried. There was no uncertainty in the world that could shake the confidence Cal had in the three of them.
Assumptions are the Bane of Civilized Conversation

It took Theodore two days to respond to Cal’s missive requesting some of his time to deliver the stone. And so, when he arrived with Wes and Mick at Theodore’s house at the time he’d been given, he was just a little suspicious. Theodore had wanted this stupid thing badly enough to pay all that money; that he waited so long to answer when Cal wanted to give it to him made Cal wonder if he did have Theodore to thank for Beatrice’s ambush after all.

“Maybe he just needed some time to get the money together for the payment.” Wes had suggested, when Cal had brought this up.

“But he’s rich.” Cal had said, shaking his head. “I mean, is money really a problem for him?”

“You know as well as anyone that being rich doesn’t mean you have piles of gold in your house.” Mick had answered with a sigh. “The man’s not a dragon, Cal. He probably keeps his money in banks like we do.”

For all that, he knew Mick and Wes were suspicious as well, and though they were unarmed out of courtesy when they called on Theodore, Cal was prepared for at least the possibility of a fight.

He tried not to let that show in his stance as he made his way up the stupidly long path between Theodore’s gates and his front door. The door was opened before he was within arm’s reach of it. Cal looked at the face of the man standing there for a second, trying to recall if he knew a name to go with it.

“Benedict.” He said, remembering as he approached polite distance. “I hope we haven’t kept you waiting behind that door.”

“No.” The manservant assured him with a dry smile and a slight incline of his head. “You are just on time, Calvin. Please be welcome—if you’ll come with me, Master Theodore is expecting you in the sitting room.”

“Thank you.” Cal smiled at Benedict and let the man lead the three of them into the house. His demeanour, the careful way he said ‘Master,’ suggested to Cal he had been a slave at some point. Benedict didn’t greet Mick or Wes except with an acknowledging nod, and they stayed quiet for now as they followed after Cal. “How long have you worked for Theodore, Benedict?”

“Long enough to know better than to engage that line of discussion, sir.” Benedict said as he led them through a door.

“No.” The manservant assured him with a dry smile and a slight incline of his head. “You are just on time, Calvin. Please be welcome—if you’ll come with me, Master Theodore is expecting you in the sitting room.”

“Thank you.” Cal smiled at Benedict and let the man lead the three of them into the house. His demeanour, the careful way he said ‘Master,’ suggested to Cal he had been a slave at some point. Benedict didn’t greet Mick or Wes except with an acknowledging nod, and they stayed quiet for now as they followed after Cal. “How long have you worked for Theodore, Benedict?”

“Long enough to know better than to engage that line of discussion, sir.” Benedict said as he led them through a door.

“Fair enough.” Cal said with a laugh. He looked around the hallway as they went down it, thinking that Theodore’s house had gotten even more ornate than before. Personal servants to people like Theodore often knew a great deal about what their masters were doing, but it seemed like Benedict wasn’t the type to gossip. Unfortunate. “I trust your winter was decent.”

“Overly long, sir, but not otherwise terrible. Here you are.” Benedict stopped in front of a door and knocked. “I’ve Calvin and his guests for you, sir.”

There must have been an answer as Benedict opened the door and showed them in. Cal nodded thanks at him and entered, giving Theodore a little bow when he did. “Thank you for making the time for us today, sir.” He said to Theodore, who was sitting in a heavy armchair in front of a table. This was a different room to the one that Cal had been taken to before, less gold and with more rugs and cushions.
Weeks ago? Beatrice couldn’t have gotten back to Merket that quickly. It was impossible. He felt Wes tense at his shoulder and could practically hear Mick stiffen at the door. Cal kept his face clear of emotion. “So it was you.” He said, leaning forward a little. Sure enough, that little slave went still in a barely noticeable way.

“Was it?” Theodore asked, his own face masked as well. “And what, pray, have I done?”

“You hired Beatrice to ambush us, to steal the stone from us.” Cal said, looking at Theodore,
searching his face, his posture, for anything. He shook his head a little. “If you wanted to save money that badly, you could have offered us half of what you did, we’d still have taken the job.” As he spoke, Cal reached out and took the stone back off the table, out of Theodore’s reach.

Theodore tented his hands and looked over them at Cal for a long minute, not saying anything, calculating. Then he reached into his own pocket and pulled out an identical stone, put it on the table in place of the one Cal had removed. “A young man named Pascal sold this to me. I’d hired him to acquire one like it, and to my surprise, he arrived with this one in hand as well. I confess I’d assumed you had chosen to make a higher profit selling it to someone else. I know nobody named Beatrice, I’m afraid.”

Now Cal frowned, looking at the decoy on the table. “Interesting.” He said after a minute, looking up at Theodore. “I don’t have an answer for you. But I think we both assumed incorrectly.”

“Perhaps we did.” Theodore said carefully. “Perhaps the one who hired your Beatrice is the same source whence Pascal acquired the stone.”

“You have a competitor.” Cal said, cutting to the point.

“So it seems.” Theodore mused. “So, how, then, is it that there are two stones?”

“A decoy spell.” Cal nodded at it. “That’s a pebble I found in my boot one morning. Enchanted to appear similar to the real stone. If you have a practitioner on your payroll, you could verify that.”

“I shall.” Theodore nodded. “No offence meant, but given the situation I’m sure you understand.” Cal nodded. “If he bears your story out, you shall have the full payment promised.”

“He will.” Cal promised. He kept the real stone in his hand for now. “I should like to know the significance of this stone.”

Theodore’s perfect eyebrows went up. “I wasn’t given to understand that people in your profession made a habit of such questions.”

“They’re not.” Cal said, fixing Theodore with a flat look. “But a man turned himself into a monster to use this stone’s power. A boy lost his life guarding it. And someone tried very hard to make sure you didn’t get it.” And a crazy old lady who might have known Cal in a previous life thought it was tied to the end of the world.

“It’s very valuable.” Theodore said. “I’m afraid that’s all I can tell you.”

“That isn’t good enough.” Cal told him with a shake of the head. “Did you know anything about this stone? The circumstances of where it was, who had it? Anything you didn’t tell me?”

Theodore affixed Cal with a look now. “I didn’t. You sound to have a personal investment in this, Calvin.”

“Do you believe in heroes, sir?” Cal asked. “The kind that they write stories about?”

Theodore’s look became contemplative. “I suppose so. I confess I’ve never met one, but the stories must come from somewhere, mustn’t they?”

“I’ve met one.” Cal told Theodore, nodding. “I didn’t believe that people like that were real until recently. But this stone was being guarded by a hero, a real one. His name was Toby, and he spent a hundred years making sure that a psychopath didn’t use it to take over the world. I want to make sure that I didn’t help him only to hand it over to someone who wants the same thing.”
Theodore did a good show of understanding, or at least appearing to. Cal suspected he was very
good at pretending. It must be frustrating to live with him. “I shall give you my word, then. I have no
ill intentions for the stone. It is, as you have doubtless noticed, a powerful magical artefact. My
desire, Calvin, is to set it on a shelf and ensure that nobody ever touches it again.”

The conviction in Theodore’s voice got to Cal, and he believed Theodore. “Okay.” He said after a
minute, and he put the stone back down on the table. “If you’re lying, know that I’ll be back for it.”

“I would expect no less from someone in whom I put my trust.” Theodore said with a nod. He stood.
“Please wait here for just a moment.”

Cal nodded, glancing at Mick, who moved clear of the door. Theodore left the room, leaving the
little slave behind, probably so the three of them couldn’t talk—or do anything funny with the stones.

For the first time Cal looked properly at the slave. He had stood there impassively through the entire
conversation and was still doing that, quiet as if the room were empty. “How old are you?” Cal
asked him on impulse.

The slave looked up at him, eyes boring into Cal’s.

“I’m not going to tattle on you to your master.” Cal said, trying for reassuring. It couldn’t be an easy
life this kid had. It never hurt to be spoken to like a person every once in a while. Most of the slaves
that Cal had seen had a broken look about them, but he didn’t.

At least not yet.

“Does it matter?” The boy finally asked.

Cal smiled sadly. “No, I guess it doesn’t. What’s your name?”

“Daniel.”

It wasn’t right. It might be legal in Merket, and across the ocean, and in a few places down south, but
slavery was just wrong. Especially when it was pretty obvious that Theodore showed a clear
preference for what type of slave he liked. Humans were meant to be free. “I wish I could help you.”
Cal said quietly, without meaning to. A part of him considered asking Theodore for the boy’s
freedom instead of money.

But he knew that would just offend Theodore, and not actually help Daniel. And even if Theodore
agreed, then what? He couldn’t just turn Daniel out on the street, at his age with no money or
possessions to his name. He’d have to come work with the three of them or he’d either starve to
death or end up selling himself back into slavery for food. It had happened to a lot of people before,
Cal knew.

Daniel’s look got even more intense, though he masked it. “I don’t need your help.” He muttered,
taking the two untouched wine goblets from the table and turning away to put the platter with the
wine jug back on the table.

“Sorry.” Cal said, a little weakly. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“I’m not offended, sir.” Daniel said politely, with his back still turned. “Slaves don’t have feelings to
hurt.”

“Of course. I feel I should at least warn you—you’re not as good at hiding your emotions as you
think.” Daniel stiffened just perceptibly at that. “I suggest that you take a second to name every
emotion as you feel it. Naming things makes it easier to control them.”

“I…” Daniel finished tidying up the platter and was left with no choice but to turn again. His face was a mask of calm again. “I’m not supposed to talk to you.” He said finally, to the floor.

“Right, sorry.” Cal glanced up at Wes and the four of them waited in silence for a few minutes until Theodore returned.

“I’ve summoned a friend who can verify the authenticity of the stone.” Theodore told them, though Cal noted that his first glance on entering the room was towards Daniel. “It may take some time for him to arrive. I wonder if you’ll join me for lunch in the meantime.”

“Of course.” Cal smiled, and stood.

“Good.” Theodore smiled as well. “I should like to hear the details of the story you told me earlier, about the hero who guarded the stone.”

“I only know the end of the story.”

“The end is the best part of any story, isn’t it?” Theodore asked, and gestured for Cal to join him at the door. Cal reached down and took the stone from the table, and made very visible that he was taking the decoy in his other hand to give to Theodore. No need to make room for accusations. “Benedict will show you to the dining room. I have some brief business and then I’ll join you.”

“Of course, sir.” Cal suspected Daniel was the ‘brief business,’ but he nodded and gestured for Mick and Wes to follow him from the room. “I hope you haven’t been standing here in the hallway this whole time.” He said to Benedict out in the hallway, once the door was closed behind them.

“You overestimate the length of your conversation, sir.” Benedict said. Cal liked him. “If you’ll follow me.”

“Of course.”

The dining room was the tackiest of all the rooms Cal had seen yet in Theodore’s house, full of tall statues of saints that Cal immediately disliked. He’d never understood piety that could have bought a small village. There was already a table set, for four. “The three of you may take seats.” Benedict told them, making to retreat. “The master will join you momentarily.”

“Thank you.” Cal looked around the room as Benedict left, leaving the doors open. It seemed empty. “Sorry, guys.” He muttered, quietly.

“It’s okay.” Wes patted Cal on the shoulder. “Free lunch.”

“I don’t like him.” Mick’s voice was a little louder than theirs. “But I think he was telling the truth before.” Wes nodded in agreement. “Makes me wonder who he thinks he’s guarding the stone from, though.”

“A shadow that thinks people are things?” Cal suggested. Mick nodded grimly. “I’ll see if I can get more out of him while we eat.”

“It always kind of freaks me out to hear you talk so formally to people.” Wes admitted. “I don’t know how you do it without wanting to punch someone.”

“I don’t. I just don’t punch them.” Cal smiled at the chuckles that got him. “At least he’s going to pay us.” He said, setting the stone on the table beside his empty plate.
“Yeah.” Mick agreed with a sigh. “At least there’s that. I can’t figure out how Beatrice got here so fast. She must have had some help.”

“Magic?” Cal asked, and Mick nodded.

“Do you ever get the feeling there’s something bigger going on?” Cal muttered, glancing up at one of the saints. He was covering his eyes, and Cal tried to remember which saint did that.

It was only a few minutes before Theodore joined them again, without little Daniel. “Sorry for the wait.” He said, taking the last seat. And setting the decoy on the table beside his own plate.

“No trouble at all, sir.”

“As I said,” Theodore told them, “I would like to hear your story. But first, I wonder if you might entertain a little more business. This stone was not the only relic I hope to keep out of dangerous hands.”

Cal straightened a little in his chair. When they’d met before, Theodore had said he was looking for a number of things. “And you’d like us to help you, I presume?”

“You’ve proven competent thus far. Tell me, have any of you ever of the Sea King’s Regalia?”
Cal yawned, making his way up the stairs of the inn. Gathering information meant sitting around in a lot of taverns talking to a lot of people, and Cal liked talking to lots of people, but he also liked sleeping and too many people liked to talk into all hours of the night.

He’d heard lots of rumours and stories about dragons and messiahs and nobility of various stripes and all of it was potentially useful at some point for him, but now he wanted to go to bed. Mick and Wes had gone up an hour earlier and left him to it, since it was more Cal’s area than either of theirs anyway, and all Cal wanted right now was to cuddle into bed in between them and sleep for a few hours.

Fishing the key out of his shirt, Cal paused to yawn again before aiming it at the lock, getting it in place on the second try and turning it the wrong way at first. By the time he finally got the stupid door unlocked, Cal considered the fact that the door opened properly when he pushed on it to be a victory.

He was trying to be quiet, figuring that he’d find the other two asleep when he entered the room. Turned out he’d been wrong.

Mick was on top of Wes, his knees on Wes’s shoulders and his mouth on Wes’s cock, and Wes, propped up into a half-sitting position with the pillows, had his face buried between Mick’s thighs. Cal paused on coming in, letting the door swing shut behind him, just watching the two of them for a second.

Mick must have heard the door close, because he looked up from his task and smiled, lifting off Wes to talk to Cal. “Hey. You took a long time.”

“Yeah.” Cal said vaguely, thoughts of going to sleep slowly fading. He turned and locked the door behind him. “Glad you weren’t bored without me. Don’t let me interrupt.”

“You’re not interrupting.” Mick assured him.

Wes shifted and lifted his head to see Cal as well, smiling wickedly. “Not at all. Come and join in.”

Cal stretched slowly, just taking in the sight of the two of them. He gestured for them to continue. “In a few minutes. I’ll watch for a bit.”

Mick shrugged as best he could and went back to work on Wes, and Wes similarly disappeared. Cal took a breath and started undressing slowly, trying to stretch some of the tired out from his muscles as he did.

He didn’t touch himself yet, letting the last of his clothes fall onto the floor as he watched. Mick was working Wes slowly, and Cal could see him periodically tense from whatever Wes was doing back there. The only sounds in the room were the two of them, slurping and grunting and moaning. Cal sat on the bed beside them, rubbing Mick’s back as he did his thing, leaning back to see Wes with his face buried between Mick’s legs, penetrating Mick with his tongue and one finger.

Not able to hold back, Cal started stroking himself slowly, taking in the scene in front of him with a smile on his face, looking up and down his friends’—lovers’—bodies. He ran a finger down Wes’s leg, liking how tense the muscles were. His eyes, travelling, watched Mick bob up and down for a bit, and Wes’s balls, hanging heavy, and further down, where in between Wes’s legs was a pretty noticeable mess. “Looks like I missed more than I thought.” Cal muttered, reaching down and taking
Mick smiled around Wes, and Wes pulled back to answer. “We’ve been waiting for you a while.” He said with a grin, which had to have been hard with Mick sucking on him like that. “Enough time to go and rest and start over.” He tapped Mick on the thigh. “You ready?” He asked.

Mick pulled back, leaving Wes glistening behind him, a line of saliva joining them. “Yeah.” He looked up at Cal. “I’m going to try having Wes put it in me.”

“Holy shit.” Cal said, shuddering a little as just the thought of it made him need to slow down a little. “Mick, he’s not going to fit.”

“Sure I am.” Wes said, gently easing Mick off of him, and Cal watched rapt as the two of them repositioned, Mick getting onto his hands and knees and Wes positioning behind him. “Don’t worry, we were careful. You want to watch, Cal?”

“Yeah.” Cal breathed, leaning in despite himself, transfixed by just how big Wes was in his own hand as he aimed himself towards Mick’s hole. He kept stroking himself in one hand and put his other one on Mick’s calf, worrying at his lip as Wes pressed his head against Mick and slowly, with a grunt, inside.

“Fuck.” Mick whispered. Fisting the sheets. Cal could see his toes curling.

“You okay?”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Slowly, okay?”

“Yeah.” Wes slowly pushed in a little further, and then out, leaving the head inside before pushing back. Cal kept palming himself as he watched, his breath coming in tune with Wes’s thrusts, which were getting deeper and deeper, more and more of him disappearing inside Mick. It didn’t seem real, it didn’t seem possible. Mick was moaning with each stroke, in obvious discomfort, but Cal didn’t think he was in specific pain.

With a sudden long thrust and an almost-growl, Wes buried himself inside Mick, and Cal came as he watched, letting out a pitiful moan as he splattered his hand and Mick’s leg. “God, Wes.” He managed.

Wes didn’t answer, just leaned in over Mick, breathing hard. “I’m all the way in, baby.”

“God…” Mick said, face contorted as he tried to get used to it. Wes kissed him a few times around the ear, on the neck, until they were both calmer. “Okay.” Mick finally nodded. “Okay, you can move, Wes.”

And so Wes did, and Cal got hard all over again as he watched Wes slide in and out of Mick, who was stretched obscenely to accommodate him. They moved back and forth, rocking the bed a little. Cal could hear it creaking in addition to all their breathing, to Mick’s moans and Wes’s grunts.

“Oh God, Wes.” Mick’s breath started to pick up, his cries becoming a bit more desperate. “God, oh God. Keep going, keep going, please…”

“Mick…” Wes tensed up really suddenly, slamming into Mick harder than he had been, both of them crying out as Wes came inside Mick with another growl, holding him tight for a solid minute as he did. Cal could see some of his cum overflowing out of the hole. Just as he was finishing Mick spasmed as his own orgasm hit him, and he buried his face in the sheets as he made a mess of them.
“Fuck.” Cal whimpered, touching himself again. He would do anything to watch that again, all the time.

Finally, with a long sigh from both of them, Wes pulled out of Mick and fell back on his haunches, looking up at the ceiling as if in prayer.

“Cal…” Mick muttered, panting. “You too.”

“What?”

“You too, come on. I want you to have a turn.”

“You sure?” Looking at him, Cal wasn’t sure Mick could take any more.

“Yeah. You’ll last two minutes anyway. I want to feel you too.”

“You’re barely going to after taking Wes’s monster.” Cal said with a weak chuckle, but after a moment’s hesitation, he got up on his knees and crawled around behind Mick, pausing when he felt Wes’s hands on his backside. “Worried I’ll get lost?”

“Maybe.” Wes smiled at him and guided Cal forward. Cal noticed that his fingers were slick with something, and just as he caught on, Wes started probing around, entering Cal from behind as Cal entered Mick with a sound akin to a hiss.

Somehow he’d expected lots of room inside Mick since he was following up on Wes, but Mick was plenty tight and his prediction that Cal would last two minutes was going to tend towards the generous, especially since he could feel Wes’s cum slicking around inside as he moved.

Within the first few thrusts Cal could feel another orgasm building up inside him, and it hit just as Wes decided to add a second finger. Cal came with a yelp, pushing sharply into Mick as he added his own seed to the mess inside him.

Mick’s knees gave out as Cal finished and they all sort of collapsed on top of each other, breathing. Wes’s fingers were still inside Cal, working patiently. “Fuck.” Mick whispered. “That was good.”

“Just good?” Wes asked from behind Cal. “Should I try again?”

“Shut up. You know what I meant.”

“Yeah, I did.” Cal could feel Wes smiling. “You did good, Cal.”

“You say that like I’ve never topped before.” Cal yawned, the tired coming back. “You can just get that idea out of your head, by the way. Mick is big like you—you’re never going to fit inside me.”

“We’ll see.” Wes smiled, pulling his fingers out and wiping them on the bed as he moved to lay beside Mick, pulling Cal onto his chest to lay there. “You didn’t think I’d fit in Mick either.”

“It’s good, Cal.” Mick reported, cuddling up beside Wes. “It’s really good. You should try.”

“You guys are too big.” Cal didn’t think either of them would hurt him, but…

“You don’t need to be scared, Cal.” Wes said, reaching out and squeezing Mick’s hand. “We won’t force you if you don’t want to.”

“Yeah, I know.” Cal sighed, nestling a little. “It’s a little intimidating is all. And if you ever repeat that I’ll punch you in the balls.”
“Because you can’t kick high enough to reach?” Mick asked with a poke.

“Fuck you.”

“You already did.” Mick smiled. “Next time I want to suck Wes while you do.”

“Oh, God.” Cal muttered, closing his eyes against the image. “I’m too tired for this.”

“Yeah, it’s late.” Wes agreed. “Let’s sleep for now.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, okay. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” Cal answered, yawning again.

“Goodnight, guys.” Wes echoed. “Love you.” And he held them both tighter, and like that they drifted off.
The cathedral in White Cape was built into the side of the hill that the city sat on, and the inside was a network of stairs and weird ledges that made the whole place feel like the inside of some perspective painting.

Two days spent here in the cathedral’s library had been enough to convince Cal that he never wanted to be a priest, but also that everyone who claimed to know what scripture meant was either crazy or way smarter than him.

Cal had always fancied himself smart, so that was really saying something.

“God.” Cal muttered, reading a line about people being dunked in rivers of molten lead. “The end of the world is going to suck.”

“Only for the sinners.” Cal looked up to see one of the priests of the church, a young man named Raphe. He was too pretty to be a priest, Cal thought. He sat on the bench beside Cal and looked over at what he was reading. He was a full priest despite his age, dressed in the black and blue cassock. He had a silver saint’s icon on a small chain around his neck.

“Are you sure about that?” Cal asked. Wes and Mick were here with him, but they were off in the shelves, looking for anything that might tell them anything about, well, anything. “It says here that…” He paused, hovering his finger over the line he wanted. “‘And the blessed shall be violated, flayed of their virtue and arrested in molten sin.’”

“It does say that.” Raphe agreed with a nod. “But it also says that this will be their reward for living saintly lives.”

“But…” Cal shook his head. “Torture really isn’t a reward—at least not where I’m from.”

“What you have to understand is that the language is metaphorical.” Raphe said, leaning back a little on the bench. “It uses violent language, but it’s doing it to get across the opposite point.”

“But why would it do that?” Cal demanded. He’d always just sort of assumed that religion made sense. It was a bit frustrating to find out it didn’t. He was getting tired of things that didn’t make sense. “Why can’t it just say straight-out what it means?”

“Because salvation is work.” Raphe smiled at him. “And because the rhetoric is more powerful using certain language. You have to remember that when this was written, followers of the Catechism were having a hard time, and were often being killed for their faith. It stands to reason that when you live in a violent world, your idea of the future will be violent too.”

Cal nodded, supposing that made a little bit of sense. “Still.” He persisted. “I’m sorry for being so rude, just it seems like if you were having a hard time, you’d want the future to be nice.”

“Well, this is also revelation, don’t forget. The writer of this can’t help what he or she saw, right? But you’re not wrong—and most modern translations of that line say something like…” Raphe looked up for a moment, trying to remember. “‘And the blessed shall be washed, clothed in virtue and purified of all sin.’”

So they just changed it to the exact opposite of what it said to make people feel better. That didn’t sit
well with Cal either. “Then why doesn’t this one say that?” He asked.

“Well, you’re not reading a translation, for starters.” Raphe pointed out, and Cal started to say he was, but he looked down at the book in his hands, at the letters and words in front of him, and realized it wasn’t the language he’d grown up reading.

“Right.” Cal shivered a little though it was hot, closed the book and set it aside. He hadn’t noticed that when he’d picked it up.

“You okay?” Raphe asked, putting a hand on Cal’s shoulder.

“This is just a little overwhelming.” Cal muttered, and he wasn’t sure if he was talking about the research or what had just happened. Even if Belle had been right and there was nothing wrong with him, he wasn’t okay with things he didn’t know just surfacing in his head.

“Divine word is supposed to be overwhelming.” Raphe said, nodding understandingly. “Maybe I can help. What specifically are you looking for?”

Cal considered the pros and cons of telling him. The pros were that Raphe might be able to help and that Cal would never see him again after he, Wes and Mick went south, and the cons were that he would have to ask someone for help. “Armageddon’s Vanguard.”

“Hm.” Raphe appeared thoughtful for a moment. “I’ve never seen that term come up in any scripture.”

Cal couldn’t decide if he should be relieved or annoyed. “The Gatekeeper of Shadow?”

Raphe shook his head. “That one either.”

“Child of Misfortune?”

“No.”

“The Doomed One?” Cal asked, trying not to appear too visibly nervous.

Raphe frowned, considering, and Cal’s stomach clenched, but ultimately the priest shook his head. “Sorry. That one’s a little vague and lots of people are called ‘doomed,’ but you make it sound like a name and there’s definitely nobody in scripture named that.”

“Okay.” Cal sighed a little. That one was definitely a comfort. The pedantic part of him wanted to run through the list of every last proper name the old lady had thrown at him to see if any of them would stick, but it seemed unlikely. Besides, he didn’t really remember most of them.

“That all?” Raphe asked.

“Yeah…” Cal hesitated. Maybe a few more wouldn’t hurt. “Is there an Oligarch?”

“No.” Raphe smiled at him. “Where are you getting all these names?”

“Crazy person shouted them to me on the street one day.”

“You shouldn’t lie to a priest.”

“I shouldn’t lie to anyone, technically.” Cal pointed out.

“Fair enough. Maybe I can’t help, but I might be able to be of some comfort, at least. There aren’t
actually that many named people in apocalyptic literature, which is all you’ve been reading, I’ve noticed.”

“I’m not allowed to be worried that the world might end?” Cal smiled, wondering of Raphe would tell him that not all apocalyptic literature was about the end of the world. It was something Cal would have pointed out. He wondered what was taking Wes and Mick so long.

“It’s going to end someday, whether you’re worried about it or not.” Raphe shrugged. He didn’t bother to point out the distinction. “Or maybe it won’t, and the whole genre is just a metaphor for something. But to make you feel better, all you usually see is some angels, some demons, most of whom don’t have names or are just named after the virtues or sins they represent. There are prophets, usually, but they have ordinary person names, not titles. You get crowds of people, God is there sometimes, and the messiah, of course, he’s pretty easy to spot as the One Who Will Come or something like that. The Empty Lord is in some of it.” Raphe paused, thinking. “Some apocalypses have weird monsters with funny names, but they’re names like the Red Kingdom and the Thorn of Creation, so you’d know them when you saw them.”

Cal nodded. That sure was a nice summary, he thought. Could have saved him two days of reading, and accidentally learning a new language by reincarnation magic. “The Empty Lord is the devil, right?”

“Yes, it’s a name for him you only see in apocalypses. You probably saw him a few times.”

“Yeah.” Cal had. “He kind of sucks.” Always tormenting the innocent and raging against the earthly purity of God’s chosen, that sort of thing.

“That’s the idea, yes. If you’d read a few more pages into that one, he’d have shown up again, though out of translation the name wouldn’t have been the same.”

“Oh?” Cal couldn’t pretend not to be interested, and looked down at the book he’d been looking at before. “Why?”

“We didn’t know Dynese very well when we started translating a lot of this scripture, so we thought the term was Empty Lord when we came across it the first time.” Raphe picked up the book and flipped through it, finding the page he wanted and showing it to Cal. “It’s this term here, toek. Later study tells us that it’s a noun, not an adjective, so a better translation might be the King of Emptiness, or…”

“Nothing.” Cal interrupted, looking down at the word. “The King of Nothing.”

“Right, that would be a pretty good way of translating it.” Raphe nodded. “Maybe you should be a priest… Cal? Are you okay?”

Cal was looking down at the line Raphe had shown him. “And from his high throne, the King of Nothing shall break the bones of the innocent, and the earth shall weep under his reign, and a coalition of the righteous shall rise against him, and he shall be dashed against the ground in the last days.” He looked up from the book, and he knew his face was pale. “I have a list of names I need to ask you about.”

“I had a feeling you might say that.” Raphe nodded, looking serious. “Tell me though, really. Where did you hear them?”

Cal paused. “An old lady who might have been crazy.” He admitted. “And might have been immortal. And who lived in a house that didn’t exist in a gap that didn’t exist between two houses
Raphe went silent for a long moment, looking away. The sun was setting outside, and the light coming in through the stained glass windows was casting the entire church in rainbows of colour. “Did she have a cat?”

Freezing cold, Cal nodded.

“Be careful of her, Calvin.” Raphe warned. He looked tired. “I don’t think she wants to hurt you, but I also don’t know what she does want.”

“You know her?” Cal’s mind exploded with a thousand questions at once, the first one being why some random priest in White Cape knew an old lady in Two Oaks.

“We met once. Now….”

“Cal?”

Cal looked up, saw Mick standing there with two books in his arm. Wes was behind him, trying to scrunch a little. The stacks were pretty narrow. “What are you doing?”

“I’m just talking to Brother Raphe. Mick, he knows the old lady.” Cal was scared as hell, but now that the two of them were here with him, it was fine. Whatever Raphe ended up saying about her, it would be fine.

“Cal, there’s nobody there.”

“No.” Cal turned, looked back at the spot where Raphe had been sitting. “No, Mick, he was definitely there. He was real, I’m sure of it. He touched my shoulder, I felt him.” He was shivering again, and not from the cold this time. Churches were supposed to be safe, and Cal didn’t feel safe.

“I believe you.” Mick set his books down and came to sit beside Cal, taking his hand. He didn’t do the magic he usually did to make sure Cal wasn’t being compelled. Just held his hand. Wes put a hand on Cal’s shoulder and the three of them just sat there for a minute.

“Why is this happening?” Cal whispered, into the silent church.

“I don’t know.”

“We’ll figure it out, though.” Wes promised. “We’ll figure it out, Cal.”

Cal nodded, taking deep breaths. “I know. I know we will. I’m just…I’m scared.”

“Don’t be scared.” Mick raised Cal’s hand and kissed the back of it. “We won’t let anything happen to you.”

“That’s right.”

“I love you guys.”

“Let’s get out of here.” Wes suggested, looking around the church. “It’s getting dark anyway.”

“We can come back tomorrow.” Mick agreed.

“No.” Cal shook his head. He wanted answers, he did. But he didn’t want to come back here. “We need to get ready to leave White Cape if we’re going to make that summer festival in Pelican Bay.”
“Alright.” Wes gave Cal a hand to stand, and the two of them escorted Cal out of the cathedral and into the darkening streets of White Cape.

It wasn’t until later that night, when he was undressing for bed, that Cal found around his neck, on a fine chain, a small silver saint’s icon.
The Shore Road that ran from White Cape down the coast was actually pretty nice to walk on, especially considering it didn’t lead anywhere very important, all things considered. It was stone, raised a nice height above the ground, reasonably well maintained, and walking along the coast made for a nice view of the ocean the whole way.

It was also nice and wide open, removing the possibility for an ambush, and Cal liked that a lot. He was tired of being ambushed. He was tired of things happening that came out of nowhere. He was tired of things happening that he couldn’t predict or explain.

He could feel his life starting to descend into chaos, and he was tired of that too.

“Do you think they ever stop doing that?” Wes was asking Mick as they walked south.

“Probably not.” Mick shrugged, looking up at the flock of seabirds screeching above their heads.
 “That’s pretty much what birds do.”

“Regular birds never shut up either,” Cal reminded Wes, stretching out one of his arms as he walked. He wasn’t going to walk around in a depressed haze, or spend all of his time being worried. He refused to let whatever was happening ruin his life. He was going to spend time with the people he loved, no matter how many weird people talked to him or gave him mysterious jewelry.

“It’s less annoying on land,” Wes grumbled, looking up at the gulls and shaking his head at them in disapproval.

“No, it really isn’t.” Mick shook his head.

“I’m with Wes on this one,” Cal said. “These guys are louder and stupider. And not as classy as land birds.”

“Do birds have a hierarchy of class?”

“Of course. Peacocks are at the top.”

“Peacocks are tacky as shit,” Mick disagreed immediately. “Falcons are the classiest birds.”

“There are so many reasons why you’re objectively wrong about that. One…”

“Cal,” Wes interrupted.

“I see them.” There was a group of people coming up a slope in the road ahead of them, just coming into view now. Even from here Cal could see that it was Beatrice and her people, and he wondered what she’d been doing down the coast.

He kept walking, unconcerned. “If this were like last time, they wouldn’t be wandering up the road at us,” he told them. Wes and Mick nodded, though he knew that Mick would have his magic ready and Wes would be holding his hand near his axe.

Beatrice and her five people kept walking as well, until they were all about to draw level, when Beatrice came to a halt, holding out a hand for her team to do the same. Cal walked a few steps closer before doing the same himself. He stayed just far enough away that he wouldn’t have to look up at her. “Nice day,” he said to her.
“Too hot, if you ask me,” Beatrice answered, looking at Cal warily.

“Coming back from Pelican Bay?” Cal asked. It was the next major city that this road would lead to.

Beatrice nodded. “And you’re headed that way. A job?”

“If it were, would you follow me so you could rob us?” Cal asked, smiling a little. “No, we’re taking a vacation. It’s summer.”

Relaxing a little, Beatrice smiled too. “Must be nice to have so little work you can take a vacation.”

Behind her, Cal watched her people. She may have relaxed, but none of them really had. Lillian, a slender woman with long hands, was watching Mick carefully. Boris and Adrianna had hands near their bow and knives, respectively. Cal didn’t know the other two men, the bearded one who’d stripped him before and the younger guy whose arm he’d tried to break. The former looked pretty okay, but the latter was tense.

“Not really. It’s more that we made so much money selling that stone that we can afford it.” Cal said, enjoying the way Beatrice’s face scrunched up just a little at that. He shrugged. “I tried to tell you the real stone was the one you tossed away.”

“You’re full of shit.”

“Am I? Go back to your employer and have him test it—or don’t, since he’ll find out you sold him a pebble.” Of course, Cal knew that Beatrice’s employer didn’t have the fake stone anymore anyway, seeing as someone had stolen it and given it to Theodore, but she didn’t need to know he knew that. “Maybe get better at robbing people, I don’t know.”

Beatrice regarded Cal for a moment longer before laughing. “Fine, whatever. It’s in the past anyway.”

“You’re full of shit.”

“Am I? Go back to your employer and have him test it—or don’t, since he’ll find out you sold him a pebble.” Of course, Cal knew that Beatrice’s employer didn’t have the fake stone anymore anyway, seeing as someone had stolen it and given it to Theodore, but she didn’t need to know he knew that. “Maybe get better at robbing people, I don’t know.”

Beatrice regarded Cal for a moment longer before laughing. “Fine, whatever. It’s in the past anyway.”

“Sure.” It very much wasn’t. “You on your way back from a job, or to one?”

For just a moment, it looked like Beatrice didn’t know how to answer that. “Back from one,” she finally said. “Recovering some stolen property.”

Ah, wasn’t that interesting. Cal was pretty sure it wasn’t in Pelican Bay. “Well, you’d be the expert.”

Except, Cal realized belatedly, if she was looking for the stone that had been stolen from her mystery employer, Cal had just told her where it was by telling her that he’d sold it. So that sucked, but it also wasn’t his job to protect Theodore’s assets forever.

Still, Cal felt kind of bad about it. Maybe next time they saw Theodore after finding this Sea King’s Regalia he’d mention it. Hopefully the lead that Theodore had suggested for them in Pelican Bay would pan out. After the vacation part of the trip, obviously.

“We all have to have our strengths, Cal,” Beatrice said, smiling. “On that note, we ought to get going. Some of us do have to earn a living.”

“Of course.” Cal smiled back. “Don’t let us get in your way, Beatrice. It was nice seeing you again.”

“You too, Cal. We should try to catch up more often.”

Cal nodded, and he, Wes and Mick made exactly no effort to move out of Beatrice’s way, forcing her and her team to part around them to keep heading north. Only once they’d moved by did Cal
start walking again, and only once they were a sufficient distance away did he let out the breath he’d been holding. “Bitch,” he muttered, shaking his head.

“I’m surprised you managed to hold that in through the entire conversation,” Wes said, patting Cal on the back. “Did it hurt?”

“It’s called professionalism,” Cal told him, pointing a figure to emphasize the point. “And knowing that we outsmarted her last time, which means we’re winning.”

“Winning what?”

“I don’t know, the game of who can be better than everyone else? We’re definitely beating her. She sucks.”

“So it’s actually pettiness,” Mick observed.

“Yes, but whatever.” Cal grinned. “We’re still winning and she just wasted God knows how long on a fool’s errand.”

“Life is good.” Wes smiled.

“Yes,” Cal agreed, and he kept walking south. “And peacocks are the classiest birds. Falcons are just dogs that can fly.”

“Well, that doesn’t make sense, but I think you’ve forgotten that swans are a thing.”

“Swans are the worst,” Mick objected. “It’s falcons. They’re underappreciated.”

“You’re both lucky I love you, because that’s the only reason I’m so willing to put up with how wrong you both are about this,” Cal told them, and that was how they spent most of the rest of the day.
Getting out of Bed Is the Hardest Part of the Day

It was dark in here. Dark, and warm, and he couldn’t move.

It had been dark for a long time, with just a few minutes of light a while ago. So long since he’d seen anyone, so long since there’d even been anyone. He was broken now, and it hurt. He always hurt, had always hurt. Maybe would always hurt.

He wasn’t alone. One of them, one of them, was here, one of the puppets, dancing on the spider’s thread. There was no light. A jangle of metal.

“Aw, damn.” The puppet said. “I thought it must have been you, Char.”

There was no response but an empty sadness.

“Okay, well.” A sigh. “I’ve got to leave you here, kid. But you did good. They never found it, Char. I’ll take it with me, okay? I can handle it from here. You did good, kid.”

A scrape of metal, a hot touch, tinged by the distant association with something antithetical. “All this time, and the world still doesn’t make any damn sense.”

A loud snap, and the darkness swirled around, and around, and everything was moving and it was too much to keep track of, and…

Cal woke up with a headache, blinking his eyes open in the dawn light that persisted despite the curtains that were up in the inn’s window. He was laying mostly on top of Mick even though it was way too hot for that, because apparently Sleeping Cal hated both of them.

Wes was on Mick’s other side, having had enough sense to pull away in his sleep and not melt them all, though he and Mick were holding hands. It was too hot for blankets, and they were all three of them stark naked.

How far they’d come, Cal thought, watching the two of them breathe. He pulled himself away from Mick, noting with a bit of resignation that they were both already sweating. He kind of liked that in a way, but that ended at the part where they had to put clothes on and wear them all day.

Cal sat, stretching but trying to be quiet about it. He actually wanted nothing more than to stay in this bed here forever, just laying with the two of them. Maybe he’d try to talk them into it when they woke up. They were on vacation, after all.

Unfortunately, he was parched from sleep, so Cal regretfully slid off the bed and quietly made his way over to the water basin on the other side of the room they were renting. He was hard with the morning, but he didn’t bother to do anything about it, and it was already starting to flag by the time he filled up a little tin cup with lukewarm water from the jug beside the basin. He’d hoped that a drink might help with his headache, but no luck there. He thought they might have some herbs for that in one of their bags somewhere, but he’d have to check.

“Hey.”

Cal looked over his shoulder. “Morning.” Wes was watching him, smiling a little. Mick was stirring too. “Sorry, didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“It’s alright, it’s morning.” Wes stretched without sitting up, a motion that seemed to involve every
muscle he had.

Cal poured two more cups of water and brought them over, handing one to Wes and putting the other on the table for Mick when he eventually woke up properly. Wes sat, still holding Mick’s hand, and Cal took that as an invitation to sit in his lap, even though it was too hot.

“How’d you sleep?” Cal asked, while Wes drained his water in one go, putting the cup down to wrap his arm warmly around Cal.

“As well as can be expected when we’re living in hell’s kettle.” Wes sighed, leaning down and kissing Cal. “You?”

“Fine.” Cal nestled a little against Wes. “I had a weird dream.”

“Bad?”

“No, just weird. It was dark and there was something talking, I don’t really remember.” Cal frowned. He had a feeling that he’d known who it was that was speaking, but now he had no idea. “I have a bit of a headache.”

“I think we have some willow bark powder in one of the bags.”

“Yeah, I’ll take it if it doesn’t go away,” Cal promised.

“It’s probably just the heat,” Mick muttered, eyes still closed. “But I can check it out if you’re worried.”

“I’m sure it’s just the heat.” Cal agreed. He didn’t want to turn every little thing that happened into some big deal. “Morning.”

“Good morning.” Mick sat up, rubbing at his eyes and yawning. Wes reached out and got the third cup to put in Mick’s hands, and he drank the whole thing in a gulp without looking.

“Morning,” Wes said, and he leaned in and gave Mick a kiss too.

Mick made a bit of a noise kissing Wes back, and when Wes was done, Cal got up and gave one to Mick as well. Only then did Mick open his eyes. “Good sleep?” Cal asked him.

“Well, I had a little furnace on my chest all night, but otherwise it was fine.”

“Aren’t you glad that I convinced you to stop wearing so much to bed?”

“Yeah,” Mick admitted, eyes raking over Cal and Wes. “Too bad we still have to get dressed now.”

“No, we don’t,” Cal protested, stretching out his feet and trapping Mick in his legs so he couldn’t leave. “Let’s just stay here, like this, all day.”

“I have to pee, though,” Wes said into Cal’s hair.

“And there’s no food in here. We’ll have to go down and get some.”

“Dammit,” Cal grunted. “It’s too hot for all that.”

“You could stop sitting on us,” Wes suggested.

“I think that this is a serious problem.” Cal slumped a little. “That requires serious solutions, not
jokes, Wes.” But he got off, and flopped down on the bed between the two of them, wincing a little at the spike in his head. He was going to need to take something. “When we have a house, we’re going to have summer days where we just don’t put clothes on, and we’re only going to get out of bed for the privy and food. And we’ll just cuddle all day.”

“As nice as that sounds,” Mick said, pulling Cal’s head into his lap, “you’d be the first to get bored.”

“I’m never bored when I’m with you guys.”

“We should get up.” Wes scooted over so he and Mick were shoulder to shoulder, and put a hand comfortably on Cal’s belly. Mick rested his head on Wes’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” Mick murmured, closing his eyes again. “We came all the way to Pelican Bay for that festival. We should at least go to it.”

“I guess.” Cal sighed. “Okay. We should get dressed and get food, then. Full day of vacationing ahead of us.”

“Yeah.”

“Sure.”

None of them moved.

“We don’t really have to do it right this minute, though,” Cal added.

“No.”

“We won’t miss anything if we wait a bit,” Wes agreed.

“Guys?” Cal asked, after a minute.

“What?” Mick was running his fingers through Cal’s hair now.

“Good morning.” He thought it would have been a bit too cheesy to say ‘I love you.’

Wes snorted. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, guys.”

Cal couldn’t think of a better way to spend one.
“I’ll be up in just a minute.” Wes told them as they finally got back to the inn, gesturing towards the back where privy was.

“Sure.” Cal reached out to take the bags Wes was holding, with all their purchases from the festival. Wes just kind of smirked at him and handed the bags to Mick. “Well, screw you.”

“If you want, when I get up.”

Cal chuckled, and Wes turned away from them. It was late but the common room was pretty busy, probably more so than usual. Cal was sure the three of them weren’t the only people in town for the summer festival.

It was fun, parades and dancing and markets and all that. There was a cool-looking sea monster museum here in Pelican Bay, which they hadn’t had time to go to. Maybe tomorrow. But it was going to be nice to go back inside to the room and rest for a while. Festivals were, as it turned out, tiring.

Upstairs, Cal unlocked their door and let them in, and Mick dropped the bags on one of the chairs while Cal pried his boots off on the floor. “Hey,” he said, looking up at Mick.

“Yeah?”

“I have an idea.”

“Oh, that never leads to anything good.”

“We’ve established that I have good ideas.” Now Mick just sort of looked at him. “Okay, whatever. But this one’s good.”

“Let’s hear it, then.” Mick crossed the room and opened the window. There was a really nice sea breeze up this evening that was taking some of the oppressive heat off.

“I think we should team up on Wes the way you and him always do on me.”

That got Mick’s attention, and he turned, looking thoughtful. “He already kind of suggested sex. There’s not much point in sneaking up on him.”

“No, I think there is. There’s something I’ve noticed and I was wondering if you have too?”

“What is it?”

Cal told him, in as much detail as he could, given that he knew Wes was going to be back soon.
Mick nodded along. “Yeah, when you put it that way it does seem likely. But what if you’re wrong?”

Cal wasn’t, but he shrugged. “Then I’ll be embarrassed and it will kill the mood a little. But you must have worried that you and Wes were wrong when you first decided to blow me in the tent last year, right? That didn’t stop you from trying.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Mick thought about it a moment longer. “Alright, let’s give it a shot. Of course, now I’ll be looking over at my shoulder every time I leave the two of you alone.”

“You should, you’re next.” Cal flashed a grin at Mick, sitting on the bed and gesturing for Mick to join him.

That was how Wes found them a few minutes later, in one another’s arms and kissing heavily. “Well, this is a nice sight,” he said, closing the door behind him and smiling at them. “My two favourite guys, doing one of my favourite things.” There it was again, that tone that Cal had noticed.

“Come here, you,” Cal said, getting up to pull Wes over to them, not giving him time to get his boots off. He urged Wes to sit down, and then sat right in his lap. “Let’s talk.”

“About what?” Wes asked with a smile, putting his arms around Cal.

“About you. Is there a sex thing you want to do?”

Wes just looked at him, and Cal could feel Mick shaking his head behind him. “What?”

“I’m serious.” Cal was. “You never specifically say you want to do anything special or different. There must be stuff that you want to try.”

Wes laughed a little, and it was obvious to Cal that he was nervous. “Not really. I just like being with you guys. I don’t care what we do.”

Cal narrowed his eyes, wriggling around until he was facing Wes, legs wrapped around Wes’s waist. “I don’t think that’s true. Come on, you don’t have to be embarrassed. It’s just us.”

Wes had coloured rather impressively seeing as they hadn’t even talked specifics yet. “I’m not embarrassed. I’ve just never really thought about it much.”

Cal sighed, leaned up and kissed Wes on the cheek. “You shouldn’t lie, daddy,” he whispered. And was rewarded with Wes going completely stiff underneath him. Cal smiled. “I…I don’t…”

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Cal repeated, as Mick made his way over to hug Wes from the other side. “Remember that I got off on you guys feeding me a while back.” He had a feeling he knew what Mick liked too, but he’d save that for later.

“It’s not really the same thing.”

“Do you hear us complaining?” Mick asked, kissing Wes’s other cheek.

“I was…just worried you’d think it was weird,” Wes whispered.

“We don’t,” Cal promised. “Come on, we love you, Wes. We’re up for a little role playing if that’s what you want.”

Wes still looked nervous, but he relaxed a little, at least. “Okay. It’s not as fun to be on the receiving
end of this.”

“It gets better,” Cal promised, shifting a little. “What should we do, daddy?”

Wes gripped Cal a little tighter for a second. “You stay right where you are, turn around.” While Cal did as he was told, Wes turned to Mick. “You okay?” He asked. Mick nodded, a small smile forming on his lips. “Good. Why don’t you take off your clothes for us?”

“Okay.” Mick got off the bed, started to undress.

“Slowly,” Wes told him, arm around Cal’s middle, fiddling with the tie on his pants. Cal moved his hands down to help and they were pushed away.

Mick blinked, but did as he was told, carefully taking off each piece of clothing, smiling with a nervousness that Cal knew wasn’t real. His shirt came off first, followed by his pants, and Mick slowly inched his shorts down his legs, bending over as he did. He never broke eye contact with Wes.

“Isn’t he pretty?” Wes asked in Cal’s ear, fingers dipping into Cal’s pants but not much else.

Cal nodded. He really was. He was completely naked now, standing there, hard.

“Why don’t you go give him a kiss?”

“Yes, daddy,” Cal said, resisting the urge to make his voice comically young. That would kill the mood a bit. He slid down from Wes’s lap and took Mick by the shoulders, getting up on his toes to kiss Mick on the mouth. “You’re pretty,” he said to Mick, who looked away.

“I think Michele might like it if you kiss him somewhere else too, Calvin.”

The use of his full name made Cal weak in the knees, and the look on Mick’s face told him he wasn’t the only one. Cal dropped to the floor, looking up at Mick once before taking him into his mouth. It wasn’t a kiss, but Cal could read between the lines.

Mick stood there valiantly while Cal did his best to suck the strength right of him, and after several minutes he made a strained noise and doubled over, shooting into Cal’s mouth. Cal took the first spurt but pulled back and tried to get out of the way. One spurt hit him on the cheek and the rest went over his shoulder and down his back. Not quite what he’d had in mind, but okay.

Panting, Cal looked over his shoulder at Wes. “Did I do it right, daddy?”

“Yeah.” Wes looked as winded as if he was the one who’d been blown just now. “You did, Calvin. Good job. Michele, why don’t you help Calvin out of his clothes?”

Mick nodded, and, giving Cal a quick kiss, lifted Cal’s shirt over his head, slowly, and then undid his shorts and pushed them down for Cal to step out of. He turned Cal around so they were both facing Wes and undid Cal’s loincloth, letting it fall to the ground for Wes to see.

“You’re pretty as well, Calvin,” Wes rumbled. “Both my boys are so pretty.” Cal fidgeted a little at that. “You’ve been very helpful tonight, Calvin. Why don’t you come sit on my lap while Michele returns the favour you just did him?”

“Okay.” Cal trotted back over and slid back onto Wes’s lap, which he admitted was a kind of nice place to sit. Wes’s arm went back around him, and Mick followed him over, getting down onto his knees and in between Cal’s legs.
“He got you to do that because you’re too short for me to do you standing up,” Mick muttered.

“Hey.” That was uncalled for.

“Don’t be mean, Michele,” Wes warned.

“Sorry, daddy.” Mick smiled coyly before going down on Cal, working slowly but quickly getting him to the point of squirming in Wes’s lap, which Cal would later deny playing up for Wes’s benefit. Mick’s mouth was warm and wet, which were both obvious things that a mouth was supposed to be, but that didn’t stop them from being a bit overwhelming, especially with the constant reminder of Wes’s arm around him, with Wes’s breath on his neck, and after a pretty short time Cal cried out to warn Mick, who pulled off just in time to let Cal shoot all over his chest and Wes’s arm.

“Did you like that, Calvin?” Wes asked in his ear. Cal nodded, trying to catch his breath. “Good. It’s really good to see my boys getting along as well as you two do. I can tell you love each other.”

“We love you too, daddy,” Mick said from down there between their legs.

“I know you do.” Wes smiled at Mick. “I’m a little jealous of how much cooler you two are. Let’s help daddy out of his boots, hm?”

Cal nodded and slid down, glancing at Mick to make sure he was good before settling down to unlace Wes’s right boot while Mick did the left. Wes just watched them do it. Cal got Wes’s boot off and tossed it aside, looking up at Wes expectantly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mick kiss the top of Wes’s foot. Cal settled for nuzzling his leg a little.

Wes chuckled, taking off his shirt. “Look how affectionate you both are. I think you deserve a nice reward for being so good.” He stood, and Cal and Mick looked up at him as he loosened his shorts and let them fall, and pushed his undershorts down as well. They helped him out of them until Wes was standing there naked in front of them, holding onto his erection while they both stared up greedily.

Well, Cal was staring greedily, anyway. If Mick wasn’t, he was crazy.

“Do you want this?” Wes asked them.

“Yes, daddy,” Cal said immediately, echoed by Mick.

“Alright, but there’s only one.” He sat back down on the bed. “So you have to share nicely. If you can’t, I won’t let you have it. Got it?”

Cal looked at Mick, who nodded, and the two of them crowded in to get at Wes, Mick taking advantage of his height to get to the tip, which he wrapped his lips around. Cal didn’t mind as that gave him access to the larger part of the shaft and to Wes’s balls, which he played with while he licked Wes up and down.

Wes struggled more and more to maintain his breathing, a hand on either of their shoulders. Cal was content just to make him feel that way, but since Wes had told them to share…

He pulled back a little, tapped Mick on the shoulder. “I want a turn too,” he said quietly.

Mick nodded and, a moment later, pulled off with a pop and moved down Wes’s length with his tongue, letting Cal take his place around the head, which he took into his mouth hungrily, enjoying the way Wes shuddered as he did. For a minute or so Cal sucked on Wes, until he judged his turn was up and got off. He and Mick worked together to lick up and down Wes’s erection, alternately
sucking on his head, until Wes made a long noise. “Boys, boys,” was all he said, and Cal looked at Mick and they both got up there and kissed Wes on either side as he shot off his first spurt, and his second, and until he’d finished on his fourth, all of it landing in Cal’s hair, Mick’s hair and Wes’s chest in some combination.

“Good teamwork, boys,” Wes panted, leaning back a little.

“Thank you, daddy,” Mick said, getting up and sitting on Wes’s lap. It looked silly with how big he was, but Wes just smiled and put an arm around him, and beckoned Cal to come up as well.

Once they were both seated, Wes sighed. “You’re the best boys, you know?”

“You’re the best daddy,” Cal told him back.

“You’re still hard, daddy,” Mick said, glancing at Cal.

“I’m not the only one.” They all were. “Are you guys up to have some more fun?” That carried a note of uncertainty that Wes hadn’t shown since they’d started this.

So Cal smiled brightly. “I am.”

“Me too.”

“Alright.” Wes smiled back at them. “How about this? You show Calvin how good you are at using your fingers, Michele. I’ll go get the oil and we’ll see what happens after that.”

Mick nodded, and they both got off of Wes while he stood. Cal lay back on the bed and Mick sat between his legs, leaning in and offering two fingers for Cal’s mouth.

Cal took them, licked them to get them wet, sucked on them a bit. They were nice fingers. Wes had gone over to get the oil out of one of the bags. “Bet you money it’s not just fingers you get inside you tonight,” he said quietly. It was teasing, but also feeling Cal out.

Cal let Mick remove his fingers, smiling nervously. “I’m not the only one. We’ll see how it goes.”

He wasn’t against the idea, as an idea. He was only against the idea inasmuch as Mick and Wes were so goddamn big and he was so goddamn not. But he knew that it could be safe as long as they were careful. He was willing to try.

He was also willing to say no if trying didn’t work out.

Mick was slow, very slow in working his finger inside Cal, starting with his longest one. He kept his other hand on Cal’s thigh, watching Cal’s face as he worked it inside.

By the time he got it all the way in, Wes had come back and was sitting behind Mick. “Be careful, baby,” he said, patting Mick’s back. “I don’t want anyone getting hurt.”

“I’m being careful, daddy,” Mick assured him as he worked a finger around inside Cal, clearly enjoying watching Cal try not to squirm. A moment later, though, Mick’s breath hitched as Wes started doing the same to him, and Cal giggled a little.

Mick retaliated by squeezing a second finger into Cal, which Cal tolerated with a shudder. He didn’t much like the sting that came with this, but Mick was slow and careful and it faded after a moment. They’d done this before, this part anyway.

Mick and Wes had been trying to stick things in him for a while now.
The addition of Mick’s third finger got a noise out of Cal, one of those pathetic ones that he wished he could stop making during sex. But it was, apparently, not to be. Cal felt himself getting short of breath and made an effort to take deeper breaths. He was covered in sweat and was no longer feeling the nice breeze.

“You okay, buddy?” Wes asked from behind Mick. Cal opened his eyes to see Mick squirming as well as Wes fingered him.

“I’m okay,” he reported. Beyond the sting, it didn’t feel bad. It was nice, in its way.

“You ready for something bigger?”

Cal let the question hang there for a second, not sure. He felt full, with Mick’s fingers inside him like that, and wasn’t sure he could take more of it. But…it was good, it felt nice. He wanted…he wanted to try, at least. “I’m ready,” he said, a little breathless.

“Alright, hold tight for just a second.” Cal nodded and didn’t move. Wes gently reached around and pulled Mick’s fingers out of Cal, and Cal just flat-out pretended that someone else had made that noise. He lay there and watched as Wes turned Mick around. “Can you sit in my lap, baby?”

Mick nodded and started do just that, and it took Cal’s foggy brain a second longer than it ought to have to realize that ‘sit in my lap’ definitely meant ‘sit on my cock,’ because that’s what Mick did, slowly sliding down, eyes closed, Wes’s hands on his sides to steady him, and even though Cal was a little confused about what was happening, it was really something to watch. He could probably have just watched it all night and been totally satisfied come sunrise.

“You okay?” Wes asked Mick as Mick saddled himself.

Mick nodded again, mouth open a little. Cal could see him shuddering.

“Alright.” Wes was panting too and clearly holding himself back from doing anything. He beckoned Cal over.

Cal got up with a little groan, came over on his hands and knees to join them. “I want you to sit in Michele’s lap, just like he’s doing for me. Can you do that, buddy?”

Cal looked down at them, and nodded. “Yes, daddy.” Part of him wasn’t pretending anymore.

With Wes’s help, Cal positioned himself over Mick, awkwardly straddling both of them. Wes’s fingers came up and inside him, awkwardly straddling both of them. Wes’s fingers came up and inside him, pulling apart a little to stretch him further as Wes manhandled Cal into position.

And then it was there, Mick, right at his entrance. Cal had his back to him, facing Wes, and Mick’s panted breath was hot on his shoulder. Cal closed his eyes and tried to stay relaxed, and then he was sliding down, Wes’s fingers leaving him, the head of Mick’s cock replacing them, and he was sliding down, and it was going further in, and it was stretching, and then it stung, and then it hurt. “Stop,” Cal breathed, hands on Wes’s shoulders.

“Are you okay?” Wes asked, holding Cal up by his armpits. He sounded worried.

Cal nodded. His thighs were burning from holding himself up like this. It felt like all of Mick must be inside him, but Cal didn’t want to look down to see how much more there was. “Just…give me a second.”

“Take as long as you need, buddy,” Wes rumbled, quietly. “Just tell me if you can’t do it.”
“I can do it.” Cal promised. “I just need a minute.”

Poor Mick, who must have been absolutely dying, wrapped his arms around Cal in a warm hug, just breathing behind him. “It’s okay if you can’t do it.” He whispered in Cal’s ear. He was so nice. Cal should do something nice for him.

“I know.” Cal nodded. But he could do it, he could, it was already hurting a lot less. He was so full, but he could do more. “Okay,” he said, after a long minute.

“Okay,” Wes repeated, loosening his grip a little and letting Cal slide a little lower down. That sent a jolt through him as Mick touched the spot right inside of him, and Cal started, tensed, and rocked back involuntarily, pushing himself further down faster than he’d intended. That got a reaction from Mick, who twitched inside of him, pushing further in at the same time, and Cal had definitely been wrong before when he’d thought most of Mick was already inside him.

Steeling himself, Cal just pushed himself the rest of the way down, crying out as Mick filled him the rest of the way. He wasn’t the only one, and Mick’s moan filled his ear.

“See, I knew you’d fit together.” Wes murmured, running his hand up and down Cal’s sides for a moment. “My boys, my perfect boys. How does it feel?”

“It’s good, daddy,” Mick panted.

Cal nodded. “It’s really big,” he managed.

“Yeah. You’re going to like this part, though,” Wes promised. And he wrapped his arms around both of them, drawing them in close. Mick was leaning back a bit to accommodate Cal in between them, but now Wes must have been holding up all of their weight. Cal put his arms around Wes and Mick did the same, resting his hands on top of Cal’s behind Wes’s back.

As soon as Wes started moving, started all three of them moving, it was clear it wasn’t going to last long. They were all wound up, too much for it to go on for more than a minute or two. Cal was pressed up against Wes’s chest, his erection rubbing against Wes’s stomach as Mick rocked back and forth in and out of him, hitting that spot again and again, and Cal found himself wishing somehow that he could be wrong and it could last longer than a minute, even as he thought vaguely that he didn’t have the energy for this to go on long.

Reasonably enough, Mick came first, tensing around Cal with a whimper of “Daddy” as he shot inside of Cal. Cal was sandwiched in between them, and it was so hot and sweaty, and both of their arms were around him, and it was just…

Cal came too, not bothering to stifle himself as he did. “Daddy…”

Wes tensed under him, and with a low moan that sounded more like a growl, came inside Mick as well.

They held like that for a minute, panting together. Wes’s grip on them loosened and after a moment the whole thing sort of collapsed and though Cal’s body protested at the sudden loss as Mick slid out of him, his entire insides felt a lot less tight, so there was that. They all lay on the bed, entangled in one another, breathing.

“Thank you,” Wes said, after who knew how long.

“Told you that you didn’t need to be embarrassed.” Cal smiled to himself. He was going to be really, ridiculously sore tomorrow. They definitely weren’t going to make it to that sea monster museum.
He’d be surprised if they made it downstairs.

“How did you know?”

“We love you, dumbass,” Mick told him. “We pay attention to you.”

Wes laughed a little at that. “Thanks,” he said again. “Was it okay? For you?”

“Of course it was.”

“Yeah.” Cal shook his head. “It was awesome, Wes, don’t worry about it—or anything else you want to try.”

“Well,” Wes paused. “I do have a bit of a list.”

“Of course you do.” Cal was not surprised.

He had a bit of a list too.

“We have to go down and get in the bath,” Wes said, another long pause later. “Get cleaned up or we’ll regret it in the morning.”

“Yeah.” Mick sighed, sat up with obvious effort. Cal really, really didn’t want to do that, but Wes was right, so he sat up as well, aware of the cum leaking out of him and onto the bed.

“I love you guys,” Wes said as they stood and cast around for clothes to go out of the room in.

“We love you too, Wes,” Cal told him.

“Yeah—you’re going to help us both wash, right?”

“Obviously.”

Slowly, tiredly, they went down to the bath. No matter how sore Cal was, he was happy. Wes had enjoyed himself—and they had too. It had been a good night.
Festivals Are Great Places to Meet New and Interesting People

Cal actually had no idea what this festival was supposed to be celebrating. It wasn’t something that was done outside of Pelican Bay, but it was a longstanding tradition here. Nobody he’d asked seemed to know either. It just seemed like the whole city had seen an excuse to have two weeks of parties in the summer and just ran with it.

That was fine with him, it was fun. The three of them had had a lot of fun here, and Cal was a little conflicted. Part of him was disappointed that tonight was the last night of the festival and they’d have to go back to work tomorrow, but the other part of him was exhausted from all this vacationing and was ready to go back to work.

They were in Swordfish Alley, which despite its name was one of Pelican Bay’s main thoroughfares, leading directly from the bay, through the merchants’ district and to the ritzy parts of town in the east. Right now it was full of dancing people and coloured glass lanterns, which were just now being lit despite the sun still having an hour left in it.

There were also ribbons everywhere, on buildings and on the ground and on the little food stalls that were set up everywhere, and on people. Everyone had at least one or two ribbons on them. Some people had a lot. Some people had nothing but ribbons on. Cal had bought some for all three of them and had made a joke about wearing just one strategically placed, but that had gotten him very thoughtful looks rather than laughter as he’d thought.

So now he was wearing his strategically placed ribbon, but under some actual clothes. It was a compromise that Cal was pretty okay with.

Masks were also part of the festival, which Cal had thought was pretty fun at first, but which at turns had made him feel funny, since he didn’t ever recognize anyone. His own mask was just a simple black band, which Wes had insisted looked dashing on him.

“Where’s all this music coming from, anyway?” Mick asked all of the sudden, as they wandered through the festival. There was a lot of music playing, but now that Mick mentioned it, Cal hadn’t seen any musicians.

“Maybe the festive spirit creates it out of the air,” Cal suggested, looking around. “Or it’s the breath of angels or something.”

“The musicians are hiding behind the light displays on the rooftops so you can’t see them,” Wes said, pointing out one such display of pink and orange lights. Sure enough, at a squint, Cal could see shapes moving back there.

“Way to kill the magic of it all, Wes,” Mick said, nudging him in the side.

“Yeah, I know.” Wes grinned under his mask, in the shape of a bulldog. “That’s usually your job.”

Mick, in a winged blue mask that put Cal in mind of a bird, didn’t deny it. “I wonder how much they’re getting paid.”

“Only you come to a festival and wonder how much the musicians get paid.”

“I think it’s a legitimate question.” Cal shrugged. “I mean—who the hell pays for all of this anyway?” The long blue ribbon that they’d tied around his neck flapped in the light breeze. “It doesn’t feel organized enough to be the local magistrate.”
Wes just laughed. “Yeah. I’m ready to go back to work too, guys.”

Mick nodded. “Vacationing is a lot of work. I’m glad we did it.”

“Me too,” Cal agreed. “But going back to actual work will be nice. We can start looking for leads on the Regalia tomorrow. We’ll start by going uptown and…” Cal felt the fingers in his pocket and snapped out his arm, wrapping fingers around a skinny wrist. “Hello there.”

“Shit.” The owner of the hand yanked it back. Cal tightened his grip but was surprised at the strength in the kid’s arm, and he pickpocket broke free. Unfortunately for him, Cal had kept him still long enough for Wes to get behind the poor kid, and that was the end of that. “Let me go!” The pickpocket shouted, from behind white face mask that could be bought all over the city, and which therefore looked like thousands of others. Most people painted theirs, though, so it being white was just as distinctive as if it had been colourful. Wes held both of his hands tight, so he wasn’t going anywhere.

Cal considered the struggling thief for just a second. He was a pretty skinny kid, a little younger than Cal. Reddish-brown hair showed atop his head and he didn’t have any shoes on. “You’re not wearing a ribbon,” Cal said, since it struck him as odd.

“What? What do you care? Let me the fuck go!”

“You should wear one, and paint your mask a little, too,” Cal went on, thinking. “And stop targeting people in groups—you want one person by him or herself, preferably someone a little drunk, which a lot of people are. Head down the street a little closer to the bay where it’s more crowded and if you do get caught, don’t let go of the purse—you might still be able to get away with it.”

“Cal, stop giving advice to the pickpocket.” Mick sighed.

“He sucks at it.” Cal shook his head. “It’s insulting. I want him to stop sucking at it.”

“Fuck you.”

“You know, the speech you’re supposed to give is the one about how stealing is wrong,” Wes reminded Cal.

“He already knows that. He’s not stupid, he’s just bad at stealing.”

“Hey! I’m right the fuck here!”


“You sure?” The poor kid was still struggling gamely even though it was clear he wasn’t going anywhere until Wes let go of his hands. There were a few people looking at them, wondering what the commotion was.

“Yeah, I’m sure.”


Mick sighed.

The would-be thief stopped. His stomach made a noise. “No. Fuck off.”

“Okay, well I’m going to go over here and buy some fish,” Cal said, pointing to a nearby man who was grilling bits of swordfish on sticks and selling them to passers-by. “And I’m going to share it
with everyone who happens to be with me at the time. So you have a good night, and enjoy the rest of the festival.”

“Cal,” Mick said to him quietly as Cal headed towards the fish vendor.

“Mick.”

“Please don’t adopt the random pickpocket.”

“I’m just going to feed him and help him get better at his job, that’s all.”

“You know what they say,” Wes added. “If you feed them once, they never stop coming back.”

“I think that’s raccoons. Or ducks.” Cal said. “It’s fine.”

He got to the guy selling the fish and put down a bunch of his not-stolen coins, not at all surprised to find a masked thief standing behind him sullenly when he turned around, handing several of the skewers to Mick and Wes. He handed several to the kid as well. “What’s your name?”

“None of your business.”

Cal shrugged, ate some fish. “I’m Cal.”

The kid looked down at his fish, seemed to realize that his mask covered his whole face and made an agitated noise before lifting it back. A square face with a splatter of freckles across the nose greeted them. He glared at Cal and ate some fish. “You haven’t been doing this long,” Cal told him. “The stealing thing.”

“Never needed to before.”

“But you need to now?”

“None of your damn business.”

“See, and here I thought we were friends—you stuck your hand in my pocket and everything.”

“Shut up,” the kid muttered as Wes snorted.

“You from Pelican Bay?” The kid’s accent placed him here. Cal was warming him up to get to the point. He had an idea.

“Why do you care?”

“I need someone to show me around.”

“Cal…”

“I do, Mick,” Cal smiled at him. “We’ve never done a lot of business here. I need someone to show me where all the interesting places to hear interesting rumours are. We’re looking for something.”

“What is it?”

“It’s called the Sea King’s Regalia.”

The kid frowned. “Never heard of it.”

“Do you know anyone who might have? Or at least a place where I could ask around?”
The kid just scowled at him.

“I’ll pay you.”

“I might know a few places you could try. No promises. No promises you won’t get stabbed, either.”

Cal shrugged. “Being stabbed isn’t as big a deal as people make it out to be. Do you have a name, or should I just call you ‘kid?’”

“I’m not a kid.”

“‘Not a Kid’ is a strange name.”

“Fuck you.”

“You’re a little young for me.”

Flushed, the kid looked away. “That’s not what I meant.”


“Sully,” the kid said, to the street.

“Alright, Sully.” Cal smiled. “You’re hired. I’ll meet you here tomorrow at sunset. In the meantime,” He untied the ribbon from his neck and handed it Sully. “Try to blend in, will you?”

Sully considered the ribbon for a long time, but he did take it, knotting it around his waist before warily making his way off, down towards the bay. Cal watched him until he was gone.

When he turned back, Wes and Mick were both looking at him. “What?”

“We’re hiring random street urchins now?” Wes asked.

“Whatever, I felt bad for him.” Cal shrugged. He did need someone to do what he’d hired Sully to do. Cal didn’t really know anyone in Pelican Bay. “It’s fine. I know what I’m doing.”

“So you always say.”

“I’m usually right, aren’t I?”

They shared a look. Even concealed by masks, Cal didn’t like that look. “I am,” he insisted. “Look, I know he’s just a random kid, but I didn’t get any bad vibes from him. He’s not dangerous, he’s just a little desperate. The worst that happens is I’ll end up giving him some money for no reason but to feed him for a few days.”

“It’s just weird,” Mick said.

“Not really. I do stuff like this a lot, you guys just don’t usually see it.” Cal smiled to calm them both down. “Trust me, okay? This is why you keep me around.”

Another look, then Mick sighed. “Okay, fine. That’s enough work for tonight, though. Let’s go and have some fun.”

“Yeah, I hear they have dramas down closer to the bay.” Cal looked down at himself. “I need a new ribbon.”
“Well…” Wes clapped him on the shoulder. “You do have another one on.”

“Pants do seem to be optional at this festival.” Mick sounded thoughtful too.

“Oh, no.” Cal stepped away from the two of them, holding up a hand. “I’m not drunk enough for that.” He was very aware of the strategically placed ribbon now.

“Yet.”

Cal grinned. It was the way they read his mind that made him love them. “Which one of you is buying?”
The bar was a step above a dive, but not a big enough step that Cal would be willing to bet money on not getting stabbed. “Just my kind of place,” he said, looking around.

“You’re fucking weird,” Sully told him, partly hiding behind him. “That’s him, there at the back.”

The man named Blind Arvin was not blind, or at least he didn’t look it to Cal. He sat at a table for two by himself, nursing a tankard, not paying attention to anything in the room but his drink. Middle aged and showing it, he didn’t look like much.

But then, neither did Cal.

“And he knows everything?”

“That’s what they say.”

“Perfect.” Cal nodded to himself, and took a step in that direction.

“Wait, what are you doing?” Sully demanded, taking Cal’s arm to stop him.

“What, I’m going to go talk to him.” That was why Sully had taken Cal here.

“You can’t just…talk to him!”

Cal turned around. “Why not?”

“I…because? He might kill you or something.”

Arvin didn’t look like the killing people type to Cal. He shrugged. “Yeah, but he might not. You can stay here if you want.” Freeing his hand, Cal turned and walked back to the table.

“I thought you just wanted to scope him out or something!”

“Nah, I’m here now, may as well get it out of the way.”

“Dammit!”

Cal left Sully by the door, taking the chair opposite Blind Arvin, who didn’t look up. “They say you know everything that passes through Pelican Bay.”

“They do say that.” Blind Arvin had a quiet voice and up close, it seemed that his eyes didn’t match.

Cal pulled a coin out of his pocket, played with it over his fingers. “Do you know about the treasure of a Lord Ferrise, passed through town a few years ago?”

Now Blind Arvin looked up at Cal for the first time. “I might.”

“It was a yes or no question.”

Arvin’s eyes flicked to Sully for just a moment, then back to Cal. “I know that your friend there owes me three silvers.”

“Only three?” Cal glanced back at Sully, who was trying to be invisible. “The way he was freaking out about me coming to talk to you, I’d figured it must be more.”
Sully seemed to owe money to a lot of people. He’d had Cal avoid several places for that reason, though he never came right out and say that was why.

“Some people get very possessive about what’s theirs.”

Cal smiled, pulled out his purse, fished out four silver coins. He put them on the table between them. “There. With interest.” He made sure it was obvious how many more coins he had in there while he moved.

“You his banker?”

“I’m his employer, and rather than talking about him, I’d like to talk about what I came here for.”

“Ferrise’s plunder.” Blind Arvin scooped up the coins, made them disappear. “What wasn’t taken by the dragon was looted, made its way through our lovely port.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know.”

“Why don’t you start by telling me what you do know?”

Cal watched him for a minute. “No,” he said, finally. “I’m not playing that game.” He stood, turned away from Blind Arvin, made for the door. “Come on, Sully. He doesn’t have what I need.”

“What?”

“I’m not wasting my time on a middle-grade information broker who wants to play at being mysterious. I’m trying to work here.”

“Cal!”

“Most of it was fenced in the city, split into the winds.” Blind Arvin called out. Cal stopped walking, smiled where only Sully could see. “If you tell me what you’re looking for, I can tell you what happened to it.”

Cal turned back around, approached the table again. “A king’s regalia,” he said, leaning on the table rather than sitting. “A sceptre, some rings, a bracelet, a necklace.”

“A crown?”

“I know where the Crown is.” Or rather, Theodore said that he did, and Cal didn’t have any reason not to believe him. “Rumour was that Lord Ferrise had the Sceptre and the Brace. They’re distinctive, made out of old coral that looks like bone.”

Or bone that looked like coral, according to Theodore.

Blind Arvin watched Cal for a long minute, thinking. “Ten silvers.”

“That’s not very much.”

“It’s plenty, because all you’re getting is a story.”

“I like stories.” Cal wasn’t sure what to make of a broker who thought stories weren’t worth much. He pulled out the money, put it on the table.

“When the Lord’s plunder came through the city, it was in chunks, looters going to the ashes of his manor to pick out the pieces that hadn’t been melted down. There was a coral brace that came with
one of the last batches, a local merchant who’d thought to try his luck once the armed looters had passed by. Name of Patton.”

“Where’s Patton now?”

“Dead. Came back to Pelican Bay wearing that cursed brace, wouldn’t take it off, wouldn’t sell it. Kept saying he had to throw it in the sea. But he wouldn’t, because it was worth something. His sane moments got less and less frequent. His wife tried to make him take the brace off. He beat her to death with it.”

Charming. “And?”

“And then he walked into the bay and never came out, rambling the whole way about how he had to take it back to the ocean. The damn thing is probably still around his corpse’s wrist at the bottom of the bay somewhere.”

Now it was Cal’s turn to fall quiet. “Not what I was expecting,” he admitted.

“Before he went completely off it, a lot of people said they heard him saying how he needed to find the other pieces, get them all together again, return them all to the sea. And that’s it. The damn thing drove him insane. And it’s not in Pelican Bay anymore, at least not the dry part.”

Cal nodded. “The Scepter never came through here, then?”

“No, and it’s a damn good thing.”

Which meant they were going to have to hunt through dragons’ nests. Lovely. “Thank you.” He pushed back from the table, put a few more coins down as courtesy. “That’s what I needed to know.”

“Obviously not, if you’re still planning to go after the other pieces.”

“I’ll be careful,” Cal promised, smiling at Blind Arvin. “Have a good night.”

“Finding that thing’ll be the death of you.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time I doomed myself.” Cal waved over his shoulder, put another coin on the bar as he passed by. “A drink for my friend.” And he collected Sully and made his way outside.

“Thanks, that was helpful,” he said, once they were out of the bar. “I think we can call it a night.”

Sully was looking at him a bit wide-eyed. “How did you do that? You got him to tell you exactly what you wanted.”

“I work with guys like him all the time. The trick is to make him think you don’t really need what he has.” Cal glanced at Sully, smiled. “Having what they want helps.”

Sully was still looking at him kind of funny. “Thanks.” He sounded very grudging about that thanks. “For paying him the money I owed him. You didn’t have to do that.”

“It’s fine.”

“I’ll pay you back. You can take it out of what you’re giving me.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Cal shook his head. “Part of doing business. It’s why I have operating funds.”
“Still, you…”

“This was the first viable lead I’ve found since I got to Pelican Bay, Sully. It was worth it.”

Sully made an agitated little noise, scuffing his bare foot on the cobblestones. “Okay.”

“Considering that’s the same money you tried to steal from me a few days ago, you’re awfully worried about where I spend it.”

“I don’t like owing people things.”

“You owe money to half of Pelican Bay.”

“That’s different, okay?”

“Oh okay.” Cal started walking, away from the bar. Sully followed him. “What kind of information were you looking for, when you went to see him before?” Sully didn’t answer. “I’m good at finding information,” Cal reminded him.

“I was looking for someone. Doesn’t matter.”

“Did you find him?”

“Doesn’t fucking matter.” Sully stuck his hands in his pockets, pouted a little. “No. Asshole didn’t help at all.”

“So you didn’t pay him.”

“Why should I?”

“Because giving people money is how you make them like you,” Cal suggested.

“You’re giving me money, it’s not making me like you.”

“My heart breaks. Also you’re a terrible liar.”

“Shut up. You talk too much.”

Cal chuckled, walking as if he knew where he was going. He had a decent idea, to be fair. Pelican Bay had three major roads.

“Why are you looking for that stuff you were asking about if it’s so dangerous?” Sully asked, as they turned on to another street.

Cal shrugged. “Someone’s paying me to find it.”

“How much?”

“A lot more than I paid Blind Arvin to tell me where it is.” Cal smirked a little at Sully. “And a lot more than I’m paying you to tell me where he is.”

Another indistinct noise. Sully had moved so he was walking a little closer to Cal. “How do you get a job like that?”

“Mostly luck,” Cal said, reaching out and grabbing Sully’s wrist as his arm moved a little closer to Cal’s coin purse. “And a lot of hard work. Anyone can do it, but it’s not easy to be good at it.”
“You used to be a thief, didn’t you?” Sully accused suddenly, pulling his arm back with a consternated look on his face.

Cal shook his head. “No, but a lot of the skills overlap. Why are you a thief?”

He assumed Sully wouldn’t answer. Sully surprised him but just looking away, annoyed. “Ran out of money.” They’d come to a nicer area with streetlamps now.

“That sucks.”

“Whatever.”

“And interesting approach to take to poverty.”

“Why do you care?”

Cal shrugged. “I’m not allowed to care about a fellow human being?”

“No. It’s suspicious. Makes me think you want something.”

Cal laughed. “I do. That’s why I hired you, so you could do something for me.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Sully looked around. “You sure you’re done for the night?”

“Yeah.” Cal looked up. It was dark, but it hadn’t been for that long. “Mick and Wes will be pleasantly surprised that I didn’t stay out all night again.”

That was just how it worked sometimes.

“Okay, I’m going to go. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay.” Cal didn’t really need Sully’s help anymore. They’d only stay in Pelican Bay a while longer, most likely. “Tomorrow I’ll...” He paused as Sully’s face contorted into a glare that couldn’t possibly have been meant for him. Cal looked over to his other side.

There was a man approaching them, not tall and a bit heavyset, a mop of brown hair on top of his head and a worried look in his eyes. “Who’s he?”

“Nobody.” Sully muttered, looking around now as if for an escape. But it was too late, and the man was upon them.

“Evening, Sullivan.”

“What do you want?” Sully asked, turning his glare back on the man. “I’m working.”

“So I see.” The man gave Cal a strange look. “I don’t mean to interfere in your life, but I’d be careful around him.”

“Why?” Cal asked, as Sully glowered. Cal moved a little so he was between this guy and Sully.

“He’s probably lying to you, for one. And he’s definitely using you, or trying to rob you.”

“He already tried that. It didn’t work,” Cal said, and the man blinked. “He works for me now. Who are you and why does he hate you more than he hates everyone else?”

The man seemed to swallow a laugh. “My name’s Bartholomew. I’m a priest at the church around
“Saint Lyra’s.”

“Saint Lyra’s is on the other side of town.” Cal knew that much. It was a pretty huge cathedral and its bells could be heard through the city four times a day.

“The new one, sure. The real church, where Lyra’s buried?” Bartholomew pointed. “Over there.”

“He’s right.” Sully grumbled, quietly. “He’s wrong about most things, but he’s right about that.”

Cal wondered why Sully cared, but he turned back to Bartholomew. Something about the man was putting him on edge a little. Maybe it was that he was a priest. “He’s not hurting anyone. He’s been a huge help.”

“That’s unlike you, Sullivan,” Bartholomew commented, a bit of dryness in there. “What are you up to?”

“Not up to anything, Bartholomew. Just showing Cal around town.”

“Look,” Cal said, stepping fully in between them now. “Whatever’s between you two, it’s got nothing to do with me. But with that said, if you’re going to pick a fight with my employee, I’m going to have to ask you to do it when he’s not working. We’re busy.”

Bartholomew looked at him for a moment, then took a step back. “Sorry. Sullivan’s not a bad person. He’s just…made questionable decisions in the past.”

“Shut the fuck up. Like you haven’t.”

“The past has nothing to do with what he’s doing right now,” Cal told Bartholomew. And Sully.

“I think you know that’s not true, Cal,” Bartholomew said, looking at Cal very strangely now. In a familiar way, as if they knew each other. “The past always determines the present.”

“Only if you let it,” Cal said, resisting the urge to take a step back, as he felt a sudden chill in the wind.

Bartholomew looked at him for a long time, and nodded. “Okay. Sorry to have bothered you. Good to see you again, Sullivan.”

“Feeling’s not mutual, you lunatic.”

Bartholomew smiled sadly, and he turned and walked off.

“The hell was that about?” Cal wondered aloud, not really expecting an answer.

“Ignore him. He just thinks he’s better than everyone else, that’s all.” Sully looked around again. “I’m going to go. See you tomorrow.” And he set off.

“Sully.”

“What?”

Cal reached into his coin purse. “Where are you sleeping tonight?”

A suspicious look. “Why do you care?”

“I just do.” Cal flicked him a coin, and Sully caught it with a minor fumble. “Don’t sleep outside.”
Sully looked down at the coin, up at Cal, expression unreadable. Cal wanted to say that he was worried about him, that he was uncomfortable all of the sudden with the idea of Sully being alone, being exposed. But he couldn’t, or Sully wouldn’t take it. He couldn’t say that he was worried for Sully’s safety, and for no good reason. A priest was hardly going to murder him in the night.

Sully nodded, pocketed the coin. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, Sully.”

Sully left, disappeared into the shadows. Cal looked around, saw nothing suspicious on the street, and made his way cautiously to his own inn. Suddenly he felt exposed too.

When he got back to the inn, Mick and Wes were both still up. “What’s wrong?” Mick demanded, as soon as he came in. “You look upset.”

“Did something happen?”

“No, no.” Cal waved them off, sat to take off his boots. “I’m fine. I think. Just paranoid.”

The two of them shared a look. “You’re okay now.” Wes promised, drawing Cal into a hug. “You’re with us now, it’s okay.”

“You guys don’t need to entertain my neurosis, it’s fine.”

“We’re just telling you that you’re perfectly safe, that’s all,” Mick said, wiggling his fingers at the door as he put wards up. “Just in case you forgot.”

Cal smiled. Now that he was back with them, he felt that. He felt safe. He hoped Sully had gone somewhere he felt safe too. “Thanks, guys. I know I am. I love you both.”

“We love you too, Cal.” Wes told him, patting Cal’s back. “Tell us what happened. Did Sully take you somewhere dangerous?”

“I wish you’d taken one of us with you.”

Cal shook his head. “No, it’s nothing to do with him.” Or maybe it was, what the hell did Cal know? “Just a weird encounter with a priest.”

“Another one?” Mick wasn’t asking about priests, not really.

“I don’t know.” Cal sighed. He wished there were fewer things he didn’t know. “What I do know is that we’re going to have to go dragon-chasing, though.”

He told them all about it, including the encounter with Bartholomew, and by the time he was done Cal felt a lot better, like there wasn’t really anything to worry about at all.

Maybe that was even true.
The Hiring Process Is always Cruel and Unusual

“Are we sure we have everything?”

“Yes, Cal.” Mick’s tone made it clear that he wasn’t impressed that they were going to have this conversation. Again.

“Food, clothes, tent, empty bags?”

“Yes, Cal.” Mick repeated.

“Rope, flint, oil…”

“Money, weapons, soap, clean smallclothes, our last will and testament in case we get eaten by dragons,” Wes cut him off as they headed for the gates of Pelican Bay. “It’s all there, Cal. We’ve done this a few times before.”

“I know, I know, sorry.” Cal sighed, looked around. He shifted his bag on his back as he walked. “I’m just a little antsy.” And he wasn’t even sure why. A combination of too many encounters with priests and the strange items they were searching for, he supposed.

“That might be because of all the dragon home invasions you’ve got planned,” Wes suggested.

Cal smiled. “It’ll be fine, they won’t be home and even if they are, dragons are probably harmless. They just get talked shit about because everyone is jealous of their scales.”

“I really don’t think that’s why.” Cal couldn’t see Mick rolling his eyes, but he knew.

“Prince Gavin got kidnapped by a dragon last year and he’s fine,” Cal went on, as the gates came into view. There was a pelican sitting on the road beside them, which Cal thought was unnecessary. “So clearly they can’t be all bad.”

“Cal, please don’t try to make friends with any dragons.”

“Why not?” Cal asked, with a grin.

A shout distracted him from behind and all three of them turned. Running at them from up the road was Sully, still barefoot. “Told you,” Cal said, smiling down the road at him as he approached.

“Yeah, yeah.” Mick crossed his arms, scowling. “I still think it’s a bad idea.”

“And I still believe in giving people chances.”

“Chances to steal from us.”

“Why would he steal if he has gainful employment?”

“Because he’s a thief?” Mick asked. “It’s in the job description.”

“We haven’t hired him yet,” Wes reminded them both, watching Sully as he closed the last few feet. “Maybe he just came to tell us to fuck off one last time.”

“It’s possible,” Cal admitted, though it wasn’t.
Sully reached the three of them, panting, bending over for a minute with his hands on his knees. “You could have waited for me. Assholes.”

“We did,” Mick told him, looking down at Sully in a very arch way that Cal almost had to laugh at because it was so unlike him. “What do you want?”

“Uh…” Sully seemed taken aback by Mick’s tone. “None of your business.”

“All right, then.” Mick turned away, waving for them to follow him. “Let’s go.”

“Wait!”

Amused, Cal watched Sully scowl at them. “Don’t leave.”

“We have to go, Sully,” Cal told him. “We’re done in Pelican Bay. Thanks for all your help.”

“Well…” Sully looked around the street, not looking at any of the three of them.

“Well what?” Cal asked. “Did you need something?”

“Yes…?”

“He needed to waste our time,” Mick said. “Probably trying to get into your purse again.”

“I’m not!”

“Then what? The bags? We don’t have anything valuable in there.”

“That’s not what I’m here for, asshole!”

“You still haven’t told us what you actually are here for, Sully.” Since Mick was going for mean, Cal tried to sound friendly.

“Aside from to insult us, that is,” Wes added, in a chuckle.

“I…” Sully’s face was a mask of red. “I want to come with you.”

Mick shook his head. “We’re not an escort service. And you don’t have enough money to hire us anyway.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Sully took a breath, glaring at Mick. “I want to help you. To find the thing.”

“We don’t need any more help,” Cal told him kindly. “We know where it is, or close enough. And you don’t know the area outside of Pelican Bay well enough to be our guide.”

“That’s not what I… I want a fucking job, okay? I want to get on your guys’s team.”

Smirking, Cal looked at Mick, who just rolled his eyes. Wes was shaking his head, barely holding back laughter. They were going to have to work on his delivery. “Oh, that’s what you were after. Why didn’t you just say so?”

“I was trying! You guys were being assholes!”

“Yeah, that’s pretty normal. You’re hired. Come on.”

“What?” Sully’s voice dropped a bit in volume, and he looked at the three of them. “Just like that?”
“They were teasing you, dumbass.” Wes patted Sully on the back, which sent Sully staggering a bit. “We already agreed to hire you—last night, when Cal told us you’d come find us before we left.”

“W-what?” Sully demanded, looking at the three of them. “You…you fucking…”

Cal reached over his shoulder, opened his bag and pulled out the pair of boots he’d stowed at the top. “Here. You can’t walk the world barefoot.” He handed them to Sully, who looked at them as if they might bite.

“What the hell was all that about?” Sully’s voice got loud again, even as he snatched the boots from Cal’s hands. “If you already knew you were going to say yes, then why all that?”

“Because you should learn to ask for what you want,” Mick told him. “Politely, if possible, though you can work on that. And because I’m not sold on this idea and I wanted to give you a hard time to make sure you meant it.”

“Well…” Sully looked like he didn’t know what to say or do, so he sat down on the street and pulled the boots Cal had given him on. “I’m not sold on the idea either, but it’s fucking…better than what my life is now.”

“He has a point,” Cal said, and Mick shrugged.

“We should get going,” Wes suggested. “People are starting to wonder why we’ve been standing here so long.”

Cal nodded, looking around to see that they were indeed getting a few looks. “Let’s go, then.”

They started towards the gates again, with Sully mutely in tow. Mick looked back at him. “You’d better not be expecting us to protect you from everyone you owe money to,” he warned.

“I’m not. I only owe money to people in Pelican Bay, and we’re leaving.”

“Probably not forever.”

“Yeah, but you’ll have paid me before forever.” Sully suddenly narrowed his eyes. “Wait, what do you mean you decided to hire me last night? I only decided I was going to ask this morning!”

“I know everything,” Cal said, pointing over his shoulder as they passed through the gates. The pelican squawked at them. Cal gave it a rude gesture in response.

“He really doesn’t,” Wes said quietly to Sully, but loud enough that Cal could hear.

“Don’t lie to the new guy, Wes.”

“The first rule of working on this team is that we don’t listen to Cal,” Mick started, with a sigh.

“Hey!”

“Except for when he’s right.”

“How…” Sully paused. “How do I know when he’s right?”

“He usually isn’t.”

“I feel so betrayed.”
“Quiet down, Cal, I’m trying to train your replacement.”

“You’re fired.”

“My pack has all the food in it.”

“Well…” Cal glared. “You did that on purpose.”

Wes rubbed Cal’s head as they walked. “We were going to put it in yours, but it would have been too heavy for you to carry.”

“I hate you, I hate both of you. Me and Sully are going dragon diving without you, get lost.”

“I feel like I made a huge fucking mistake all of the sudden,” Sully said. “You’re all insane.”

“Yeah.” Cal said, smiling at him. “Welcome to the team.”
“All I’m saying…”

“All I’m saying is that I asked.”

“Shut up, Cal,” Mick told him.

“For fuck’s sake.”

“I asked, both of you, a bunch of times.”

“It was an accident, you asshole.” Mick sounded resigned to hearing the rant, though, which was good, because Cal was going to give him the rant.

“You are being kind of an asshole,” Sully added, and Cal glared at him.

“You’re supposed to be on my side,” he told Sully.

Sully shrugged. “What are you going to do, fire me?”

“I might,” Cal threatened.

“Nah, first of all I’d take off with a quarter of your stuff if you did,” Sully grinned at him, hefting the pack they’d given him to carry. “And second, Mick and Wes like me better than they like you.”

“It’s true,” Wes confirmed.

“I dislike you both equally,” Mick disagreed, shaking his head. “I like Wes the best.”

“Aw.”

“But at the moment, Cal is being the most annoying, so I’m on Sully’s side here.”

“Treason, high treason everywhere.” Cal sighed to himself. “You should go back to just hating Sully for no reason.”

“That got tiring.”

“I knew you’d warm up to me eventually,” Sully muttered.

“Don’t push your luck.”

“Anyway,” Cal said, bringing them back around to the main point. “I asked you like four times if we’d packed everything. Four times and yet somehow, you forgot the fishing twine—which was in the bag already, how did you even do that?”

“Must have happened on one of the four times you made us take everything out to make sure it was there,” Wes told him in a rumble. “It’s just some twine. We can get more and you don’t even like fish.”

“That’s not the point,” Cal told him.

“There’s a point?” Sully didn’t have to sound so surprised about that. He was fitting in really well with the team and at that moment, Cal wished he wasn’t.
“No, there isn’t,” Mick told him. “Cal’s just annoying.”

“The point is that you should listen when I talk.”

“If there was a point, it would definitely not be that.”

“I’m always right,” Cal protested.

“People who say they’re always right usually aren’t,” Sully observed. “If they were, they wouldn’t have to remind people of it all the time.”

While the other two snickered at him, Cal turned another glare on Sully. “Listen, you ungrateful…”

“What’s that there?” Sully asked, pointing over Cal’s shoulder.

“I’m not falling for that.”

“No, seriously.” Sully sounded really serious, and was peering around Cal to try and get a better look.

Still not convinced that Sully wasn’t trying to make him look like an idiot, Cal just cast a quick glance in that direction.

And he saw the gravestones.

“Huh.” There were eleven of them in two even rows, moss-covered and mostly sunken into the ground. The area they were travelling through right now was lightly wooded and they’d veered off of the path yesterday. Probably nobody had been through this particular strand of trees in a long time.

Which Cal could easily believe, given that the gravestones looked ancient.

“They’ve been here for a while,” Mick commented, as they approached the gravestones.

“Yeah, no kidding.” Cal knelt in front of one, rubbed some of the moss from it. The stones were uneven, not cut.

“There’s no inscription,” Mick said, looking with Cal. “The weather saw to that, probably a long time ago.”

“There was never an inscription,” Cal muttered, running his hand along the edges of the stone. “These rocks were just what was lying around at the time.”

“How do you know that?” Sully asked, his footsteps light on the grass.

“He didn’t know who they were, but he had to bury them.” Cal didn’t break his study of the gravestone. “That’s what you do when someone dies. It’s the right thing to do.”

“Cal.” Wes’s hand fell on Cal’s shoulder. “It was a long time ago.” There was a tone of worry in his voice, a tone of pleading maybe.

“Even when you’re the one who killed them,” Cal said, hearing Wes but also hearing screams. “Even when you’re the one who killed them, you’re supposed to bury someone who’s died.” His hands, covered in dirt and blood. Two things he’d been supposed to do.

“Cal…” Mick knelt beside him now, voice soft.
“I remember them,” Cal whispered. He could see their faces, hear them crying. Begging. Six adults, three children and three who’d been just in between. One, a girl, had managed to run away, to get away. “I remember them.”

“You didn’t kill them, Cal.” Now Mick’s tone was firm.

“What the fuck’s going on?” Sully demanded from behind them. “Is he okay?”

Cal closed his eyes, looked away from the gravestones. “I put these here,” he said, clenching his hands into fists. “I dug the holes, and I found these stones and I stood them here, because I…because he had to bury them, even though he’d killed them.”

Nathen. That was what the old lady had called Cal. Mick was right, Cal hadn’t killed these people. But Nathen had, he was sure of it.

“Cal, we’re going to go,” Wes told him, and he and Mick helped Cal stand.

“I’m okay,” Cal promised, letting them lead him away from the gravestones. “I’m okay, I’m here. I’m still me. I just…I remember. I remember doing it. I don’t remember why, but I remember killing them. One of them was just a baby.” He’d killed the baby last so the parents wouldn’t have to watch it happen.

“Is somebody going to tell me what the fuck’s happening?”

“Cal has…” Mick hesitated. “Memories. The working theory is that they’re left over from another life. Reincarnation. I’m not sure I buy it, but it’s the most plausible theory we have at the moment.”

“Fuck.” Sully crossed his arms, glanced at the gravestones. “And he’s the one who killed all those people? A long-ass time ago, you mean?”

“No.” Cal shook his head. “It wasn’t me. It was him, it was…I think his name was Nathen.” It was a distressingly familiar name to him. “He did it. Not me. We’re not the same person.”

“Exactly,” Wes rumbled. “Even if the reincarnation thing is true, you’re not him, Cal.”

Cal nodded. And he turned back to the gravestones.

“That’s not a good idea, Cal.”

“It’s okay, just give me a second.” Cal took in a long breath, approached the graves and knelt again. “I’m sorry,” he said to them, to the rocks. “I’m sorry that you died, especially like that.” He’d killed the adults first, the children had had to watch. He’d decided that was a greater mercy than making parents watch their children die. “But I’m not going to apologize for killing you. Because it wasn’t me who did it. I’m sorry that you’re dead but it’s not my fault.”

And he stood up, turned away from the stones. Wiping his eyes, Cal said. “Let’s go.”

The three of them followed him, silent until they were well away. “You okay?” Wes ventured after they were.

Cal nodded. “They were a family. Two brothers and a sister, their wives and husband. Their kids. The youngest was just a baby.”

“Why’d he kill them?” Sully asked, quiet.

“I don’t know.” Cal shook his head. “I don’t understand him.”
“It’s probably better that way,” Mick said, putting his hand on the small of Cal’s back. “You’re better off not worrying about why he did what he did. You’re not like him anyway—you’re not going to randomly start killing people, Cal.”

“I know.” What worried Cal was that he didn’t think Nathen had randomly started killing people either, at least not in his own estimation. “He was a terrible person. I’m glad he’s dead.”

“So am I,” Wes told him, hand on Cal’s shoulder. “It let the world have a much better person.”

“Thanks.” Cal hoped that was true.

“Are you…” Sully was hesitant. “Are you okay, Cal?”

Cal nodded, putting on a smile. “I’m fine now. I’d be better if I had fishing twine.”

“Oh, shut up,” Mick huffed. “It wasn’t our fault.”

“Accidents happen,” Cal agreed, mind feeling less heavy the farther away he got from Nathen’s makeshift graveyard. He let out a long sigh. “There were twelve of them,” he said, not sure why. “One of them got away. He didn’t get all of them.”

“Good,” Wes told him.

“Yeah, it is good,” Cal agreed, and he took comfort in it, just like he took comfort in Wes and Mick’s hands on him, and in how close they stayed to him the rest of the day.
“And then Wes says, serious as you can, ‘You can never have too many pairs of boots.’”

Sully’s giggles erupted into full-out laughter at Mick’s story. Even Cal laughed, and he’d been there when it happened. “That’s…you’re making shit up. I can’t picture Wes being that ridiculous.”

“They were extenuating circumstances,” Wes said, putting on the same serious face.

That gave Sully another fit and he nearly fell off the log he was sitting on.

“You’ve only seen Wes when he’s pretending to be serious and grown-up,” Cal told Sully, elbowing Wes a little. “He’s a very silly person.”

“I take umbrage to that. You’re the silliest person I’ve ever met.” Wes glanced at Sully.

“Don’t,” Cal warned.

“It’s too late in the night to tell the whole length of this story but tomorrow I’ll tell you about the time Cal pretended to be a fish for two days.”

Cal narrowed his eyes. He could make Wes forget that he’d promised to tell that story, he was sure. It had been for a job.

“Wait, I want to know about this.”

“We have a hard enough time dragging you out of bed in the mornings anyway,” Cal told him, shaking his head and glancing at the sky. It had gotten late while they’d been talking “Bed.”

“Okay, dad.” Sully rolled his eyes like a sullen teenager, but he yawned. “Shut up,” he warned, before Cal could say anything.

The four of them set about preparing for the night. Cal put out the fire and Wes did a perimeter check while Mick put up wards. Sully put all the dishes and tools away for the morning.

“Hey,” Sully said, as they were finished and heading into their tents. He looked at theirs, and then at his, which was the same size. “Which one of you gave up your tent for me?”

Cal looked up from his boots as he unlaced them to see Sully considering the three of them. “What’s that?”

“Well there’s three of you in that tent and just me in this one. I don’t mind sharing. It seems kind of unfair.”

Cal smiled, ducking his head a little as he got his boot off. Mick and Wes were clearly waiting for him to answer. “The three of us have always shared. We got that tent for you so you wouldn’t have to cram in with us.”

“Thanks, but…” The only light in the camp now was from a globe of light Mick had summoned to hover above them, but Cal could see some colour rising in Sully’s face. “Fuck it, look. I don’t know which two of you are fucking but whatever one of you isn’t could share with me if you don’t want to put up with it. Is all I’m saying.”
Mick had closed his eyes, covering a smile, while Wes was doing a much poorer job of pretending.
“You don’t know which of us it is?” He asked Sully.

Sully scowled, as if he’d sensed a trap. “Well, it’s not like I’m fucking looking in on you guys. I can hear you at night when you go at it, though. You keep me up half the damn night.”

Now Cal laughed. Oops. “Do you have a guess?” he asked. He hadn’t realized that it had been a secret. He’d just assumed that Sully knew.

“No. At first I thought it was you and Wes. Then I thought it was Wes and Mick, and then I thought it was you and Mick and now I’m not sure.” Sully’s scowl deepened. “I don’t give a shit. I just think that whichever one of you’s not getting it might want to not lay beside the guys who are. But whatever, don’t mind me.”

“Your guess was right,” Cal told him, smirking a little.

“Which fucking one?” Sully rolled his eyes.

“All of them,” Mick said.

“All…”

“We don’t generally have an odd man out to take you up on that offer. But thanks for making it anyway.”

Now Sully was totally red in the face. “Should have fucking known…well that makes it easier. You all can just be a little quieter about your naked gymnastics, you hear? Some of us want to use dark hours to sleep.”

“It’s mostly Cal,” Wes told him, patting Cal on the back. “We’ll try to keep him quiet.”


“We’ll probably just sleep tonight,” Cal told him. Which was what they did most nights. Though perhaps they—and mostly he—had been a little noisy the night previous.


“We don’t,” Mick assured him.

“Good. Okay. I’m going to bed.” And he went into his tent, trying hard as he could to look like he wasn’t fleeing.

Cal held in his snickers until the three of them were inside theirs and he fell onto their blankets, laughing quietly.

“You shouldn’t tease him so much,” Mick said with a sigh, sitting down to undress.

“But it’s hilarious.” Still holding in laughs, Cal sat up and took off his shirt, and he gave Mick a kiss on the cheek. “Sorry if I embarrassed you.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it. Just be quieter next time.”

“Stop being so good with your hands and I will,” Cal promised, getting the rest of his clothes off.
They were over the border into Kyaine now, just about to enter the hilly territory that came before the Flaming Plains. Cal knew from experience that those weren’t as interesting as they sounded, but south of them rested more hills, not proper mountains, and a lot of cliffs that were home to dragons. Though summer was fading to autumn now, the journey into the hotter part of Kyaine was keeping the heat on.

Mick gave Cal a shove with those hands, knocking him into Wes. “Maybe I’ll just gag you.”

“I’d be down for that.”

“Course you would.”

Mick sighed as he lay back. Cal cuddled up to him while they waited for Wes. “I’m worried about him,” Mick said after a second.

“Sully?”

Mick nodded in the dimmed light of his globe. “It’s dangerous, once we get down to where the dragon nests are. I’m not sure he’s prepared for it.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Cal started, but Wes nodded on his other side.

“I don’t think he’s a coward, but we’ve never seen how he reacts to actual danger. There’s a risk he might bolt or do something stupid.”

“Yeah,” Cal sighed. “That’s true. I’ll take responsibility for him if there’s a fight, don’t worry.”

He was going to have to, since if they had to fight a dragon, Mick and Wes were going to have to do the fighting.

Wes snickered now as he lay beside Cal. “He wasn’t wrong, you know.”

“About what?”

“You act like his dad.”

“Oh, stuff it.” Cal muttered, closing his eyes. “He’s a teammate. It’s normal to look out for your teammates.”

“Whatever you say, Cal.”

“I’m going to sleep now,” Cal huffed, though he wasn’t. He just wanted Wes to stop talking.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Cal sent a mental goodnight to Sully in the other tent as well.
“Sometimes Plans Have to Change at the Last Minute”

Chapter Notes

How many complications can I add to this plot? The mystery continues.

“You’re not afraid of dragons, are you?”

Sully looked up from his porridge, giving Cal an incredulous look. “You’re asking me this now? The dragons are like twenty minutes from here.”

“Probably still a few days,” Cal said with a wave of his hand. From the gates of this town they cold see the hills that were the southern border of the Flaming Plains, and the cliffs that housed dragons’ nests weren’t far from there. But they were hardly on the doorstep. “Slipped my mind until now.”

“No, I’m not fucking afraid of dragons,” Sully informed him. “They’re just lizards with teeth.”

“The teeth are bigger than you,” Mick muttered.

“All the fucking easier to get away from them, then.”

Wes nodded. “Good. If we have to fight dragons, you’re going to hide with Cal while me and Mick do the work.”

“Hey,” Cal said. He didn’t have to word Cal’s strategic use of cover like that.

“Fucking obviously.” Sully rolled his eyes. “Do I look like I’m going to strongarm a giant monster?” He sighed, was silent for a second. “But thanks. I’ll be okay.”

Cal nodded. “We know. You wouldn’t be here if we didn’t think you would be.”

Sully coloured a little, went back to his porridge.

“We’re going to spend today buying supplies,” Cal went on, though Wes and Mick already knew this. “God only knows how long we’re going to be out there, I don’t want to starve and none of us are going to want to go back if we have to break to restock. Rumour is there are dozens of dragon nests in those cliffs, current and old, and the Sceptre could be any of them, so unless we get lucky, we’re in for a few weeks of searching once we get there.”

Sully looked up. “How many dragons can we get attacked by in a few weeks?”

“Does it matter? It’d only take one to eat us all.”

“You know.” Sully pointed a spoon at Cal. “I figured out what your problem is. You think you’re funny.” He turned to Wes and Mick. “Have you guys noticed that he thinks he’s funny?”

“It’s an ongoing problem,” Wes said with a grim nod. “We’re working on it.”

“You know.” Cal sighed dramatically, leaning back in his chair. “Fuck all of you.”

“No thanks,” Sully said, giving his head a shake. “That’s a burden I’ll let Wes and Mick bear
“Now look who thinks he’s funny.”

Snickers from Wes and Mick suggested they agreed with Sully’s grand delusion, which was unfortunate. Cal had hoped that adding Sully to the team might help him be less outnumbered, but it had done the opposite. Obviously he was the one who was deluded.

Not about being funny, though. Cal was hilarious, and it was just jealousy that had the other three refusing to admit that.

The inn they were staying at was a small little place, with only about a half-dozen tables in the common room and only three rooms upstairs. Cal wasn’t surprised, the town of Heated Rock was a little off the path; they probably didn’t get any visitors and likely couldn’t accommodate them anyway, given how small they were. The only reason to come through here was if one was headed across the Flaming Plains, which just didn’t happen that often. Or at least Cal assumed it didn’t.

The only other guests at the inn were a pair of guys sitting at the farthest table from them, who had thus far ignored Cal’s team and given Cal no reason to assume that would change.

Cal should have known better, though. The world wasn’t that nice to him. “So…” Sully asked, looking suspicious now. “You three have a lot of experience with dragons, right?”

As he said it, the two guys got up from the other table, breaking off from their conversation, and headed over to their table. Cal glanced in their direction but returned his attention back to Sully. “Tonnes.”

“You’ve literally never seen one, have you?” Sully sighed, put his head down on the table. “You’ve let me think this whole time that you knew what you were doing.”

“I wouldn’t say we’ve literally never seen one,” Cal mused, looking at Mick for confirmation as the two strangers drew closer to their table.

“Seen lots of pictures,” Mick agreed, fingers twitching.

“People in costumes.”

“A statue once,” Wes added.

“And read a lot of books, so literally I’ve seen a lot.”

“That’s literally,” Mick corrected him.

“Same word.” Cal waved a hand vaguely.

“We’re all going to die.”

“Of course we are,” Cal assured Sully. “I hate to break this to you, but none of us is immortal.”

“You are,” Sully accused.

“That’s different.”

Cal looked up just in time to see the two strangers approaching their table, clearly meaning to talk to them. Or start something. Or something. One was a brown-haired, medium built guy about Cal’s age who had one of those noses that it was hard to tell if it was broken or not, and the other was wearing
a heavy cloak over most of his body, including part of his face, disguising most of his build, but Cal was experienced in the ways of being fucking short and was pretty sure he had a competitor in the height department under there. “Can we help you gentlemen? Or gentle people, anyway?” It was hard to tell what was going on under that cloak.

Not that what was going on under the cloak would answer the gentleman/lady question for Cal, but anyway.

“You guys are going to look for dragons?” The cloaked one asked in a voice that surprised Cal with its cadence Which was to say that it was a bit of a squeak.

“We’re going to look for dragon nests. With any luck, the dragons won’t be home,” Cal told the figure with a nod, glancing at the other guy, who was just sort of standing there. Looking nervous, now that Cal took him in.

“They will be. Why are you looking for dragons?”

“Why the fuck do you care?” Sully demanded. “We’re having a private conversation here, God.”

“You’re very loud, you know.”

“Sully’s question is valid,” Mick said, tapping his finger against the table. “Not to be rude, but it’s not really any of your business.”

“Yeah,” the boy—Cal was almost certain he was a boy—in the cloak said, smiling a little. “You just all seem really friendly, and dragons are assholes. No offence, but they’ll kill you. You should go somewhere safer.”

“Nobody ever had fun going somewhere safer,” Cal told him. “And the dragons have something we need. So thanks for the advice, but we’ll be fine.”

“You won’t be, though!”

“Joey,” the other guy said, putting a hand on a cloaked shoulder. “You said your piece. Let them be.”

“No, they’re going to die.” Joey shook his friend’s hand off, fixing Cal with a glare from under his hood.

Cal met it calmly, not bothered at all. “Everyone dies, it’s hardly something to get all upset about. But for what it’s worth, none of us plan to be killed by dragons.”

Joey made an agitated noise, shook his head, the folds of his cloak shifting. He definitely wasn’t a very big guy under there. “Fine, then we’re going with you.”

“What?”

“What?” That was Joey’s friend.

“We just got back from there,” Joey went on, ignoring his friend and looking at Cal, head held high. “We know the way around. You’re going to need help if you don’t want to get killed.”

“Joey.”

“Travis, it’s important,” Joey insisted. “We can’t let them go alone.”
“We don’t need a tour guide,” Cal told him, shaking his head and wondering again why Joey cared so much. “Thanks for the offer, but we’ve made it through plenty of dangerous situations before now.”

“But you just said you’d never met a real dragon before—you don’t understand how dangerous they are.”

Cal sighed. He hated eavesdroppers. “And you don’t understand how dangerous we are. You two obviously got out of there unscathed, there’s no reason why we won’t as well.”

“You…”

“Look,” Cal interrupted, holding up a hand. “I can’t stop you from following us if you want to, okay? But we’re not feeding you and we’re not paying you, and if your intention is to get in our way, then that’s just a very bad idea and there’s a string of robbers and zombies and evil mages from here to the east coast that will agree with me on that. We have a job to do and we’re going to do it. So stop trying to stop us, okay?”

There was a long silence as Joey tried to stare him down. Cal got the impression he was used to winning staring contests, but Cal just held his gaze for a good two minutes before Joey finally looked away. “Fine, but we’re going with you.”

“Suit yourselves.”

Cal turned away from Joey and the increasingly agitated looking Travis, who’d started to look a little angry there at the end. He looked at Wes. “When we passed through that marketplace yesterday, I saw a guy with a whetstone sharpening weapons. Let’s make sure we drop by there while we’re out?”

“Right,” Wes nodded, joining Cal in ignoring the two strangers thoroughly. “We need to get Sully some proper weapons as well.”

“I have a knife,” Sully protested.

“You have a piece of shit,” Cal told him, shaking his head. “It barely cuts cheese. We’ll get you a real knife.” Or three. Cal believed in always having a few extras.

“Before we set out I’ll put some enchantments on all the weapons, just to be extra cautious,” Mick said, looking at the table. “It never hurts.”

Joey made another annoyed noise and stalked away, back to his table with Travis, who followed him. Cal didn’t look up. “Yeah,” he said with a nod. “It doesn’t. God only knows what kind of danger we might run into out there. I want to be ready for anything.”

Cal didn’t like unknown factors, and more seemed to be presenting themselves every day with this job. In his experience, the best way to mitigate those was to plan as well as possible, and just be ready to cut anything that might jump out of the grass off at the knees.

Nothing was going to get in between them and that sceptre. Or at least nothing was going to be allowed to stay in their way for long.
A day on the job.

“Go wake up your son,” Mick told Cal, stretching.

Cal rolled his eyes. “He’s the same age we are.” Roughly, anyway.

“And yet you knew who I was talking about,” Mick teased.

Cal didn’t have an answer to that. “You win this round. I’ll be right back.” He got headed over to Sully’s tent as the two of them started breakfast. As he went, Cal cast a glance over at the third tent that was pitched under the overhang they’d camped over with the thought of not being seen from the sky. Joey and Travis weren’t out yet, but he could vaguely hear their voices in the tent. All the time here and the two days they’d been searching through dragons’ nests so far with no incident, but he still wondered what they actually wanted.

“Sully,” Cal said at the flap of Sully’s tent. There was no answer, which didn’t surprise Cal since Sully was a heavy sleeper, especially in the mornings. He also wasn’t very good at tying his tentflaps shut, so it wasn’t hard to get in. “I’m coming in, get your hand out of your pants.”

Sully’s hand wasn’t in his pants. He was a sprawler, arms thrown out to either side and legs spread, laying diagonally across his bedroll in his smallclothes, blankets a tangle around his bare legs. He slept with his mouth open too. Cal went in and crouched beside his head. “Sully. Wake up.”

Sully chose not to comply.

Cal sighed, reached down and flicked his ear.

Sully yelped, starting and rolling away from Cal, tangling himself further in the blankets as he tried to sit and face Cal. “What the fuck?”

“Wake up.”

“I’m fucking awake!”

Cal smiled. “I see that. You’re welcome.”

“You’re an asshole,” Sully told him, glaring as he blinked sleep out of his eyes.

“So they tell me. But being nice doesn’t do much to get you started in the morning, does it?”

Sully made a noise, rolled his eyes. Then he suddenly seemed to notice the state sleep had left him in, which Cal had been politely ignoring, and made a different noise, seizing the blankets in an attempt to cover himself. “There’s a fucking thing called privacy, you know,” he muttered, red in the face.

“Never heard of it,” Cal said, standing. “Don’t take forever dealing with that, we’ve got a lot of ground to cover today.”
“Fuck you!” Sully raised his voice just a little.

“I remember you saying you didn’t want to not that long ago,” Cal said over his shoulder as he left the tent, chuckling.

He sat down on a rock beside Wes, leaning into him and pulling his hand-drawn map of the area out of his pocket as he did. Wes put an arm around him. “How long are we going to have to wait for him to get his ass up?”

“Probably only a few minutes. He’s stuck with a little problem,” Cal said with a smile, looking down at the map. He was trying to chart as they went so they didn’t end up getting lost or going in circles by accident.

“You’d think you’d have more sympathy,” Wes laughed.

“You’d think. And yet.” Cal pointed over to the west, up the path. “When we scouted up there last night I’m pretty sure I saw some more caves, so that’s where we’ll head today. If our luck holds we’ll get through at least two or three more.” They’d managed to do three both yesterday and the day previous, and ran into zero dragons on the way.

“Our luck could also improve and we could find the stupid thing,” Wes suggested.

“Let’s not get crazy,” Cal muttered. “If all else fails, we can probably make a fortune moving some of the stuff we’ve found already.” Dragons hoarded by nature, so they pretty much always had cool stuff in their caves. The benefit of being in the cave when the dragon wasn’t home was that there was nobody to notice if a few piece of that cool stuff went missing into their bags.

He frowned suddenly. “Wait, was that a short joke earlier?”

“ Took you long enough.”

“I assumed it was a boner joke.”

“It was both.”

“You suck.”

“Much to your enjoyment. Back on the topic of looting, we all know you’re not going to let us leave until we find what we came for, love.”

Cal smiled, though he was still a bit miffed. “No, I’m not.” He glanced over at the third tent again. “Sully’s not the only one who has trouble getting up in the morning, is he?”

“Apparently not.” Wes glanced over there too as Mick came over and sat with them, passing out bowls for breakfast. “They’re having sex.”

“Really?” Cal frowned. “It’s really better to do that at night when there’s more time. I’m not sitting here waiting for them…”


Oh. Cal nodded. “Good for them. Poor Sully.”

“I don’t think they’re bothering Sully,” Mick told him.

“I don’t know, they’re a bit loud. I heard them last night when I got up to pee,” Wes said.
“I meant poor Sully’s the only person who’s stuck with his hand for companionship,” Cal chuckled.

“He’ll live.”

“I know, it’s just funny.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“You love me anyway.”

“It’s not clear why,” Mick sighed. “Let’s eat so we can get going.”

Cal nodded. “If Sully hurries the hell up, maybe we can just leave the two of them behind.”

Sadly, Sully didn’t hurry the hell up and by the time they were finished breakfast, Joey and Travis had come out from their tent, Joey still hidden in his cloak, and managed to strike camp at the same time.

They managed to search through two nests that morning before lunch, to no avail. Cal found a signet ring with the sigil of some long-vanished noble house, and Wes uncovered a pair of golden gauntlets that Mick identified as magical. Mick found what he thought was a spellbook, and Sully had the most luck, finding a locket with an old painting of a noble woman inside, a pair of eyeglasses that let him see in the dark and a sceptre that they all got excited about for the few seconds before they realized it wasn’t the one they were looking for, too bejeweled and made from tarnished silver. None of them found what they were looking for, though.

They stopped for lunch on a little plateau where the path widened out for a bit. The terrain was hilly and steep, getting more and more cliff-like the more they headed west, which wasn’t unexpected. It was a lot of paths that they had to hope went places and, increasingly, moments of climbing. It was hot, a dry heat that felt oppressively not-dry in a way that Cal found a little unnerving.

“You know,” Joey said, coming up to Cal as they were packing away lunch and getting ready to move again, “this might go faster if you’d tell us what you were looking for so we could help.”

Cal looked at him, or what he could see of him under that hood. The way the top of the hood rested on his head was strange, as if he had a hat on underneath. “I might do that if you’d tell me why you’re so interested in what we’re doing out here,” he countered. He didn’t need Joey and Travis deciding to steal the Sceptre once they’d found it.

Joey let out an agitated sigh. “Is it so hard for you to believe that I’m worried about you getting eaten by dragons?”

“Yes.” Cal tightened his pack and stood. “The last several times I ran into people seemingly at random who are interested in what I’m doing, they’ve either tried to rob me or turned out not to exist. It’s coloured my impression of strangers a little.”

“Well…” That clearly threw Joey, which Cal had meant for it to. He didn’t say anything else, and Cal called for them to get going again.

There was another cave not far from where they were, and this one had clearly been abandoned for a long while, and yielded nothing interesting at all. “I don’t like them,” Sully told Cal as they searched.

“Me either,” Cal agreed. “But I’m not too worried about it.” For all that he wasn’t sure about them, Cal really didn’t think that Joey or Travis meant them any harm.
“They’re nosy and I get bad vibes from Joey,” Sully declared, wiping sweat from his forehead. “I don’t like that he’s hiding under that cloak. It’s too hot for that, it’s got to be because he’s hiding something.”

Cal nodded, holding his torch a little higher in the dark cave, which revealed nothing. “Yeah. I’m keeping an eye on him, don’t worry.”

“Okay, but…fuck, what’s that?”

“What’s what?” Cal asked. Sully was wearing those eyeglasses, so he was doing a lot better in the dark than Cal was.

“That.” Sully pointed, and he looked at Cal, took off the glasses and offered them up.

Cal put them on, disturbed at first by how quickly everything suddenly got clear. Then he looked where Sully was pointing. “Oh, wow.”

The dragon had been dead a long while, long enough that only its skeleton was left. The ribs stood taller than Cal by a good two feet, and he and Sully together could have fit inside the skull. They approached it, and Cal gave the glasses back to Sully as the skeleton came into the torch light. “I guess we know why there’s nothing in this cave.”

“It’s already been looted.”

Cal put a hand up to the dragon’s bones, which felt cold, metallic. “I knew they were big, but…”

“There are human bones here too,” Sully said, pointing them out. Cal held the torch out, saw them not far from the dragon. Still dressed in rusted armour, a broken sword beside them. Several of the bones seemed to be broken. “Do you…think they killed each other?”

Cal nodded. “Yeah, I bet they did. Guys, come here!”

They were joined by the other two. “Did you find something? Because the rest of the cave has turned up a whole lot of…oh, shit,” Mick said, as his ball of light came closer and illuminated the dragon skeleton.

“We were grave robbing this time,” Wes said, putting a hand against the dragon’s skull. “Wow.”

Mick gestured and his light got brighter, started to gently fill the whole area in a way that wouldn’t hurt their eyes, letting them all properly see the dragon. Sully took his glasses off and stuck them carelessly in a pocket.

“You know, I really like our jobs sometimes,” Cal said, as they all looked up at it.

More footsteps could be heard coming from behind. “Guys, you really should tone the light down, you’ll attract…oh.” Joey was staring up at the dragon too, and Travis’s hand came up to rest on his back.

None of them said anything for quite a while, just looking up at it, contemplating the size, the scope, the timeframe. The marks the past left on the present, what was left behind.

After a while, though, Cal had to turn away. “We should go,” he said quietly.

Wes, Mick and Sully followed him, but Joey and Travis lingered in front of the dragon skeleton for another few minutes, not emerging from the cave until Cal had already pointed in the direction he
wanted to go. “So weird to think they can die,” Sully said as they started walking. “They’re so big and…” he shrugged.

“So weird to think they can die,” Joey muttered, looking at the ground as they walked, obviously trusting Travis to lead him in the right direction as he walked behind his friend.

“The caves are getting more concentrated,” Wes said, coming up alongside Cal as they walked. “And the cliffs are getting steeper.”

Cal nodded. “It’s going to get harder now.”

They came across a gap in the path, which Mick had to magic them over, much to Cal’s amusement as he watched Sully. Not that he’d been any less freaked out, but anyway. Once they were across that, Mick spotted another cave not far from them, and they headed there. “After this, let’s think about looking for a place to camp,” Cal said as they approached it. “There’s still some light left, but we’ve gone through a lot of them today already.”

This cave smelled, a fetid air that wafted out and hung in the air. “This one’s not empty,” Joey warned.

“Yeah.” Cal held out a hand for everyone else to hang back, and snuck towards the entrance, peering inside. There was a lot of stuff in there, but nothing moving. “It is at the moment. Let’s be quick. No browsing this time.”

“We could help,” Joey reminded him.

“We’ve had this conversation already.” Cal waved at Wes, Mick and Sully and the three of them followed him inside.

The bodies of what looked like two different cows were to one side of the cave, opposite the piles of treasure the dragon had hoarded. “Gross,” Sully declared.

“I didn’t know dragons planned ahead,” Wes said, looking over there.

“They don’t, usually.” Joey had followed them in, and was frowning at the cows. He glanced at Travis, and started to go deeper into the cave.

“Don’t get lost!” Cal called, and got a wave in response.

“You could let them help,” Mick said as they started to root through all the piles of things. Some gold, lots of chalices and jewelry and gilded furniture, even. No coral sceptres. “Even if they tried to steal from us, we outnumber them two to one.”

“I know,” Cal said with a sigh. “It’s the principle. I don’t like not being told the truth.”

Sully and Wes had moved around to the back side of the piles, rooting through them from there. Since there was nothing on they side they could see, Cal followed after them, letting Mick come with him.

Joey and Travis’s footsteps returned before they did, running this time. “Guys. We have to go.”

“We’re not done,” Cal called.

“There are baby dragons in the back of the nest. If he comes back while we’re here, he’s going to be pissed.” Under his hood, Joey looked genuinely scared. Unencumbered by a cloak, Travis was more
openly worried.

Cal looked at Mick, took a breath of rotting air to call out to Sully and Wes.

A rush of air filled the cave with the smell of outside. All six of them ducked behind the piles of gold. The cave shook a little. Green-scaled and long, the dragon came into the cave, another dead cow in its mouth, which it tossed to the side with the other two.

Wes loosened his axe and Mick was moving his fingers a little. Sully was mouthing the word ‘fuck’ over and over beside Cal. Cal looked over, judged the distance between them and the mouth of the cave. If the dragon went back to where its babies were, they’d be able to get out, no problem.

Joey seemed to twitch, and a small cascade of treasure sounded, filling the cave with clanging as he covered his ears, clearly wishing he was somewhere else.

The dragon’s head swung around, and it lumbered over, taking up nearly all the space between the floor and ceiling. “Go!” Cal hissed, and Wes and Mick both stayed low, moving behind the piles and towards the entrance, out of the dragon’s sight. Sully followed after Cal gave him a good shove. Travis was pulling at Joey, but they weren’t moving quickly enough. The dragon was inspecting the piles, near where Joey had made all that noise.

Cal closed his eyes, already annoyed with himself, and he seized a heavy golden chalice and threw it with all his strength. It cleared the dragon’s head, hit the floor near the back of the cave, towards where the babies were.

The dragon snapped its head in that direction, and Cal grabbed Travis and Joey by one arm each and pulled. “Come on.” All three of them made their way to the entrance while the dragon went to go check on its young.

Outside, Cal breathed in the relatively fresh air as he put his back to the wall beside the cave entrance for a second, smiling when Wes and Mick crowded him. “I’m okay.”

“You almost got us killed,” Sully growled at Joey, who was on his hands and knees with Travis’s arm around his back.

“I’m sorry,” Joey panted.

“Yeah, that would mean a lot if we’d been fucking eaten.”

“It was an accident, Sully.” Cal said, looking across the ravine that they were There was a cliff that went up quite high, and up there he could see another cave with no obvious means of ingress.

“Accident, my ass.”

“Sully.” Cal looked away from that cave, at Sully. “It’s okay. It happens. We’re not dead, which is what matters.”

Sully glared down at Joey for a minute, but sighed. “I guess.” He didn’t sound convinced, but he stopped looking like he was thinking of kicking Joey, at least.

Travis looked up at Cal. “We should get away from here and set up camp.”

“Yeah,” Cal nodded. “Except for that second part.” He pointed up at the cave he’d seen. “I want to look in there first.”
All of them looked up to where he was pointing, and there were a variety of pained expressions. “How are we going to get up there?” Sully asked.

“I can’t magic us up that far,” Mick added.

“Can you help us across the ravine?” Cal pointed lower down now, to a small outcropping they could stand on. Mick squinted at it, nodded after a minute. “Good. Take us over, and we’ll climb from there. We’ve still got three hours of light, I think. Should be enough.”

“This can wait until tomorrow,” Travis insisted, shaking his head. Joey was standing now, breathing a little more normally. “It doesn’t have to be today, you’ve already done a lot today.”

Cal shook his head, still looking up there. “It’s in there.”

“You don’t know that.”

Yes, Cal did. “No, I don’t. But I’ve been doing this for a long time. My instincts tell me it’s in there.”

“A long time?” Travis sounded incredulous. “You’re my age.”

“Some of us got an early start,” Cal told him, turning to Mick, Wes and Sully. “Guys?”

Mick nodded. “If you think it’s in there, let’s go.”

“If it’s not, you’re getting dunked in the next river we cross,” Wes warned.

Sully sighed when Cal looked at him. “We’re all going to die anyway, may as well be before we’ve fucking recovered from almost all dying. Stick it all into one day, you know?”

“You’re all fucking insane,” Travis said quietly.

“Main job requirement,” Sully told him, very matter-of-fact.

“Our boy’s growing up so fast,” Wes said, wiping away an invisible tear.

“Fuck you.”

“You’re propositioning us an awful lot today,” Cal told him, smirking. “Mick?”

“Yeah. You’re going to have to go across one at a time, because that’s the number of people I can lift at once.” Mick nodded, looking around. “Wes, we’re going across first. Let me on your back.”

“Yeah.” Wes got down on a knee, let Mick climb on him.

“Mick can’t lift himself,” Cal told the others as Wes stood and Mick took a breath. “So Wes has to carry him.” One of those weird things about magic that Cal didn’t understand.

“While Mick carries Wes,” Sully added, watching them.

“Yeah. We’ve done this before, don’t worry. Careful, guys.”

Mick nodded. “I’ll take you over by size so I don’t tire myself out.” As he said that, Wes lifted off the ground, and Mick smiled. “See you in a minute.”

Slowly, they floated across the ravine, which wasn’t that wide, probably only about ten feet. “Fuck,” Sully muttered, watching them. “I’m going to be sick.”
“Don’t be,” Cal advised. He glanced at Travis and Joey. “Are you coming with us?”

They looked at each other for a second before Travis nodded. “I guess.”

“Then you’re going next.” Sadly, even though Joey was short too, Cal was going to end up going last again, just because Joey was fucking heavy, as Cal had learned while pulling him.

Cal watched Wes and Mick until they were across and standing on the outcropping. He waved at them, then patted Travis on the shoulder. “It’ll be okay,” Joey said to him. “I’ll be over in a minute.”

“Yeah, Mick probably won’t drop you, don’t worry.” Cal said with a smile.

“What?”

But it was too late, Mick was holding out a hand on the other side of the ravine and Travis was floating in the air. “Hold still,” he called over.

“That’s harder than it sounds!”

“Falling is easier than it sounds too, so hold still,” Mick ordered.

Travis held still while he was floated over. “You next,” Cal said to Sully.

“Maybe I could just…I don’t know, quit the team? Or go get chummy with that dragon in there? Or…something?” Sully asked.

Cal patted him on the back while Travis landed, and Mick lifted Sully into the air. “Fuck all of you, you’re the worst.”

“More propositions?” Teasing Sully was way too fun. This was probably how Mick and Wes felt about teasing Cal.

Sully managed to glare at Cal over his shoulder before he started to move across the ravine, which he suffered in silence and with his eyes closed. He managed not to throw up.

“Thanks for helping me,” Joey muttered quietly as they watched Sully go.

Cal let out the breath he’d been holding when Sully’s feet touched the ground. Everyone he liked was across, at least. “Just because I don’t want you here doesn’t mean I want you dead. Be more careful next time, okay?”

Joey nodded. “Sorry. I was scared.”

“Me too.” Cal patted him on the back, and he was lifted from his feet with a badly concealed yelp. “Dragons have that effect, I guess.”

Any reply Joey might have made was swallowed as he was floated across the ravine, clutching his cloak shut, which just made him look like a ghost or someone’s laundry, hanging there in the wind.

When he was on the outcropping, Cal smiled. “Ready?” he called across.

Mick nodded and Cal took a step back, ran the two steps to the ledge and leapt into the air, enjoying the rush he got as he sailed, feeling the moment when Mick’s magic grabbed him to stop him from falling. Sully shouted out loud when he jumped.

“I hate it when you do that,” Mick told him when he put Cal’s feet on the ground, perhaps slightly...
harder than necessary.

“It’s fun, and I know you’ll catch me.” Cal grinned. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

From here, it was clear that there was ground about fifteen feet below them, and looking up Cal could see a lot of potential handholds. “Mick.”

“Yeah.” He put a hand on the cliff face, then started climbing up it easily. It wasn’t totally vertical, which helped a little.

“Shouldn’t he be there to catch us if we fall?” Sully asked.

“He will be,” Cal told him, watching. “But he’s the better climber of all of us. He’ll find a safe way up and watch us from the top. Pay attention to where he goes.”

They were about fifty feet from the cave Cal had seen, and fortunately Mick was able to take a reasonably straightforward path to get there. He climbed up into the mouth and a second later stuck his head over, waving them up. “Alright, follow me, especially if you’ve never climbed before. Put your hands where I do.”

Cal took a breath and grabbed hold of the rock wall, pulling himself onto it. It wasn’t very far; the three of them had climbed four times this height to get out of a canyon in the north a little over a year ago and it had been raining then. He moved slowly and carefully, ignoring the protests in his hands and wrists as he used them to support more of his weight than they would have liked.

He was a little out of practice, but it wasn’t the most arduous climb ever, fortunately, and he kept his eyes up on the ledge where Mick was waiting.

The wind picked up a little, but not enough to be worrying. Nor enough to really take any of the heat off, which would have been nice with how much Cal was sweating. He didn’t like sweating very much, and tried to avoid doing it if he could. It made grabbing the rocks just a tiny bit more precarious. He wished he hadn’t gone first; he could hear the other behind him, but not see them. They were fine, Mick was watching them too, but not being able to see them worried Cal more than it should have.

He almost didn’t notice when he got there, not until Mick’s hand was around his wrist, pulling him up. Cal let him, letting out a sigh as he was on the solid ledge. “Fuck, I forgot how much I don’t like climbing.”

“You’re the one who wanted to come up here,” Mick reminded him, as Cal looked down to see the others. Sully was next with Wes behind him, and Joey, then Travis in the rear. All of them seemed to be doing okay and one by one, Cal and Mick helped them all up onto the ledge.

“We’re never doing that again,” declared Sully. “Whatever voting power I have on this team is going towards voting that we never do that again.”

“Okay,” Cal said, smiling. “I guess you’re going to have to stay here when we all climb down later.”

Sully groaned. “I hate you. You most of all, mister-jumps-off-a-fucking-cliff.”

“There’s always that brief second where I consider not catching him,” Mick admitted.

“I don’t know why I’m friends with any of you people,” Cal announced, turning and looking into the
cave. The position of the sun did a lot to illuminate the front part of it, which was nice. It was big, both tall and wide, descending quite sharply from where they were standing into a large cavern that even from here Cal could tell was filled with shiny stuff.

“This is going to take a long time to look through,” Wes said, considering the cave.

Sully sighed. “Why’d you have to pick the cave of the rich guy dragon? We can’t take anything from here or we’ll have to carry it down the fucking cliff.”

“It’s probably a rich lady dragon,” Joey said, still catching his breath a little from the climb. “This seems like it would be the matriarch’s cave.”

“What, like all the other dragons’ mom?” Sully asked.

“Not really.” Joey seemed to smile. “Maybe. Female dragons are bigger and more aggressive than males, and the males have to compete for them. Since this is the biggest cave and it’s surrounded by smaller caves—and at least one of them has a male dragon living in it, since we just met him—it would make sense if this was the female’s cave. Since there are so many dragons in this area, there are probably a lot of females, but each of them would want their own territory away from the others as much as possible.”

“So those were her babies in the other cave, then,” Cal ventured, taking a careful look around the cave to make sure she wasn’t home.

“Yes. The dads take care of the young once they’re born, the females can’t be bothered.”

“You know quite a lot about dragons,” Wes said, looking down at Joey.

“Yeah,” was all Joey said, and he started the treacherous slide into the cave. “The faster we can get out of here the better,” he told them.

“He’s right. We don’t want to be in here when it gets dark.” Cal followed him, and the others were behind them. “Split up and get looking.”

“Travis and I can…”

“You two can keep an eye on the entrance and warn us if she’s coming back,” Cal told Joey, heading deeper into the cave.

It looked like it was all one large cavern, which was convenient, but it was dotted with different piles of treasure, which wasn’t. Looking through all of them was going to take forever, but Cal sighed and started looking, letting Sully, Wes and Mick take one each.

As Cal looked picked through a pile of what looked like mostly expensive dishes, he wondered how it was that dragons were so patient. All the nests they’d been in so far had had the treasure arrayed in nice piles, and if Cal were the size of a dragon, he wasn’t sure he’d have the patience to arrange his stuff in such a neat way.

Now that he thought about it, actually, the piles in this cave in particular were pretty organized. This one was all dishes, there was a pile of coins over there, Sully was looking through one that was mostly jewelry, Mick had his hands in one that was all weapons, and Wes was looking through a pile of what Cal would think of as knickknacks, candelabras and decorative boxes and so forth.

“Dragons sure do have a lot of free time,” Cal mused, wondering at that.

“Look at this,” Mick said, holding aloft a fancy sword in a gold sheath, much too ornate to actually
fight with. Cal wandered over and Mick pointed at the sigil that was engraved on it, two stags butting heads. “That’s House Ferrise’s sigil.”

Cal’s face split into a grin. “Ferrise’s plunder. It’s here, or at least part of it is. Which means that sceptre probably is too.”

“You were right.”

“I’m always right.”

“Let’s not get crazy.”

“Guys?” That was Sully, and Cal and Mick looked up to see him looking over into the corner, backing away a bit. He had his glasses on. Cal looked where he was looking.

It was the back corner of the cave, an area not hit by the sunlight at all, and all Cal could see was darkness. He moved closer to Sully, peering into that darkness. “What is it?”

The darkness moved.

“Oh, fuck,” Cal whispered. Mick made a globe of light that shone into that part, flashing over scales of dark blue, shifting softly, a form twice, three times as big as the last one, a head with horns taller than Wes.

Closed eyes, she was sleeping. “Everyone get out, now,” Cal ordered in a hushed voice. “Quietly.” They were lucky she hadn’t woken up yet. All of them started to back away, heading for the entrance to the cave as quickly as they could. Cal couldn’t fathom how big she must be.

As Cal moved, his eyes swept away from the dragon and into the rest of the area exposed by Mick’s ball of light. Against one wall of the cave, near where the dragon was sleeping, were some chairs, a sofa, a table and the rest of a collection of furniture probably taken from Lord Ferrise. It was arranged as if in a regular living room, which Cal honestly wondered if he was imagining. There was even a musty carpet underneath part of it. Surely the dragon hadn’t done that?

But in looking at that Cal saw something else in his peripheral vision. In a pile of what looked like random objects nearest the dragon’s head. A length of greenish white. It could have been bone. Or coral.

Cal started towards it.

“Cal,” Wes hissed, seeing him go.

Cal shushed him, waving them towards the entrance. “The Sceptre is right there,” he whispered by way of explanation, creeping his way towards the pile, one eye on the dragon.

She stayed asleep, which didn’t surprise Cal all that much. If she’d slept through them all talking and looking through her stuff, probably Cal walking wasn’t going to wake her up. He could hear that the others had stopped moving and he gave an annoyed wave behind his back to urge them all to get to the exit as he drew level with the pile.

It he didn’t want to cause a huge crash, he was going to have to move a few things out of the way to get to the Sceptre. It was in there, he could see the most of the shaft of it. But on top of it was a metal birdcage that was too small to hold a bird, which Cal carefully lifted and set aside, exposing what turned out to be the bottom of the Sceptre. After hearing the story Blind Arvin had told him in Pelican Bay, Cal didn’t want to touch the thing for fear of falling under whatever curse was on it, so
he took off his shirt and wrapped it around his hand, grabbing the end through that and giving a tug.

He wasn’t cursed, or at least Cal didn’t think he was, but the Sceptre only moved a bit before catching on something. The dragon snorted. It was a small golden box, which Cal reached down and carefully lifted just a few inches since it was part of the pile, shuddering a little as his arm seemed to vibrate. Maybe this was the pile for magical things.

That freed the Scepter and Cal pulled it out and put the box down, wincing when something inside the pile shifted with a loud clack. The dragon shifted in her sleep, but didn’t wake up. Cal’s heart wasn’t beating and he stepped back, looking at the Sceptre in his hands. The top was wide and clawlike, as if to hold a jewel of some kind that wasn’t there. Cal glanced at the entrance and then at the dragon, and he started out of the cave as quickly as he could.

He was the last one out, and he started panting from exertion as soon as they were out on the ledge, even if he hadn’t done anything. “Oh, God.”

“I can’t believe you did that, you asshole,” Wes growled at him. “We could have come back when she wasn’t home.”

Cal smiled at him. “Sully didn’t want to climb back up the cliff.”

“This is what you’ve been looking for?” Joey asked, peering at the Sceptre from under his hood. Travis just looked confused.

“Yeah.” Cal held it out to Mick, to started to do whatever spells he’d decided on to prevent any of them (and specifically Cal) from coming under whatever influence it might have. “Doesn’t look like much, huh?”

“Not really,” Joey admitted, making a bit of face. Or maybe a lot of a face. It was hard to tell since Cal couldn’t see much of his face. “What does it do?”

“I don’t know. But it’s worth a lot of money, and that’s all I care about.”

“You risked all our lives for money?” Joey sounded incredulous.

“No, the four of us collectively decided to risk our lives for money. You two risked your lives because you’re nosy.” Cal smiled at him, though. “But thanks for the help.”

“I…”

“Look, I like arguing too but can we maybe not do it right here?” Sully demanded. “As much as I don’t want to climb down, let’s fucking climb down so we’re not here when Madam Dragon wakes up and realizes we fucking robbed her?”

“He’s right,” Mick said, finishing his spell. He hesitated for just a second before reaching out and taking the Sceptre from Cal with his bare hands, pausing for a second. “The binding spell seems to have worked. You can put your shirt back on.” He stuck the Sceptre into his pack in the harness that they’d sewn there for it.

“I don’t want to,” Cal complained. “It’s hot.”

“You’re going to wish you had when you’re scraping all your skin off climbing down this cliff,” Wes pointed out.

“Fuck.” Cal sighed, put his shirt back on. He looked back into the cave, at all the awesome shit that
they could have taken if only it weren’t so inaccessible and also so guarded by a giant monster.

He gave one more sigh, then turned back to the rest of them. “Let’s get the hell out of here and find somewhere to sleep. Good work, everyone.”

It had been a pretty productive day. Cal couldn’t complain.
“So why did you guys want that sceptre so badly?”

Cal looked at Joey across their campfire. “It’s worth a lot of money, I told you that.”

Joey chuckled, nodding. “Yeah. But really, what did you want it for?”

Cal glanced at Wes, who shrugged. He looked back at Joey. “So it could make us a lot of money.”

“I mean…” Joey made an agitated noise. “You can tell me the real reason. I’m not going to steal it, God.”

“So says every thief under the moon,” Cal reminded him. He looked at Sully, who looked like he wished they hadn’t drank all of their only bottle of wine. It hadn’t been a big bottle and there wasn’t much for each person with six of them. “Almost every thief under the moon.”

“Oh, shut it,” Sully grumbled. “Some of us prefer the straightforward approach.”

“The straightforward approach might have gotten you killed if you’d tried to rob someone less altruistic than me.”

“Oh, please. You only didn’t beat me up because you’re a vindictive bastard and you’d rather torture me over a span of years with terrible jokes and endless bitching.”

Mick snorted. “He’s not wrong. You do tend to hold a grudge.”

“Only when people deserve it.”

“I wonder how Beatrice is doing these days?”

“Who cares?” Cal asked, looking into his empty cup and also wishing there was more wine. “She’s awful. Hopefully she’s dead.”

“My point is made.”

“I have a legitimate reason to hold a grudge against her.” Cal scowled. He needed more wine for this conversation.

“You were holding a grudge against her long before you had a legitimate reason,” Wes reminded him.

“Did you forget about the time with the wolves?”

Joey giggled at them, leaning into Travis a little. “You guys are funny.”

“Don’t tell Cal that,” Sully grumbled, glaring at Joey. “He’ll believe it and then we’ll have to deal with it after you go away.”

“Consider it your punishment for being so mean to us,” Joey told Sully.

“How many knives did you get in your ribs in the last little while?” Sully challenged. “This is us being friendly.”
“Has anyone ever told you that you kind of suck at it?” Travis asked, sipping at his cup. He still had some wine, which Cal didn’t approve of.

Mick nodded. “Sully gets told that all the time.”

“The rest of us are very personable,” Wes added.

“Personable people would tell me what their magical dragon sceptre was for,” Joey disagreed, leaning back on his rock a little. Even now, he was totally covered in that cloak from head to toe.

Cal sighed. “How many times do I have to tell you, it’s for making a lot of money.”

“But what does it do?” Joey pressed. “It’s magic, right?”

“It makes money for whoever sells it.”

“You’re so annoying.”

“That’s more accurate,” Sully told him, looking at the fire now.

“What would I have to do to make you trust me?”

Cal looked at him. “You could start by not hiding under that cloak.” He saw the way Joey tensed at that. “But if you can’t do that, a good way to make us trust you would be to stop wanting to know stuff about us.”

“What?” Joey crossed his arms. “What should we talk about then, then, the weather?”

“I hope this winter is easier than last year’s don’t you?”

Joey made another annoyed noise, but it was Travis who spoke. “Joey’s naturally curious about most things. He doesn’t mean anything by it.”

“And what about you?” Wes asked, and Cal let him take over. “It seems like it’s your job to explain Joey to us.”

Travis went a little red at that. “Seems like it’s your job to talk when Cal’s not being intimidating enough.”

Cal swallowed a laugh, but Sully didn’t, first snorting and then laughing so hard he fell off his rock. Cal was going to pour cold water on him to wake him up tomorrow.

“I had a bit of a sheltered upbringing,” Joey said, watching Sully. “Travis is a bit more worldly than me. So he helps when I’m bad at it.”

“Well, we’ll give you some free advice then,” Mick told him, pointing. He set his half-empty cup down and Cal swiped it. “Inviting yourself to tag along after people you don’t know and then asking them lots of questions about what they’re doing is going to make people suspicious, and then they won’t trust you.”

“So…” Joey had away of emoting without most of his face being visible, and Cal could tell he was frowning. “The best way to get you to tell me what you’re doing is to just…not ask?”

“That sounds right,” Cal told him.

“It’s the kind of back-asswards logic these idiots work on,” Sully said, leaning on his rock from his
new place on the ground.

“You’re one of these idiots, you know,” Cal reminded him.

“Well, I didn’t say you were fucking wrong.” Sully looked at Joey again. “Besides, you guys are going to fuck off in a couple of days when we get back to the village, right? So who cares?”

“I guess…” Joey sounded a bit disappointed. “I was just curious is all.”

“Curiosity is dangerous,” Mick told Joey, giving Cal a bit of a look as Cal drank the rest of his wine. “Not to say you shouldn’t be curious. But be careful where you apply it.”

“Fine, but you guys not telling me about the thing isn’t because it’s dangerous, that’s because you don’t trust me or Travis.”

“And we don’t want to risk that your curiosity is going to be dangerous for us,” Mick finished.

Joey let out a long sigh, and Cal could see him thinking. “Okay,” he said finally. “I wish we could have been friends.”

“Me too,” Cal said, nodding. Joey seemed nice enough, and he was starting to wonder if his paranoia was starting to affect his judgement. Just because he’d decided Joey was hiding something didn’t mean he was right.

That seemed to get Joey’s attention, but he just snorted. “So, what do you guys think of this weather?”
“Alright, I think it’s time for bed,” Cal declared, stretching, subtly touching Wes’s foot with his.

“Yeah,” Wes agreed. They’d been sitting around talking for a while, but it was getting late. “Long day ahead tomorrow.”

“Long day of boring-ass walking,” Sully grumbled, watching them.

“Two more days,” Cal promised. “Then we’ll get to the town. And then more walking while we go north. This is what you signed up for.”

“I wasn’t fucking complaining,” Sully grumbled, looking away as Mick put a hand on Cal’s shoulder. “Just saying, it’s not any different from a usual day.”

“Your jobs do seem to be mostly pretty boring,” Joey observed, leaning into Travis a little, arm around him.

“The not-boring parts are the parts where we almost die,” Cal reminded him.

“I guess so. We should head to bed too,” Joey said, nudging Travis.

They weren’t very subtle, especially not with how quickly Travis nodded.

“You’re all useless,” Sully declared. “It’s too early to go to sleep.”

Cal looked at Mick, then at Wes. Then at Joey and Travis, then back at Sully. “Did any of us say sleep?” he asked innocently.

“You…” Sully’s cheeks exploded with colour, which he hid by shaking his head, agitated. “You’re all so fucking obnoxious.”

“That sounds a lot like jealousy talking,” Cal said, looking to Mick for confirmation. “I think our new teammate wishes we hadn’t bought him his own tent.”

“Oh—fuck off.” Still obviously embarrassed, Sully got to his feet, glared at all of them. “Just, be fucking quiet. That’s all.”

“Of course we’ll be quiet,” Wes told him, shouldering Cal a bit. “We’re only going to be playing cards. Cal gets a bit noisy when he loses, but it should be fine.”

“Oh, don’t even—I’m not talking to any of you. Goodnight.” Sully stalked off into the woods, irritation following him like a cloud.

Cal chuckled.

“You pick on him a lot,” Joey observed, as the three of them got up.

“Good-natured hazing,” Cal explained. “He can take it. Goodnight.”

“Enjoy your card game,” Joey said, a smirk practically audible under his cloak.

“You too,” Cal waved at him. Travis was red in the face, but he’d put his arm around Joey know and was looking very impatient. Sure enough, as he headed for his tent, the two of them got up as well.
and headed for theirs.

Once he’d taken his boots off and the three of them were inside the tent, Mick tied the flaps shut and
the three of them started undressing. “Cal,” he said, once Cal had his shirt off.

“Yeah?”

“Let’s talk about your crush on Sully.”

“What?” Cal paused in the act of untying his pants, turned awkwardly to look at Mick over his
shoulder. “I don’t have a crush on Sully.”

Mick and Wes looked at each other for a minute, and Wes nodded. “Yeah, you do. It’s kind of
obvious.”

“I…”

“You spend a lot of time flirting with him,” Mick interrupted, holding up a hand. “In the same way
you used to flirt with us when we weren’t together yet.”

“I don’t think he’s noticed that’s what it is, though,” Wes added.

“Cal is kind of bad at it,” Mick agreed, nodding.

“Guys!” Cal turned around, stomach feeling a bit funny. “I’m not interested in Sully.” He also wasn’t
sure where this was coming from. But if he’d made them feel like that…

“Yeah.” Mick shook his head. “The thing about that is you’re really bad at noticing your own
feelings, remember?”

“We’re not mad, Cal,” Wes said, patting Cal’s leg. “I think Mick just wanted it out in the open.
Secrets are poisonous.”

“Exactly.” Mick nodded this time. “I know you chose us. It doesn’t worry me that you noticed the
existence of someone else.”

Cal sighed, looking inward. Thinking about Sully, and the way they’d been interacting. He didn’t
think there was anything that different. He treated Sully like a member of the team.

But then, he was sleeping with the only two other members of the team. So maybe there was
something to that. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. He’s cute enough,” Mick said, considering. “He’s annoying.”

“And loud, I bet he’d be loud.”

“Oh yeah, he’s definitely loud,” Mick agreed.

“I don’t want to have sex with Sully,” Cal reminded them. Even if he did, maybe, have a bit of a
 crush. He wasn’t about to just jump in bed with someone when he had two perfectly good someones
already.

“We know.” Wes smiled at him. “But if you change your mind about that, don’t keep it a secret.
We’ll talk about it.”

“You’d…be open to that?” Cal asked, unsure. He wasn’t sure if he would be. But maybe. It wasn’t
like he didn’t see the difference between sex and love. He’d slept with people before getting together with Wes and Mick that he’d just liked. Not a lot, but once or twice.

Wes shrugged, and Mick made a face. “Maybe. If you asked me tomorrow, no. But later, maybe. We’ll see what happens.”

Face burning, Cal looked down. “Okay. Thanks, guys. For…” he waved his hand. “Being so awesome.”

“That’s what we’re here for,” Wes told him, hand coming up and tugging at Cal’s pants. “In the meantime.”

Cal cocked a smile. “In the meantime?”

“In the meantime, maybe we’ll remind you that you do belong to the two of us,” Mick finished, crawling forward and kissing Cal’s shoulder. “Take the rest of your clothes off.”

Now Cal grinned, and moved to obey as quickly as he could. “Finally, you’re talking sense.”

“Oh, Cal,” Wes said, stripping as well. He smiled. “Neither of us is here for your smart mouth tonight.”

“And what are you going to do to—oh.” Cal fell backwards, propelled by an unseen force, and Mick smiled at him, wiggling his fingers. Cal’s pants came the rest of the way off and his loincloth came undone on its own, and Mick got in between his legs.

Cal wasn’t sure Mick had ever undressed that quickly before. “This is one of those nights where it’s better for me to just lay back and let you have your way, isn’t it?”

Mick looked at Wes, then back down at Cal. “Do we ever have nights where it’s not better for you to do that?”

Cal felt himself shiver a little. This was going to be good.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” Mick said, licking his fingers and reaching in between Cal’s legs. “I’m going to fuck you. Then when I’m done, Wes is going to take a turn. Sound good?”

Another shiver. Cal glanced at Wes, smiling down at him, also undressed. He’d been a bit wary of Wes entering him. He was so big. But he liked having Mick inside him. Cal nodded, swallowing a little. “Okay.”

Mick smiled, and slid a finger inside. “I hoped you’d say that.”

Gasping for air, Cal tried to relax and let Mick work his finger in. Wes was sitting beside him, at his shoulder, stroking Cal’s hair as the two of them watched Mick. “Try to keep quiet, babe…”

“Yeah,” Cal panted, nodding a little as he felt Mick’s knuckle at his base. Another finger probed around, and Cal took a breath as Mick slid it inside. He was much more used to this now, he knew he could take it. Mick was always slow and gentle with him. Wes was always so nice and encouraging.

He loved them both so much.

By the time Mick was ready for his third finger, Cal had managed to get himself into a steady breathing pattern, and he just took in a slow breath along with Mick’s finger, closing his eyes as he
got used to it, letting Mick stretch him while Wes whispered to him about how well he was doing.

Mick’s three fingers were seated all the way inside Cal now, and he started moving them around, pulling them in and out, stretching Cal as much as he could. Then, with a smirk, he pulled them all out at once and Cal yelped a little.

“Shh…” Wes reminded him, patting Cal’s cheek.

Cal whimpered a little in reply, trying to keep his breath steady, waiting to feel Mick at his hole.

Instead he felt hands on his sides, urging him to roll over. “On your belly,” Mick ordered. Making a little noise of discomfort, Cal rolled over, squirming a little as his hard-on was pressed against the blanket. Mick gave his butt a squeeze before using one hand to spread Cal’s cheeks, lining himself up against Cal’s hole. “Ready?”

“Yeah.” Cal sounded needy, but he didn’t give a damn. He was needy.

“Good.” Mick pressed in, slowly. Cal didn’t know when he’d slicked himself up, but he had, and he went in as easily as he could, giving Cal time to get used to him.

“Stay relaxed, buddy,” Wes reminded him, holding Cal’s head as Mick slid inside. “You know you can take it.”

“I know,” Cal panted, nodding as Mick pushed farther and farther in. He was always bigger than Cal remembered.

“Our beautiful guy is so big, isn’t he?” Wes asked, as Mick stopped, pulled out a bit, thrust in further.

“Yeah!” Cal squeaked, going a bit red at how high his voice got.

Mick stopped again. “How many times is Wes going to have to tell you to be quiet?”


“Try harder,” Mick whispered, and he gave a long thrust, pushing the rest of the way into Cal in one motion. Cal cried out.

Wes sighed, lifting up Cal’s chin. He had his cock in his other hand, Cal saw. “We’re going to have to do something about all that noise of yours.”

“I thought you didn’t want my smart mouth?” Cal asked, managing a coy smile.

Wes smiled back, pressing the tip of his cock against Cal’s lips. “I’d like it to do something useful so we don’t have to listen to Sully bitching tomorrow.”

Cal kissed Wes on the head of his cock, teasing. “You’re right,” he said. “You’d better quiet me down, then.”

Moving his other hand into Cal’s hair, Wes pressed his cock to Cal’s lips and then past them, sliding into Cal’s mouth. Cal relaxed his jaw, let Wes in, let him all the way in. He was much better at making room up here.

Mick waited until Wes’s balls were on Cal’s chin to run a hand down Cal’s back slowly, lifting him up a little in one hand. “You’re so pretty, Cal.”

And he started moving, not as slowly as he had been before. Not rough, but harder than Cal was
expecting. They were shallow thrusts, and getting faster, pushing Cal forward onto Wes. Wes started moving once Mick had found his rhythm, thrusting into Cal’s throat, which burned along with his gut, a burn Cal liked. He was making pathetic little noises as he drooled around Wes’s cock, driven back and forth by the two of them steadily, flowing like water back and forth as they thrust into him.

He wasn’t the only one making noise and Cal could hear them above him, grunting and groaning, muffled, kissing, Cal could hear them kissing as they fucked him from either end, hands on him but attention on each other as they used him, used Cal’s body in a way that he loved, that he knew was because they loved him. *We’ll remind you that you do belong to the two of us.*

Cal was reminded, and he loved that.

Because Mick had lifted his hips he had no friction, no attention at all on his cock. It didn’t matter, not with the angle Mick was fucking him at, not with the sounds the two of them were making above him, not with the heat that was spreading through his body, a fiery wave that was taking him away, and Cal exploded, burning from the inside, shooting all over the blanket underneath him. He clenched tight around Mick, let out a sustained, low moan around Wes.

That was enough for Wes, who grunted once, pushed all the way in, and seared Cal’s throat with cum, pumping shot after shot into him. Cal swallowed, kept swallowing, swallowed it all until the last spurt, when Wes pulled out, all the way out, all at once, and let Cal have the last one on his face.

Gasping for air, Cal rocked back and forth, eyes open but not seeing. Mick was still fucking him as Wes fell back, sat and watched, harder and harder. Mick kept going, hands gripping Cal’s hips now, probably making bruises, harder and harder until, with a deceptively quiet noise, he blew inside Cal, burning him from behind just like Wes had from the front. Mick didn’t pull out though, giving Cal all of his cum inside, where Cal wanted it.

He pulled out too, all at once, and nearly collapsed beside Cal, panting. For a moment the tent was full with their breathing, stale with their sweat, hot with their bodies. Cal lay there, buzzing, tingling. “You’ve been holding out on me,” he croaked.

“On myself too,” Mick muttered, getting up, looking at Wes. The two of them manhandled Cal, turning him around so that he was opposite how he had been, rump open for Wes. In front of him, Mick wiggled a finger, and coated his own cock in what looked like water, moving around. Cleaning it off, Cal realized after a second. That was thoughtful.

“You ready, baby?” Wes asked, hand on Cal’s lower back. Cal nodded, and Wes, wet from Cal’s mouth, pressed against his entrance now. “You’re nice and stretched now,” he cooed, rubbing Cal’s back with one hand before reaching around to lift him again for better position. “Should go in pretty easy.”

It didn’t, or at least not as easy as Cal would have liked. Wes was a lot thicker than Mick, especially around the head, and Cal’s already sore hole was stretched painfully. Clenching his jaw and fisting the blanket underneath him, Cal bore it for what felt like ages, until he couldn’t anymore and he just thrust his hips back hard, letting Wes’s head pop in with a stab of pain that shot through his body and had him swallowing a cry.

“Fuck…” Wes hissed. “You okay, buddy?”

Cal nodded, eyes squeezed shut. “Give me a minute.”

“Why’d you do that? I was trying to go slow.”
“Too slow,” Cal gritted. The pain was starting to fade now. “Couldn’t take it.”

“See?” Mick asked Wes. “Cal doesn’t need you to be gentle.”

“Should I…”

“No.” Cal shook his head. Mick’s hands were on his shoulders, which was good. “I’m okay. Now you can go slow.”

Wes grunted quietly, and he pushed in a bit farther. Rather than sliding progressively forward like Mick had, he then pulled back, pushed back in again. Back and forth, going in farther each time, deeper each time. The pain was gone now, and it was replaced just with a sense of fullness that was the same as what he’d felt with Mick inside him but more, like he was being stretched to his limit, just on the verge of splitting in half.

“Here,” Mick said, once Wes was a good amount in. He lifted Cal’s head by the chin, offering his cock. The water he’d been using to clean himself was gone now. “Before you get noisy.”

Cal wanted to make a snarky comment, but he didn’t have it in him. Wes’s cock was all he had in him at the moment. He just nodded, opened his mouth and let Mick slide himself in, sucking greedily to get more and more inside, breathing through his nose as he let Mick into his throat, taking all of him in. Wes was still thrusting, back and forth, deeper and deeper, churning up Mick’s cum inside him.

Wes was going gently, but Mick started sliding back and forth into Cal’s throat, not as hard as he’d been going earlier, but harder than Wes, and every thrust pushed him back, further onto Wes, whose dick just seemed endless, like it was going in more and more until Cal was sure that the two of them were going to meet inside him.

Then Wes bottomed out with a groan, and he leaned down and kissed Cal on the back of the neck. “You took it all in,” he said in a hoarse whisper. “Good job, baby.”

All Cal could do was whinge around Mick’s cock and buck his hips to encourage something else. He felt so full, so hot, and he wanted more. More movement. More of Wes. More of Mick. More.

They gave it to him, gave him what he needed, gave him more. Wes pumped in and out, pulling nearly out every time, firmly pushing all the way back in, filling Cal, pushing him onto Mick, and Cal swallowed Mick down, keeping firmly on him as Mick thrust more shallowly into him, keeping Cal’s mouth and throat full, keeping Cal full. Cal breathed deeply through his nose, inhaling Mick as he did, tears falling as he felt Wes push into him over and over and over and over and…

Wes hit Cal just right and Cal cried out around Mick, nearly choking as he came again, shooting onto the blanket with an almost painful force. When the white that had filled his vision faded and sound returned to the world, Wes was giving a low rumble and, with one very hard thrust in, shot heat into Cal from behind, filling him what felt like forever, cum running down Cal’s legs as Wes leaned down and kissed him on the back of the neck.

When Wes finally finished, he stayed like that, buried in Cal, leaned over him while Cal worked on finishing Mick off. “You’re doing great, baby, so great. You’re so amazing, Cal, keep going…”

Mick was moving faster now, erratic, close, and Cal sucked harder on him, making a little needy noise. For that, he was finally rewarded, Mick going tense in front of him as he started to cum. Cal swallowed it all down, gulping to keep up.

Mick slid out of his mouth with a low moan, falling backwards. “Love you,” he whispered.
“Love you too,” Cal said back, trying to keep his voice whole. “Both of you.”

“Come here,” Wes said, lifting Cal up, not pulling himself up, and holding Cal against him from behind, laying them both down on their sides. “There we go.”

“Um…” Cal squirmed a little, more cum leaking out and running down his leg. “Can’t sleep like this, big guy.”

“Sure we can,” Wes kissed his ear. “Went to a lot of trouble to get inside you, I don’t plan on taking it out until I absolutely have to.”

Cal laughed a little, then realized Wes was serious. “If you say so,” he said, too tired to argue.

Mick came over and lay in front of Cal, cuddling with both of them, legs entwined with Wes. “I might decide I want another turn later, so don’t get too comfortable.”

Cal kissed him, still trying to get comfortable. He had a feeling he wasn’t going to be sleeping much anytime soon. He had a feeling none of them were. “Duly noted.”

From outside the tent, they could hear a faint yelping sound that sounded like Joey. “Sounds like their card game is going well,” Cal muttered.

“Yeah,” Wes snorted.

“Poor Sully,” Mick muttered, eyes closed.

“Who?”

“Cute.” Mick kissed Cal on the forehead. “Just don’t forget.”

“I belong to you guys, I know.” Cal smiled, pulled Mick a little closer and snuggled back against Wes. “I picked you two. I’ll always pick you two.”

“We’ll always pick you too, Cal,” Wes promised from behind.

“I’ll never let anyone else sleep with their cock inside me,” Cal promised, yawning.

Mick gave him a bit of a shove on the shoulder. “You’re the goddamn worst romantic.”

“Mm.” Cal smiled. “Yeah. Thanks for putting up with me.”

“Always, Cal.”

“Always.”
“Do you think your spell is going to work?” Cal asked Mick, as they approached the rock from which the town of Heated Rock got its name. It was heated because of the sun, which was not as impressive as it could have been. It was very big, at least.

“I don’t see why not,” Mick said, glancing over his shoulder at Joey and Travis. “It’s got a powerful enough signature that I should be able to pick up on it.”

Cal nodded. Mick could use the Sceptre to find the other parts of the Regalia, which was good, since they didn’t have any other leads on finding any of them. Depending on how far away they were, they would decide whether it was more efficient to find them and deposit them with Theodore all at once, or return to Merket first. Cal didn’t think it was a good idea to let the Sceptre out of their sight until they had at least one other piece, since it was the only way they had of getting anywhere with this job.

“Okay. Once we’re in the inn, maybe get on it if you’re not tired? It can wait until tomorrow.” Theodore hadn’t given them a time limit. Cal smiled at Mick. “I know we’ve been working you harder than usual lately.”

Mick chuckled. “Happens. Magical shit sort of requires the magical person, yeah?”

“Probably better if you wait,” Sully said in front of them, hands behind his head as he walked. “Until we don’t have hangers-on.”

“Don’t be rude,” Wes suggested. They were coming up on the rock now. The road curved around it, leading to the town, which was hidden from view.

“Just saying.”

“You’re saying it rudely. I didn’t say you were wrong, just that you’re a jerk.”

Sully snorted. “Whatever. So are you.”

“What did I do?”

“You totally knew Cal was planning to throw water at me!” Sully accused. “And you didn’t stop him!”

“You should wake up earlier.”

“Waking up early is for old people!” Sully glared at Wes. “Nothing good happens before lunch.”

“Breakfast is pretty good,” Joey called from the back.

“You keep your wrong opinions to yourself back there.”
“You feeling okay, Sully?” Mick asked. “You haven’t said the word ‘fuck’ yet in this tirade.”

“Fuck off. Maybe I’d get up earlier if you all didn’t keep me up all fucking night.”

“That’s better.”

“It was also two days ago,” Cal added. “Get over it.”

Sully opted to sulk instead of engaging either of them further, or at least that was how Cal interpreted his silence.

Smiling, Cal looked over his shoulder at Joey and Travis. “Where are the two of you headed after this?”

“We…” Travis started to talk, but Joey grabbed his hand.

“It’s a secret.”

“Oh?” Cal quirked an eyebrow, amused. “Why is it a secret?”

“Well apparently in this group, we keep secrets from each other for no reason, so I’m just trying to fit in.”

“You’re surprisingly bitter about something you supposedly have no stake in,” Cal told him, as they made to turn with the road around the rock, to the entrance of the town.

There were two people standing there, on the road, who hadn’t been there a second ago. The first was a polished, thin man with pointed mustaches and a black cape. The second was Belle, the healer who Cal had been to see in Merket, dressed in her pink. Belle was holding a sword.

One Cal recognized.

Sully dropped his arms from behind his head, widening his stance a little, hands near his knives. Wes had his near his axe. Mick was preparing his magic. Cal went still, watching them. “Can we help the two of you?”

Belle smiled at him, gave a nod. But her attention soon left him. “Interesting company you’re keeping these days.”

She was talking to Sully.

He was tense, Cal saw, in a way that he hadn’t been before since they’d known each other. “What the fuck do you want?”

“You know what we want, Sullivan.”

“More creditors, Sully?” Cal asked, but that wasn’t it. Something about this whole thing was off. Aside from all the obvious things that were off like Belle having followed them down here with a sword that Wes had broken, which now wasn’t broken, something was just wrong.

“You guys should run,” Sully said, not breaking eye contact with Belle and her friend. “Now. Go.”

Cal looked at Wes and Mick, and all three of them moved into fighting stances. Wes’s axe came out, Mick’s hand raised, and Cal drew his short sword. Behind him, Travis pulled out his knives as well, and Joey moved behind him.
“Guys…” Sully pleaded.

“You’re about to make a serious mistake, Sully,” the polished man said.

“No,” Sully told him, shaking his head, drawing his own blades. “I’m going to fix the one I made a long time ago.”

“Sully, what’s going on?” Cal asked quietly. There was something more to this than what the three of them were saying.

“We’re all about to die.”

Well, that was helpful. Cal looked up, at Belle and her friend. “Whatever your issue is with Sully, get over it. There are more of us than there are of you and we’re not going to let you hurt him.”

Belle smiled at him. “Don’t misunderstand. We’re not here for Sullivan. We’re here for you, Nathen.”

Cal took an involuntary step back, chilled through, sword coming up in front of him.

“Get behind us, Cal,” Mick ordered, fire playing across his fingers, darting out towards Belle as Wes advanced.

Belle tilted her head and Mick’s fire disappeared. Her friend…twitched. “Fuck,” Sully said, as the man in black went blurry and was gone.

He reappeared before Sully got out that hard ‘K,’ in between Cal and Mick, who both shouted, stepping back. Cal brought his sword up, slashing at the man, who seemed unarmed. He disappeared again, this time appearing behind Cal, with a long dagger in his hand.

Cal spun, breath coming hard, and met that dagger with his sword, the smash of metal ringing through the air. The man raised his weapon to bring it down at Cal, who stepped back.

A blur, and Sully was there in between the two of them, catching the man’s weapon between his daggers. They weren’t the daggers Cal had bought for him, though. They were longer, curved, jagged on one side, and radiated something that Cal could just barely perceive. “Mick, get Cal out of here,” Sully ordered, pushing the tall man back and slashing at him to keep him away.

Mick’s hand was on Cal’s shoulder, pulling him back. Wes cried out and Cal spun, to see that he’d been tossed to the ground by Belle, who was approaching them now, sword still in her hand, unused. There was no time to think about anything that was happening. Cal raised his blade. “Cal…” Mick hissed.

“She hurt Wes,” Cal said, and that was enough. Belle didn’t blur like the other man, she approached them at normal walking speed while Sully fought her friend behind them. “Magic, Mick.”

“Yeah.” Mick gestured, and flowers of fire started to bloom around Belle, but she just walked through them all, unhurt, unbothered. When the last one wilted, she flicked a finger, sent Mick flying backwards, where he landed between Joey and Travis.

Cal felt a liquid hatred course through his veins. “Leave them alone,” he snarled.

“You’re the one who involved them, Nathen.” Belle smiled.

“That’s not my name.” Cal ran at her, blade forward.
Lowering the sword, Belle held out a hand and simply caught Cal’s weapon, wrenching it from his hand and tossing it aside. “You can do better than that.” Belle glanced to the side as Mick sent a streak of lightning from beside Joey, and she waved a hand and made it vanish with the smell of burning air. “You probably can’t,” she said to him. “But you can’t help it if you were born human.”

With a sudden snarl, Joey lowered his head and ran at Belle as if to headbutt her, which since he was unarmed was probably exactly what he planned. Belle made a derisive little noise and stood there, and Cal took the opportunity to dive for his discarded sword. Wes was there to help him stand once he’d gotten his hands on it. “You okay?”

“I’ll live.”

Joey tackled Belle, who started and made a surprised noise, stepping back really abruptly. Cal straightened. “She’s not invincible.” And was apparently susceptible to headbutts.

“Fuck,” Belle said, grabbing Joey by the top of his cloak, by the hair, and hoisting him into the air. Cal and Wes moved up from behind, weapons drawn. “Should have paid more attention to the entourage.” And she reached up with her other hand, undid the clasp on Joey’s cloak and let him fall, leaving the swath of fabric in her hand. Joey collapsed to the ground in a pile. A pile of limbs and tail.

Joey had a tail, a heavy, scaled tail that was between his legs as he stood, backing away from Belle, fear on his face. His hair was nearly white, broken by two long horns protruding from his frontal bone, curving up with his skull.

Cal stopped moving, brought short by that, staring at Joey. “What the hell…”

“He’s a demon,” Wes said, faint. Cal nodded, watching the way that Joey tried to hide in broad daylight, the way he moved back from Belle. He was afraid of her.

“Not a very powerful one,” Cal muttered, returning his attention to Belle. “Let’s worry about these two first.” He cast a glance over at Sully, who was fighting the other man at a speed that Cal almost couldn’t follow. Joey wasn’t the only one who wasn’t as normal as he’d seemed. Travis seemed to be over there with them trying to help, but mostly the other two were just moving around him to get to each other. Mick had never felt any sign of magic from Sully, but he couldn’t be moving that fast otherwise.

Mick had stood up when Cal returned his attention to Belle, and was behind Joey, looking to Cal for instructions. He nodded at Belle. That was who they were worried about at the moment, demon or no demon.

Cal and Wes ran at her, weapons ready, and Mick prepared some magic as well. Belle made another noise and ducked under Wes’s arm, and she pushed Cal sharply, sending him staggering back several steps as she caught Wes’s axe. She had blood on her front, Cal saw. Joey’s horn must have punctured her. She smiled at Cal and tossed the sword at him, a gentle lob that had it flying in a clean arc.

Behind Cal, Sully swore and Cal heard him fall to the ground. If Sully weren’t keeping the man at bay, Travis wouldn’t be able to do it on his own.

Cal reached out, tossing his sword to his left hand, and caught the flying blade by the hilt in his right. He span it, turned, brought it up to defend himself from the strike he could feel coming.

Steel crashed as his sword caught the man’s knife. Cal looked up at him, saw him straining. He gave
a push. The man fell backwards, barely keeping his feet, his cape flying out behind him. His appearance rippled, and he had wings, black like a bat’s, obvious fangs in his mouth, and his hands were long claws. “Now there’s the power I’ve heard so much about,” the man hissed, face contorting into a smile that was too wide.

Sully stood, and he’d changed too. Lined tattoos ran down both sides of his face, behind pointed ears and down his neck. He had slitted eyes like a snake’s, a thin tail with a barb at the end, and two pointed horns in the centre of his head.

“Demons…” Cal whispered, looking over his shoulder at Belle. She had horns too, several of them curling up from her hairline, and what looked like a third eye in the centre of her forehead, closed. Her arms had an extra joint in them, and she stood a little hunched. “You’re all demons.”

“How very observant you are, Nathen,” the man drawled, dagger out.

Cal took a step back, one sword pointed at the man, the other at Sully.

“Cal, I’ll explain.”

“Don’t,” Cal shook his head at Sully. “Don’t explain. Trusted you.” He had trusted Sully and brought him onto the team. He had brought Sully near Mick and Wes. “Fuck…” He backed up, until he was with Wes and Mick. Travis had gotten up and joined Joey, arms around him. “All of you.” He, at least, looked human enough.

“That get rid of your little delusion, Sullivan?” Belle asked, moving away from Cal, Mick and Wes and flanking Sully with the other man. Travis was trying to pull Joey away. “He’s not your friend. He’d see you dead just as readily as the rest of us.”

Wes and Mick had hands on him, holding Cal in place. He couldn’t take his eyes off them, the three of them, except to occasionally glance at Joey to his other side. He felt surrounded, he felt besieged. He felt like everything in the world was wrong and he had to fix it.

He felt like he couldn’t fix it.

“He’s not who you think he is,” Sully insisted, watching Cal.

“Nathen ended the world once. Do you think he wouldn’t do it again?”

“Shut the fuck up!”

“I’ll handle Sullivan,” Belle told the man. “Asher, take them.”

“No!” Joey broke free from Travis as the man, Asher, raised a hand, something glowing between his claws.

“Joey!”

“Don’t,” Sully warned Belle, trying to get around her.

“Run,” Cal ordered Wes and Mick.

Travis ran forward, grabbed Joey, managed to toss him aside just a widening spear of light shot from Asher’s claws. It enveloped Travis, moving too fast for him to do anything but shout, and surged towards them.

There wasn’t enough time to run.
Cal was tackled by something hard and sent flying, out of the beam, out of the path of Asher’s attack. He landed hard on the ground, and the world filled with noise.

He watched the light hit Wes and Mick, watched helplessly as it swallowed them, as it took them from his sight, as it took them, as it took them, as it…

All the noise in the world came to a halt as the light disappeared.

Sully rolled off Cal, panting. “Fuck…” he whispered, eyes closed.

“Travis?” Joey asked.

The wind blew over the three of them. They were the only ones here. Belle and Asher were gone. The light was gone, leaving a scorch mark on the ground as the only evidence that it had been. Travis was gone.

Wes and Mick were gone.
There wasn’t enough air in the world. Cal couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t make himself breathe, because Wes and Mick were gone and they’d taken all the air in the world with them.

He screamed, raw and hard and long and pathetic and he didn’t care, and he closed his eyes until it all went away, but it didn’t go away, because they were gone. Wes and Mick. They were gone.

They were dead.

At some point he ran out of air to scream with and he was just there, half sitting on the ground, clenched around himself.

“Cal…”

Cal’s eyes snapped open, air came back to him in a hiss. Sully.

He stood, a sword in each hand, backing away from Sully, and from Joey, who looked just as broken as he did. They were demons, both of them. Cal pointed his sword at Sully, Nathen’s at Joey. “Get away from me,” he snarled, looking back and forth to both of them. “Both of you, don’t come near me or I’ll kill you, I swear I’ll kill you!”

Cal had never wanted to kill anyone in his life. He had killed someone, once, and he’d never wanted to do it again.

Now, now he wanted to kill them. Sully, and Joey, and Belle and Asher and everyone else in the goddamn world that had taken the only two important people away from him.

For the first time, Cal really understood Nathen. Belle had said that Nathen had ended the world once. Cal was more than happy to do it again.

“Cal.”

“No,” Cal shook his head, advancing on Sully. Joey was just crouched there, tail wrapped around himself, crying. He wasn’t a threat to Cal, not right now. “Don’t talk.”

“Cal, please,” Sully pleaded, hands held up, dropping his knives on the ground. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“No you’re fucking not, because I’m going to kill you.” Cal was shaking all over. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the charred ground where Asher’s spell had killed them. Every muscle in his body was coiled like a snake, ready to lash out.

“They’re not dead, Cal!”

That pronouncement rang out into the grass, hanging around them.

Cal went still, swallowing bile. “Don’t fuck with me, Sully.”

“They’re not.” Sully’s stance read conviction. “That wasn’t an attack that Asher used. It was a teleportation spell.”
“It burned the grass,” Cal said, shaking his head. He swung Nathen’s sword around to point at Sully, pointed his own at the charred land. “Teleportation spells don’t burn the fucking ground they’re used on, Sully.”

“Asher’s not good at subtlety. I would know,” Sully muttered, sighing. “I trained him. Cal, they don’t care about Wes and Mick. They’re after you.”

“Then why keep them…”

“Because they know you’ll come after them. Cal—Wes and Mick are alive. Asher didn’t kill them, he took them hostage.” Sully sounded like he might cry. Sully didn’t have the right to cry.

“What about Travis?” Joey asked quietly, voice a near-sob. “Him too?”

Cal looked over at Joey, who was getting to his feet, shaking, tail wrapped around one leg, tears streaming freely down his face. His clothes didn’t fit. He didn’t look like much of a demon.

“Yes,” Sully said. “He was hit with the same spell. He’ll be with them.”

“Where?” Joey demanded, voice hardening a bit.

“I…”

“Where?” Cal repeated, cold.

Sully looked between the two of them, eyes landing on Cal. “It’s a trap. They’re trying to lure you in.”

“I don’t care. Where are they?” Cal would kill every person between him and the two of them, he didn’t care if it was a trap.

“Probably the Citadel,” Sully said, eyes averted. “In the Amaran Mountains.”

Northeast of here by a good distance. Cal looked in that direction. “If you’re lying I’m going to come back and kill you.” He wasn’t sure he wasn’t going to kill Sully anyway.

“I’m not lying, but Cal, you can’t just go there.”

“Watch me.”

“I’m coming with you,” Joey said, looking around nervously.

“No.” Cal shook his head. “I’m going alone.”

“You can’t go by yourself, Cal,” Sully insisted.

“I’m not going anywhere with any demons!” Cal shouted. “You’re lucky I haven’t killed you yet, Sully!”

“I’m not a demon.”

Cal looked over at Joey, at his horns and tail, and he laughed, not a nice sound, one he was surprised to hear from himself. “I’m not fucking blind.”

“I’m not!”
“Don’t…”

“He’s not.” Sully’s voice was quiet. “And I am, so believe me if you don’t believe him.”

Sully obviously didn’t realize how stupid he sounded. Cal looked back at Joey. “Most humans I know don’t fucking have horns,” he spat.

“I’m a dragon.”

Cal didn’t have it in him to laugh again, so he just looked at Joey, unimpressed. “You’re a bit short for a dragon.”

“I knew there was a reason I was getting bad vibes from you,” Sully grumbled, watching Joey. “I thought you guys went extinct.”

Joey frowned at him. “Dragons aren’t extinct.”

“That’s not what I meant. I meant…” Sully let out a sigh, gestured at Joey. “Whatever the fuck you are. Shapeshifters.” He glanced at Cal. “There was a project a long way back to try and harness the power of dragons. Led to a lot of dragons developing shapeshifting powers. The project failed, or at least we thought it did.”

“Most dragons can’t change shape,” Joey said, defensive. “Or at least that’s what my sire told me. Some can. Look, I don’t…” Joey shook his head. “Care. I don’t care about this. I just want Travis back. I love him.”

“Fine,” Cal said, looking away. “You can come. We’ll get them back together.” Joey sounded sincere, and if he wasn’t a demon, then he wasn’t as bad as Cal had feared. And Sully wasn’t wrong—he couldn’t just storm a fortress by himself.

“Thank you,” Joey said quietly, eyes watering again.

Cal turned to Sully, taking a breath. Sully looked back. There was quiet for a good minute. “I’m not on their side,” Sully said, finally. When Cal didn’t answer, he took a step forward. “I’m not. I fought against them. I tried to protect you, Cal.”

“Why?”

Sully stopped short, looked away. “Because they’re wrong. About you. They think Nathen is too dangerous to be allowed to live. But they’re wrong.”

“They let me live, though,” Cal said quietly, hurting everywhere. “Why not just kill me?” If they’d just killed him, Wes and Mick would be okay. None of this had to happen.

“Because they don’t want to kill Cal. They want to kill Nathen.” Sully said it as though there was a clear difference. Which there was in Cal’s head, but it didn’t seem like Belle had thought there was. “That’s why she gave you that sword. That’s why they’re luring you in. Because they’re hoping that Nathen’s personality will re-surface properly so they can kill him.”

“There’s no fucking difference. It’s one body either way.”

“The difference is that every other time they’ve killed you, you keep coming back.”

Cal felt his heart freeze up for a second. “What?” he whispered.

“This isn’t your second go-round, Cal. God, it’s got to be your fiftieth or something.” Sully gave him
a pained look. “Usually they leave you be. Usually they don’t even find you. But every once in a
while you start to remember Nathen, and that scares them. So they kill you. And it’s never worked,
Nathen always comes back.”

You’re the Doomed One, aren’t you?

“Who the hell is Nathen?” Joey demanded suddenly. “I get that it’s Cal. And that he’s come back
from the dead or something. But why do demons hate him so much?”

“I don’t know,” Sully said, shaking his head. “I don’t know. But they do. And I think…this is a
guess, but I think that they figure if they can get him to come back all the way, turn you into Nathen
for real, then they can kill him for good.”

Cal needed to sit down. But if he did, he was worried he’d never get up again. So he looked away
instead. “I never wanted any of this. I’d be perfectly happy if I’d never known about Nathen.” Tears
started to fall now, now that the hatred that had been coursing through him had softened, been
replaced with grief and fear.

“Yeah.” Sully sighed, kicking at the grass. He took a long breath, and his form rippled, replaced with
the human appearance he’d been using before.

“Why should I believe you?” Cal asked, not looking at Sully.

Sully didn’t have an immediate answer for that. He picked up his knives, normal again, and put them
away. “You shouldn’t. I lied to you. I knew who you were. Not right away, but by the time you
hired me, I knew who you were. Travelled with you anyway. You shouldn’t believe anything I say.
But you don’t know the way to the Citadel and I do.”

“Why did you travel with us?” Cal asked. “If you knew, why?” And how had he known? Did
demons have some sort of Nathen-detecting magic?

“Because I’m a fucking idiot and I thought I could protect you.” Sully kicked up some dirt. “Because
I was part of the group that originally decided Nathen was a threat and I regret it. Because, I don’t
know. I thought I could do something right for once in my fucking life.”

“Good job,” Cal grumbled. He wasn’t in the mood to indulge Sully’s self-pity.

“Yeah.”

Cal sighed. The wind swept over them all. “You’re sure they’re alive?”

“Yes.”

“And you know where they are?”

“Yes.”

Cal nodded. “If you’re wrong, or if I find out that you were involved in this at all…”

“I’ll kill myself, Cal.” Sully was hugging himself, rocking back and forth in the wind.

“What do you need his help. I…I don’t like it either, but we don’t know where to go and he
does. We have no choice but to trust him.”

Cal knew that. “Fine. We need your help, Sully. I don’t trust you and I think I might hate you, but I
need your help.”
“Okay.” Sully looked up, at the road, to the village where they’d been headed before the attack. “We should go back to Pelican Bay first.”

“That’s north, it’s the wrong way.” Cal wasn’t in the mood for detours. They didn’t have time for that.

“The three of us can’t storm a demon fortress alone. I can get us help in Pelican Bay.” Sully sighed. “Besides, there’s a road from there that leads east. It’s the fastest way.”

Cal started to protest, but he wasn’t wrong. “Fine.” He slid his short sword back into his sheath, wondering what the hell he was supposed to do with Nathen’s battered blade. “We’ll stop in town here tonight, rest, resupply. Fuck, Wes and Mick had most of the supplies.” Cal swallowed back the lump in his throat. He’d cry later, when Sully and Joey couldn’t see him. “We’ll resupply and get going in the morning. We’re not wasting time.”

“We’re going to get them back,” Joey said in a low voice. It sounded like a promise.

“Yeah,” Cal agreed. “We are. I’m not afraid of demons. Let’s go.”

Cal wasn’t afraid of demons, not at this moment. What he was afraid of was losing Mick and Wes forever. And if that was what they were threatening him with, then the demons had better learn very quickly that it wasn’t Nathen they needed to be afraid of. It was Cal.
“We’re going to have to hunt before we get to Pelican Bay,” Cal said, looking around at the countryside after they’d left Heated Rock. They hadn’t had enough money to buy supplies to get them all the way there.

“What about after we get there?” Joey, safely under his cloak again, asked.

“I have money in banks. We’ll be fine after that.”

They wouldn’t be fine. They wouldn’t be fine until they’d gotten Wes and Mick back. But having enough money not to starve would be a start.

“Why can’t he just teleport us right to this Citadel?” Joey asked, nodding at Sully. The way his cloak moved when he shifted his head, Cal didn’t know how he hadn’t realized there were horns under there before. People were good at not seeing what was supposed to be impossible, he figured.

“Good question,” Cal said, glancing over his shoulder at Sully, who hadn’t said two words to them since the attack. To be fair, they hadn’t said two words to him either. None of them were feeling very talkative.

“Because the Citadel has a million shields and wards up and like I said before, the three of us can’t do it alone. Teleportation spells can go haywire, and anyone who was expecting us, which Belle and Asher are, can easily divert us so we appear exactly where they want us. Or, you know, at the bottom of the ocean or some shit.” Sully let out a long breath. “Which, before you ask, is also why I’m not teleporting us to Pelican Bay. If you want any shot of not dying at this, we need to do it the old-fashioned way.”

That sounded like a lot of excuses to Cal, but he wasn’t in a position to make Sully teleport them anywhere. “So they’re more powerful than you, Asher and Belle?”

Sully was quiet for a minute. “Belle is. Asher might be now. He wasn’t when he was a kid, but I’m out of practice now.”

“You said you trained him,” Joey ventured.

“Yeah well, we’ll go ahead and add that to my list of mistakes, okay? I trained a lot of people. I used to be good at it.” Sully shook his head.

Cal didn’t care if Sully felt sorry for himself. He needed information, not self-pity. “And this help you’re going to get us in Pelican Bay can help you fight Belle?”

Sully sighed, looked away. “It’s not Belle I’m worried about. She’s better than me, but not by that much. I’m worried because the two of them probably weren’t acting of their own volition.”
“They’re answering to someone,” Joey said.

“Yeah. We’re not huge into hierarchy most of the time, but with something this important, I would be surprised if they didn’t at least tell Cameron, and frankly I’d be surprised if she wasn’t the one calling the shots.”

“Cameron?” Cal asked.

“She’s our leader. Sort of.”

“The devil is a lady named Cameron?” Joey sounded a bit skeptical.

“No, that’s someone else. It’s…complicated.”

“We have a lot of time,” Cal told him, not gently.

Sully sighed. “Okay. Our original leader—also not the devil, I think—is this guy Klaus. He was the first person that we know of who was like us.”

“A demon,” Joey said.

“We didn’t call it that at the time, but yeah, if you want. Klaus made a lot of the older demons, told us what to do. We were his soldiers in this fuck-off big war against the old gods, the ones from before the Catechism.”

“Wasn’t that supposed to be the angels?” Cal asked. Fighting demons who’d been worshipped as gods, if he remembered his history correctly.

“There was no difference at the time,” Sully said, irritable. “Will you let me tell you the goddamn story?”

Cal looked at him for a second, but then looked away. “Fine.”

Another sigh. “Klaus ran our group for a good while. He was a genius, naturally gifted, brilliant tactician, powerful enough to shake the world, all that shit, and it was fine. Then one day he fucking disappeared. No explanation, nobody knows what happened to him. Cameron was his second in command, and she took charge. Claimed she killed him, that he’d lost sight of our ideals or some bullshit. Some of us don’t buy it, think Klaus is still alive, but that doesn’t matter. Cameron was the leader when we decided to stop Nathen from coming back. It’s always been her pet thing, and she told us later it was what she argued with Klaus over. She’s…powerful. She was the only person in the world who could ever touch Klaus. To be honest, she was stronger than he was. If she’s in the Citadel when we get there, we’re fucked with a broadsword and there’s not much to do about it.”

“That’s encouraging,” Cal muttered.

“I didn’t lie to you. I told you it was impossible from the beginning. But even if she’s not there, it’ll be more than just Belle and Asher we have to worry about. That’s why we’re getting help.”

“From another demon?” Joey asked.

Sully was quiet for a minute. “From an angel.” He looked at Cal. “You remember the priest, Bartholomew?”

Cal did, and he looked at Sully, skeptical now. And uncomfortable. At least knew why Bartholomew had been so creepy. “And why would an angel help you?”
“Because I don’t care what they taught you in church, the only difference between angels and
demons is what side of the argument they ended up on back then.” Sully looked so normal, under
whatever disguise he was wearing. Cal could almost look at him and not see him for what he was.

“What argument?”

“The one about whether to find and kill Nathen or to wait for him to come back like the humans
were and support him in saving the world.” Sully looked away as he said it.

Cal didn’t have an answer for that. He just closed his eyes, shook his head and took a deep breath. “I
hate all of this so much.”

“Obviously it was the angels who won the popular vote,” Sully added. “And, you know, got
churches built around it. By that point humans had forgotten Nathen’s name and just started calling
him God. Natural consequence of the fact that gods plural were trying to kill them. They wanted at
least one god who was on their side. Led them to make up one, and only one.”

Cal felt queasy. “You’re telling me that I’m God?”

“No. I’m telling you that a few assholes who were born four thousand years ago convinced
themselves you were. They’re nuts. We’re all nuts.” Sully shook his head. “None of us should exist
anymore, the world doesn’t need us.”

“No,” Cal agreed. “It doesn’t.”

“Why do you think this angel is going to help you?” Joey asked. “Aren’t you supposed to be
fighting?”

“Yeah. But Bartholomew used to be a friend of mine. And he’ll help Cal—without involving other
angels,” Sully added, seeing Cal’s expression. “He was five seconds away from being on our side
before the schism, and I’m pretty sure the others haven’t forgotten that. He won’t call them when we
ask for his help. And he’s a lot stronger than I am. Asshole.” That last part was said in an undertone
as Sully kicked at a loose stone.

Cal squeezed his eyes shut, fighting back tears again. There was no way around it. He was tied up
with angels and demons and no matter how much he wanted to be rid of all of them, he couldn’t if he
wanted the best chance possible at saving Wes and Mick. And Travis. Cal didn’t care about him, but
Joey did, and it was Cal’s fault that he’d been dragged into this. He’d save all three of them.

“If Cameron shows up we’re still fucked.” Sully was still talking. “But if she’s not there we might
stand a chance, at least.”

“Okay.” Cal was tired. They’d only been up for a few hours and Cal was tired. He wanted to find a
bed and sleep in it and cry for hours, but he couldn’t. He had to walk, to get moving, to get to
Pelican Bay and get help from whoever they could.

“If I knew where Klaus was, he’d put a stop to this, I know it.” Sully made an agitated noise. “I’m
sure he’s alive, he’s the kind of guy you don’t believe is dead until you see his fucking body. But
he’s fucking hiding somewhere, probably just watching everything like a…” Another noise. “I’ve
been looking for him forever, we’re not going to find him in the next three weeks, so it doesn’t
fucking matter. An attack on the Citadel might get his attention, though. Maybe…”

“Sully,” Cal didn’t raise his voice, he didn’t have the energy for that. “I can’t…” he could only do
angels and demons and gods for so long. “I can’t listen to you anymore. We’ll talk about this more
later.”
Sully went quiet, a silence Cal would call sullen under other circumstances. “Yeah, okay,” he said. “Sorry.”

Cal just shook his head and kept putting one foot in front of the other in silence, focused only on what he needed to do, by any means necessary.
Cal’s face hurt from staring into the fire too long, but he didn’t want to stop. Moving seemed like a lot of work, and if he did, he’d end up faced with the fact that he was travelling with people who weren’t the right people.

He wished he had wine, but he hadn’t been able to justify wasting any of their limited money on alcohol when they’d needed to buy things to survive on. Maybe he could have swung some cheap wine, the kind that was barely even wine.

The fire popped, and Cal blinked as the sparks flew at him, moving back a little. They had finished eating the food he’d rationed out—a good amount, he wasn’t planning on starving them and had confidence in his ability to hunt once it came to that—and were sitting now. It wasn’t quite dark, and they were mostly just waiting for it to be late enough to go to bed.

Behind them, the lone tent that they had with them was already up. Mick had theirs, and Travis had the one he shared with Joey, so all they had was the one Cal had given Sully.

Cal had taken to sleeping outside.

“How much longer is it to Pelican Bay?” Joey asked, voice breaking the silence that wasn’t a silence, filled by the crackle of the fire, the caws of birds, the wind in the grass, their breathing.

“I think about a week?” Sully didn’t look up.

“Bit more than that,” Cal muttered. “Eight, nine days if we’re not slow.”

Eight or nine more days that Wes and Mick were in captivity. Cal couldn’t bring himself to think on that, to think about what they were going through. He had to believe they were okay, that the demons hadn’t hurt them. Otherwise he’d just…

“We’ll have to stay there for a few days, probably,” Sully ventured, in that careful tone he used when he was starting a conversation, worried Cal would yell at him. Cal hadn’t yelled at anyone since the attack; he didn’t know what Sully was worried about. “Then it’s a few weeks east on the road to the mountains.”

“Just under a month,” Cal corrected.

“How do you know that?” Joey asked.

“It’s my job to know. I know where things are and how to get there, and I find information and plan our jobs for the team. Wes and Mick do the heavy lifting after that, Wes does the fighting and strongarming, and Mick makes sure our cargo doesn’t kill us. I just watch.”

“That’s like Travis,” Joey said, giving a small smile. “He does all the figuring out where we’re going to go and how we’re going to get there. I just follow him and make his life harder.”

“He doesn’t feel that way,” Cal told him.

“You don’t know that. You don’t know him.” It wasn’t quite sullen, whatever Joey was doing, but it was getting there.

“He didn’t know Asher’s attack wasn’t going to hurt you,” Sully put in. “And he pulled you out of it
and let himself fall in instead. That’s not something you do for someone who makes your life harder.”

“I…” Joey took a shaky breath, nodded. “Thank you.”

“You know you can put your hood down if you want,” Cal told him, looking at Joey buried under that stupid cloak. “It’s just us here, nobody can see you.”

“I…yeah, right.” Joey reached up and pulled back the hood, revealing his horns and face. “Sorry. Travis told me to make sure I kept it on when I wasn’t inside the tent. He was worried someone would see them and kill me.”

“Has that happened?” Cal asked, wanting to talk now that they were talking. “I mean, have people tried?”

“No,” Joey said, shaking his head. “But people in the mountains were looking for a dragon to kill when we left. Someone kidnapped a prince and they were going to look for him. We were worried they’d kill me if they found me. They…killed my sire.”

“I’m sorry,” Cal said.

“It’s fine,” Joey told him. “He’d already kicked me out of the nest before that. Travis and I found his body after we left my cave. I…dragons don’t feel family the way humans do. We’re solitary. If he’d been alive and I’d gotten a bit bigger and learned how to change shape, we would have been rivals.”

“How come you have to learn how to not look like a human?” Cal asked. “I’d think it would be the other way around.”

“I don’t know,” Joey sighed. “I’m just a freak, I guess. That’s why we were in the cliffs, I wanted to ask other dragons if they knew why I was different. But they didn’t, or at least they didn’t tell me. Assholes.”

“It just means your shapeshifting power manifested in part before you had the faculty to control it,” Sully told him. “You were probably shifting before you were born, and your brain forced your body to stabilize into something so you didn’t emerge from your egg a pile of mush.”

Joey blinked. “Really?”

Cal, for himself, was trying to reconcile the fact that Joey had hatched from an egg. Even if he was a dragon, that was a bit weird for him to process.

“Yeah. I wasn’t the one doing these experiments, but I was there when they happened. The problem is your brain put a barrier between you and your powers, because it doesn’t trust you with them. You’ll have to break past that if you want to learn how to shapeshift.”

“How…” Joey’s expression turned serious. “Do you know how to do that?”

“No, sorry.” Sully shook his head. “You’d have to ask Theresa, she’s the one who headed the project. She’s an angel now, though. Or Klaus or Cameron, they know everything, but good fucking luck.”

Joey deflated a little. “It’s fine. I’ll figure it out on my own.”

If he could do it in the next few weeks, Cal thought, that would be awesome. They could use a fully-grown dragon on their side. Though even if Joey learned to shapeshift, they’d probably only have a
small dragon, he figured. Still, half a dragon was better than none. “Why’d you guys give dragons shapeshifting powers anyway?”

Sully shrugged. “We were fighting gods. Klaus wanted allies, and dragons were fuck-off powerful back then. More than now, and bigger. But hard to reason with or talk to.”

“Did…it work?” Joey asked. “Did we help you?”

“For a while, until you got tired of dying, then you fucked off and we decided to be grateful you didn’t change sides, at least.” Sully sighed. “We honestly thought the power got bred out of you, it was never natural to your species and only a few of you could handle it to begin with. Most of my people would be surprised to know you exist.”

“I’d rather they didn’t find out.”

“Good call. They’d cut you open and try to figure you out before they asked your name,” Sully told him. “Restart the project. They wanted werewolves but with scales, and I bet they’d love the chance to try again.”

“Werewolves?” Cal asked.

“Yeah, like…people who are wolves?”

Cal closed his eyes for a second. “I know what werewolves are. I just didn’t think they were real.”

“They are if you go far enough north,” Sully told him. “They were wiped out down here, but they’re still around on the northern continent as far as I know.”

“You mean in Aergyre’s colonies?”

Cal didn’t know much about those, except that the western empire had sent people and ships and armies up north, far, far to the north and found a new land. A new land with people living on it.

Sully nodded. “I mean, they weren’t always that. And mostly they’re still not. My money’s on the empire only holding them for ten, twenty more years before they lose their grip on the territory. There were kingdoms and nations and armies there for a long while before the empire tripped over it. One of them invaded you guys about two thousand years ago.”

Cal frowned, mind running through history. “The Flame War.”

“That’s the one. Or ones. It was a bitch of a time to live through, let me tell you.”

“The story is we were invaded from the east.” And all the disparate kingdoms had gathered together to fight off the invaders, leaving the land scarred and charred and in five kingdoms that would later turn into two.

“That’s because they started there, marched west.” Sully shrugged. “If I’d known they’d get it wrong in the future, I’d have written a history book for you.”

Cal was watching Sully carefully, looking for any sign of falsehood. But there was no reason why Sully would lie about that. “The five waves of invasion?”

“That’s about accurate. And I think they teach you that the invaders were fractious, fought each other?”

“Yeah.”
“That’s because there was a change in monarchy back home after the third wave, and the first three decided not to accept it. The last two waves were to pacify the rebels.” Sully smiled. “The invasions never really stopped so much as the invaders just stayed here long enough they became the locals. Wes has got a lot of Hyggen in him.”

“Don’t tell him that,” Cal muttered, looking away. “He’ll get ideas.”

“If he wants to conquer in the name of a kingdom that doesn’t exist, that’s up to him.”

Cal snickered despite himself. “What’s it like?” he asked. “Watching a kingdom die?”

“Sad.” Sully looked down at his hands. “It’s really sad. But, the things is, they don’t. Unless you wipe a country, a people, right off the face of the world, names disappear, customs change. But nothing dies, not really. It just gets a new name and keeps going.”

Cal nodded, looking into the fire again. “That’s a bit depressing,” Joey said.

“Immortality is depressing. They didn’t tell us that part when we signed up for it.” Sully looked at them both. “I didn’t mean to make this sad again. How’d you and Travis meet?”

“Uh…” Joey seemed genuinely surprised by the question. “He came looking for dragons in the mountains. He wanted to make friends with one. So we became friends.”

Cal couldn’t help but look at Joey. “He wanted to be friends with a dragon?”

“Yeah. I…realized after I met other humans that he was a bit weird.”

“Yeah,” Cal agreed, nodding. “You should keep him.”

“I plan to.”

“Good.” Cal smiled, looking back down into the fire. “Good.”

“How did you meet Mick and Wes, Cal?” Joey asked, watching him.

“On our first job,” Cal said, smiling a little to himself. “I was looking for something in this town. I needed help. Mick was travelling with this group of actors and Wes was working as a delivery boy for a grocery. I might have…kidnapped both of them at knifepoint.”

“You did?” Sully asked, incredulous.

“If you make a short joke I’m going to stab you,” Cal warned. “It was a bonding experience. We laughed about it later.”

“How much later?”

“Well…” Cal thought about it. “Not until after the prison break, the naked rooftop chase and stopping a magic sinkhole from swallowing the town. It was kind of a weird morning.”

“And they stayed with you?”

“I’d brainwashed them into thinking I was cool by that point,” Cal admitted.

“You pestered them until they agreed to be your friend, didn’t you?” Sully asked.

Cal rolled his eyes. “Pester is a strong word. I impressed upon them how well we worked together.
Repeatedly, for a week.” He paused. “And when that didn’t work, I started stealing their stuff so they’d have to come get it from me.”

“You know…I just sort of let Travis come to me,” Joey offered.

“Yeah, well not all of us have horns to attract mates with,” Cal said, gesturing vaguely at his head. “We have to do these things the old-fashioned way.”

“Stealing their stuff is the old-fashioned way?” Joey didn’t look convinced.

“It’s a human custom, I wouldn’t expect either of you to know about it,” Cal said, waving that away. “The point is it worked, okay?”

“If you say so, Cal,” Sully snorted.

“Hey. You’re single. I’m not. In fact, I have two boyfriends, he’s only got one and you have zero.”

“You don’t know how many people I’ve got stashed away,” Sully challenged.

“It’s zero. I can tell by the way you dress.”

“Hey! You’re the one who’s had his shirt on backwards all day.”

“I…” Cal looked down. His shirt was fine. “I have not.”

“No, but you checked.”

Joey started to laugh, and Sully snickered as well. No matter how Cal glared, he couldn’t hide that he was smiling too. They ended up staying up well past full dark.

They weren’t the right people, but they weren’t all wrong.
“I’m going to sleep,” Cal announced, stretching. “It’s late.”

“Yeah,” Joey agreed, looking up at the overcast sky as if in search of stars. “I guess.”

“Wimps,” Sully muttered, shaking his head. “Or maybe you’re secretly both old men.”

“Excuse me, old man?” Cal asked, crossing his arms. “You’re how many centuries old?”

“Exactly, and I don’t go to bed early,” Sully challenged. “Staying up late is good for you. So’s sleeping in.”

Cal held his gaze. “I’m waking you up at dawn.”

“I hate you.”

“Yeah, well, I hate you too.” Cal shrugged. He was pretty sure that he didn’t really hate Sully. Pretty sure.

It was easier not to look at him and see Wes and Mick disappearing in a bar of light now. It was easier to think it wasn’t his fault and not want to vomit now.

As they argued, Cal was reaching into his small bag and pulling out his single blanket, prepared to get up and go find somewhere to sleep.

“Cal,” Sully said, looking at the blanket. “Sleep in the tent tonight. You too, Joey.”

Cal shook his head. “I’m fine out here.”

“Well.”

“It’s going to rain tonight.” Sully pointed up at the sky. “The tent can sleep three people.”

“It’s your tent, Sully.” They’d bought it for him.

“And I’m inviting you in. Come on. Look, I’ll sleep outside if it bothers you that much. But you guys shouldn’t freeze out here on my account.” He had a pleading note in his voice.

“You’re not sleeping outside,” Cal told him, pointing at the tent. “It’s your tent, don’t be dumb.”

“He could say the same to you,” Joey said, looking at the tent. “It is…kind of silly to sleep out here when there’s a perfectly good tent right there.”

“You’ve been sleeping out here too.”

Joey shrugged. “Maybe I’m kind of silly. I’m going to go in the tent, I don’t want to get rained on.
Sully’s...he’s not as bad as I thought. He’s not a bad person, Cal.”

“I know,” Cal sighed. “I know.” There, he’d said it. “I know you’re not a bad person, Sully.”

“Then come in the tent, Cal,” Sully said, waving him over. He gave a nervous grin. “I promise I’ll even keep my pants on.”

Cal laughed. He knew for a fact that Sully slept in nothing. “You sure are making a lot of promises to get me into your tent, there.”

“I just don’t want you to freeze.”

“I don’t know, I’ve read a lot of stories about being tempted by demons, and it usually doesn’t end well.”

“You’re reading the wrong stories, then,” Sully said. “The ones I read, people get awesome powers and stuff.”

“Before they die,” Cal reminded him. “And get dragged off to hell for eternal torment and all that.”

“Well, yeah,” Sully admitted. “But that’s not going to happen to you, now is it? You’ll come back, so go ahead and make as many deals with the devil as you want.”

Cal snorted, headed for the tent. “Maybe that’s how I get Nathen to stay dead, yeah? Give his soul to your friend Klaus in exchange for a lifetime supply of cheap bubbly wine.”

“I told you, he’s not the devil. Just a guy who got powers. I’m pretty sure.” Sully paused, considering. “Possibly he got his powers from the devil, but I can’t say for sure.”

Rolling his eyes, Cal unlaced his boots before opening the tent flap for Joey and then following him in. He threw his bag in there as well. He didn’t go in, intending to put the campfire out and pee before he went to sleep. “You know, all of this ‘you’re secretly God’ stuff is making me worry that the devil’s going to show up one day too. Are you sure you don’t know who he is? It would be useful if I could call him by name when he appears and is all ‘hello, Nathen, it’s been a while.’ You know?” Cal shrugged. “Kind of badass if I could just go ‘oh, hey Pete, how’s it going?’ That sort of thing.”

Sully laughed. “Never met the guy,” he insisted, hands spread.

“Okay.” Cal shook his head. “Don’t know why I keep you around. I’m going to close up the camp.”

“Yeah.”

Sully helped him, and Cal made Joey help too because it had turned out he was kind of useless at this stuff. Travis must have been doing it all for him, but he was going to learn now if Cal had to beat it into him. With that done, they went and peed in the woods together, before heading back for the tent. Cal hesitated for only a second before going in.

“I’ll sleep outside if you really want me to,” Sully told him quietly. “I do understand.”

“No,” Cal shook his head. “It’s fine.” He went inside, letting Sully follow him. Joey had already taken one side of the tent, so Cal sat in the middle, letting Sully have the other side. He stretched, and unfolded his blanket.

Sully got comfortable with his own blanket, before stripping out of his shirt. “I promised I’d keep my
“pants on,” he said, when Cal looked at him. “Careful when you make deals with demons. Pay attention to the specific wording.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Cal yawned, laying back. He didn’t care. He’d seen a lot more of Sully than his bare chest.

“You’re going to sleep with your clothes on?”

He glanced at Sully. “You have a vested interest in me taking them off?”

“No, I just know you don’t usually.”

Cal narrowed his eyes. “How do you know that?”

Sully smiled. “Wes told me. It was one of the reasons he gave for why jumping on you in your sleep was a bad idea.”

Cal wondered if he should be more surprised that Sully had been planning to do that, or that he’d told Wes about it. “I’m fine like this.”

“Suit yourself,” Sully said, shrugging. “I promise not to ogle all three inches of your chest if you do.”

“Fuck off, that wasn’t even a good short joke.”

Joey was giggling on his other side. “I’m going to take my shirt off,” he said, already doing just that. “I usually sleep naked too. Clothes are itchy.”

Cal agreed. “If nothing else, at least you’re both not totally insane.”

“I only started wearing clothes because Travis made me,” Joey continued, laying down. His tail was wrapped around his waist. “I never did before I met him. I still don’t really get the point, especially when it’s hot.”

“Humans like to make things more complicated than they need to be,” Cal told him, looking up at the roof of the tent.

“I know! Ugh.” Joey shook his head, huffed a bit. “I’m telling Travis you said that. You can back me up next time he tries to make me wear smallclothes.”

“You know,” Sully said, pointing upwards. “There’s this concept of too much information.”

Cal was almost certain Sully didn’t wear smallclothes either.

“I don’t understand why humans are so afraid to talk about their bodies. You all go around pretending you don’t have dicks.”

Sully snorted. “Hey, do I look human to you?”

Joey got up on an elbow, scowling over Cal. “At the moment? Yes!”

“He’s got a point,” Cal muttered.

“Yeah, I could stop wearing my illusion and have to deal with both of you pretending I don’t creep you out.” Sully kind of made it sound like a question.

With another yawn, Cal gave up and took his shirt off. He tossed it at Sully for fun. “I don’t care
what you look like. But I’m going to sleep, so look like it quietly.”

Joey was still looking over Cal as he pulled his blanket onto himself. “My horns are better than yours,” he said after a moment, then lay himself down as well.

“You of all people should know it’s not about size, it’s about quality,” Sully shot back.

“That wasn’t a funny short joke either.”

“There’s no such thing as a funny short joke,” Cal added.

“It wasn’t a short joke.”

Joey stifled a laugh. “Then I’ve got bad news for you.”

“Big talk from a small dragon.”

“If you’re going to have a dick-measuring contest, go outside,” Cal said, eyes shut. “Some of us want to sleep.”

They were silent for a minute. Cal could feel their eyes on him.

“He’s only saying that because he’d lose.”

“Obviously,” Sully agreed.

“Goodnight,” Cal said. Firmly. He should have slept in the rain. It was starting now, pattering lightly against the canvas.

“Goodnight, Cal,” Joey said, grin audible as he rolled onto his side and faced the wall of the tent.

“Night,” Sully told them both, sighing. He probably wouldn’t fall asleep anytime soon.

Cal was still going to wake him up at dawn.
Pelican Bay didn’t feel real when they passed through its gates this time. Cal let out a long sigh, noting that the same pelican from before—probably—was still standing there by the gate.

At least some things stayed the same.

“Okay,” Cal said, readying himself. “We’re not staying here more than three days, and ideally I’d like to leave tomorrow.” He knew that wasn’t going to be possible, just because they’d already lost so much of today and by the time they finished supplying tomorrow leaving wasn’t going to be worth it.

“We’ll go see Bartholomew in the morning,” Sully said. “And after that we can…”

“We’ll go see Bartholomew now,” Cal interrupted, shaking his head. They’d come all the way here to see Sully’s friend. Cal wasn’t waiting any longer. “We can’t do any planning or anything until we know if we have his help. He’s at Saint Lyra’s, right? The small one.”

Sully looked like he wanted to argue, but he looked away, nodded. “Yeah.”

“You’re sure he’ll talk to you?” Joey asked. “And help you? You talk about him like you’re not sure.”

“We haven’t been on speaking terms for a few…thousand years,” Sully admitted. “But that’s kind of my fault anyway. I think he’ll hear us out if nothing else. He did used to be my best friend.”

“Okay,” Cal said, setting off. “Let’s go. We can’t be wasting time.” Everything about this trip was a waste of time—not that it wasn’t necessary, Cal understood that it was, but that it took so much time to get here, was going to take so much time to get to the Citadel, everything was taking so much time. Even if Sully was sure that Wes, Mick and Travis weren’t being hurt, Cal hated having to leave them there for so fucking long.

“Why isn’t he your best friend anymore?” Joey asked as they headed down the hill.

“He, um. Well, we joined different sides during the schism.”

That sounded weak to Cal, it sounded like Sully wasn’t saying something important. “If there’s something between you two that’s going to screw this up, say it now.”

“It’s fine. The anger is on my side and I’m over it,” Sully assured, but Cal wasn’t assured.

“You didn’t seem over it when you met him before.”

“That was before.”

“That was a month and a half ago. What changed in six weeks that didn’t change in six thousand
“Four thousand years, and it doesn’t matter, okay? I’m a professional, and so is he and we need his help. I wouldn’t have made us come here if I didn’t trust him to help us.”

Cal looked at Sully for a good long minute as they walked down the hill into the city. And seeing sincerity on Sully’s face, he nodded. “Okay.”

“And it was okay. They walked down the main thoroughfare, Cal trusting Sully to lead them to the little church. Before he took them off the main road, though, Cal stopped, looking around.

“What?” Joey asked, peering out from under the hem of his cloak.

Cal shrugged. “Sully, you recognize this?”

“Recognize what?”

“This is where we met. It’s where you tried to pick my pocket. It’s where I hired you.”

Sully stood there, a little struck. “Well…that was a mistake.” He was flippant, but he sounded emotional under it.

“No,” Cal said, moving down the road. “It wasn’t.”

“You know, I…” Sully trailed off, sighed. “I still have that ribbon you gave me. And the mask I was wearing. I don’t…know why I kept them. I don’t know why it matters.”

“Because having people care about you always matters,” Cal muttered, oddly touched that Sully had kept that stuff.

“Cal…”

“Let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

A little while later Sully took them down a side street, then around a few corners, up the hill a bit and, with one final turn left, to a small church that looked well-maintained, wood front painted blue, a mural of two saints over the door. “Saint Lyra,” Cal said, looking at the one on the left. “And…”

“Saint Stephen, I think,” Sully said, shrugging.

“They’re not in stories together,” Cal said, thinking. Saint Lyra was known for calming hurricanes on the west coast and was the patron of Pelican Bay, where she’d died in combat with a storm demon. Saint Stephen had cured nightmares and defended people from attack by the demonic while they slept.

“They didn’t know each other,” Sully said. “Or at least I don’t think they did.”

“Were they real people?” Joey asked, frowning up at them. “Travis told me about some saints, but I was never sure if they were real or just stories.”

“No reason they can’t be both,” Sully said, smiling at Joey. “Not all the saints were real people the way you want people to be real. Sometimes it’s collections of stories that all get given the same name
when they're retold. Some of the stories might be made up, I don’t know. But at least some of them are real. I never met these two, but I’m pretty sure they were real people at least.”

“Why put them together?” Cal asked, still frowning at the mural. Something about it struck him as off.

“I don’t know,” Sully said, shaking his head. “Ask Bartholomew, though he didn’t paint it.”

“Then why ask him?” Joey asked.

“What’s the point of a priest who can’t answer questions about saints?” Cal asked, as he approached the door. “Hell, what’s the point of an angel who can’t?”

“Good point.”

Cal pushed the door to the church open and stepped inside. It was clean, smelling of fresh wax and old wood, and a sombre light drifted in from the high window above the door and the other one above the altar. Rows of pews reached from the altar to the back wall where they stood on entering the building, and on the walls were more paintings, all of Saint Lyra calming storms. “Hello?” Cal called out, not wanting to raise his voice too high. There were certain manners that were supposed to be observed in churches.

A door shut off to one side, and Cal heard footsteps. “Hello,” a voice answered. “Welcome to Saint Lyra’s Little Cathedral. Can I help…” Bartholomew came into view, his mop of dark hair falling a little into his eyes, hands stained with ink, his black and blue robe frayed a little. He stopped on seeing them. “Hello…”

“You can just say it,” Cal said, swallowing a smile. “I can see Nathen’s name on your tongue.” He had the old sword strapped to his back, wrapped in cloth.

Bartholomew blinked, looked from Cal to Sully and then back to Cal. “I wondered,” he said quietly. “When we met before.”

“You knew,” Cal corrected. “You just didn’t say anything.”

That got him a small smile from Bartholomew. “Maybe you’re right. We’ve never met before. I couldn’t be sure. I didn’t think it was worth making a fuss over.”

“Someone thought it was worth making a fuss over,” Cal said, walking down the aisle towards Bartholomew, noticing the way Bartholomew went a little tense. At his words or his approach? “They kidnapped people who matter to me.”

Bartholomew frowned, and looked at Sully. “Belle and Asher,” Sully muttered, dropping into a pew and leaning on the back of the one in front. Joey sat behind him. He’d been told not to draw attention to himself, not to let Bartholomew see his horns, just in case. Cal sat as well, on the other side of the aisle. “They kidnapped his two partners, and Joey’s as well—he got caught in the crossfire.”

Bartholomew looked the three of them over, sat down himself, looking at his hands for a second. “It’s a trap,” he said after a second, looking at Cal. “To lure you in.”

“I know.”

“You can’t go after them, Calvin. I’m sorry, but you…”

“I didn’t come here to ask your permission,” Cal interrupted, with a shake of his head. “Sully thought
“You would help.” He made it sound like a question in the way he phrased it. Which it was.

“Why isn’t Sullivan on their side?” Bartholomew asked, looking at him again. “They’re your people.” There was a hint of bitterness behind that.

“Because they’re fucking wrong,” Sully told Bartholomew. “And because Cal’s not the person they think he is and whatever Nathen has coming to him, it’s not worth punishing Cal over—and it’s definitely not worth punishing Wes, Mick and Travis over. It’s not worth hurting innocent people over.”

“You know, if you’d believed that when we were young, we’d still be friends.”

Sully gave Bartholomew a grim smile. “Do you really think so?”

Bartholomew held his gaze for a second, and then looked away. “No. I wish I did.”

There was pain between them, Cal saw that. It was a pain that was older than him, something that had passed between them before anyone in Cal’s family had been born. And neither of them wanted it there.

“Look,” Cal said, not sure how to tackle this. “I get that you guys have a history and if that means you’re not going to help us now, just say so and we’ll go. I don’t have time to waste if you’re not interested.”

Okay, maybe that was not the way to do it. But Cal didn’t have time to coddle these two. They were older than civilization, they could work their shit out like adults.

Bartholomew looked at Cal, surprised, then looked down, shook his head and let out a sigh before giving Cal back his attention. “I don’t know that I can help you. If Sully’s told you anything, you know that they’re being held in the Citadel, which is…not impregnable, but close.”

“We’re banking on that ‘not,’” Cal told him.

“And you know that Cameron is probably behind this or at least involved. If you attack her, you’re going to die.”

“Why do you think we’re asking you for help, Bartholomew?” Sully demanded. “We know that.”

“So what? You want me to call down a squadron of angels on the fortress? Lose half our numbers in the hopes of taking your leader out?”

“No,” Sully said, shaking his head firmly. “I don’t want any other angels involved. I don’t want them near Cal. They want Nathen just as badly as my guys do. I don’t want him in their hands. I don’t want them knowing about him.”

Bartholomew snorted. “They already know about him, Sullivan.”

“They…do?” Cal asked, stomach dropping.

“Where’d you get that icon you’re wearing around your neck?”

Cal blinked, hand coming up. “I’m not…” But he was, the silver saint’s icon that had appeared there around his neck again. He’d thought that was in Wes’s bag. Cal’s skin felt cold. He took it out from his shirt, slipping it over his neck.

“Where’d you get it?” Bartholomew asked, sounding like he knew the answer full well. Sully made
an annoyed sound.

“It appeared on my neck after I talked to this priest named Raphe in White Cape,” Cal muttered, looking at it.

“Well.”

Sully hissed. “Fuck, Cal. You…talked to Raphael? I really wish you’d told me about that.”

Cal threw his hands up. “It was before I met you! He didn’t introduce himself properly. Am I supposed to tell you about every vaguely unsettling supernatural encounter I have?”

Sully took in a patient breath. “It would be a good idea, since most of them were probably with friends of mine. Or, you know—the goddamned archangel.”

“Raphael is no friend to either of you,” Bartholomew said, stern. “You can bet he’ll be trying to get Nathen to resurface. Give Sullivan that icon, he should be able to at least stop Raphael from tracking you.”

“So you’re not on their side?” Cal asked, tossing the necklace to Sully without hesitation. “The archangel—that makes him your boss.”

Bartholomew gave them a shrug. “It does. Raphael was the leader of the faction that opposed Cameron’s faction back in the day. But that doesn’t matter. I agree with Sullivan—it would be just as bad for you if my people got their hands on you as it would be if his did. Either way, you’d die—it’s Nathen all of them want, after all.”

Cal gave Bartholomew a hard look. “Why should I trust you, then? Why aren’t you helping them?”

Bartholomew gave him a sad smile. “Because Sullivan wants me to help you.”

“And that’s a good enough reason? You said you weren’t friends anymore.”

“Don’t you have someone in your life who, no matter what had happened between you, no matter how long it had been or what they suddenly showed up needing, you’d give it to them?”

Cal and Bartholomew shared eye contact for a good minute, and Cal nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “I’ve got two of those.”

He just hoped he never ended up with Wes and Mick the way Sully and Bartholomew seemed to have.

“Then you understand. I can’t come with you to the Citadel,” Bartholomew said, holding up a hand when Cal tried to speak. “Not right now. It’ll be noticed if I leave Pelican Bay and there are some things I need to pay attention to here anyway.”

“You don’t think this deserves your attention?” Sully asked, incredulous.

“I do, but there’s other stuff on the go right now, Sullivan. Besides, I’d get noticed if I came. Call me when you’re prepared to assault the Citadel. I think I can arrange a distraction for Cameron so that she won’t show up. And then I’ll come and help you with Belle and Asher and whoever else is there.”

“And you’re strong?” Joey asked, from behind Sully, getting Cal’s attention. “You’re good at fighting?”
Bartholomew smiled at him. “They tell me I’m both of those things.”

“Okay,” Cal said, standing. He wished his heart weren’t beating so fast. “Okay. We should go make our preparations, then. Sully knows how to call you?”

“Yes,” Bartholomew assured him.

“Okay.” Cal nodded. “Okay. We’re going to go.”

“I’m going to…stay here for a bit,” Sully said, looking at Bartholomew with a question in his eyes. “If that’s okay.”

“Sure,” Bartholomew said quietly, expression unreadable.

Cal looked between them, nodded. “We’ll be staying at the Drake’s Fang,” he told Sully. “Come on, Joey, we have to find the bank and then get hunting for supplies.”

“Sure…” Joey said, standing and following after Cal, casting glances over his shoulder at Sully and Bartholomew, who were just sitting there, looking at each other.

“Hey,” Cal said, pausing at the doors to the church. They both looked up at him. “I don’t…this probably doesn’t matter, right? Which saint is on that icon?”

Sully looked down at it, and gave Bartholomew a look. “It’s Saint Stephen.”

“Yeah,” Cal whispered, unsure why he’d expected anything else. “Okay. I’ll see you both later.”

And he took Joey out into the street, closing the church door behind him, breathing in deep.

“Do you think we can trust him?” Joey asked, quietly.

Cal didn’t know. “I think we can trust Sully.”

“What do you think they’re going to talk about in there?”

“I don’t know.” Cal shook his head. “I don’t know. Let’s go, there’s a lot we need to do.”

Cal led Joey away from the church. The two figures on the mural seemed to watch them as they headed up the street.
“I don’t like horses.”

“Too bad,” Cal said to Joey, patting the flank of Joey’s mare before she could try to bite him again. Horses didn’t like him much either. He wondered if it was because they were prey animals. “It’s faster to ride than to walk and we’re done wasting time.”

“It’s faster to teleport than to ride,” Joey reminded him. “And I won’t get my hair eaten.”

“No, but you’ll get your puny ass frozen in a glacier at the bottom of the world,” Sully told him irritably. “We’ve been through this.”

Joey just made an inaudible noise that sounded like a growl and looked away, hand tight on his reins.

Cal shook his head, leading his horse up the road towards the gates of Pelican Bay. “I would imagine Travis would rather spend an extra week in captivity because you want to walk instead?”

Joey glared at him, then relented. “Fine.”

“That’s what I thought you’d say.”

Seeing as how Cal had already bought the horses anyway, it wasn’t like Joey had much of a leg to stand on. He’d taken way more money out from the banks than he usually did for any job; he wanted to be fully prepared for this. Anything that they could use to help them rescue everyone was worth it.

Sully had spent a night and day at Saint Lyra’s with Bartholomew, and he’d come back absolutely sure that they were going to get the help they needed. He was a little quiet, but that was fine with Cal as long as Bartholomew was going to help them. They needed all the help they could get.

“So on horseback it’s about three weeks east, right?”

“Maybe shorter if we push it, but we have to be careful not to…” Cal was distracted by a cat’s meow. It was just a regular alley cat, grey and scarred, darting off into a gap between two houses.

“Cal?”

Cal looked at Sully and Joey. “Is there a gap between those two houses?”

“Yeah,” Sully said, glancing over there. “Not big enough for anything to be there or anything, but…”

“Thanks.” At least Cal wasn’t hallucinating this time. He picked up the pace, speeding away from the cat and the houses. But now he was thinking. Anything that could help them, any help they could get.

Biting his lip, Cal handed his reins to Sully. “Hold these.”
“Why?”

“I’m going to go…over there.” Cal said, ducking under the horses, approaching two different buildings, a cobbler and a wineseller, with no gap between them. He closed his eyes.

*I shall be here, when you wish to speak with me again,* she’d said.

“Cal?”

Cal opened his eyes, and now there was a gap there between the two stores. He swallowed. “I’ll be right back,” he promised.

“Where are you going?” Sully demanded.

“To have a vaguely unsettling supernatural encounter,” Cal said, nodding to himself. “I’ll tell you about it after.”

And he stepped forward, ducking into that gap that didn’t exist.

Cal flew, the world rushing by him, and nearly lost his feet when the void stopped screaming and tossed him down inside the old lady’s cottage, the matted cat hissing at him.

“Sorry to intrude,” Cal said, eyes finding the old lady hunched over her fire.

“I don’t believe you,” the old lady said, looking up at him. “You’ve never been sorry for anything. Are you Nathen, or Calvin?”

“Calvin,” Cal said, stepping a little closer. “I’ve always been Calvin, and I always will be.”

“I hope so,” she said, waving at a stool for Cal to sit. “And what brings you to break your promise not to visit me again, Calvin?”

“You know.”

“Do I?”

Cal sighed, remembering that he’d come here for help. “Wes and Mick have been kidnapped by demons.”

“And you seek my help to rescue them?” The old lady smiled. “I cannot provide you martial aid.”

“I know that. But you know things.” It sounded stupid when Cal said it like that. But knowing things was important.

“I know what can be known. The Child of Misfortune and the Gatekeeper of Shadow are alive and healthy at this moment.”

Cal frowned, though relief stole through him. Thank God. “Why don’t you call anyone by their names? Why all the nicknames?”

The cat hissed, and the old lady chuckled. “Names are the most powerful thing ever given to living beings, Calvin. One should be careful with them. But most of us have many names and use only one in the world. Do you remember my name?”

Cal looked at her, shaking his head. The way she talked, it was clear she’d known Nathen. “No. Sorry.”
“More dishonest apologies.”

“Nathen may never have been sorry,” Cal said, firmly. “But that’s because he was a psychopath. The world should be glad he’s dead.”

“The world is, Calvin,” she said, smiling sadly. “Some of its denizens less so.”

“As far as I can tell, there wasn’t anyone he didn’t want to kill. You knew him. Why does anyone want to bring him back?” If this person had known Nathen, she might know the people who’d killed him. She might know more about him than anyone else. She might know something useful.

A long sigh. “I only know what can be known, Calvin. You cannot save the Child of Misfortune and the Gatekeeper of Shadow.”

Cal went cold. “I can. And I will.”

“Not so long as you wish to remain human. No human can defeat the enemies you seek to face.”

Cal stood up. This had been a mistake. “That’s not true.”

“You came here seeking my help, did you not?”

“And that was a mistake.”

“Perhaps. Nathen never sought my aid. Never once. Not even when he had no allies in this world, not even when I would have been his only. He never asked a single soul for help once he started his quest, Calvin. And so in seeking help, you have already distanced yourself from him. Please continue to do that if you value this world.” She held his gaze, firm.

Cal swallowed. “I will. I don’t want him anywhere near me, or the world.”

Or Wes and Mick, or Sully. Or anyone else he cared about.

“I hope that is the truth, Calvin. Else Armageddon’s Vanguard will carry out its destiny. May I give you a gift, to aid you in your journey?” She held out a hand, shaking.

Cal considered it, then, slowly, held out his own hand as well.

She dropped a small bead in his hand. “When there is no one and nothing, you will find aid, Doomed One. Trust the King of Nothing. The Star Knight must not succeed. The False Prophet is in danger, and the One Who Leads begins his ascent. The Traitor is chained, and the Oligarch does not speak the truth. Do not fear the Sea, it is the Dragon who imperils all. The Horned Owl will act, and the Puppeteer plays dangerous games. Do not heed the Desperate Soul.”

She withdrew her hand. Cal stepped back. “I don’t know who any of those people are.”

A chuckle. “I am aware, Nathen. But knowledge takes many forms. Do you remember my name?”

“Meryan,” Cal whispered, the name filtering into his head from somewhere.

Meryan gave him a warm smile, like spring. “I’d never thought to hear you say it again. Do you believe we will meet again?”

Cal wanted to say no, he really did. But he nodded. “I do.”

“Then I shall wait for you, as I have always waited for you. Go, Calvin. People wait for you, as they
“Thank you,” Cal whispered, not sure what he was thanking her for. Slipping the bead into his pocket, he turned and headed for the door.

Hand on the handle, he turned. “Meryan. He wouldn’t have killed you, I think.” He wasn’t sure why he thought that. He wasn’t sure if he really did think that. Maybe he was just saying it to make a crazy old lady feel better.

A cracked smile. The cat had come to sit on her lap. “I wish he had.”

Cal didn’t have an answer to that, and he opened the handle, letting the world rush away.

He didn’t end up in Pelican Bay. Cal opened into a small room lit by lamplight, a bed in one corner, a small armoire, a writing table with a small chair, a trunk at the foot of the bed. From the small window, starlight filtered in.

The man sitting at the writing table looked up at Cal. “There you are.”

“What the hell is this?” Cal demanded, looking around. He pulled open the door, revealing a stone hallway, dark. “Who are you?”

“Don’t worry, you’re not in danger.”

“That’s not an answer to my question.” Cal had no idea where he was, and he didn’t like that. He could feel it rising in his chest, the need to run, to fight.

He wished he hadn’t left his sword with the horse.

He wasn’t sure which sword he wanted.

The man smiled. He was pale but tanned at the same time, features hard to pin down even looking right at him. Short hair, bright eyes, but tired. He seemed to glow, but he didn’t put off light in the lamplit room. “So you don’t remember me yet?”

“I wish you people would stop expecting me to remember you,” Cal hissed, taking a step back. “Who are you?”

“If I tell you that, do you promise not to yell? I’m not the only one who lives here and you’ll wake the others up.”

“Who are…” Cal closed his eyes, trying to breathe normally. “Just tell me.”

The man smiled. “My name’s Rawen.” He looked at Cal expectantly. “Nothing?” A snort. “Should have known.”

“Send me back to Pelican Bay,” Cal said, slowly. “I’m not who you want me to be.”

“I’ll send you back. I just want to talk to you. It’s been such a long time.”

“We’ve never spoken before,” Cal insisted.

“From your perspective. Here, I’ll try a name you might have heard before.” The man smiled, a smile that made Cal go a little cold. “Not a name so much as a title, but sometimes titles have meaning. They call you God, that means something.”
“It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Then I guess,” the man said, smiling still. He leaned forward a little, closer to Cal. “It doesn’t mean anything when they call me the devil.”
Cal took half a step back, hit the door, and stopped himself, trying not to freeze entirely. He put his foot down, tried a cocky smile. “The devil, huh? I’ve been expecting to meet you. Thought you’d be more…” he waved a hand.

“Evil looking?”

“I was going to say visibly interesting.” Cal managed. “Horns or something. Just wasn’t expecting you to look like…” he took a moment, took in what Rawen was wearing. Drab robes, wrapped simply around his body. “A monk.”

Rawen smiled a little, nodding. “Well, we have to look our parts. I’d stand out a little if I had horns and flaming fingers and all that here.”

“Here.” Cal looked around the room, simply appointed, some books on the desk the only decoration. “Saint Oscar’s monastery,” Rawen said, waving at the walls. “Near a town called Acacia Lake, just at the eastern edge of the Havfar Desert.”

Cal frowned, trying to process all of that. “Aergyre.”

He’d been taken across the ocean. Cal felt unbalanced.

Rawen nodded. “You sound unimpressed. Were you hoping for a tour of hell?”

“Well…yes?” Cal asked, holding out his hands. “The Catechism makes you sound all impressive and scary. And I get here and you’re a slightly luminescent monk with a bad haircut.”

Rawen blinked, hand coming up to his hair. He smiled at Cal. “Sorry to disappoint. Next time I can take you to hell, if you like.”

“Is hell real?”

Rawen shrugged. “That many people can’t be wrong.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I guess not.” A sigh. “Yes, hell is real. You wouldn’t like it if we went there.”

“No kidding,” Cal said, deadpan. “Everyone makes it seem like such a friendly place. What do you want?”

Rawen raised an eyebrow, an amused expression on his face. “Most people would be a little bit more alarmed at being summoned by the devil.”

“Most people have time for the devil’s bullshit,” Cal snapped. The more he hid his worry behind his veil of snark, the easier it was getting. “And the word you wanted there was kidnapped, not summoned. What the hell do you want?”

With a swallowed laugh, Rawen covered his mouth. “You’re really not him. You’re not like him.”

“That’s the nicest goddamned thing I’ve heard in a while,” Cal muttered, looking around before
going to sit on the low bed. “I’m busy. Get to the point and then send me back.”

“What makes you think I’m going to send you back?” Rawen asked, smiling now, leaning forward in his chair. “Maybe I’m going to keep you here and make you take vows.”

Cal sighed, closing his eyes. “Of course the devil is a pain in the ass,” he muttered. If he didn’t get sent back, he wasn’t sure what he’d do.

“Okay, okay.” Rawen sighed. “I wanted to ask if you needed my help.”

Cal opened his eyes, giving Rawen an incredulous look. “No.”

He must have thought Cal was very stupid indeed to expect him to fall for something that transparent. Scripture always made the devil seem clever and sneaky. Apparently not.

“That was a fast decision.”

“There’s a whole thing about making deals with the devil. Usually it doesn’t work out and we’ve already talked about how I wouldn’t like hell.”

“I’m not looking for your soul, Nathen,” Rawen grumbled, eyes rolling. “I’m offering to help you. You want Wes and Mick back, don’t you? You know that Sully isn’t going to be enough to help you—even if Bartholomew comes along.”

Cal frowned, inching away. “Are you watching us?”

“Intermittently,” Rawen admitted with a nod.


If it was the latter, there wasn’t going to be much Cal could do about that without ditching Sully.

“No, no. That’s not how being a demon works.” Rawen smiled. “A spell. I borrow eyes—birds, mostly.”

“Birds…” Cal said, trying to figure that out. “The pelican by the gate.”

Rawen shrugged. “I don’t have specific pet birds. Don’t worry too much about it.”

“Don’t worry too much about the fact that the devil is spying on me?” Cal let out a mean laugh. “Okay, sure. No, I don’t want your help. Send me back.”

“Shouldn’t have said the devil thing,” Rawen muttered, rubbing his face with a hand. “Teach me to have a sense of humour. It doesn’t mean anything. I want to help you.”

“Why?” Cal challenged.

“Because you’re my friend, Nathen,” Rawen said.

“That’s not my name, and your friend was a mass-murdering psychopath who would have served the world better by jumping in a fire.”

Rawen winced, and looked away. “You’ve only got a few of Nathen’s memories, then,” he said. “Or you’d know that’s not true.”

“Every memory I have of him is violent. What else is there?” Cal demanded. He did not believe at all
that he’d just so happened to miss out on all the memories where Nathen had built orphanages.

“He was killing gods,” Rawen said, quiet. “That’s all. All he wanted was to make the world safer for humans to live in.”

“Told you that, did he?” Cal snapped. That wasn’t his impression of Nathen at all. Gods? Cal supposed he shouldn’t be surprised at the casual mention of the old gods, the ones worshipped before the Catechism. They were supposed to be demons, but demons hadn’t turned out to be what they were supposed to be either. Nothing was turning out to be what it was supposed to be.

“No,” Rawen sighed again, looking around the room as if for a distraction. “He didn’t. He never told me anything. He just…went off.”

“Same thing the old lady said,” Cal muttered, looking down at his hands. She’d also said, Cal remembered, to trust the King of Nothing. And if the scriptures he’d read in White Cape were to be believed, he was talking to the King of Nothing right now. “He never asked anyone for help.”

“I’m glad you’re in touch with Meryan,” Rawen said. “She was in love with Nathen, you know.”

“I know.” Cal didn’t know why he did, but he knew. “She would have helped him, if he’d asked.”

“And she’ll help him now. Keep close to her.” Rawen smiled. “Though I guess you might want to avoid doing that since I’ve suggested it. You going to her was what let me grab you. You were between worlds on your way back. It’s easy to divert someone like that.”

“That’s what Sully said about teleporting to the Citadel,” Cal said. He wasn’t sure what to say. He wasn’t sure why they were having this conversation.

“He’s right. The demons don’t work for me, not anymore.” Rawen sighed. “Not ever, probably. Even when Klaus was around, I don’t think he and I had the same goal.”

“What goal?”

“I just want to help my friend.” There was a pleading quality to Rawen’s voice.

“Your friend is dead.” Cal stood up, looking out the small window into Aergyre’s night. *Trust the King of Nothing.* “What does help from you look like?”

Rawen lit up a little. “A lot of raw power, for one. Power that they’ll have no way of seeing coming. I’m one of the only people around who can tackle Cameron and walk away.”

That, Cal admitted, was appealing. “And what do you want from me?”

“Nothing, I swear.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m…” Rawen half-rose out of his chair.

“No,” Cal shook his head. “You’re not lying. You don’t want anything from me. Careful how you word deals with devils, that’s what Sully told me. What do you want from Nathen?”

Rawen didn’t answer that, not quite making eye contact.

“That’s what I thought. You want your friend back.” Cal stared the devil down. “You can’t have him. I refuse to roll over and die so that you can have him back.”
“I know.”

“Then you know that I don’t trust you not to try. I’m not willing to accept your help.” No matter what the old lady had said.

Rawen sighed, sank back into the chair. “Okay,” he whispered. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought you here; it was a mistake.”

“Yeah. I can’t be who you want me to be, Rawen.”

Rawen closed his eyes. “Yeah. Open the door with your right hand, it’ll take you back.”

“Thank you.” Cal crossed the tiny room, reached to pull the door open.

“Nathen—Cal.”

“What?”

“Do me a favour.” Rawen was looking at the floor. “Just…don’t forget about me. Please? Think about me sometimes.”

Cal looked at him for a moment, sitting there in his chair, looking like the world was burying him alive. He wasn’t sure it was possible for a person to be as sad as Rawen exuded, and part of Cal ached to reach out to him. “I won’t,” he said quietly, not sure why. He turned away, swallowing. “I won’t forget about you, desh’ekh.”

Rawen jolted a little in his chair. “What did you…”

Cal opened the door, stepped through before anymore words popped into his head. He didn’t know where that had come from. With a heavy breath, he pulled the door shut behind him, the sun hitting his face.

“Cal!”

Sully and Joey ran over to him, horses abandoned in the street. Not the same street. No hill, different cobblestones. “Are you okay?” Sully demanded. “Where were you? What happened?”

“I was…talking to the devil,” Cal said, looking around. “This isn’t Pelican Bay.”

“The devil?” Joey asked, pale as linen. “Cal!”

“It’s okay,” Cal said, shaking his head. “He wasn’t…he was just sad. Look, I’ll tell you about it in a minute. Where are we?”

“We got hit with a teleportation spell,” Sully said, ashen. “I thought it was them, Belle and Asher. But it happened when you came out…I wonder if it was him.”

Cal looked up at the roof across the street. A crow took off, cawing. There was someone passing by, so Cal called out, “Excuse me. I’ve forgotten the name of this town.”

“It’s Jerrik’s Mound, kid,” the man said, looking at them funny. “You lost?”

“No, just…had the map upside-down. Thanks.” Cal waved the guy away, turning back to Sully and Joey. “Jerrik’s Mound is halfway to the mountains. He must have sent us here.”

“The devil?” Sully looked terrified. “Why would he…”
“Because he wants to help his friend,” Cal interrupted, looking up at the crow that was perched on a nearby house. “Come on. Let’s get out of here. I’ll explain what happened as we go.”

Not that Cal really understood what had happened, but that was the norm these days.

What he did understand, though, was that this whole mess was only going to get more and more complicated the longer it went on.
Cal looked out the window at the mountains, wishing they were closer. Even with Rawan teleporting them halfway there, they still had another week and a bit before they reached them, and then God knew how much hiking and climbing once they were actually in the mountains. Sully hadn’t been very clear on exactly where the Citadel was.

But it didn’t matter. He’d get there, no matter how long it took.

Assuming either of his new teammates could ever manage to find their damn clothes and get them on.

Just as Cal was about to go and bang on doors, the one across the hall from his room opened and Sully trudged out, looking angry at the world like he usually did in the mornings. Before Cal could do more than affix him with an unimpressed look, the other door opened and Joey came out of his room as well, tugging at his cloak.

He should have just gotten them all one room so he could prod them along in the morning. “Why does it always take you so long?” he demanded.

Joey just gave him a look. “You try wearing pants with a tail. Clothes are the stupidest thing humans ever came up with.”

That…definitely raised the question of how Joey wore pants at all, but Cal decided that was better left unasked. He turned to Sully. “What’s your excuse?”

“I’ve got a tail too!”

“A small one,” Cal countered. “And you’re just lazy. You went back to sleep after I woke you up.”

Sully held his gaze for all of ten seconds before looking away. “Let’s just be fucking grateful I woke up again.”

“You’d better be, or I’d have been in there with a bell,” Cal grumbled, waving them to the stairs. “Come on.”

“You’d be less grumpy if you slept later,” Sully commented as they followed him.

“I’d be less grumpy if you two woke up earlier. Should never have let you have your own rooms.”

“Huh,” Joey said, looking at Sully. “I thought he wanted his own room so he could jerk off without us looking. But I think he’d be less grumpy if he’d done that too.”

“Shut up.”

“He’s got a point,” Sully told him. “It’s not like you had anything better to do.”

“Who says that’s the reason I’m grumpy?” Cal asked, as they cleared the stairs and entered the common room at the bottom.

“So I was right?” Joey asked. “You didn’t.”

Cal had not, in fact. “Shut up,” he repeated.
“I mean, I did. Just, it’s hard not to?”

“I don’t need to know this.” Cal surveyed the common room routinely as he led them to the door, stopping short when he saw two women sitting at a table nearby. “What’s she doing here?”

“Who?”

Cal didn’t answer. At the table over there, Beatrice had seen him too, and was frowning as she looked at Sully and Joey. She looked tired. Cal headed over to her table. It was Lillian sitting with her, her magical partner. Cal didn’t know what kind of practitioner Lillian was, now that he thought about it. “Where’s the rest of your band of merry thugs?” he asked.

He wasn’t worried she was following them again, necessarily. But he wanted to check, just to be sure.

But when he said it, a shadow seemed to fall over Beatrice’s face. “They’re gone.”

The tone of voice made Cal frown. “What happened?” he asked, softening his tone. Yes, he hated her and everything she stood for, but this didn’t sound like something that it was appropriate to snark over.

Beatrice shook her head. “Doesn’t matter. You don’t care. Where are Wes and Mick? They finally grow some sense and abandon you? Or did you just swap them for people whose faces you could see without standing on your toes?”

There was hurt in her voice, a lot of it. “Wes and Mick got kidnapped,” he said, nodding over his shoulder in a vaguely eastern direction. “We’re on our way to rescue them.”

That got her attention, and Beatrice straightened. “They got kidnapped? How? I mean, I could understand if it was you, but carrying off the two of them…”

“Yeah,” Cal said, shaking his head. “Anyway, I just wanted to make sure you weren’t following me again.”

“No.” Beatrice looked away. “Boris and Adrianna are dead,” she said, just as Cal was turning to leave.

He turned back. “How?”

A shake of her head. Lillian put a hand on Beatrice’s arm. “Bad information,” Lillian said, voice melodious.

“A bad job,” Beatrice corrected. “Took this job to steal something from this witch in the woods out east. One of those magic rocks like I stole from you by the swamp.”

Cal nodded, thinking it would have been more efficient to just get both of them at once since they were reasonably close to one another. He wondered if Theodore knew about this.

“Anyway, it was stupid. We were stupid. Went in an attacked him and he went nuts. Summoned all these fucking tree roots and just…” Beatrice shook her head. “Killed Adi and Boris. Deck and Matty took off after that, and can you fucking blame them? I’m not sure why Lillian’s still here.”

“Because someone has to stop you from drinking yourself to death, Bea.”

Beatrice looked away.
Cal was annoyed. How was he supposed to hate her if she was so sad and pathetic? He sighed. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Yeah, and I’m sure Wes and Mick getting kidnapped wasn’t yours, but you’re still here blaming yourself, aren’t you?” Beatrice demanded.

“Fair enough,” Cal muttered, though that was different. That actually was his fault, for one. He sighed again. “Look, I’ve got to go save my partners from demons. So, you know. Don’t die. I like hating you.”

“Demons?” Beatrice asked, looking confused.

“Yeah. Long story.” One Cal didn’t feel like telling her. “But it’s fine. I’ve got it under control. I’ll see you later.”

“Wait, you can’t just…” Beatrice was out of her seat, hand on Cal’s wrist. “Are you serious, Cal?”

“Yeah. I’m on a schedule here, Beatrice. I’ve got a fortress to assail and everything, so…”

“You’re being serious,” she said, frowning. “You’re doing that thing. The one where you act flippant because you actually mean what you’re saying.”

“That’s not a thing I do.”

“Yes, it is, and you’re doing it. You actually…” she looked over his shoulder at Sully and Joey. “You’re going to fight demons with those two? Alone?”

Cal smiled. “They pack more of a punch than they look. And it’s not like I have a choice.”

Beatrice shook her head, sinking back into her chair. “You’re going to die.”

Cal shrugged. “Probably not forever. And not until I rescue Wes and Mick.”

“Okay.” Beatrice shook her head, looking confused.

Cal turned away, and she let him go. He rejoined Sully and Joey. “Sorry, let’s go.”

“Who’s that?” Joey asked.

“Business rival. I…” Cal could feel her watching him, and he sighed. “I’m going to regret this.”

And he turned around, went back to the table. “You guys look unemployed. Want a job?”

“Screw off, Cal.”

“I’m serious. I need all the help I can get. And I object less to you than to some of my other options.” Beatrice may be a bitch and kind of the worst, but at least she wasn’t literally the devil. “I want Wes and Mick back, Beatrice. I need all the help I can get.” And the loss in Beatrice’s eyes, in her voice, made him think that maybe it was possible to trust her for once.

“Yeah, well…” Beatrice looked at Lillian, who smiled at her. “It’s not like we have anything better to do. It’s going to cost you, I don’t come cheap.”

“We’ll worry about that if we don’t all die in a demon fortress from the dawn of civilization,” Cal said, waving for her to come with him. “Come on, I was serious about being on a schedule. I’ll explain on the way.”
He didn’t bother checking to see if she was following him. “Cal?” Sully asked.

“Congratulations, you’re not the new guy anymore,” Cal told. “I’d say be nice, but don’t.”

“Does this mean you’re not going to pick on me anymore?”

“No.” Cal looked at Joey. “Keep your hood up for now.”

Joey nodded, and they stepped out into the street.

Cal looked at the mountains to the east, taking a breath. “Okay,” he muttered. “It’s not a deal with the devil, but it’s the next best thing. Let’s go.”
He walked through the streets, empty of life. Blood stained the streets of the city, and all around Cal, thunder crashed.

They were here. Nathen had come here because they were here. His enemies. The evil ones. The ones he needed to kill. To finally rid the world of all that ruined it, all that soiled it. All that threatened to throw it into chaos. The streets were full of life, people everywhere, laughing, living their lives. The humans he needed to protect. The inheritors of the world.

There was a temple ahead, bodies littering the steps. Cut, torn, broken, charred. Destroyed bodies, frozen in death, looking at the sky or down to the earth. Cal felt sick. Who could have done this? But he knew.

The temple soared ahead of Nathen, clean and pristine and corrupt to the core with the filth that inhabited it. There was no correcting, no redemption, none but one. There was only one way to cure what ailed the world.

The sky was torn above Cal as he climbed the steps, picked over bodies. Men, women. Old people. Children. A young boy lay there, shaking. He was alive. He was the only person alive. “Are you alright?” Cal asked, leaning down. But the boy shrieked and disappeared as soon as Cal touched him.

Ascending the steps of the temple, Nathen looked around, behind him at the people running about their lives. He wasn’t one of them. He couldn’t be one of them. But he could make the world safer for them. The ones who deserved it.

Shaken, Cal climbed the rest of the steps, approaching the temple, stepping inside. More bodies, more death, more horror. One man, standing there. Him. With sword bloodied, breathing heavily, crazed in the eyes. He was crying. “What the hell did you do?”

Nathen entered the sanctum, looking around. Nobody was evident. But they were here, he could feel them. Deeper within. Waiting for him. They were meeting under the auspices of peace, but only Nathen knew that any peace forged here could and would never last. There was only one true peace, and it could not happen so long this poison walked the earth.

Cal approached Nathen, feeling like he was floating. “Nathen, why did you do this? The people here…they were…they were innocent.”

“Nobody is innocent,” Nathen whispered, approaching the centre of the room. The air was fetid with power, with rot. “Nobody is clean. Nobody is…”

Cal stepped into the middle of the room, a glowing circle. Nathen looked around, realizing for the first time something about the peace summit. Cal grabbed his arm. “You can stop this!”

“It’s too late,” Nathen whispered. There was to be no peace. And never had that been anyone’s intention. This, all of this. It had been to lure him here. Cal screamed as the air vibrated, as power filled everything.

And as thunder fell around them, Nathen and Cal faded, torn, together, apart, destroyed.

“Cal, Cal!”
“Fuck!” Nathen gasped, shaking himself. Cal. Cal. He took a second, remembered where he was. Who he was. He was Cal. Calvin. “Fuck.”

“You okay?” Sully asked, hands on Cal’s shoulders. On Cal’s other side, Joey was stirring, wriggling his legs as he made a throaty growl in his sleep. “You were thrashing.”

“I was…” Cal rubbed his face, slick with sweat. He was shaking. “Dreaming. A Nathen dream. Not a big deal.”

“Sounds like a big deal,” Sully said, voice just above a whisper. There was a little light floating just above his head.

“I think… I saw him die. Or remembered dying,” Cal muttered. “He was in a city. There was a temple. He went to it and…” he shook his head. He couldn’t remember.

“Thunderfall,” Sully said, hands still on Cal’s shoulders. “That’s what they call it. I don’t know the details—nobody does—but Nathen died, and he took a couple hundred gods and a city with him.”

“Fuck,” Cal said, letting out a breath, hand on Sully to keep himself steady. “I hate this. I…” he sighed. “I’m okay. Sorry if I woke you up.”

“It’s fine. I don’t sleep much.”

Cal smiled at Sully in the dim light. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“It’s nothing. It’s the least I can do. I…” Sully shook his head. “I just want to help.”

“I know. I shouldn’t have been so shitty to you before.”

“I think it did.”

Sully chuckled a little, skin moving against Cal’s making him aware that he still had his arms around Cal. It was… nice. It was a good feeling, to be held, and Cal shifted a little closer. Sully responded by moving his arms farther around Cal, breath on Cal’s shoulder. It was nice. It was warm. It was… intimate.

Cal moved away suddenly, heart skipping. No. He didn’t… he wasn’t going to do that. He knocked into Joey, who stirred again, sat up.

“S’dark,” Joey growled, rubbing his eyes. Then he made an annoyed sound. “Hot.” And without further ado, he reached down at slid his pants off, tossing them aside. Then, with a content noise, he flopped back down on his back, taking up more space than before, and fell right back asleep.

Cal and Sully just sort of looked at him, and then at each other. Cal chuckled, he couldn’t help it. And then Sully did too, and the tension disappeared. Sully openly looked over at Joey, illuminated in the light. “He wasn’t joking about the size thing.”

He had in fact not been. At an eyeball, Joey looked bigger than either Mick or Wes. Well then. “Poor Travis.”

“He’s probably into it.”

“Better than it being into him.”
They both snickered, and Cal sighed, shaking his head. “Sorry about the…just now.”

“It’s fine, I get it. I shouldn’t have...”

“No, it’s...” Cal snorted. “It’s fine. I just…would want Wes and Mick to be back before we...” He shrugged.

Sully looked at him. “Before we...?”

Cal shrugged again. “We’ll talk about it when we get them back, if you’re interested.” While Sully gaped at him, Cal yawned. “Anyway, Joey’s already broken the clothing barrier, so fuck pants.” And Cal slid his own pants off, untying his loincloth as well before laying back nude.

Sully was looking down at Cal, obviously red in the face. “Well...”

“Your bluster disappears awfully quickly,” Cal commented, yawning again.

“Shut up,” Sully grumbled, and he took of his pants as well, laying down and putting out the light. “I’m not interested; you’re annoying.”

“Uh-huh.” Cal smiled in the dark. “Should have put the light out before you undressed. I saw how not interested you are.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

“Maybe someday.” Though Cal would top, thank you very much.

“Shouldn’t have woken you up.”

“Goodnight, Sully.”

A sigh. “Goodnight, Cal.”

“And thank you. Really.”

“Yeah.” Sully was quiet for a minute. “Anytime.”

Cal had a feeling that Sully thought he was asleep, but he heard it just fine.
“Just a day or two up this path there’s a town,” Cal said, as they started to climb. They were at the mountains now, and walking their horses for a bit. “It’s called Techen’s Stand. It’s the last settlement we’re likely to see before we head for the Citadel. We’ll have to stable the horses there, I think.”

“And you know how to get to this Citadel?” Beatrice asked. “You’re sure? Because I’ve never heard of a fortress in this part of the mountains.”

Cal nodded. “Sully knows where it is.”

“And why does Sully know that?”

“I’ve been there before,” Sully muttered, glancing at Cal.

“You’ve been to a demon fortress before?” Beatrice pressed. “That’s a slightly suspect claim.”

“I don’t think he’s lying, though,” Lillian said quietly.

Sully sighed. “Cal.”

“Yeah.” Cal stopped walking, and so did all the rest of them. “I guess it’s time to mention a few things that I didn’t before.” He looked at Joey too. He’d already told both Joey and Sully that revealing themselves was up to them. Sully had made his, but Cal didn’t know what Joey wanted to do. He was nervous about people wanting to kill him if they found out he was a dragon.

“What kind of things?” Beatrice asked, watching them all warily. “I don’t like being kept out of the loop.”

“We’re letting you in the loop,” Cal said, trying not to sound testy. “Just…don’t freak out until we’re done, okay? There’s a couple of things you should know that are a bit weird at first.”

“This is fucking promising,” Beatrice growled.

Sully stepped forward, hands out front. “Look, before I do this, I promise it’s not as bad as it…” he broke off, looking up as a shadow passed over them. “Uh…fuck?”

They all looked up just in time to see it circle, a big dragon, dark blue, watching them. Cal’s heart froze in place and he took a step back, not that it mattered. “Joey…”

Not that Joey was going to be able to do anything to stop it if it attacked them. “Oh, shit,” Joey said, voice barely heard over the rushing of wind. Beatrice had pulled out her sword and Lillian had her hands up. “That’s…that’s the matriarch…”

“What?”

The dragon finished its circle and landed, crashing into the ground in front of them, huge. It was so
big, Cal couldn’t see all of it at once. Joey stood in front of Cal, and so did Sully. Cal didn’t like that. He didn’t need them to protect him, not when they were all doing to die anyway.

Though she wasn’t attacking, Cal realized, trying to keep the panicking horses under control.

And then, the dragon’s form shifted, slid sideways, and morphed into that of a tall woman with dark, curling hair that carried a hint of the same blue as her scales. Her tail swished behind her, and her horns curved up and back, thicker and longer than Joey’s. Her wings, blue like her tail but darker, flapped behind her as she steadied herself, keeping the dust she’d kicked up from hitting her face. She was nude, which Cal supposed made sense since she’d been the size of a building a second ago. Her features were sharp and angular, and her eyes seemed to pierce them all, settling on Cal.

“What the fuck?” Beatrice whispered.

“She’s a shapeshifter,” Lillian muttered. “I didn’t know those existed down here.”

The dragon took a step forward. “You,” she said to Cal, “have stolen from me, human.”

“Funny,” Cal said, summoning his courage. “I think I’d remember you. I don’t often see giant sky snakes turning into sexy naked ladies. I mean, sometimes, but not often, you know?”

The matriarch smiled. That was good. They could talk, then.

Joey raised his hands. “Cal, don’t. Matriarch, I can explain.”

“I shall deal with you presently, small one,” she said, barely giving Joey a glance. “After I have retrieved my property.”

“Yeah, about that,” Cal said.

The matriarch moved quickly, rushing Cal. She batted Joey aside with her tail, and stretched out her hand as if to grab Cal by the neck. He had his sword on, but he reached left, for his saddle, where Nathen’s sword hung.

It didn’t matter. Sully was in between them, knife out, taking the full force of the matriarch’s strength. “Lady,” Sully warned, illusion wavering just a little. “Don’t fucking try it. You’re not the scariest thing here.”

Sully sounded worried, though.

The matriarch held for a moment, pushing against Sully, but then stood straight, withdrawing her hand. “Curious. Because history suggests that I am, at least if you’re my only competition.” Then she looked away from Sully, dismissing him, and back to Cal. “You snuck into my cave and stole a part of my hoard. Return it and I shall consider not killing you.”

“I don’t have it anymore,” Cal told her. “It was stolen.”

That surprised her, Cal saw. The matriarch blinked, looking around. “Was it now? You could not even defend one piece of treasure?”

“Neither could you,” Cal reminded her, smiling.

“Cal…” Joey warned.

The matriarch narrowed her eyes. “Be careful, human. I am not known for my patience.”
“What in the fuck is going on?” Beatrice demanded, still holding her weapon as if she wanted to fight.

With another dismissive glance, the matriarch ignored Beatrice. “Where is it?” she asked Cal.

“How did you know we were here?” Cal wanted to know, watching her carefully. He was still pretty sure he could take her out of killing him.

“You are aware that you are only not dead because of my generosity, correct?”

“Liar,” Cal accused, standing his ground. “We’re not dead because you don’t know where the Sceptre is. But you knew where we were. How?” Cal did not like that they’d been tracked all this way, especially since part of their journey had been by teleportation and they shouldn’t have been able to be tracked normally. Maybe she was also a wizard? But being a dragon and a magic-user just seemed unfair.


“An imp,” Lillian said, peering at it. “Harmless.”

“A trap, in case a robber escapes my notice,” the matriarch told him.

Now Cal looked at Sully, trying not to seem too accusatory. “You didn’t notice this?”

Glaring at the thing, Sully shook his head. “No. It was dormant until now, its power wasn’t detectable, probably unless you have the key…which would be the box you mentioned. You’ve got to stop fucking touching every piece of magical shit you find, Cal.”

“He’s not wrong,” Lillian added, helpfuly.

Well, that wasn’t going to happen. So Cal ignored Sully, looking back to the matriarch. “My partner was holding the Sceptre when my team was attacked by some demons not far from your territory. Half my people were abducted, and the Sceptre with them. We’re on our way to rescue them.”

Now the matriarch looked at Sully again, obviously trying to fill in the blanks. “To have come all this way. They are being held in the fortress in these mountains?”


“I know of it. It is unassailable.”

That sounded like quite the admission to Cal. “Not if you know how to get inside,” Cal said, nodding at Sully.

“I see,” the matriarch said, nodding slowly. Now she looked at Joey. “You do not possess the combat ability to recover the Sceptre. You will be destroyed by the demons before you can get close.”

Cal shrugged. “I hear an offer to help in there.”

“Cal,” Joey said, shaking his head. “No.”

“Joey, we’ve accepted help from an angel who might want to kill us, an old lady who doesn’t exist, and my professional archenemy. I think we can make a deal with a lady who thinks you’re too short to take seriously, don’t you?” And that wasn’t even to mention that Cal hadn’t outright rejected the
devil’s offer.

“But…”

“And why should I help you?” the matriarch asked archly. “You robbed me. Now I am to help you recover my property? I think not. I can merely wait until you die and recover the Sceptre from your corpse.”

“I think so,” Cal countered, noticing that suddenly she did think he could get the Sceptre back. “Because the Citadel will have all kinds of good shit in it. And you said it was unassailable. You can’t attack it on your own. But if we attack it together, you can have the Sceptre back and anything else you want to loot from it.”

As a treasure hunter, Cal hated that. But hey, if she ended up taking something he wanted, it wasn’t like he didn’t know where to find her. And Wes and Mick were more important to him than the Sceptre or Theodore’s money or any amount of treasure.

“Hm,” the matriarch said, nodding. “You offer me much without saying what you want in exchange, human.”

“My name’s Cal,” Cal said, smiling now. “All I want in exchange is help getting my three people out of the Citadel safely, and I’d like it if you could not kill any of us—including Joey.”

It seemed important to add that last part.

The matriarch considered for a tense moment, before nodding again. “Very well. I agree to forgive your trespass on those terms. You may call me Mathilda. I believe you will find it easier to pronounce than my actual name.”

Cal tried not to let his relief show too obviously. “Thank you for being so reasonable, Mathilda. We’ll be attacking the fortress in about a week, maybe a bit more.”

“I understand, Cal.” Mathilda looked up at the sky. “I have other business in these mountains as long as I am here. When you are prepared to attack, agitate the imp.” She nodded at Cal’s arm, and the little thing that was hanging there. “I shall come and aid you.”

“Thank you.”

A nod, and Mathilda turned, walked away from them, heading up the path a bit. “Bringing back friends and helping them rob me,” she said to Joey as she passed. “You are braver than I expected, small one. Well done.”

Joey just looked away, and Mathilda walked farther up the path, transformed again, scaring all the horses, and flew off in a gust of wind that knocked all of them from their feet.

Once they’d stood and calmed the horses again, Cal sighed. “Well. That worked out okay.”

“I can’t believe you talked her out of attacking us,” Joey whispered.

“You know her, I take it?”

Joey nodded. “Travis and I met with her not long before we met you,” he said. “I needed help with…something. She didn’t want to help me.”

“And you joined us because you were pretty sure she’d kill us if we met her,” Cal said, smiling at
him. “And here I thought you were just being nosy.”

“Is one of you going to explain what in the name of fuck is happening?” Beatrice demanded. “Because I’ve never seen anything at all like that, and what the fuck?”

Cal turned his smile on her now. “Right. So, secretly dragons can shapeshift and look like humans.”

“Also I’m a dragon,” Joey said, taking his hood down and nodding when Beatrice stepped back, Lillian’s hand on her shoulder, calm. “And we don’t look like humans, that’s racist.”

“And I’m a demon,” Sully said, raising his hand, illusion rippling. “Which I was trying to say before she showed up.”

“And I’m the reincarnation of God,” Cal added, nodding, before they could freak out. “Which is why demons kidnapped Wes, Mick and Joey’s boyfriend. They’re trying to lure me into their fortress so they can kill me for real without having me come back again, which I guess usually happens. Also, I’m being stalked by angels, I think I ended the world a while ago and I recently made friends with my four-thousand-year-old ex-girlfriend and the devil in the same day.” Cal took a breath. “I think that’s it for major stuff. We should get going.”

Beatrice looked at him. Then she looked at Lillian, who nodded. Then she looked back at Cal. “You know, I always knew you were a pain in the ass,” Beatrice said, shaking her head. “Thought it was a localized phenomenon.”

“You should have known better, Bea,” Lillian said. “You attract trouble, and not the small kind.”

“You’ve got to stop underestimating me,” Cal told her. They were taking this pretty well.

“No, I just need to start drinking more when you’re around. “There’s a tavern in this town we’re going to, I’ve been to it before. Let’s go, get drunk and you can tell me the story behind all of that.”

“It’s a fucking long story,” Cal told her.

“Good. We’ll get to drink a lot. Come on.”

And they started up the mountain, everything out in the open and another ally clinging to Cal’s arm. It had been a productive day considering all they’d done was climb a hill.
Cal had been to Techen’s Stand several times; it was the town he always passed through when crossing the mountains, unless he really needed to be up north, which nobody ever did unless they were insane. There were giant spiders and a lot of ice up there. At least down this far south all he had to worry about was the odd dragon, and they avoided the settlement.

Except for the dragon who was with him, Cal thought, but he probably wasn’t going to attack the town, so that was fine. “Hey,” he said to Joey, as they entered the dusty main street. “Why don’t dragons attack this town?”

“How should I know?”

“Well, I assumed there was some, like, secret dragon reason or something,” Cal said, shrugging. Maybe an old agreement or something like that.

“Stop being racist, Cal,” Beatrice said, smacking Cal’s shoulder.

“I’m not!” Cal said, defensive.

“It’s a bit racist,” Sully agreed.

“Why would you assume that I’d know just because I’m a dragon?” Joey asked, innocently. “We don’t all know each other, you know.”

“I just…” Cal glared. Why was it that it always turned into everyone dogpiling on him? At best it was speciesist rather than racist. “Nevermind.” He looked around the town while they all snickered at him. “The inn’s just up here.”

“I wonder if it’s the proximity to the Citadel,” Lillian suggested as they headed up the main road. “The matriarch suggested it was known to be dangerous. If the dragons all know it’s there, they may well be collectively staying away from it.”

“That would make sense, actually,” Sully said, as Cal eyed some knights who were apparently just wandering the town. Why were there knights here? “Dragons have a latent sense for magic, so even if they’ve never attacked the Citadel, they’d know it was powerful.”

“I don’t have a latent sense for magic,” Joey said, frowning at Sully under his cloak. “I never sensed you, or Mick or Lillian. Are you sure you’re not making that up?”

Sully shrugged. “Not my fault you suck at being a dragon.”

“Hey!” Joey growled.

Sully laughed at him. “That’d be a lot more intimidating if you weren’t so short. Grow a few dozen centimetres and some wings and we’ll talk.”

“At least I’m still growing,” Joey growled. “I’ll have wings soon. You’re a million years old and you suck at being a demon, and that’s probably not going to change.”

“He has a point,” Beatrice said.

“Now who’s being racist?”
“Still Cal, probably.”

“Hey, I haven’t even said anything!”

“You were thinking it,” Lillian said, smiling mysteriously. Cal knew for a fact that she couldn’t read minds even if she was trying to make him think she could. He’d tried thinking dirty thoughts at her yesterday for an hour just to make sure, and she hadn’t reacted at all.

“I wasn’t thinking anything.”

Sully snorted. “That’s not unusual.”

“You people are the worst,” Cal told them all, heading for the inn. “The absolute worst. I’m calling Mathilda and travelling with her. She didn’t seem like the worst.”

“She is,” Joey told him. “You just don’t know her well enough.”

“At least she’s hot, though,” Beatrice said. “Are dragons good in bed?”

“Yes,” Joey said, immediately. “Yes we are.”

“That seems unlikely,” Cal teased. Though it didn’t. He could picture Joey being good at sex.

“You’re just jealous that you got two boyfriends and they were both human,” Joey said. “Better luck next time.”

“I did get pretty lucky, actually.”

“How any of you got lucky is completely beyond me,” Beatrice said, sighing. “You’re all a pain in the ass.”

“Well that’s one of the things Travis likes about me,” Joey said, before Cal could make that exact same joke about Wes and Mick.

Stupid Joey.

Beatrice just rolled her eyes, and Lillian chuckled. “It’s something they have in common with you, Bea.”

“And yet she’s still single,” Cal said over his shoulder, heading for the inn. Another knight was standing outside. Someone important was passing through the town. Hopefully there were rooms available.

“That’s her choice,” Lillian said, smiling at Beatrice, who looked confused for a second. Then she looked not confused, and Cal snorted.

The inside of the inn wasn’t too crowded, though there were two more knights sitting at a table just behind two others guys, one who had the look of a fighter and the other who was very well dressed and clean. The one all the knights were guarding, Cal figured, ignoring them as he headed for the counter. “Excuse me,” he said to the innkeeper, a tall southerner. He looked like he was probably from the Fury Plateau, unless Cal’s guess was totally off. Strange to see him this far north. “Do you have rooms available?”

“Sorry,” the man said, nodding apologetically. “Not a one. We’re all full up.”

Dammit. “Figured with all the steel around,” Cal muttered. “Don’t suppose you’ve got stable for a
few horses, at least?"

“Sorry, kid.” The man smiled. He seemed friendly enough. “Not a speck of room.”

Cal sighed. “Okay. Well, guess we’ll camp then. Thanks.”

“Sorry for the trouble.”

“Not your fault,” Cal said, waving as he turned away. He shrugged at the rest of them. “No rooms.”

“Why the fuck does a random inn in the middle of nowhere not have any rooms?” Sully wanted to know as they started to leave.

“Because there are people staying in it,” Cal suggested. “It doesn’t matter, we’ll camp outside the town.” It wasn’t like sleeping in a bed was crucial. It would have been nice, but not the most important thing.

“At least we can eat and not have to suffer through Cal’s cooking,” Beatrice said.

“There’s literally nothing wrong with my cooking,” Cal told her, sighing. She was right, though. They could buy meals here without staying, which was also good. “You’re just a bitch.”

“Hey.”

Cal looked over at the noble guy he’d noticed before, who was trying to get his attention. “Yeah?”

“Come here,” he ordered, waving at a few empty chairs. “I’m the reason why there aren’t any rooms here for you guys. Maybe we can work something out.”

“Work something out,” Cal repeated. He came over and sat down, wondering what that would entail. He did kind of want the rooms if he could get them. “Okay. It’s not a big deal, we’re only here for tonight and probably tomorrow,” he told them. Just time to get some last supplies before going after the Citadel.

“Us too. I’m Gavin, this is my intrepid fiancé, Owen.” Up close, Gavin was very pretty, with short blonde hair and a soft face. Owen was harder-lined, blockish and big.

“Cal,” Cal shook Gavin’s hand, and introduced his people. “Sully is the loud one. That’s Joey under the cloak. Lillian is the pretty one. The one who looks like she wants to kill us is Beatrice, and don’t worry about that, it’s probably me she’s thinking about.”

Probably.

“I hope so, because there are a lot of people here who would get angry if someone wanted to kill me,” Gavin said, smiling. Cal felt like he should know who he was. He was obviously the son of some noble house, and he felt like he knew which family had a Gavin in their line. Cal had let his attention to nobility waver in the last few months. “How many rooms are you after, three?” Gavin asked.

“Just two is fine,” Cal told him, because being modest was never bad with noble folk. “We can do the boy/girl thing.”

Nodding, Gavin looked over at his fiancé. “Talk to Elaine, will you? Convince the knights that they can use two rooms instead of four.”

“You want to stick six of them in one room?” Owen asked, with a nod of his own.
“Do you think they’re going to insist on the boy/girl thing too?” Gavin’s tone made it clear that he thought that was stupid.

“Probably.”

“Well, I don’t really care,” Gavin said, waving a hand. “They’ll live either way. No reason for us to run random people out of town just because Gabrielle insists that I have a battalion of babysitters. Sorry for the inconvenience,” he said to Cal, as Cal tried to figure out who Gabrielle was. Another one that sounded familiar. “I’ll talk to the innkeeper.” And just like that, Gavin was gone.

“Uh…thanks?” Cal said. Owen didn’t seem phased by this at all, which meant it probably happened a lot. “You didn’t need to do that.” Nobody expected nobles to give up rooms for strangers, even if it was only their bodyguards’ rooms.

“It’s fine,” Owen said with a shrug. “Like he said, no reason for us to take up the whole inn. Which way you guys headed?”

“South, you?”

“East, Pelican Bay. The pass doesn’t go south.”

“No,” Cal said, leaning back a little. He shrugged, projecting confidence because he was suddenly very aware that Owen was dangerous. “We’re explorers.”

“Yeah? What are you looking for out in the mountains?” He still sounded suspicious, and Cal wasn’t the only one who thought so, judging by how his people tensed. But Owen just laughed at them, a happy noise. “Guys, I’ve got a job and a fiancé here. I’m not going to steal your loot.”

Cal believed him—Owen struck him as genuine. “Sorry,” he said, laughing. “It’s been a strange few lifetimes. Paranoia is easy to learn. There’s a big fortress hidden a bit south of here, built a long-ass time ago. We’re looking for it.” Close enough to the truth.

“Really?” Owen waved over at someone for a drink, leaning on the table for all the world like a mercenary about to start swapping stories. Which maybe he was he had the air about him. Cal wondered how he’d come to be engaged to a noble, though. “I’ve never heard that.”

“Yeah,” Cal agreed, not looking at Sully. “Neither had I until recently. Apparently it was built during the Catechism Wars, and rumour is something we want is being kept there.”

“Something you want?”

“That part’s a secret, sorry.”

“Why is that the only part that’s a secret?” Joey asked.

“A legitimate question,” Beatrice added. Cal was going to have to have a chat with these dumbasses about agreeing in front of strangers.

“Because I’m a secretive asshole,” Cal told them both, even though the real reason was because everyone knew that nobility couldn’t be trusted not to stick their noses in other people’s business all the time.

“Alright then,” Owen chuckled, unbothered. “So you’re just here to stock up before the last leg of your trip?”
“Yeah. Rest and resupply and then we’re out of here.” They were, Cal realized, being interrogated. To make sure that they weren’t a threat to Gavin. Well, two could play at that game. “An inn full of bodyguards. Knights, seems like, including you.” Maybe. “Gavin’s a noble?”

“Something like that,” Gavin said from behind Cal. He was a quiet one, Cal hadn’t even heard him approach. “Gavin ven Sancte, you’ve probably heard of my dad.”

Cal blinked. Ven Sancte. Gavin and Gabrielle. The names had seen familiar because Gavin was the prince of Dolovai. Well, now Cal felt like an idiot. He bowed just a little in his chair.

“Huh. Well he’s probably heard of me too, your Highness, just by a different name. What brings the prince all the way out to these mountains?” Gavin didn’t seem all that fussed that they’d been talking informally, so Cal didn’t feel like he had to start.

“Pirates,” Gavin said, glancing at Owen, who was no longer looking at Cal, but at Joey, who behind him had gone all tense.

“You’re a prince?” Joey asked quietly.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it,” Gavin told.

Cal read the set of Joey’s shoulders, and he was worried about it. “Are you…are you the one who got kidnapped by a dragon last year?”

Oh. Oh, shit. Cal glanced at Sully, who also looked worried. Joey’s sire, his dad, had been killed for kidnapping a prince. For kidnapping Gavin.

Gavin laughed. “Yeah, that’s me. Hopefully someday I’ll live that one down. Fortunately I had Owen here to rescue me.”

Oh, fuck.

“You…” Joey looked at Owen. “You killed the dragon.” His voice had gone low, growly. His hands were twitching under his cloak. Cal tried not to look at the two knights at the table behind theirs.

“Joey,” Cal said, warning. He really didn’t need Joey picking a fight. He really didn’t need to end up killing the prince and his boyfriend by accident. He really didn’t need any of this.


Goddammit, why did Owen have to sound so happy about that? Fucking blockhead who thought with his sword and couldn’t read a room.

“You…” Joey took a step forward, clearly intending to attack.

Sitting there, at the table without a weapon in his hand, Owen managed to shift just a little and seem very dangerous without actually doing anything. The knights behind him had their hands on their weapons, and so did Beatrice and Sully.

“Joey, not now,” Cal said, firm. He looked at the prince. “Sorry about him. He gets upset about dragons. He’s a fan.” It was a stupid cover, but it was all he could think of on the spot.

“Cal…”

“Not now, Joey.” It wasn’t like Cal didn’t sympathize. But he really needed Joey to recognize that
they had more important things to do than right a year-old wrong right this second.

Joey glared at Cal, and Cal glared right back, willing Joey to back down. Finally he did, turning and leaving the inn without a word. Cal sighed, turned to Sully. “Go after him,” he ordered. “Make sure he doesn’t do anything dumb.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Sully sighed, getting up. He sounded relieved. “Dumbass.”

Cal waited until he’d left too. “Sorry,” he said.

“What was that about?” Owen looked calm, but still dangerous.

“Like I said, he likes dragons,” Cal repeated. “Doesn’t like hearing about it when they get killed.”

Which was true.

“You’re a really shitty liar,” Gavin told him, smiling. He seemed to think this was funny.

“He’s not wrong,” Beatrice agreed. She wouldn’t know what had really just happened either, since Joey had never told her about his sire. Probably she could get the gist.

Cal just gave them all a smile. “I don’t suppose you’d believe me if I told you I was God?” he asked.

“No, but I’d think you were crazy,” Owen said, sufficiently distracted.

“See, nobody believes anything I say anyway, so who cares if I’m good at lying or not?” Cal could play this off, he wasn’t too worried about it. And he could just put Joey on a leash for the rest of the time they were here in Techen’s Stand and everything would be fine.

Owen and Gavin looked at each other, and Gavin shrugged. “Well anyway, I’ve worked out two rooms for you with the innkeeper. Just give my people a bit to clear their stuff out of them and they’re yours.”

“I appreciate that, your Highness,” Cal said, nodding. Both the rooms and Gavin’s willingness to overlook Joey’s display. Though now he didn’t really think that it was a good idea to have them all in the same inn. “We’ll be out of your hair in a few days.”

“They’re looking for an old fortress that’s supposedly around here somewhere,” Owen told Gavin. “To find a secret treasure that they’re worried we’ll steal.”

Gavin seemed interested in that. “Fair enough. What kind of fortress? I’ve never heard of anything like that in this neck of the mountains.”

“It’s well hidden. I only know about it because I know someone who’s been there, which is a long story.” And one he wasn’t going to tell just two minutes after he’d defused one almost violent situation. “So you lot are going to fix piracy in Pelican Bay, huh?” he asked, to change the subject.

“Well, I thought we’d try.” Gavin didn’t seem amused at the change of topic, but he went with it. “If it doesn’t work out we’ll just pop down to Bright Harbour and make it the southerners’ problem.”

“Which it is anyway, speaking as a southerner,” Cal said. A young, blonde serving boy had brought them some drinks, and he took a cup. “We came from Pelican Bay. There’s a good inn just off the main street near the Mercantile District. Though I guess you’ll be staying in Lord Draughten’s place anyway, so that’s a moot point. If you get the chance, though, you should check out the waterfront at night, the view’s really good.”
Cal just sort of kept them talking about nothing for a while until the rooms were ready, trying to get them to forget that his people had almost killed Gavin a few minutes ago. This was going to be a tricky couple of days.
“You’re up early.”

Cal looked up from his equipment, which he was sorting. “I’m always up early,” he said to Prince Gavin, who was approaching him. He had a bow and some arrows with him. “Occupational hazard. What about you?”

“I like the mornings,” Gavin said, setting his bow down and pulling an arrow out of his quiver to inspect it. “They’re a good quiet time.”

“Yeah,” Cal agreed, counting his rations. “I like to use them to get ready.”

“Your team disagrees,” Gavin said. “Or at least I assume they do, since they’re not here.”

Cal chuckled. “Sully and Joey are lazy. I think Beatrice and Lillian tired each other out last night. Usually…” he trailed off for a minute, thinking about Wes and Mick, and the mornings they’d spent together.

“Usually?” Gavin asked, not looking up from his arrows.

Cal finished counting, packing his food into his bag. He knew how much he needed to buy, now. Or at least he could estimate. He didn’t know how long they’d be at the Citadel and he had to pack extra rations for Wes and Mick and Travis as well. “Usually I’m not the only one up,” he said finally. “I have two other people I normally work with, but they’re not here right now.”

Gavin paused in what he was doing, looking at Cal. Had he noticed something in Cal’s tone?

“Where are they? Or is that confidential too?”

Cal smirked. “I try, your Highness.” He didn’t care if Gavin was annoyed that he wasn’t spilling his guts. He wasn’t telling his life story to random passers-by, even if they were royal. “Sir Owen doesn’t share your appreciation for mornings?”

“Hm.” Gavin set to stringing his bow, glancing down the courtyard in the back of the inn. It wasn’t ideal shooting territory, Cal thought. Too enclosed, just a wall for a target. Something about the place felt strange to Cal, made him feel like he was being watched, but that was probably just the paranoia that had become part of his personality the last few months. “That was a better lie than the ones you told yesterday.”

Cal smirked. “I try, your Highness.” He didn’t care if Gavin was annoyed that he wasn’t spilling his guts. He wasn’t telling his life story to random passers-by, even if they were royal. “Sir Owen doesn’t share your appreciation for mornings?”

“He does,” Gavin said, pulling back his bowstring as if taking aim, but with no arrow nocked. “We just don’t often share the earliest parts of the morning. We wake up and he goes to get some training in before breakfast.”

“I guess that’s what separates knights from the rest of us,” Cal muttered. He was an early riser but he wasn’t about to go practice with his sword at this time of day.

“I guess. Why does your Joey hate him so much?”

Cal pursed his lips, taking a breath as he re-rolled the rope he had. He’d been hoping that wouldn’t come up. “He doesn’t.”
“I’m only letting you get away with the other lies because you’re going to tell me the truth about this one,” Gavin told him, not looking at Cal. “Most things I can forgive. Danger to my betrothed I will not.” He pulled an arrow from his quiver now, practicing drawing it back.

Shit. Cal thought for a moment, spooling his rope. “Joey’s father was killed a man like Sir Owen. He thinks it might have been Sir Owen himself who did it. That’s all.”

Gavin nodded slowly, lowering his arrow and facing Cal now. “Was Joey’s father a bandit? Owen’s only killed a handful of people, and three of them were bandits, and one of them was a wizard who was trying to create eternal winter from beyond the grave. That’s it as far as I know.”

Cal frowned. “The long winter last year was intentional?”

Gavin nodded. “Some psycho and the centipede inside him. He was already dead.” He smiled. “Owen killed him again, though. So if you’re a fan of spring, you can thank him for that later.”

“A centipede inside him.” Cal frowned, looked down at the ground. That was disturbing in a really particular way that he couldn’t put his finger on. There are centipedes everywhere, Doomed One. “Been seeing a lot of centipedes around lately.”

“You too?” Gavin asked. “I’m starting to wonder if there’s something to it. There are some in the capital too, under the big cathedral.”

“That’s…very ominous,” Cal said, not liking that at all. “Someone should do something about that.”

“Yeah. We’re should.” Gavin sighed. “If we knew what the hell it was about, anyway. Anyway, you changed the subject and I don’t approve. Joey’s father.”

Cal tried not to glare. He’d hoped Gavin wouldn’t notice that. “He wasn’t a bandit. And he wasn’t a wizard.”

“Then Owen didn’t kill him.” Gavin said, drawing back his bowstring again, arrow nocked. And pointed at Cal.

“Your Highness…” Cal said, frozen. The arrowhead looked very sharp. Not that it mattered at this distance.

“Aren’t these cool?” Gavin asked conversationally. “They’re tipped with dragonbone. One tried to kidnap me right out of the castle—again—and Owen killed it with an ornamental sword. Maybe it’s a bit shitty that I feel a sort of smugness about the fact that we turned her into our arms and armour, but there it is.”

“It’s very impressive,” Cal agreed, swallowing his nerves. “Means you have to be careful where you waste the arrows, though.”

Gavin nodded. “Well, the dragon had a lot of bones, so I can always have more made. It’s stronger than steel and it’s magic-resistant, so there’s not much that can stop it. Owen’s got a sword from the same material.”

Cal nodded, watching the arrowhead. “That’s a hard position to hold for long.”

“Yeah,” Gavin agreed. “It is. So about your friend.”

“There’s nothing to tell you that I haven’t already.”
“I’m pretty sure that’s not true.”

“And I’m pretty sure that a prince can’t just go around murdering people who lie to him.”

Gavin smiled. “I don’t think you understand what being a prince means, Cal.”

“You’re not above the law.”

“No, I’m not,” Gavin agreed, sighing. “I’d say that if your friend attacks Owen I’d kill him. It would make me feel all protective and strong. But in reality, Owen would kill him before I even got there, so make sure you give him good advice.”

“I will,” Cal promised. “He won’t do anything. He’s not that stupid.”

“Good.” Gavin lowered his bow. “We just have to coexist for one day, then we’ll be out of each other’s hair, right?”

“Right,” Cal said, already planning to leave this afternoon. He wasn’t sure that it was a good idea for them to spend a long period of time around Gavin’s group. Someone would die. He packed away the last of his supplies, mentally tallying them. “Breakfast.”

“Good suggestion. Owen should be back from training soon.” Gavin slung his bow over his shoulder, picked up his quiver, and headed into the inn ahead of Cal.

That was good, made Cal feel less like he had something pointed at his back. He still oddly felt that way as he left the courtyard, like someone was watching him. He wondered if Gavin had that effect on everyone, or just on people who had something to hide.

Inside, Gavin sat at a table, gesturing for Hope, the inn’s serving boy, to bring him breakfast. “Join me?”

Cal nodded. There wasn’t really any polite way to say no. “I’m going to go get my lazy teammates up, I’ll be down in a second.” As he said that, he saw Beatrice and Lillian coming down the stairs together in a cloud of subtlety.

“You’re party have all come down already, sir,” Hope told him. He was a youngish northern boy who spoke in a voice that couldn’t really be as deep as it sounded.

Cal looked at him, frowned. “All of them? I don’t see two of them.”

Hope nodded. “Sorry, sir, excuse me. The other two left. I just…thought you might like to know, and save yourself a trip upstairs.”

Cal nodded, glancing at the door. He suddenly had a very bad feeling. “They left together?”

“No, sir. Your friend in the cloak went out first, all quiet-like. The other one followed after him a few minutes later. He seemed upset.”

“Shit,” Cal muttered, closing his eyes. It could well be nothing. Joey might just need to pee or something. But they weren’t back yet and Cal had a very, very bad feeling. “Shit, thank you. Shit.”

Gavin had stood up, headed over to the knight at the door. “Elaine. Where is Owen training?”

“On a cliff just outside of town if I’m not mistaken, your Highness.”

Gavin nodded, and left the inn. Elaine glanced at someone else behind Cal, but Cal didn’t bother
turning around to see who. He hurried after Gavin, leaving his bag on the table. “I don’t think so,” Elaine said, a burly woman whose armour made her look bigger. She held out an arm to block the door.

Cal glanced over at Beatrice and Lillian, and Elaine was gently moved aside. “Hey!”

“I don’t need knights swarming us while I talk Joey off the ledge,” Cal said to Beatrice, who nodded, turning away from him. He trusted her and Lillian to handle it. And to rifle through his bag and steal his shit after, but whatever. He could get new shit.

Cal raced after Gavin, catching up with him just a bit down the road. “It’s probably nothing.”

“Maybe,” Gavin said, bow still strung as he headed for the gate of Techen’s Stand at a near-jog.

“Joey’s no threat to Owen. Owen’s twice his size or more.” Joey was strong and heavier than he looked, but from what Cal had seen of Owen, Owen could just pick him up and toss him over a cliff.

He really hoped that they were just talking.

“Yeah. It’s more likely that Joey’s already short half his head,” Gavin agreed. Cal felt a little ill, but he nodded. “Still.”

“Yeah,” Cal muttered. He understood. He did. But he also wasn’t going to let someone hurt Joey if it could be avoided.

Together—were they together? Cal wasn’t sure—they hurried out of Techen’s Stand, past the rock that marked the entrance, and down the path a little. The path proper wound north, but they could hear voices coming from the east, just off the path.

There was a little plateau there, facing the mountains and the rising sun, and on it were Owen, Joey, Sully and two of Gavin’s knights. The sun was in Cal’s eyes and he squinted to see, but neither Sully nor Joey was disguised, and Sully was backing away from one of the knights while Joey was rearing to jump on Owen, who was distracted looking at Sully.

Cal could barely see and he imagined Gavin couldn’t either, but that didn’t stop Gavin from reaching into his quiver, pulling out an arrow and nocking it. And he took aim and let it fly before Cal could even say anything, and Joey fell to the ground. “Joey!” Sully shouted, making to get to his side but stopped by that knight’s sword—what was he doing?

Owen turned, saw them standing there, smiling a little. “You okay, Owen?” Gavin asked, approaching.

“Yeah.” With a glance down at Joey, Owen put his sword away. “Looks like it was your turn to slay the dragon.”

“I guess so.” Gavin reached Owen, put a hand on his chest. Cal was watching Joey. He was writhing on the ground, growling. That arrow probably wouldn’t kill him. But he was obviously in pain. “He was going to kill you.”

“He was going to try,” Owen said.

Gavin nodded. “Explanation now,” he said to Cal.

“Apparently I killed his father,” Owen said, before Cal could say anything. Of course Joey had had to tell him. “Which if he’s a dragon, means that his father was the one who kidnapped you.”
“Yeah.” Gavin sounded annoyed. Which Cal didn’t blame him for.

Okay. Well, he was going to have to tell the truth and hope that they didn’t all get arrested. If all else failed, Cal was mostly confident that they could fight their way out of it. “Some dragons can shapeshift,” Cal explained, figuring he may as well just dump it on them and get to the part that mattered. “Joey’s one of them. That’s why he looks human. Listen, he needs to be healed or he’s going to die.”

“Yeah, I’m not so sure that’s a bad thing.” Owen looked extremely displeased.

“He’s not a bad person,” Cal said. He’d tell them what they wanted to know, but Joey was bleeding. “He’s really not. He’s just stupid and upset. We’re on our way to rescue the people we love, they got kidnapped by demons and we’re trying to get them back. Please just…let Sully heal him.”

“Your people were kidnapped by demons,” Gavin said, as he and Owen turned on Sully, stuck between the two knights. “But you’ve clearly got one with you. Forgive me if I don’t believe you.”

“It’s a really long story, which I don’t have time to tell you because my teammate is over there fucking dying.” Cal didn’t mean to lose his temper, but nobody ever meant to lose their temper. These two were going to let Joey die because of some stupid prejudice and he wasn’t going to stand for it. Tingling all over, Cal made himself calm down as he just pushed past them, waving Sully over. Sure enough, the knights let him come.

“You can heal him, right?” Cal asked Sully.

“Yeah,” Sully muttered, pulling the arrow out of Joey. Joey cried out, eyes squeezed shut. Cal put a hand on his chest while Sully covered the wounds with his hands. “I’m not the best healer, but I can manage. That arrowhead was tipped with dragon bone.”

“I know.”

“Kind of shitty.”

“What the fuck was Joey doing?” It was kind of shitty, but Cal didn’t care about that right this second.

Sully shook his head. “He was gone when I got up. I went after him. I…ran into Edwin there, thought he might help. Which I guess was stupid. He’s got a demon-cutting sword there.” Joey had gone mostly quiet now as Sully healed him.

“I was wondering what your problem with him was,” Cal said. He looked down at Joey. “Fucking dumbass.”

“Yeah. He’s upset.”

“I know, I get that. But still, he almost got himself killed.”

“Sorry…” Joey mumbled, coming to. Sully leaned back, the healing done.

“He’ll be fine.”

“Good.” Cal sighed, helped Joey sit. “Don’t do it again.”

“Yeah…”

“Okay.” That was Gavin, having come over with Owen. “You have five minutes to talk yourselves
Joey almost growled, but Cal put a hand on his shoulder, glancing quickly at Sully to keep him quiet too. “There’s a fortress near here called the Citadel. It was built by demons during the Catechism Wars.” He debated for a moment over how much to say, but fuck it. “There are some demons who have a beef with me and they kidnapped three of my teammates to lure me in. My…not just my teammates. The people I love, and the guy Joey loves too, just because he was there. They want to lure me in, so I got together some backup and I’m going to knock their front door down and strangle them in their own trap.”

It sounded pretty badass, now that Cal put it that way.

“And Sully?” Owen asked, obviously not convinced.

“I’ve had a bit of a falling out with the other demons,” Sully explained when Cal looked at him. “Switching sides and all that. Long story.”

“We don’t want any trouble.” Cal didn’t want any trouble, anyway. “We just want to go to the Citadel and get our people back, that’s all, I swear.”

“One of you wants trouble,” Owen reminded Cal. Joey was still glaring daggers at him. “Your father. Big, scaly? Kind of red, had a cave on top of a big mountain?”

“Yeah. Until you cut his throat.” At least Joey wasn’t growling anymore. Cal had learned enough dragon to know that this was him being nonthreatening.

Not that Joey was all that threatening when he growled. He was mostly just kind of cute.

“Yeah.” Owen sighed. He actually looked upset for once. “Sorry. Not for killing him. He kidnapped Gavin, I’d kill him again. But I’m sorry for orphaning you. If I’d known he had a kid I’d have…done something. Hell, if I’d known dragons could talk I’d have tried to reason with him first.”

Cal hadn’t expected an apology out of him, even a weak one like that. He hoped Joey took it.

“I did try to reason with him,” Gavin said, unhelpfully. “He didn’t seem to care.”

“My sire couldn’t shift,” Joey told them. He sounded a lot calmer now. “He couldn’t speak human. He…I’m sorry for attacking you. That was stupid. I just, when I saw you, when I realized who you were, I couldn’t…I’m so angry at you and I just…”

“I understand, I really do,” Owen said. “And if you want to try and kill me again you’re welcome to. But I’m not going to just stand here and let you and I’ve killed dragons bigger than you, so decide how badly you want that revenge before you try again.”

Cal almost got annoyed at that, but he realized something. Owen was speaking dragon to Joey. He was talking in challenges and boasts. And he probably didn’t even know it.

Joey’s growl came back, but not as roughly. “I’m not going to attack you again,” he finally said, deferring. Cal wondered if Owen understood that. “I want Travis back more than anything and I can’t get him back if I’m dead.” Finally, something intelligent.

“That’s better,” Cal said, giving Joey a proud shoulder pat. He’d handled that well. “Joey’s not a threat to anyone, and neither is Sully,” he added, looking over at Edwin, who still looked worried.

“Tell that to my friend to got torn to pieces by a demon.” Edwin’s glare didn’t diminish. Cal sighed.
Of course they’d had to run into the band of people with the most reason to hate them.

“Yeah,” Sully said, nodding. “Most of us are assholes. But it probably wasn’t me. I don’t usually tear people to pieces.”

Yeah, that would comfort Cal in this situation. Someone still needed to work on people skills.

Edwin made as if to attack again, but Gavin stopped him with a gesture. “Okay. I’m going to forgive all of this and we’ll just pretend it never happened.”

Oh, thank himself, Cal thought. The knights didn’t look happy, but they didn’t make the rules. Cal smiled. “Thank you, your Highness. We really appreciate…”

“That said,” Gavin interrupted, with a nod from Owen. “You can’t be allowed to just go off on your own until I’ve ascertained that you’re actually not dangerous. You won’t be permitted to leave my supervision until I can determine that.”

“What…” Cal started to rise, not even bothering to keep Joey and Sully from doing the same. If Gavin was going to try and stop them from rescuing Wes and Mick and Travis, he had a very violent other thing coming.

“Which is why we’re going to go with you to this Citadel to rescue your people.”

“What…”

“Your Highness…” Edwin protested.

But Owen smiled. “It’s the most logical solution, right? We need to make sure it’s safe to let them wander around, they need firepower to storm a demon fortress. Obviously we should all travel together for a while.”

Wait. Wait a minute.

“Sir Owen,” the other knight beside Edwin said. “I really don’t think it’s in the best interests of the prince’s safety to join up with people who have attacked us once,” Erik said.

“I don’t agree,” Owen said, standing there confidently. He was clearly in charge, or at least being the prince’s fiancé gave him some clout. “I think that it’s way better if we know where they are. Besides, Gavin didn’t ask our permission, he’s already decided. Would you two go back to the town and inform Sir Elaine of the prince’s decision?”

“Who…I suspect is being held up by Beatrice and Lillian,” Cal said. He didn’t suspect anything. “I don’t suppose we get a say in this?”

“No. I always get my way, you’ll get used to it.”

“It’s a good idea, actually.” Sully said, touching Cal’s shoulder and kind of ruining Cal’s in-charge image. “Owen’s armour is made of dragon scales, it’ll repel magic. And Edwin’s sword is…well let’s just say that demons aren’t going to be too happy to see it. If for no other reason than those two, it’s a good idea to have them with us when we attack the Citadel.”

Cal smiled at Sully. They were really going to need to work on the part where Cal did all the talking to distract attention from how powerful everyone else on the team was. “Yeah. I was already going to say yes, but thanks.” It was obvious that Gavin wanted to help them, not supervise them. It was obvious that he couldn’t just offer help, but that doing this was his way of making sure that Cal had
the backup he needed to properly attack the fortress. And Cal wasn’t going to say no to more backup. He’d been collecting it the whole way here, after all.

Joey staggered to his feet, moving closer to Owen. Cal let him do it, watching as Joey got close enough that he was in Owen’s space while simultaneously emphasizing how short he was compared to Owen. A symbolic challenge paired with a reminder that he was no threat. “I hate you.”

“You’re not my favourite person either,” Owen said, looking down at Joey with just the right amount of derision. Maybe he was part dragon too.

“If…” Joey was clearly afraid. “If you can help me get Travis back, I’ll hate you a little less.”

“Hm.” Owen nodded after a minute. “Deal. And in the meantime you can try to convince me that not all dragons are assholes.”

“Well, we are,” Joey said, relaxing. “But okay. Deal.”

“All right.” Gavin smiled, turned around. “Now that that’s all worked out, let’s go back and have some breakfast? I’m starving and we have a fortress raid to plan.”

And that was that. He just headed back for the town as if stuff like this happened to him every morning. Maybe it did. Cal looked at Joey, and then he looked at Sully. “You heard the prince,” he said to them. “Let’s get a move on. You two have almost made me miss breakfast.”

He was feeling so much better about their chances of succeeding at this as every day passed.
There Is Very Much Such a Thing as the Calm before the Storm, and it’s Often Filled with Flirting

“You know, I was more flattered at your offer to join you before I realized that you were extending similar offers to just everyone you met,” Beatrice said, sitting down beside Cal to eat lunch. They’d left Techen’s Stand this morning with Gavin’s group in tow, bringing their total party to fifteen people. It was a bit unwieldy.

“I didn’t realize when I saw you pouting in that inn that I didn’t have to scrape the bottom of the barrel,” Cal said back, not looking at her. “If I’d realized I’d be getting a bunch of knights, I’d have let you drink yourself to death back there.”

“I don’t think you would have. You’re a bleeding heart. It’s one of the many, many weaknesses that you cram into such a small package.”

“And being a bitch is one of yours,” Cal said, leaning back. “At least we have each other to point out our weaknesses.”

“Have you ever noticed that you only ever insult me on the basis of my gender?” Beatrice asked him, tone casual.

Cal frowned, looking over at her now. They were sitting on some rocks, the whole procession stopped to eat. They were making good time, considering how many of them their party now contained. “I don’t.”

“Bitch is a pretty female word last time I checked.”

“It’s a non-gendered insult. I’m using it in a way that implicates the many, many flaws in the matrix of unpleasantness that passes for your personality. I don’t care that you’re a girl.” Cal’s issue with Beatrice had nothing to do with her being a woman and everything to do with her being the worst.

“But have you ever used it in reference to a man?” Beatrice asked, smirking.

“Well…” Cal looked away. “Okay well, that is a fair point. You’re an asshole, then, if that makes you feel less discriminated against.”

Beatrice laughed, and punched Cal in the arm. “See? Bleeding fucking heart. It takes two seconds to make you feel bad for someone you don’t even like.”

“Oh…” Cal felt himself go red, and he huffed. “Fuck you.”

“As if you’d know what to do with a woman.”

Cal rolled his eyes. “Having boyfriends didn’t make me forget how women work. I’ve been with your kind before. You’re not that mysterious.”

“I’m actually surprised,” Beatrice said, snorting. “I didn’t know you liked women.”

“I like everyone,” Cal told her. “Or at least I don’t pick who I liked based on which bath they use. Just so happens that Wes and Mick happen to be guys.”

“And Sully.”
“And Sully,” Cal admitted. There was no harm in admitting it.

“And Joey.”

Cal frowned. “I know you haven’t met Travis, but I don’t think he’d like that very much.”

“Hm. I notice you’re not saying you wouldn’t like it, though.”

Cal blushed again, glancing over at Joey, who was grappling with Owen in a small area that was kept clear. It wasn’t entirely clear what they were doing—possibly trying to kill each other—but they seemed to be having fun. “I…guess I wouldn’t…object.”

“Hm. Your team is looking more and more like a brothel floor. You only hire people you want to fuck, don’t you?”

“Hired you, didn’t I?”

Beatrice leaned against Cal. “See, that can be taken either as a yes or a no depending on how you want to interpret all your aggression towards me.”

“Fuck off,” Cal told her, scowling. Ew. “As if anyone would want to fuck you.”

“I recall you saying you wanted to just a few minutes ago.”

“You’re fired. I’m keeping Lillian. She’s useful. But you’re fired.”

Beatrice laughed. “Seriously, though. What I actually came here to say was I’m glad. That you gave me a chance. I know I screwed up a lot. Made your life hard.”

Cal shrugged, resisting the urge to tell her he hadn’t meant anything by it. “It was nice to have a less competent rival to compete with. Made us look really good by comparison. You weren’t that bad.”

“Sorry I tied you to a tree.”

“No, you aren’t. But even if you were, I’d untied myself before you were even over the hill.”

“Which time?”

“Both times.” Cal smirked at her. “Sorry you fell for taking the wrong stone.” He smirked. “We still made bank on that job.”

“Yeah,” Beatrice laughed. “I knew we should have taken both of them. Decided to be dramatic instead of sensible. It got stolen from the guy I sold it to anyway. He sent me to find it but we never did.”

“Yeah,” Cal said, still smiling. “I know. The guy I was working for was the one who stole it, or at least the one who ended up with it after.”

“Nice,” Beatrice said, punching Cal again, but more gently. “Small fucking world. They say there are more in that set, you know. Five in total. They’re probably super valuable all together.”

Cal nodded, thinking about that. The purple stone had had the power to do what it had done in the swamp, he didn’t like thinking about what the others might do, especially together. “Guess that’s why people are collecting them. My guy had a second one. And your guy sent you after another, you said.”
“Yeah,” Beatrice said, reaching to her belt for a flask that Cal noticed wasn’t there. “That was fucking stupid of me to take. Don’t underestimate witches. Fuck.”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to…”

“No, no, it’s fine. Not your fault.” Beatrice sighed. “They were good people, Boris and Adi. Anyway. All this has given me something to do other than sit around and angst about them. So thanks for that.”

“Thank my bleeding heart,” Cal told her, and Beatrice rolled her eyes. “Seriously. I’m glad you’re doing better.”

“Yeah. And hey, maybe we’ll all die on this rescue mission of yours. But at least it’ll be impressive.”

“And I’ll come back,” Cal added.

“You lucky bitch.”

Cal laughed, accepting that. He saw Joey, finished fighting Owen, coming over to join them with a wide grin on his face. He was all flushed and sweaty, and Cal swore he had part of a boner in his pants. “Someone enjoyed all that wrestling.”

“Maybe you’ve got some competition in Sir Owen the Dragonslayer,” Beatrice teased.

“Eh. I could take him,” Cal said, though he couldn’t and he also didn’t feel the need to.

“You keep on telling yourself that, little guy.”

“Listen. Just when I was starting to think you might not be the total worst…”

Beatrice punched him again. “Stop hitting on me or I’ll make Lillian throw you off a cliff.”

“As if Lillian wouldn’t take my side,” Cal said. He wasn’t the worst, which made him preferable to Beatrice right away.

“I don’t know. She didn’t bang your brains out two nights in a row. Oh, maybe that’s your problem. Boyfriends gone, all horny and lonely by yourself, are you?”

“He is,” Joey said, sitting down on Cal’s other side. “Me and Sully tried to talk to him about it but it didn’t work. He’s stubborn.”

Cal rolled his eyes. “At least I’m not getting hard from wrestling with my archnemesis.”

“No, but you are over here flirting with her from what I could see.” Joey did look down between his legs with a strange expression on his face though, as if he hadn’t noticed that.

“You know what, we’ve gone back to that thing where everyone gangs up on me, and I think we ought to stop that.”

“Yeah, he only likes that in bed,” Beatrice said, not missing a beat.

“You’re such a bitch,” Cal muttered, going back to his lunch and trying not to smile. He was feeling better, more confident, safer than he had been for a while now. Everything was going great. If only Wes and Mick were already back, everything would be perfect.
Cal looked to the south, wishing he could see the Citadel, but it was still two days off at least. He wanted to be there now, not in two days. He’d been patient, he’d been patient for weeks since he’d lost them. And now he was done being patient, and he wanted them back.

But there was nothing to be done. He didn’t have the power to speed up time, and he also didn’t have any wine, which was annoying, so he was just sitting here, staring at the southern horizon while the sun went down behind the mountains, painting everything an orange that was steadily fading behind lengthening shadows.

“You can’t see it,” Sully said, beside him. “Even if we were close enough, it’s enchanted to be hidden from the ground.”

Cal nodded. “Mathilda knew it was there.”

“I guess we didn’t think to hide it from the air. Was kind of stupid.”

“You should tell them that when we get there.”

“I’ll make sure to mention it. Course,” Sully added, smiling to himself. “They might well go and mention that I could have thought of that when I was helping enchant it.”

“You know,” Cal reflected, sighing, “you could have spent less time back in the day making my life hard now.”

“Yeah, I always wanted to take up needlepoint, but instead I wasted a lot of energy on fucking with you,” Sully admitted. “I just knew how much of a pain in the ass you’d be someday, I guess.”

Cal looked at Sully. “I’m reconsidering sleeping with you.”

“No, you’re not.”

Cal shook his head. “No, not really. When we get them back.”

“Yeah.” Sully smiled. “Assuming they’re into it.”

“They are,” Cal promised, looking up as Joey came over, walking a bit funny. He sat down beside them, red in the face. He’d been hot all day. “Are you okay?”

Joey nodded, breathing heavily. “I’m…I’m fine,” he managed. “I’m just…hot.”

“If you have a fever, we should get you checked out,” Cal said. “You’ve gotten up and wandered off like five times in the last half hour. Something wrong with your guts?”

Joey shook his head. “No, that’s not it. I’ll be fine.”

“Joey, if you’re sick…”

“I’m horny,” Joey interrupted. “That’s all. I just…I’m really hard and I can’t make it stop.”

Cal looked at him a second, then rolled his eyes. “Okay,” he said. At least it wasn’t anything serious. “You’ll have Travis back in a few days. Can you hold out until then?” It was a joke, mostly.
But Joey shook his head, face contorted in genuine upset. “No,” he said quietly. “I…Travis helped me with his last time. I can’t…”

“Can’t what?”

“My…my rut is starting again,” Joey muttered, squeezing his eyes shut. “I thought it was only supposed to happen once a year. But it’s happening again, and Travis isn’t here to…”

“Your what?” Cal asked, looking at him.

“Dragons mate on a cycle,” Sully told him, reaching out and putting a hand on Joey’s forehead. “Males rut usually once a year in the spring. If he’s entering that part of his cycle now…”

“There’s…nobody here for him to mate with, Sully,” Cal said, a little worried now. Joey sounded upset, almost in pain. And Sully seemed worried.

“Yeah. He’s not going to die or anything, but it’s going to be rough for him, and it could take forever to finish.”

“Three days,” Joey muttered, curling his knees up to his chest. “It took three days last time.”

“We can’t wait three days,” Cal protested.

Sully nodded, putting his hands on Joey’s shoulders. “I can help you.”

Joey shook his head. “No. I’m not…”

“Joey,” Cal said. “You can’t go anywhere if you have to stop to jerk off every five minutes. And we can’t wait three days. Let Sully help you.” He understood, he did. He wouldn’t want to have someone not his boyfriends help him with this either. But there were extenuating circumstances.

“But…”

“Look,” Sully said, tilting Joey’s head up to look at him. “I’m not going to let you do anything that Travis would get mad about. But you need help.”

“I g-get rough…”

“And you can’t hurt me. Come on. Please?”

Joey sighed, a tear falling, and he stood, letting Sully help him. The tent in his pants was extremely evident in the firelight. “Please help.”

Sully nodded, taking Joey’s hand. “He’ll be okay in the morning,” he promised Cal, putting an arm around Joey.

“Okay,” Cal said, deciding not to ask. Maybe tomorrow he’d ask what had happened, instead of doing it now. “Take the tent.”

“You…”

“Can sleep outside,” Cal said, waving them off. “The tent is more comfortable than some cave, and Joey could use a little comfort. Go.”

Sully looked at him for a moment, the nodded. “Okay. This is not quite the sexual situation I’d hoped for in that tent.”
“Consider it practice,” Cal said, turning them towards the tent. He patted Sully’s shoulder. “It’ll be okay. Sully will help.”


Sully nodded, and the two of them went into the tent, leaving him alone and really wishing he had wine. Really cheap, bubbly wine. Why was the world so cruel as to not let him have that?

Maybe Beatrice had some, she liked to drink. Even if she hadn’t been lately. Which probably meant she had some booze that Lillian wasn’t letting her drink. Which meant Cal could drink it.

So he went over to her tent, which he knew to be empty, because she and Lillian had gone for a walk. But sadly, as soon as he reached for the flap, he heard footsteps behind him. “Hey. That’s not your tent,” Beatrice said.

Cal sighed. “I noticed.” He turned around, saw her and Lillian, arms around each other. “I was going to steal your alcohol.”

“Don’t have any,” Beatrice told him. “Got rid of it all.”

“Why the fuck would you do that?” She sucked at being a drunk. Not that Cal was surprised.

“So she didn’t drown herself in it,” Lillian said, stroking Beatrice’s arm. “It’s better that way.”

Cal rolled his eyes. “Well, that’s stupid. You could have given it to me.”

“Well, I didn’t. Go ask the knights, they might have some.”

“They’re not allowed to drink on duty,” Cal muttered, annoyed. “Oh, wait. That means they aren’t using theirs.”

“Yes. Now will you get the hell out of the way so we can go in there and have sex?” Beatrice demanded.

“Bea,” Lillian said, smacking her arm. “Don’t tell him that.”

“It’s not like he doesn’t know. He’s a horny little shit; he would have assumed anyway.”

Cal rolled his eyes again and moved aside. “You can do better,” he told Lillian.

They ignored him and went inside the tent. Cal sighed, pretending it wasn’t bothering him that everyone on his team was having sex—or whatever Joey and Sully were doing—except him, and headed over for the small cluster of tents the knights had set up nearby the prince’s tent.

From which were coming some pretty loud sounds. Cal wasn’t surprised. It seemed like Gavin and Owen only stopped having sex because they couldn’t do it while walking. And he’d thought his libido was high.

There was nobody guarding their tent, which was a bit odd, but Cal went past that and to the knights’ tents, joining them at their fire without asking. “Aren’t there usually more of you?” he asked.

The three of them looked at him. Sir Quentin was tall and a bit older, distinguished looking. His squire Parry was Cal’s age, he was pretty and dark haired, and holding a cup of something, which Cal wanted. And Sir Erik was blonde and lanky, like Wes if his limbs were too long for his body and his chest too narrow.
“Sir David and Sir Elaine have the night off,” Sir Erik told Cal, nodding vaguely at one of the tents, from which…sounds were emerging.

“And their squires are off patrolling,” Sir Quentin added, graciously passing Cal a tin cup and pouring some wine into it.

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s what they’re doing,” Parry said, rolling his eyes. “Patrolling. Each other’s bodies, maybe.”

“Thank you,” Cal said, drinking half of it in one go. “I really only came over here for that. I’m glad there’s at least someone in this camp who’s not fucking right this minute. Where’s Edwin?” Cal asked Erik.

“Guarding the prince’s tent.”

“No, he’s not.”

Erik blinked. “Then I don’t know. He was with Sir Owen earlier.”

“Maybe he’s still with Sir Owen,” Parry suggested. “They do eye-fuck each other a lot.”

“They do do that,” Erik said, obviously amused, taking a drink. “As long as he’s having fun.”

Owen and Gavin didn’t seem like the threesome type to Cal, but it wasn’t like he knew them. “At least some of us here know how to have fun with our clothes on,” he said, raising his cup.

“Actually,” said Sir Quentin. “I was just thinking that Parry and I ought to retire.” He drained his cup and stood, stretching. And since everyone knew that knights and their squires had sex, Parry did the same with a sigh. Well, whatever. More wine for Cal. “Sir Erik?” Sir Quentin asked. “You could join us if you like—you’ve been so hospitable to Parry on this trip and you’re without companion for the night.”

“I am,” Erik said, smiling at Parry, who blushed. “Sure, if you both don’t mind.”

“Not at all. Would you like to join as well?” Quentin asked, which was really very nice of him.

Cal smiled though, shaking his head. “No, thanks. I’m good. I have the wine. Have fun.”

So the knights got up, said their goodnights and headed into a tent, and Cal sighed, left by himself. It wasn’t long before he heard more sounds, so he kicked dirt over their fire and stole the bottle of wine, heading back to his own.

There, he sat facing south, drinking wine from the bottle. Stupid everyone, having sex without him. Not that he wanted to have sex with anyone here—maybe he wouldn’t have minded being in there with Sully and Joey, but that was it—so much as now he just kind of wanted to be having sex generally since everyone else was.

But his boyfriends were in a demon fortress and Cal wasn’t, so no sex for him until he got them back. Stupid demons were going to pay for that. Cal drank more wine. He was hard now.

Well, it wasn’t like anyone was around to fucking see, since they were all fucking. Stupid everyone. Cal awkwardly pushed the front of his pants down, undid his loincloth. He couldn’t go to sleep like this.

Cal jerked himself off in one hand, keeping the wine bottle in the other. When he had Wes and Mick
back he wouldn’t need to do this. He’d be in a tent too, sucking Wes’s dick or fucking Mick or sandwiched in between them, kissing and touching and not wearing any clothes and it would be great.

Cal came really quickly, shooting into the fire and nearly burning the tip of his dick, which nearly made him fall over. But he recovered, had some more wine, and sighed, wiping his hand on the ground. He hadn’t done that in a good long while. Too long, clearly.

He wasn’t quite satisfied, so he kept his pants down, sitting there, staring south, and drinking the wine. Soon he’d have them back. But for now, he had all night.
Cal complained as he did, in fact, climb the hill hung over.

“You should have thought of that before you got trashed last night,” Sully reminded him helpfully.

Cal glared at him, his head still pounding. “It’s the afternoon now. The hangover should be gone. That’s how it works. You drink, you have a shitty morning, it gets better, you get on with your life, you drink again. It’s a cycle.”

“You have a problem.”

“Yes,” Cal agreed. “And my problem is that I’m still hung over.”

“You drank an entire bottle of wine,” Joey reminded him.

“You fuckhead,” Sully added.

Neither of them sounded too hot either, but that was because they’d both been up most of the night. Whatever Sully had done to help Joey had obviously worked, since Joey wasn’t trying to stick his dick in everything that moved. He said he’d basically helped Joey with the immediate impulse and then cast a spell of some kind to stave off the rest of his rut—not, Sully had reminded both of them, a permanent solution, but it was supposed to buy Joey a week or so, which was all the time they needed to get Travis back.

“Name calling isn’t necessary,” Cal muttered. “And it wasn’t even good wine. It was cheap wine. I wouldn’t mind being hung over all day if the wine had at least been good. Or bubbly. But it wasn’t. So I should be fine. Can’t you magic my headache away?”

Sully smirked. “Yes, I could.”

“Then why aren’t you?”

“Because you drink too much.”

“I hate you,” Cal told him. “I’m not sleeping with you ever. You can join Joey and Travis’s relationship instead of ours.”

Sully rolled his eyes, but Joey was eyeing him in a way that suggested appraisal to Cal. Cal noticed these things, even when he was hung over. “This hill is the last major obstacle between us and the Citadel,” he told Cal.

Cal felt himself calm a little. “Are you sure?”

Sully nodded. “Once we get to the top there’s a plateau, and from there it’s a regular path to the
Citadel. It’s not much farther.”

“You could have said that earlier,” Cal accused. If he’d known they were that close to their destination, he might have insisted on travelling faster. And drank less last night.

“I wasn’t sure. Actually,” Sully said, peering up ahead of them. The three of them were at the head of the column, except for the scouts, who’d gone on ahead to scout. “I should head up there, before those two decide there’s nothing there and tell everyone to turn back. There’s an illusion over the path.”

“Go,” Cal told him, patting Sully on the back. “We’ll meet you up there.”

Sully nodded, and sped up, climbing at a speed that wasn’t normal. He was clearly using his demon powers, which made Cal feel better about the fact that he couldn’t possibly match that pace.

He did speed up, though, and so did Joey. “We’re almost there,” Joey said quietly, a determined set to his jaw. His tail lashed behind him, anxious.

“Yeah,” Cal agreed, nodding. He reached out and took Joey’s hand for a second, squeezing it. “We’ll have them back soon.”

“Yes.”

“What’s got you two all riled up?” Beatrice asked, coming up behind them and, Cal noticed, breathing heavily with the exertion. “Sully ran off and now you’re jogging up the damned mountain.”

“We’re almost there,” Cal told her. “The Citadel is just past the top of this hill. Sully’s gone to open the path.”

“Nice,” Beatrice said, looking up, slightly despairing, at the length of hill that was left. Sully had disappeared. “So this is probably way too late to be asking this, but if we have to do fighting in there— are any of you good at fighting? Like, at all?”

“I’m a perfectly good fighter,” Cal told her, oddly insulted.

“Sure you are. It’s obvious that Wes and Mick do all the lifting on your team. And whether or not you really are God, you don’t seem to have any useful powers for it. If you’re going to need to be protected in there, I want to know before we head in.”

Cal looked at her for a minute. She was trying to help, he reminded himself. She was just being a bitch about it, that was all. “I’ll be fine,” he told her. He reached up to his back, patted the hilt of Nathen’s sword. “I was able to drive them off with this thing before. But thank you.”

Beatrice nodded, looking at Joey rather dubiously. “I can defend myself,” Joey told her, voice a fraction of a growl. “I was the only one who managed to make one of them bleed when they attacked us last time.”

“Good.” Beatrice looked up ahead. “Can I assume we’re not on a mission of murder here? We’re getting your boys and getting out, not starting a new Catechism War?”

“That’s right,” Cal told her, though he very much doubted it would be that simple. “If we can incapacitate or kill the demons in there, Sully should be able to teleport us all out after we’re done. If not we’ll have to leave the old fashioned way or risk them interfering in the spell and teleporting us to the sun.”
“As long as we’re not leaving through the window, it’s fine,” Beatrice said.

“I’ll catch you if you do,” Lillian said. She’d only just caught up with them. “You people are insane. Climb slower.”

“We’re almost at the top,” Joey told her.

“All the more reason to climb slower and not pass out once we get there.”

They did not climb slower, but soon they were at the top of the hill, stepping onto the plateau that topped it. On the other side, Sully was standing with Edwin and Erik, looking at the long, winding path that led from here to the next mountain over, where stood the Citadel. Carved into the side of the mountain, it had a circular outer wall barbed with columns and a set of imposing towers.

“You said it was a regular path,” Joey complained, looking at that long walk. “That’s not a regular path.”

“If you had wings like a real dragon it wouldn’t matter,” Beatrice commented.

Joey growled at her.

“It’s an easy walk,” Sully said, attention on them. “Just a few hours. We should wait until everyone else catches up, see what they want to do. It’s kind of late to start the walk now.”

“Yeah,” Cal said. He didn’t take his eyes of the Citadel. That was where Wes and Mick were. “It’s fine. We’re almost there.”

If Cal had to carve that thing right out the mountain to find them, he would. They were almost there.
The More Players in the Game, the More Chaotic the Climax

Chapter Notes

It's finally time!

With the gates of the Citadel looming before them, Cal took a breath. He was ready. He could do this. He could get them back. “We’re going to do this,” he said.

“Yeah,” Joey agreed, beside him. “We’ll get them back.”

“You should call the hot dragon lady,” Beatrice said, checking her sword in its scabbard.

“Oh, yeah.” Cal frowned down at his arm. “Um. How do I agitate an imp?”

He batted at his arm, trying to wake it up. “Hey. Wake up, imp. Go tell Mathilda we’re doing the thing.” Nothing happened. He frowned. “Sully. Lillian. How do I make it do the thing?”

“Uh…try hitting it again?” Sully suggested.

“That’s super helpful advice,” Cal told him. “You’re a huge benefit to this team, I’m so glad I hired you.”

“Fuck you.”

“We’ll see what Wes and Mick say once we get them back. Lillian, suggestions?”

“Hm. It would help if you knew its name,” Lillian said, considering. “But I’m guessing you don’t, since you acquired it by touching a random magical object. I doubt you even read the engraving, did you?”

“Obviously not,” Cal muttered, patting his arm some more. “Wake up, you stupid, freeloading, piece of shit spiritual leech.”

He stopped talking to his arm as he heard someone approaching him, saw the prince, looking up at the Citadel. “These are big-ass doors.”

They were indeed pretty big. Cal looked up at them.

“They’re enchanted,” Lilian said. Cal had assumed that. “It’ll take a few minutes to get through them.”

Sully nodded. “Just a few minutes. I can shut down the magic on them, just give me…”

Cal wasn’t going to give him that. They weren’t here to mess around quietly—the whole point was that he was going to violently spring the demons’ trap on them. So he pulled Nathen’s sword off his back and, hoping that this didn’t make him look like an idiot, swung the sword at the doors.

They blew off their hinges, landing in the courtyard inside with two bangs. Cal’s arm tingled. He put the sword away.
No useful powers, his ass. Choke on that, Beatrice.

“Or we could do that,” Sully said.

“Didn’t think he had it in him,” Cal heard Owen say behind him. It didn’t matter. They could do the suspicious thing if he wanted—they were getting Wes and Mick back. That was all he cared about.

“Me either,” Beatrice said. “But Cal’s got a lot of surprises packed in that tiny little body.”

“I can hear you.”

“I know—I’m saying you’re short.”

Cal rolled his eyes and kept going, leading the whole group inside. There was nothing interesting in the courtyard, so he crossed up, went up the stairs, pushed open the front doors—normal ones—and came into the Citadel proper. It was a tall foyer room, a curving staircase on each side, two imposing sets of doors, one below the stairs and one above. Other doors led off to the sides. It was empty, but the demons were here. Cal could feel them.

Sully pointed at the lower of the two sets of double doors. “That’s the meeting hall. It’s the main room. The other doors up there will lead to the laboratories and the armoury.” Now he pointed to one side. “The side doors lead up and down both. There’s a concourse on the third floor that’ll connect all the towers, and the lower floors are all connected as well.”

“Where are they likely to be?” Cal asked, looking at that door.

“The lower floors, is my guess,” Sully said. “It’s…well, it’s where most of the living quarters were.”

Living quarters, Cal thought, just as Gavin spoke up. “That’s what they called dungeons back in your day?”

“We didn’t have a dungeon,” Sully said quietly. “It wasn’t a war where you took prisoners.” Cal nodded. He wasn’t surprised. “We sometimes kept research specimens in the towers.”

“We’ll take the downstairs.” Cal started off that way. He wasn’t going to have a big argument about whatever horrible shit demons had done thousands of years ago. He was more interested in the horrible shit they were doing now.

“We’ll search the towers, then,” Owen said behind Cal as the rest of Cal’s people followed him.

Sir Elaine, the knights’ leader, started to order her people to the main hall to serve as the distraction, but Cal had stopped listening. He opened the door, saw stairs leading down. They were down there. He was going to find them.

Cal’s head was buzzing with a feeling he knew by now to associate with Nathen. But he didn’t care. He didn’t have time to give a damn about Nathen and his world-ending temper tantrums. He strode down the stairs, looking left and right at the bottom. “There’s no way to know, is there?”

“No,” Sully said. “Sorry.”

“Okay. You come with me. Joey, Beatrice, Lillian, go that way.” He pointed to the left, turning to the right himself. “If you find them, do something magical that Sully will be able to notice.”

“Can do,” Lillian promised.

“This hallway will loop around and meet up on the other side,” Sully explained. “Rather than going
down to the next level, if we don’t find them up here I suggest waiting for each other at the top of the stairs so we all go down together.”

That seemed inefficient to Cal, but then, it couldn’t take that long to search a bunch of empty rooms. “Agreed. Let’s get going.”

They broke apart, Cal heading right with Sully. The hallway was lined with doors and Cal opened all of them, to mostly empty rooms. “You said these were living quarters?”

“Mostly,” Sully said. “There’s a library down here if you want to catch up on four-thousand-year-old fiction. Couple of common rooms, a few baths, that sort of thing. We lived here for a long time during the war.”

“Why don’t you live here anymore?” Cal asked, opening to another empty room, though this one had a straw mattress in it that didn’t seem like it had seen any use lately.

“After the schism it was too dangerous. We were two sides instead of one and we and the angels both knew where it was and how to get in.”

“It’s…too bad,” Cal said, as they progressed to the next door. “It’s a solid fortress. And it’s nice to be able to live with the people you like.”

“Yeah. It’s, um…” Sully shrugged. “It’s weird. To see it all empty like this. It’s depressing. I…the best years of my life were when we all lived here together. It was hard, it was war and it was awful and we all did terrible things. But they were my friends, my family. I’d never had that before. And I haven’t had it since. I miss it.”

“I’m sorry,” Cal said, wanting to pat Sully’s back but not sure if he should.

“Wasn’t your fault.”

“It kind of was.”

“Well, yeah,” Sully admitted. “Indirectly, I guess. You really do make a habit of fucking my life up, you know that?”

“You’re welcome.” Cal tried another door. It was locked. He frowned, heart skipping. “In here.”

Sully nodded and put his hand on the door handle. Smiling at Cal before just pulling and taking the door right off its hinges. Cal stepped past him, looking into the room.

For just a moment, Cal thought it was empty. But then he saw movement in the left-hand corner and stepped closer. “Travis.”

“Cal,” Travis said, standing up. “Is Joey with you?”

“Yeah…” Cal said, looking at him. Travis had…changed. A lot. His skin was grey as the stone wall behind him, and it looked like he had scales coming up his neck, running down his arms. “What happened to you?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Travis said, moving closer to Cal, looking over his shoulder. “Where is he?”

“He’s in another hallway looking for you,” Cal told him, still stuck on the scales. “Travis…”

“They…” Travis sighed. “There’s this demon named Tabitha. She was doing experiments on us…you.”
He’d seen Sully, and Cal moved in front of him. “It’s okay,” he said, holding up his hands. “He’s on our side.”

Travis stopped, skin lightening a little as he moved away from the wall. “He’s a demon. Just like them.”

“I know,” Cal said. “Travis. We need to find Wes and Mick and get out of here before the others show up. Do you know where they are?” Had something like this been done to Wes and Mick as well? Cal didn’t care if it had—he wanted them back. But if they were hurt...

Travis was still looking at Sully over Cal’s shoulder, but he let out a sigh. “They’re here somewhere. We were in the same room at first but they separated us. You sent Joey off by himself?”

“He’s with two people I trust, don’t worry.” Cal gestured to the door. “Let’s go.” He was on fire now. He felt confident. He’d never feared that they were dead, he really hadn’t. But seeing Travis here, alive, healthy, albeit with scales, bolstered Cal. Wes and Mick were okay too.

“Okay, but…” Travis was grabbing his bag—they’d let him keep that?—and following them out.

“I’ll explain everything later. Just don’t stab Sully until we’re out of the fortress, that’s all I ask.”

“I can do that,” Travis said, though as they entered the hallway, he walked so that he was a good distance from Sully.

“This is a problem,” Sully said to Cal as they went, opening doors. They were nearing the corner.

“He’ll come around.”

“No, I don’t care about that—Tabitha is Cameron’s right hand. If she’s here, it means Cameron definitely knows about all this.”

Cal nodded. That wasn’t good. “But Bartholomew is keeping her away, right?”

“I fucking hope so,” Sully muttered.

As they neared the corner, they heard footsteps. Only one set. Cal stopped, and waved for Sully and Travis to stop too. He drew Nathen’s sword. Sully drew his knives. Travis had pulled one out of his bag too. The demons really hadn’t been worried about him if they’d let him keep his weapons.

Belle stepped around the corner, coat swishing. She stopped, regarding them. And pointed at the door on her left. “They’re in this one,” she told Cal. “Nice job on the distraction up there. It took me a minute to realize you were down here.”

“Get out of the way,” Cal told her, holding the sword out.

“I don’t think I will.”

“Belle, don’t do this,” Sully said, taking a ready stance. “It doesn’t end well for you. And even if you stop us—you’re not going to get what you want out of it.”

“It’s worth a try, Sully.” Belle smiled, reaching behind her back and waving with her left hand. Her right arm ended at a stump partway down, which it hadn’t before. And into view came a monster—a huge, bearlike demon with no fur and not enough skin, jaws larger than Cal’s torso, snarling without sound. “Tabitha wanted to introduce you to this guy.”

“A chimera,” Sully muttered. “She’s…making new ones. I thought that was a lost formula.”
“Yeah,” Belle agreed. “The thing about lost things is that you can find them again.”

“You’re…oh, God,” Sully whispered. “You’re trying to learn how to make more demons.”

Well, that sounded bad.

“We’re about to be short one, aren’t we?” Belle asked, waving. The bear monster—the chimera—charged past her, right at them.

“Shit,” Sully said, as Cal raised his blade. He blurred and moved past Cal, slamming into the chimera. It knocked him into a wall without pause, continuing to run at Cal, who moved to the side, pulling Travis with him, fending the monster away with the sword.

“Is this supposed to scare me?” Cal asked with a sneer. “You gave a bear a haircut. Good on you.”

The bear turned and growled at Cal. Sully got up, rubbing his head, and moved. But another blur intercepted him, and Asher was standing there. “Don’t think so,” he said to Sully.

“Come on, Nathen,” Belle said, arms crossed. “It’s not that powerful. You can do it.”

She wanted him to kill the thing. To use Nathen’s power. Cal understood now—but it wasn’t like he had a choice. He raised the sword.

The building shook suddenly and the hallway filled with dust and mortar as the outer wall collapsed, crashed inwards, stone flying everywhere, noise filling the fortress, the floor shifting under Cal’s feet. And a head emerged from the dust where the wall had used to be. A dragon’s head, triangular and green, snake-like eyes looking around everywhere as the dragon forced its way into the building.

Sully and Asher had fallen down, just narrowly avoiding being squished. Belle was shouting, but the dragon’s tail swished in and slammed her against the wall. The chimera snarled and leapt, but the dragon caught it in its jaws, twisting its head and just tossing the thing out through the hole to plummet down off the mountain side.

And then, with a shift in the air, the dragon changed shape, into a black-haired, black-horned guy with a green tail and wings, and a scar on one cheek. Coughing as he stood up, waving dust out of his face, he grimaced. “Well, I’m never doing that again.”

“Who the hell are you?” Cal demanded, as Sully and Asher got to their feet. Sully belted Asher in the head and he fell down again.

“Louis?”

Cal looked at Travis, who’d detached from the wall and was approaching the dragon.

“It’s you,” Louis said. “Human boy.” He paused, looking at Travis. “Not so human boy. Travis, that’s your name.”

“Yeah, what are you doing here?”

“You know him?” Cal asked.

“He’s Joey’s friend.”

“I heard the runt was doing something stupid,” Louis said, brushing dust off his arms. “I’m here to help. Where is he?”
Travis shrugged. “Somewhere. In one of these hallways. It’s…good to see you.”

“You too.” Louis looked over his shoulder. “You can come in now!” In a lower tone, he added, “Now that I’ve done all the work.”

A second later, another dragon, bigger and blue, was visible through the hole Louis had made on entering. And Mathilda shifted into her smaller form in midair, landing on the destroyed floor with way more grace than was necessary in the circumstances. “Oh,” said Cal. “You came.”

“I said I would, did I not?” Mathilda asked him.

Travis blinked, his eyelids closing conically from all sides. “You’re the matriarch.”

“That’s correct,” Mathilda said, stepping further inside. “This is not as impressive inside as I’d imagined.”

“It’s not usually all torn to shit,” Sully said, glaring. “I have to admit we never thought we’d have to worry about a dragon literally ramming into the building.”

“A foolish oversight.”

Cal let them argue, turning back to the door that Belle had been guarding. It stood there, waiting. He headed for it, put his hand on the handle, looked down. Belle had a set of keys just showing out of one pocket from her coat, and he took it, fitted the key into the door’s lock, forgetting the rest of the hallway existed.

The door swung open, and Cal stepped inside.

Standing together near the back wall, they saw him at the same time, weapons and worry lowering.

“Cal!”

“Guys!” Cal ran into the room, dropping Nathen’s sword, and all but leapt onto them, tears springing to his eyes as he managed to hug both of them together. “Oh my God, oh my God. You’re here. You’re okay. You’re okay. Are you okay? I’m so sorry.”

Their arms were around him, holding him, holding each other, and Cal felt whole and like himself for the first time since they’d been taken.

“We’re okay,” Mick whispered. “We’re okay. We knew you’d come for us.”

“We’ve been waiting for you,” Wes confirmed. “Didn’t expect you to blow the place up, though.”

“That was the dragons,” Cal said, still crying. “Long story. This is all my fault. I’m so…”

“It’s not your fault, Cal,” Wes said, hand on Cal’s head. “It’s not. Don’t beat yourself up—we’re fine. Are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” Cal told him, stepping back from the hug and wiping his eyes. “I’m okay now.”

He looked at them now, taking them in. Wes’s hair was longer, falling in his eyes and brushing his neck as well. Just visible from this angle was the mat of heavy hair—or fur—that seemed to run down his back, and it was on his arms too, covering them to the wrists. He looked somehow lighter to Cal than he had, and he had a furry tail too, hanging between his legs.

Mick had a beard growing in and he looked tired. They had tattooed heavy lines down his face, disappearing under his shirt, and around his collar and on his arms Cal could see raised mounds, not
of skin but of something that had obviously been put there, most of them strangely coloured and standing out starkly.

“They were doing experiments on us,” Mick said, looking down.

“They were going to kill us once you got here,” Wes added. “But in the meantime they wanted us to be useful…”

“Are you hurt?” Cal asked. “Did they hurt you?”

“No,” Wes said. He shook his head. His ears were pointed. “They usually just put us to sleep.”

“Okay,” Cal reached forward, took both their hands, warm in his. “That’s all I care about. We’ll figure out the rest later.” He was angry, furious that the demons had done this to Wes and Mick. Not because of what they now looked like, but because they hadn’t asked for this. It had been done to them. “We have to go, before more of them show up.”

“Yeah,” Wes said, smiling. He took Mick’s hand in his other one, and the three of them stood there a second, before breaking apart. “Okay, let’s go.” They gathered their stuff, and Wes picked up his axe in one hand. Cal grabbed Nathen’s sword again. And Cal led them into the hallway where Travis, Sully and the dragons were waiting.

“Oh,” Mathilda said, on seeing them. “My Sceptre.”

Mick did still have it attached to his bag. “Excuse me? Cal?”

“She’s the dragon we stole the Sceptre from. Also dragons can shapeshift.” Cal sighed. “Can we get out of here and then I’ll explain everything?”

“Fine, let’s…” Mick stopped, eyes falling on Sully. Wes was watching him too.

Sully had dropped his illusion and was just standing there, obviously aware they were watching him. Wes took a step towards him. “Wes, it’s okay,” Cal said. “He’s…”

“Don’t, Cal,” Sully said, raising his hand. “It’s okay. I’d be pissed at me too if I were them.”

“You lied to us,” Mick said, standing beside Wes, looking down at Sully.

“Yeah.”

“You knew that your friends would be coming for Cal and you didn’t say anything,” Wes accused.

“I know.”

Wes and Mick looked at each other, then back at Sully. Cal watched them warily, unsure of what was going to happen.

They moved together, grabbed Sully’s arms. And pulled him into a hug. Cal blinked. Sully seemed very surprised. “Uh…”

“You helped him get here,” Wes said, quietly. “You brought Cal to us.”

“You stayed with him,” Mick told him. “And helped him when we couldn’t. Thank you.”

“This is…not what I was expecting,” Sully said, squirming a little between them.
They let him go, Mick patting his shoulder and Wes clapping his back. “We can beat you up if you want,” Mick offered.

“No,” Sully said, stepping back. “That’s good. I’m okay with the hug.”

“There are more important matters right this moment,” Mathilda said, stepping forward.

Cal held up a hand. “You’ll get your Sceptre once all my people are safe and ready to leave. Not before.” He looked around the hallway. “Where are Belle and Asher?”

“Tossed them out the hole,” Louis said, gesturing at the drop with his thumb. “Can we go?”

“You tossed them…out the hole.”

Well, that was one way to get rid of them.

“They’re probably still alive,” Sully said. “Green boy is right, we should get going.”

Cal nodded, started moving. They followed him. “You okay?” Mick asked Travis as they walked.

“Yeah. Joey’s here, Cal said.”

“You sent him off by himself?” Wes asked Cal.

“He’s with Beatrice and Lillian on the other side of the hallway,” Cal explained.

“What?” Wes and Mick looked at each other. “Why are they here?” Wes asked.

“I hired them. I was desperate.”

Mick snorted. “Of all the people I thought you might replace us with, Beatrice wasn’t even on the list.” Doors were opening as they walked by, Cal noticed. Mick must be opening them.

“It was a desperate situation. I was accepting help from everyone. Plus she looked sad. Why are you opening all the doors?”

“There might be other prisoners,” Mick told him. “I know there’s at least one. I think his name’s Darby.”

“You think?”

Mick nodded. “Not totally sure. We’re not speaking the same language and I’ve only seen him a few times.”

“Okay, we’ll bring him with us, then. There’s a second level to all this…”

“Nobody’s down there,” Wes growled.

“That’s where they take us to do the experiments,” Travis explained.

“The lab space is all upstairs, though,” Sully said.

“Well, tell that to Tabitha.”

Sully just shrugged.

There was nothing in the rooms on this part of the hallway, and they turned another corner. And saw
a commotion at the far end of this one. It looked like more of those bear monsters, and Cal saw Beatrice and Joey. “Let’s go,” he said, hurrying.

The rest of them followed him at speed, and they drew level with the group. There were three of the monsters, one on either side of their group and one in the middle—Lillian had the middle one on what looked like a glowing leash, Cal noted. And she was using it to keep the second one at bay.

The third one was growling at Beatrice and Joey, and at the naked boy behind them—who had wolf ears and a tail, and was growling back at the monster.

“Guys,” Cal said, raising his sword. “Get back.”

“Cal?”

The chimera turned at his voice, and it charged without looking racing towards them. Cal prepared to attack it.

Mathilda pushed him out of the way, moving in front at a walk, stretching out one arm to make a fist. And when the chimera drew level with her, she surged forward, punching downwards, fist connecting with the top of the chimera’s head.

The chimera was slammed down into the floor, head smashing under the force of Mathilda’s punch, blood and brain matter splattering everywhere. It twitched once and didn’t move again.

“Well,” Cal said, gesturing at the dead monster. “I guess, sure.”

Mathilda stepped around the chimera, approaching the rest of them.

“Matriarch...” Joey said.

Mathilda pushed him out of the way, and Beatrice too, stepping in between them. The boy with the wolf ears—Darby, maybe—wisely moved out of her way. So did Lillian and the other monster, which she’d obviously tamed. Mathilda approached the other chimera.

Which turned and ran away.

“A wise creature,” she said, nodding. “Rare.”

“Cal,” Joey said, moving around the dead chimera as they approached. And stopping dead. “Travis!”

Taking a cue from the fleeing chimera, Cal stepped aside and got out of the dragon’s way. Joey raced past him, leaping on Travis and knocking him to the ground, kissing his face all over. “You’re okay, oh, Travis, I missed you, oh, my God. God...”

“I missed you too, Joey,” Travis said from the ground, hugging Joey back. “I knew you’d come.”

“Of course I’d come. I’m not going to let anyone take you. Never. I’m sorry I took so long.”

“We found this kid,” Beatrice said, pointing at the boy, who was just sort of standing there watching them all warily. “Don’t bother asking him anything, he doesn’t seem to talk.”

“It’s not his fault you can’t understand him,” Mick told her, stepping around and making eye contact with the boy. “It’s okay.”

The boy started to move his hands at Mick almost right away in recognizable patterns—though the fingertalk he was using wasn’t one Cal recognized. There was a variety of it in Kyaine that he and
Mick were both passable in, but this wasn’t it. “You can understand him?” Cal asked.

“We’re teaching each other,” Mick said, signing back. “He just wants to know who the hell you people all are.”

“Fair enough,” Beatrice said, smiling at Mick, then at Wes. Then at Cal. “You found them.”


“Thank me after we get out of here. Hey, Wes.”

“Hello, Beatrice.”

“Did Lillian tame that thing?” Cal asked, looking at the calm chimera.

“It wasn’t hard,” Lillian told him. “It was already bound with a spell—I assume to obey the demons. It was easy to just rewrite that a little.”

“What happened to your hands?” Travis asked Joey, as they sat up.

“I don’t know.” Joey held up his hands, which were less hands and more claws at the moment. “Those monsters attacked us and they just…turned into claws. I can’t turn them back.”

“Partial shifting is fucking hard,” Louis said, smiling down at Joey. “I’m surprised you pulled it off.”

“Louis! Why are you here?”

“ Heard you were trying to get killed.” Louis patted Joey’s back, pretty hard. “Good to see you.”

Joey hugged him—which doubled as a headbutt—then hugged Travis again. “And what happened to you?”

Travis shrugged. “I got turned into a lizard.”

Joey nodded. “I’m sorry. I’d have stopped it if…”

“Don’t. It wasn’t your fault. And I don’t mind. It’s not like it hurts.”

“Okay,” Mick said, getting Cal’s attention. “He’s going to come with us. Not that he really has a choice.”

“Fine.” Cal looked around at all of them. “Let’s get going…”

A pressure appeared in the air, making Cal wince. Mick and Lillian both raised hands as if to fight, Joey and Louis put their hands on their heads, and even Mathilda reached up to touch her forehead. Sully looked terrified. “Sully? What’s going on?”

“It’s Cameron,” Sully said, looking up. “She’s here.”

Fuck. “I thought that wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“So did I. We have to get out of here, we have to…”

Cal shook his buzzing head. “The rest of them are all up there. Gavin and all his people. We can’t leave them, Sully.”

Sully looked like he wanted to protest, but he just sighed, closing his eyes. “Okay. But we’re all
“Yeah.” Cal looked around again. “The boss demon is up there. But the rest of our backup is too. Let’s go.”

And that was that. They followed him to the stairs and up, collectively seeming worried. Which was fair. Cal was also worried. Nathen’s sword was almost burning in his hand. “What backup?” Mick asked him as they climbed, still signing at Darby—interpreting, probably.

“We ran into Prince Gavin and his retinue,” Cal told him. “They wanted to help.”

“You’ve got a prince up there fighting the queen of demons?” Wes asked. “Not to mention dragons, and Beatrice. You really pulled out all the stops.”

Cal looked at him and smiled. “Did you think for a second that I wouldn’t move the world to get you back?”

“Are they always this saccharine?” Mathilda asked Joey.

“Yes,” Joey answered, holding Travis’s hand. His tail was wrapped around Travis’s waist.

“Disgusting.”

“You get used to it,” Beatrice told her. “Unfortunately.”

“You’re all just fucking jealous,” Cal told them, climbing the stairs faster to get away from them. Unfortunately, they climbed faster with him, and they all got to the stop of the stairs faster. From there, they headed right, towards the hall.

“We’re all just grateful you’re going to be getting laid again,” Beatrice said. To Mick, she stage-whispered, “he’s been getting cranky.”

Mick nodded. “He gets like that.”

“We’ll fix it later,” Wes promised. “Don’t worry.”

Darby made a disgusted face and signed something at Mick. “He wants you to know that we’re gross.”

“He’ll get used to it too,” Cal muttered, approaching the door, slowing down. There was a commotion coming from inside, and Cal’s head pounded in response to it.

Beatrice and Lillian moved past him and went into the room with the chimera, and Mathilda followed them. Wes, Mick, Darby and then Cal went into the room after them, with Sully beside Cal, fretting. Cal understood—he would have liked to go in before them all too. Joey, Travis and Louis followed after them.

Inside the room was chaos. The knights were scattered near the back wall, one of them helping Owen stand, with Bartholomew, bleeding and sporting wings, not far from them. Near the wall the door was on were Gavin and two other knights, weapons out. Demons were arrayed in between them, with a tall lady in a black dress dominating the centre of the room. But she was looking not at the knights or the prince, but the other party in the room. A group of people in white, blazing swords in hand, standing in their own light. At their head was a tall, blonde guy with a spear, who looked nothing like the priest named Raphe but who Cal nonetheless recognized.
He tightened his grip on his sword.

They stood there, just taking in the scene. It was wrong. All of this was wrong. They shouldn’t be here. They shouldn’t be. They shouldn’t…none of this should…

“What the fuck?” Sully asked, voice quiet.

“Ah, there he is.” The woman turned, her crown of horns reflecting some of the angels’ light. She took a step towards him. “Hello, Nathen.”

He recognized her. They’d met, once. She’d been younger. The Obelisk, she’d been there. She’d stood against him. She’d fought when he’d come. And she’d staggered him, enough that he hadn’t noticed Meryan for a moment.

“Cameron,” he said. That was her name. “Lord of demons.” And the other one, he’d never met the other one, but he knew, he remembered that one from more recently. “And you’re Raphael, the one they call archangel.”

“That’s correct,” Raphael said, bowing his head. “If it pleases my lord.”

“It does not.” He tested his sword, took a step forward. They were wrong, both of them were wrong, they shouldn’t exist. He’d stop them. Stop them from existing. The world didn’t need them. “I appreciate you gathering here, however.”

Nathen swung his blade, his power striking out against both of them. “My lord!” Raphael cried.

“He’s not your lord,” Cameron growled, extending claws. “He’s a monster.”

“Cal!” It was a distant voice, and Nathen ignored it. He charged at Cameron, sword catching in her claws. He pushed against her, regretting that he lacked his total power at the moment, pressing, pressed against. Raphael approached him from behind and Nathen turned, slashing at him now, knocking that divine spear back. Cameron surged from behind and Nathen turned again, and Raphael prepared to attack.

A burst of chaotic power, a flame in the air, and Rawen was there in between them, interfering, again. Again. He pushed Cameron and Raphael away easily, grabbing Nathen’s arm, power holding him in place. “Enough, Nathen. Don’t.”

“Let me go, Rawen,” Nathen hissed, struggling. “Don’t interfere. I need to…”

“Purify the world, I know. I can’t let you.”

“You…will let me…”

“I won’t. Because you’ll hate yourself for it someday. And I’m your friend, so I can’t let that happen.”

“You are no friend,” Nathen grunted, flexing his power as best he could. It broke through the small room in a wave, pressing Rawen back, breaking him away from Nathen’s power. But then the two humans jumped on him, insects, worthless.

No, no... don’t... Nathen was going to crush them, tear them apart, purify the world of their corrupting... if you hurt them... don’t hurt them or I’ll...

Cal cried out as Wes wrenched the sword from his hand, stomped on it to snap it again. And he
nearly fell over, supported only by Mick’s arms. “What the…” Blinking, he got his bearings. “Aw, fuck.”

He hadn’t been himself there. At all. For a good several minutes. He’d been Nathen. And that had been…

Terrifying.

His single-mindedness was insane. He was insane.

“It seems that…deliberation is required,” Raphael said, watching Cal carefully. “We shall withdraw. Bartholomew. You are neglecting your mission.”

“I’m not,” Bartholomew insisted from the back wall. “I’m multitasking. The other thing is also under control.”

He’d said he had something else to do in Pelican Bay, Cal remembered vaguely.

“Hm.” And the angels all teleported out of the room at once in a flash of light.

The demons were doing the same, one at a time and minus the ostentatious flash. “Hm,” Cameron agreed. “A brief reprieve until we can…decide. Until later.”

Decide what? But Cal couldn’t ask, because she was gone. He looked over to where he’d thrown Rawen. He wasn’t there either.

“Sorry for all that,” Bartholomew said, sounding tired. “I’d explain, but the world’s about to end somewhere else and I need to go. Sullivan, I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah, I should fucking think so,” Sully said. He was shaken. Surprised. Scared, Cal thought. Fair enough. Cal had probably scared him.

Bartholomew teleported out without another word, leaving just them.

“Well,” said Owen, swaying a little.

“Indeed, what the fuck?” Gavin asked, as they all moved to join in the centre of the room. Everyone seemed to be accounted for, and with the dragons, Wes, Mick, Travis and Darby, that brought them to twenty-one people. And Lillian’s chimera.

Cal smiled. “I guess I owe a few explanations.” He was not in the mood for explanations. Especially because he only understood half of what had happened. But they were all looking at him. “But first —this is Wes and Mick, and that’s Travis.” He pointed at them all in turn. “And Louis and Mathilda. They’re only here for the treasure. And that’s Darby, we found him down there too.” Darby was just sort of looking like he might run, but that was fair. Cal hoped that Mick would tell him what was happening. Not that he expected Mick knew any better than the rest of them.

“Hi,” Owen said, looking funny at Louis and Mathilda. Cal hoped he didn’t decide to do the dragon slaying thing.

But before he could step in—or introduce the other half of their big party, Gavin spoke up. “Can Owen get a healer?” Gavin asked. “He’s a bit loopy.”

“Sure,” Mick said, crossing over and putting a hand on Owen’s head. “You’ve got a concussion,” he declared.
“I got pushed through a wall,” Owen told him, grinning like a fool. “And a roof. And two floors. And then almost through another wall.”

What the fuck had he been doing? And here Cal had assumed all the action had happened downstairs.

Then he noticed the hole in the ceiling. And the dead chimera right underneath it.

What the fuck had he been doing?

“That’ll do it,” Mick said. “There.” He took his hand away.

“Oh, wow, I was way more out of it than I thought.” Owen’s voice even seemed clearer.

“You don’t fucking say,” Edwin chimed in, looking down at his glowing sword in consternation.

“Okay, let’s get out of here,” Owen said with a nod.

“I’ll explain everything once we’re clear of the fortress, okay?” Cal said. “Promise.” They were going to want answers. That was fair. Cal wanted answers too.


Cal smiled. “Me too. Let’s go. Sully?”

“I doubt they’ll interfere, Cameron said she was letting us go. Sort of.” Sully sounded reasonably sure, he thought. “We can walk if you want, but it’s probably safe to teleport out.”

Cal did not want to walk. Cal wanted to lay down and hug Wes and Mick. “If the prince doesn’t object, take us back to Techen’s Stand, will you? Then we can rest.”

“Yeah. Just give me a second—there are a fuckton of you and teleporting is hard,” Sully grumbled, taking a deep breath as he concentrated.

Cal turned to Mathilda while that happened. “I assume you’re staying?” She was going to want whatever treasure was in here, after all. Cal found that he didn’t want it, whatever it was.

“I shall. I shall take the treasure in the fortress, per our agreement. I do want back the Sceptre, of course,” Mathilda reminded him.

“Right.” Cal had almost forgotten. It was nice of her to ask so politely. “Mick? I told her she could have it in exchange for help.”

“Sure thing.” Without objection, Mick unslung it from his pack and handed it over. “I don’t want to see it ever again.”

“I’ll come with you to the town,” Louis told Joey. “I want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” Joey said, sounding like a petulant younger sibling—which maybe he was. But Cal was absolutely sure that ‘I’m fine,’ was code for ‘I’m going to bang Travis’s brains out.’

“Yeah, yeah, shut it,” Louis said, rolling his eyes. Cal had a feeling he could translate Joey just fine.

“Okay,” Sully said. “Everyone hold the fuck on.”

Cal noticed Mick rapidly signing to Darby, probably explaining what was going to happen. Cal
smiled at the boy, and summoning knowledge he hadn’t used in a while, he signed \textit{it’ll be okay.}

Darby glared at him. Oh well.

Sully’s teleportation was nothing like Rawen’s or Meryan’s, which had been like sliding through a tunnel. This was like being shoved through a hole by the toes, but it worked. Until the hole closed up and they were pulled somewhere else. Cal felt it, felt sick, felt…

They materialized in a light room with white walls, big windows, no carpet and the ocean roaring in the background.

“What the hell?” Cal asked Sully, trying to get his bearings. They were all there, looked like, even Mathilda, who wasn’t supposed to be.

“There it is.”

Cal turned to face the speaker. A boy on a throne made of coral and seaweed. He started to notice the details of his appearance—round eyes, big ears, nice teeth, western complexion—but he stopped, because instead he noticed what the boy was wearing.

Rings, a necklace, a brace, a crown. Made from whitish coral that looked like bone.

Just like the Sceptre. He was wearing all the Sea King’s Regalia.

“Who the fuck are you?” Sully demanded, but Cal knew who he was. Because who else would be wearing all the Regalia?

He stood up, smiling down at them. Looking right at Mathilda, who was holding the Sceptre defensively. “I’m the Sea King,” he said, confirming what Cal already knew. “And you have my Sceptre.”

And, unspoken, was the second part. He wanted it back.
Well, this was bad. Because Cal didn’t need to ask to know that Mathilda wasn’t going to give him the Sceptre, and he didn’t need to ask to know that the Sea King wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

“Funny.” Mathilda held the Sceptre aloft before Cal could even think about trying to defuse the situation. “Because I seem to recall it belonging in my hoard.”

“It was taken from me after I was killed,” the Sea King explained, coming closer to them.

“You’re awfully energetic for a dead guy.” Owen’s hand was on his sword as he said that, but he hadn’t drawn it yet. Maybe they could still talk their way out of this.

“Death does wonders for one’s vitality,” the Sea King said with a smile. Cal couldn’t help but agree. “I feel four hundred years younger. Hand over the Sceptre and I shall return you all whence you came.”

Oh, good. Cal started to agree.

“I think not,” Mathilda interrupted. Fuck. “This Sceptre is my property, and I’ve gone to great lengths to get it back.” Fuck.

Cal had to try. “Mathilda, give him the Sceptre—it’s not more important than us getting the fuck out of here.”

“I disagree. I shall not stand here and allow that which belongs to me to be stolen right from my very hands.” Fuck, she was looking at the Sea King in open challenge. “And if you try to take it, I will kill you.”

“So be it,” the Sea King said, waving.

They were all knocked over by the Sea King’s power in a wash of salty air, Cal kind of landed on Wes, who was nice and soft, and then helped him stand. He smiled as the two of them helped Mick to his feet. Owen was drawing his sword now and Mathilda was jumping at the Sea King and punching him and Cal sighed. “Guess we’re fighting now,” he muttered.

“We outnumber him by quite a lot,” Wes said. “I don’t think we’re fighting for long.”

As he said that, Mathilda kicked the Sea King and slammed him into the back wall. “Guess not.”

“What is the point of a human whose only strength is his magic?” Mathilda asked haughtily.

“Search me,” Owen said, shrugging. “Guess the Sea King wasn’t that…” He trailed off, seeing what Cal already did. The Sea King was getting up.

“I see that you do not comprehend the danger that you court,” the Sea King said as he stood.

He was one of those pontificating villains, Cal reflected. If only they’d tried talking instead of going right to the punching. What could have been.

“And you’re four hundred years old? It doesn’t show in your speech at all. Guys.” Owen said it so casually, like they’d planned this.
And since Lillian, Sully and Mick all moved, Cal could buy it even though he’d fucking been there when they didn’t plan any of it. The Sea King staggered back a step, but then straightened, hand out, and everything was crashing and noise and falling and pain and…

“Ow, fuck,” Cal muttered, lying on top of a pile of rubble and on top of Travis.

“Yeah,” Travis agreed, under Cal. “Um. Get off?”

Cal nodded, and got off, helping Travis stand and taking stock. It looked like the floor had collapsed under them, and now they were in a different room, or at least some of them were. Sir Quentín was there, and Travis, obviously. Cal didn’t see anyone else. “Okay,” he said, sighing. There was a sheaf of coral in front of them that formed a sort of ramp. “We can probably get back up there if we climb up this…”

As he said that, Wes, Mick and Joey walked right through the coral, seeming unscathed. “Woah, where’d you guys come from?”

Wes smiled, letting go of Joey and Mick. “Managed to fall through the floor before the floor fell through. Got a bit startled, I guess.”

“And…that made you fall through the floor?” Cal was very confused.

“One of the side effects of the demons’ experiments,” Mick told him. “Wes can walk through walls.”

“Huh.” Cal looked at him, shrugging. “Well. That’s useful.”

Wes shrugged. “Now that I’m not in a room with wards on the walls, yeah.”

“You’re welcome.” Cal continued looking at him. “Any more powers I should know about?”

Wes grinned now. “Maybe.”

Cool. Cal looked at Mick. “And you?”

Mick just smiled mysteriously. “You’ll see.”

“Travis can turn invisible,” Joey said, pointing at Travis’s skin, which had turned the white of the coral behind them.

He was also blushing. “Not really,” he protested. “I just…blend in. And you can still see my clothes.”

“Oh, good,” Joey said. “A reason to stop wearing them.”

“Then you wouldn’t know I was there.”

“I’d know.”

“Not that this isn’t all fascinating, boys, but let’s see about getting back up there?” Quentin cut in. He’d gone over to the corner and helped up Sir David, who had fallen under some rubble.

“Yeah,” Cal agreed, taking a breath. He looked up and saw Owen passing by the hole in the ceiling. “Hey!”

Owen looked down at them. “You guys okay?”
“We’re not hurt. The prince?” It was technically Cal’s fault that they were here. Hopefully Gavin didn’t see it that way.

“He’s fine. He’s headed out of the castle.” A crash interrupted him. “Listen, you guys find a way out too. I’ll get everyone else out once you’ve cleared the way.”

“Owen, you need our help. You saw what he did.” There was no way Owen was going to be able to handle that guy and his magic by himself.

“It’s fine, I’ve got Mathilda and Lillian up here with me.” Another crash. “I also have the dog kid. I think the others must be with Gavin.”

Maybe Gavin had fallen in a different hole. That meant Beatrice was with him, and Louis. He was probably fine. “This is our fault, Owen. We’ll come up and…”

A thunderclap broke Cal off. “It’s fine. Look, I do shit like this before breakfast every day, okay? Just go and I’ll catch up once I’ve dealt with it.”

And Owen left without letting Cal speak back, and Cal frowned up at the hole. “Asshole.”

“Can’t believe you’re not used to that yet,” Quentin said from behind Cal.

Cal shrugged. “I guess. He did start our relationship by trying to kill my friend.”

“Actually I tried to kill him,” Joey reminded Cal, smiling apologetically at Travis. “I’ll explain later.”

“Are we going to go up there and help him?” Wes asked, as a sort of silence fell in the room above.

Cal sighed, looking at Quentin. “Does Owen mean it when he says he can handle it?”

Quentin nodded. “From what I hear.”

“Then no. Let’s figure a way out of this fucking place—and maybe find the prince too, it sounds like they got separated as well. We’ll let the punchy people do the punching.” Cal had his doubts, but fine.

There was a door on the wall that hadn’t been covered by rubble and Cal headed for it. It led to another, larger room, and he stepped through, taking a look around. It was a dining room. He waved the others to follow him in, and wandered down the length of the table, inspecting the place settings. “They’re perfect,” he muttered.

“The Sea King must be bored,” Mick said, picking up a fork and looking at it. “Looks like it was dragged up from a shipwreck.”

“Maybe it was,” Wes said, arms crossed, keeping an eye on all of them.

It was so good to have them back. It made being in this weird-ass place much more normal. “What are you smiling about?” Mick asked him.

“Just thinking it’s good to have you guys back,” Cal said, brushing his hand before turning to look out the large windows, which had no glass in them. “There’s definitely nothing but the ocean out there. Some boats.”

“Then I guess we’re getting on a boat,” Wes said, coming to look out the window with him, hand on Cal’s back.
Cal nodded. “But how? I don’t suppose any of these powers you won’t list for me can summon a boat over here?”

“I can probably get us to one,” Mick said. “Not because of weird powers, just normal magic. But we should go outside. Assuming there’s an outside.”

“There’s an inside,” Cal said. “There must be a door. The Sea King didn’t strike as the kind of guy who’s jumping out windows when he needs to run errands.” Suddenly he sighed, a little annoyed. “This is not how I expected our grand reunion to go.”

“No?” Mick asked, rubbing Cal’s shoulder. “How’d you expect it to go?”

“I figured there’d be hugging and kissing and talking about everything that happened,” Cal lamented. “Instead of running for our lives from another crazy thing.”

“Seems more in keeping for us to run from the crazy thing,” Wes said. “Don’t worry, we’ll do the other stuff once we’re clear.”

“Or we could just be Joey and Travis,” Mick added, looking over his shoulder.

Cal looked with him, saw the two of them making out on the other side of the room, as if nobody else was here. He rolled his eyes. “Guys, focus, there’s a crisis.”

“There’s a hallway out here,” David called, from the room’s other doorway. “Looks like it might lead out.”

The castle shook as he said that, and Cal looked up. “Let’s go.” They headed for the doorway, even Travis and Joey, who’d stopped kissing at the shake. So that was all it took, apparently. Cal snagged a fancy goblet off the table as they left, because why not?

He stuck it in Mick’s bag and they entered the hallway, vaguely annoyed that his own bag was in a base camp in the mountains and he probably wasn’t going to be getting it back anytime soon.

“Cal,” Mick said, as they stepped into the hallway. “I swear to God if that thing is cursed.”

“It’s fine,” Cal said, shrugging. “What’s the worst that could happen? The Sea King might kidnap us again? Going to be hard since Owen and Mathilda are going to beat him to a pulp.”

“Where did you even find any of these people?” Wes asked, taking up the rear.

“Well, I found Mathilda in a cave when we stole the Sceptre from her,” Cal said. “Then she found me again because I accidentally touched some magical shit in the cave that told her where I was, so oops. Owen’s the prince’s fiancé. We were passing through the same town, but then it turned out that Owen killed Joey’s dad a while ago so they had a fight that led to us all being friends and here we are.”

“Well, that clears that up,” Wes said, dry.

“And then you hired Beatrice,” Mick added.

“No, that was before. She was drunk in an inn and she looked sad. Plus Lillian is useful. That was just after I met the devil, who it turns out is a depressed monk, and the crazy old lady from before, who’s Nathen’s ex-girlfriend. Also every priest we’ve met since leaving Merket is an angel and Nathen is probably God, so keep that in mind next time you want to make fun of me.” Cal took a breath. “I think that’s everything. What did you guys get up to?”
They did that thing where they looked at each other over Cal’s head. Cal had forgotten how much he hated that thing. “I learned how to walk through walls,” Wes said. “And sometimes float.”

Mick nodded. “I can see through things. And possibly read minds, but I haven’t tested that yet.”

“We played stones a lot.”

“Yeah, we got really good at that. Wes taught me how to use his axe.”

“We had sex pretty often,” Wes said, as if he’d just remembered that.

“Pretty often,” Mick agreed.

“Well good for you,” Cal muttered with a sigh. There was a lot of loud crashing from behind them and Cal was choosing to pretend it was normal fighting sound. There was probably lots of fighting in the throne room at the moment.

“Guessing you didn’t?”

“With who?” Cal asked, rolling his eyes.

“Sully.”

Cal blinked, looked over his shoulder at Wes. “No.”

“We would understand, Cal,” Mick said.

“Mick.” Cal caught up with him, took his hand. “I didn’t.”

Mick looked at him a second, then smiled. “I know. We’re just giving you a hard time.”

“I’ve had a hard enough time,” Cal muttered. He hoped Mick and Wes hadn’t spent this whole time thinking he’d do that.

“Look,” Travis said, pointing. “People.”

There were indeed people at the end of this hallway, a tall man and a girl at the lead of a small group, heading up a flight of steps. “The Sea King’s people?” Cal asked. It didn’t seem like they’d noticed them.

“Well, if they’re not more of your people,” Wes said.

“Yeah, maybe we should…”

“The exit’s over here,” Quentin called, getting Cal’s attention. He’d gone down a branching hallway and was standing in front of an open door, through which Cal could see sunlight.

“Okay.” Cal nodded, turned that way. “Let’s clear ourselves a way out and then we’ll go back and get them.” If Mathilda and Lillian couldn’t handle a few random people, he was going to fire both of them anyway.

Mathilda didn’t work for him and therefore couldn’t be fired, but Cal would find a way.

He led the way down the hallway and they emerged into a large, mostly unadorned vestibule with two curving staircases going up on either side of them. The large front doors of the castle were open and it looked like there was a little courtyard out there. Cal could see open ocean and boats.
On each set of steps was a young guy with a knife in hand, both frozen as they looked down at Cal and his people. “This is a really busy castle considering it belongs to an evil wizard who lives in the middle of the ocean,” Cal commented.

“I was just thinking that,” one of the guys said. He was heavy and pale and looked extremely worried. “Are you trying to escape as well?”

Cal nodded, looking up at him. “As well. So I guess Gavin’s people came through here.”

“Someone came through here, but I didn’t ask most of their names on account of it being a very time sensitive situation. I’m trying to save someone’s life, you see. So I don’t really have time for pleasantries.”

“Right.” Cal got that. “Fair. Well, you should go, but be careful…” Thunder rolled overhead. It had been for a few minutes now, but that was one was particularly loud. “There’s a lot of fighting going on in the throne room, which I assume is where you’re headed.”

“You assume correctly,” The guy said. “But I’ll be fine. In return, be careful, most of the ships out there are pirate ships and I expect they don’t take well to visitors.”

“Thanks,” Cal said, nodding. “We’ll keep that in mind. But we need a ride.”

“My ship will probably give you one. It’s called the Coral Witch. It should be easy to spot, it’s different from the others. But I don’t know how you’ll get there.”

“Okay. We’ll figure that part out. Thank you.”

“I guess I’ll see you soon,” the guy said, and then he and his friend hurried up the stairs, towards the throne room.

“Well,” Travis said as he went off. “That’s convenient.”

“Yeah,” Cal agreed, heading for the main doors. “Let’s see if we can find this ship and get onto it. Mick?”

“I can get us there if we can find it.”

It was pouring rain outside, a thunderstorm having kicked up from nowhere. Clouds swirled overhead and the water churned. A full-scale battle was going on between a large armada of ships with black sails and a smaller group of vessels that Cal recognized as belonging to Dolovai’s navy. “Well, this is fucking insane.”

The castles shook and Cal turned to look at it. It wasn’t tall, but it rose high enough to block the sky from here. But it was coming apart, which might have had something to do with the huge fucking dragon that was breathing fire on it back there. “Goddammit, Mathilda.”

“I don’t know what you thought the matriarch was going to do,” Joey muttered. “She decided the Sea King was her enemy. Of course she’s going to kill him.”

“She doesn’t have to kill the rest of us to do it,” Wes growled.

“She doesn’t have to care about the rest of us,” Travis told him.

“Cal,” Mick said, looking out. “The ship. I think it’s that one.” Cal looked where he was pointing, saw one lone ship fighting the pirate vessels that wasn’t naval.
Cal nodded. “Yeah, it’s got to be that one. Let’s go…”

“Hold on,” David said, pointing somewhere else. “That’s the naval flagship. They’ll be in charge of the battle.”

“Then we’ll be in their way,” Cal reasoned. He did notice that Gavin wasn’t out here, which meant he was probably over there.

And as he said that, Louis—or at least a green dragon that he assumed was Louis—appeared in the sky and started blitzing pirate ships, obviously sourced from the flagship. So Gavin was probably there.

“They’re too busy with the battle,” Wes said. “They’re not going to be able to do what Cal needs them to do.”

“Which is…”

Cal smiled. “Someone has to rescue all those people in the castle before Mathilda fucking sinks it into the ocean. Mick.”

“Everyone hold hands. This is going to be a bit tricky.”

They did, battered by the rain. Then, in a blink, they weren’t on anything steady, wooden boards moving beneath their feat, the sky having moved. There had been no discernable shift. “Wow,” Cal said, looking around the deck of the ship. “That was…abrupt.”

“I got better at a lot of things thanks to this,” Mick said, gesturing to himself.

“Um…” Joey said, getting Cal’s attention.

A few people were sort of around them with swords out. Fair enough. “Hey, it’s okay,” Cal said to them, hands up. “We’re not pirates. I need to speak to your captain.”

“Like hell you’re not pirates,” one of them said, taking a step forward.

Wes just reached out and gently took his sword away from him, and Cal pushed past him, heading for the front part of the ship where a tall woman was standing at the wheel. He approached her, trusting the others to handle the crew. “Are you the captain?”

“Yes, and you’re trespassing. Who the fuck are you?” she demanded. She was an angular western woman with long hair.

“Cal. My people just escaped the Sea King’s castle. Or some of them did. I need you go to around the side there and rescue the rest of them.”

“I have more important things to do…”

“I know. But that stupid dragon is about to sink the castle into the water and my people are going to sink with it—and so are yours. I ran into them on my way out.” As Cal said that, the dragon disappeared, probably shrinking again. It kind of looked like another creature was sinking into the ocean as well, but he didn’t get a good look and it was dark.

The captain looked at him now. “Pax made it in safely?”

Cal shrugged. “He looked fine to me.”
The captain sighed. “You’re right. That thing isn’t going to stand for much longer. Alright, we’re going—but for reference I don’t appreciate you trespassing and we’ll be discussing that after we all survive.”

“Deal,” Cal said. “Is there anything we can do to…holy fuck.”

A sea serpent had risen out of the water and was attacking the naval flagship, which, Cal noticed, was also trying to get closer to the castle.

“Just stay out of my people’s way,” the captain told him, seemingly unperturbed. Maybe she saw stuff like this a lot. “We’ll get there and get your people out.”

“Thank you.”

Cal stepped away from the helm, rejoining his group. “We’re on the way to pull them out. She doesn’t seem all that worried about the huge snake.”

“Louis is going to kill it,” Joey said, pointing. Louis was indeed banking around to attack the serpent.

“You could help him,” Wes suggested.

“Not really.”

“Joey doesn’t transform,” Cal told him. “He’s touchy about it.”

“I’m not.”

“He also doesn’t have wings.”

“Okay, I’m touchy about that.”

Travis put his arms around Joey, smiling.

Cal rolled his eyes and looked around the deck of the ship, where sailors were prowling with weapons, looking nervous that pirates might come too close.

Then he frowned. There was someone standing there at the rail, fire streaking from her hands as she launched it at the various pirate ships. She was dressed head to toe in a green veil, but it didn’t matter. Cal recognized her.

Nathen recognized her.

She turned, probably feeling his attention. And with a step back that was halted by the rail, she raised her hands, fire blooming.

“Woah, woah!” Cal raised his hands, and the others moved as if to defend him. “Fucking cool it, lady.”

She did, blinking through her eye slit. “That’s not a very in character thing for you to say, Nathen.”

Cal sighed. Of course. “My name’s Cal. Nathen’s…sleeping.”

“Hmm.” She lowered her hands. “In deference to the situation, I shall believe you. For now. Yet even sleeping, he had you recognize me.”

Cal nodded. “I have little bits and pieces, that’s all. That’s all I ever have from him. Sheheren, that’s
your name.”

She shook her head. “I prefer Sharon these days, Cal.”

“Okay.” Cal sighed, waving everyone around him down. “It’s fine, guys. It’s fine. She’s not going to do anything, and I have Nathen under control.”

Sharon snorted. “You do not, young man, and it is dangerous to think you do. It is not in Nathen’s nature to be controlled.”

Cal smiled. “Nor in Rawen’s, but you still tried.”

“And look how that worked out.”

“That part I don’t quite remember,” Cal admitted. “Bits and pieces. Plus I don’t think he was there for it, so.” He shrugged. “You should get back to the battle.”

Sharon nodded, turned around. Cal moved back a little. “What the fuck?” Wes demanded.

Cal shook his head. “Nathen knew her.”

“No,” Cal said, interrupting Mick. “She’s a god. Like Nathen. Like Rawen and Meryan.”

“Meryan is the old lady,” Mick guessed. “Rawen?”

“Friend of Nathen’s.” Cal shrugged. “Claims he’s the devil.”

“And she knows him?”

“She’s his mother.”

“Well, that’s not fucking ominous at all,” Wes said, crossing his arms.

“I’m surrounded by fucking ominous shit,” Cal told them, shaking his head. “I’m getting used to it.”

Wes and Mick looked at each other again, then they hugged Cal in tandem. “Sorry,” Wes said, voice low, “that you had to get used to it without us.”

Cal shook his head. “It wasn’t your fault. It was mine.”

“Don’t blame yourself,” Mick told him.

“Too late.”

“This is the sort of thing,” David said, “that the prince might have liked to know before he helped you.”

“He didn’t ask.” Cal looked out at the ocean, watching the battle between Louis and the sea serpent with Joey. “I imagine we’ll all be due some explanations once this is all over and done with.” He let Wes and Mick keep holding him. He wanted that.

The sea serpent launched at the flagship, and then it spasmed and went limp, sliding into the water, dead. Louis hadn’t done anything. “Weird.”

“Someone on the ship must have killed it,” Travis said to Joey, who nodded.
“Louis is going to be annoyed.”

“He’ll live,” Travis muttered.

“Do you ever feel like you’re kind of just there?” Mick asked.

Cal chuckled. “After all the times when we were in the middle of what was happening, I’m okay to be kind of just here.”

And indeed, they were just kind of there, standing, while the Coral Witch got closer to the castle, the naval vessels dealing with most of the fighting. Occasionally a pirate ship would get too close and Sharon would roast it, but it seemed like the pirates had learned their lesson early and mostly stayed away.

Still, somehow, they reached the edge of the castle at the same time as the flagship. There was something sickening in the air, a stain in Cal’s sight as he looked at the castle, a stain that he recognized. “Do you guys see that?”

“There’s a bit of a smear…” Wes said.

“It’s powerful,” Mick added.

“It’s the thing from the swamp,” Cal whispered. “The monster that was controlling Toby’s body.”

What the fuck was it doing here?

But as soon as Cal wondered that, it disappeared. And the castle started to fall completely apart. The storm was dissipating already as well. Seemed like the battle was over.

“Hopefully they’re okay,” Joey said. They could see people jumping from the castle onto the flagship—seemed like there’d been no rush for them to get here after all. One of the people was a wolf, which Cal assumed was Darby. He also saw Mathilda’s wings and Lillian’s chimera.

With a rustle, Bartholomew the angel landed beside them, and Cal glared at him. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

He looked down at Cal. “I could ask you the same thing. Where’s Sullivan?”

“With the prince somewhere, I guess,” Cal said, mildly concerned. But Sully was probably fine. “This was your other business.”

“Yeah. Told you I had it under control.”

“You call this under control?”

“Well…admittedly, not really. But anyway. The Sea King got away.”


“You should. He’s dangerous.”

“I just got Wes and Mick back an hour ago. I don’t care about anything else right now.”

“Aw,” Mick said, pulling Cal closer. “We love you too.”

Cal smiled, and there was a commotion on the other side of the Coral Witch. They were pulling
people out of the water. It proved to be the two crewmen they’d met on the way in. And, shaking, the heavier guy ignored everyone and went immediately to the captain, clutching something in his hand. “He looks upset.”

“The Sea King is possessing his boyfriend,” Bartholomew told Cal.

Ouch. That was rough. “Well. I’m glad he got away, then.”

Wes nodded. “Me too. Losing one of those is hard. I hope he gets him back someday.”

The guy—Pax, the captain had said he was named—had spoken quietly to the captain and was holding her hand now, and the two of them were hugging, crying together. It was…hard.

Cal looked away, and hugged Wes and Mick again. “I’m so fucking glad you guys are safe,” he said, tears falling. “I was so worried about you.”

“God, Cal,” Mick whispered. “We were so worried about you too.”

“You have no idea.”

Cal nodded, sniffing. Joey and Travis were hugging again too. “I just…I don’t know what the fuck I would have done if I’d come all the way there and not gotten you back.”

“Tried again,” Mick told him. “Which is exactly what he’ll do. You’d have kept trying until you had us.”

“Yeah.” Cal nodded again. “Yeah, I would have. I wouldn’t have given up. I won’t give up. I love you guys.”

“We love you too, Cal,” Wes said, and Cal felt it, and he cried.

The clouds clearing, the battle over, Cal just stood there and the three of them held each other. Together, and safe, finally.
It’s Hard to Get a Quiet Moment to Yourselves When Everyone Just Wants to Talk about the Fate of the World

It had been a long day and a lot of people owed each other explanations, so they all kind of gathered on the deck of the large naval flagship. Gavin had started by giving the fleet admiral and Natalie’s people a rundown of how they’d gotten here, which came off as impressively coherent seeing as how it had been a mostly incomprehensible sequence of events for those of them who’d lived through them. Cal was impressed.

“So basically he just invited himself along?” Wes asked Cal quietly.

Cal nodded. “Basically. I think he was bored.”

“Worked out okay for us,” Mick said. “Though now we’re stuck with him for God knows how long.”

“No, I really don’t.” Cal had a feeling it would be a while.

“It’s a good thing we took a shortcut here, since it transpires you’d not have been in Pelican Bay when we came to help,” Gavin was saying to the fleet admiral, arms crossed.

“Apologies, your Highness. But there was a rather pressing situation involving a dangerous magic-practitioner.” The fleet admiral was old enough to be Gavin’s grandfather and was obviously nervous. Which was fair with Gavin being a prince and all, but also kind of silly. “Not to mention the fact that we didn’t know you were coming.”

“There is that,” Gavin admitted with a slightly petulant sigh. “You might also have mentioned that had you not left when you did, my people wouldn’t have had a way out of the castle.” Oh, well at least he knew he was being silly.

“I have every faith that you’d have managed to commandeer a pirate ship, your Highness,” the admiral said, smiling. “Nonetheless, I am pleased that it all worked out as it did.”

“Yes, me too. Thank you for your cooperation. I realize I was not being very rational.”

“None of us is rational when the people we care about are in peril, your Highness.”

According to Beatrice and Sully, Gavin had been almost manic about rescuing the people in the castle—about rescuing Owen. He’d evidently threatened Sully and Louis and then taken over the flagship in all in a span of fifteen minutes. Cal could relate.

“No, we’re not,” Gavin agreed. “Okay, speaking of which.” He turned, looking at Pax, who was standing there with Natalie. “You’re dating the Sea King? How’s that going?”

Cal thought he could be a little less gruff about it seeing as Pax’s boyfriend was still evil and now they didn’t know where he was. It was kind of a rough situation.

“It’s going very well, actually,” Pax said firmly. “Our relationship has never been stronger.” He didn’t sound upset, which was some good compartmentalizing.

“My son Nate is the one wearing the Sea King’s Regalia,” Natalie put in, saving poor Pax. “It’s possessed him.” Man, Cal thought. Both of them were really having a bad day then.
Poor Pax wasn’t all that interested in being saved, it seemed. “The Sea King possessed him. That’s an important distinction because it abrogates responsibility from Nate for all the evil Sea King things that the Sea King—not Nate—has been doing. Abrogate means to do away with. You seem like you probably know that, your Highness. I was defining it because I’m not sure your ox-friend here knows.” While Cal tried not to snort at the look on Owen’s face, Pax continued. “The point being that the Sea King is a malevolent consciousness who was allowed to form when the Regalia came into contact with one another and he’s taken over Nate’s body, so don’t make the mistake of thinking that it’s Nate who’s evil.”

Well, that explained why people who held pieces of the Regalia went insane.

“You talk too much,” Owen said gruffly, giving Pax a look. “Just get to the point.”

“The point is incredibly nuanced, Sir Ox,” Pax insisted, “and I don’t want to distill it and risk missing out on important details that would lead you to stabbing my boyfriend again.”

“Which would lead to you stabbing me again,” Owen finished. Cal hadn’t realized that Pax had stabbed him. He seemed fine.

“Yes, probably,” Pax said, very confident.

“Which would lead to me stabbing you, so yeah, I can see why that would be bad.”

“You could try.” Someone should tell him that encouraging Owen was a bad idea.

“I’m very good at stabbing things,” Owen explained.

“Me too. Should we have a contest?” Pax asked, smiling nicely. “Oh, wait, we already did and I won on account of you got stabbed and I didn’t.”

Cal liked Pax. It was kind of too bad he already had a job.

“Anyway,” Gavin interrupted. “The Sea King got away. And he took your boyfriend with him.”

“Sorry about that,” Owen, sounding only slightly apologetic.

“Only part of him,” Pax said, still calm. He pulled a round medallion out from inside his shirt. “Nate’s soul is in here. The Sea King has his body—which is still bad, don’t get me wrong, I quite like Nate’s body and I do think we ought to retrieve it soon—but the important parts of Nate are in here.”

Cal glanced at his own recently recovered boyfriends, thinking that if he’d only gotten their souls back he wouldn’t be quite so pleased. Mostly because though he loved them with all his heart, there were also very physical parts of them he was very glad to have back in addition to their minds and souls.

Still, he was happy for Pax.

“Well, that’s weird,” Owen said, simplifying Cal’s thoughts rather a lot.

“Do you see me judging your relationships?” Pax snapped.

“I meant how did that happen?” Owen said, sounding tired.

Natalie had the answer to that one. “Pax’s knife cuts souls,” she said, as if that made sense.
Actually…Cal leaned back. “Didn’t we steal something like that about a year ago?” he asked Mick.

Mick nodded, speaking quietly. “Yes. From a Lady Redwater, if I remember right?”

“Sold it in Merket, didn’t you?” Wes asked. “Wonder how he got it?”

Cal wondered too, but there was no time to ask.

“One of my knives, I have several,” Pax was saying. “Listen, I don’t suppose the mysterious voice you heard at the end of the battle told you where it was taking Nate, did it? Because that would be useful.”

“No,” Owen said with a shake of his head.

“The magic it used was very powerful,” Mathilda said, arms crossed over her chest. “He could be anywhere.”

“Great,” Gavin muttered. “So we have no leads on the Sea King.”

“Not quite,” Cal said. He took a breath. He’d been thinking about this since the end of the battle. “That creature, that entity. I’ve met it before. Around the end of last winter. It was possessing a dead body in a swamp and it attacked us.” He tried to keep his voice even as he thought of Toby, but that wasn’t the part that mattered right now. What mattered was that he’d encountered that thing twice, with one common denominator. “It was trying to steal a magical stone, which isn’t important except that we were there for the stone on the orders of the same man who sent us after the Regalia.” Two jobs for Theodore in a row had ended with an encounter with that monster and Cal couldn’t imagine it was a coincidence.

“You think that thing knows Theodore?” Mick asked him, frowning. Cal hadn’t mentioned it to them yet. There hadn’t been a lot of time.

“I think they have more common interests than you’d expect from strangers,” Cal said. He wasn’t sure what to think, but it was something, anyway.

“This Theodore might know something, then,” Gavin muttered thoughtfully.

“Aren’t we getting a bit off track?” Owen asked, obviously missing the significance of all this.

“No.” Fortunately Natalie was both sensible and patient. Cal liked her too. “Because the Sea King represents a huge threat—the collected power of everyone here is not insubstantial and he overpowered all of us. That shadow is our only lead on him—and Theodore might be our only lead on the shadow.”

“We’ll go see him,” Gavin said. “Where is he?”

“Merket,” Cal told him. He thought about mentioning that Theodore was kind of a creep, but decided against that for now. It wasn’t important to the task at hand.

“I’m not going up there for the winter again,” Gavin said with a scowl. “We’ll summon him to Pelican Bay when we get there and talk to him. One of the benefits of being royal. We’ll get your Nate back,” he promised, addressing Pax.

“I know,” Pax said, sounding certain. Cal wished he’d been that certain when he’d lost Wes and Mick. “I very rarely fail at things and I suspect you’re the same. Between the two of us we’ll probably be fine. I guess everyone else will be there too. They can hold our coats.”
Well, okay then. Cal had never felt that his supposedly godlike powers were more useless than he
did right now. Not that he actually seemed to have any godlike powers, so maybe Pax wasn’t wrong.

“Works for me. Actually, on that note,” Gavin turned to Cal. “Answers. You promised them to me at
the Citadel. Who the fuck are you?”

Shit. Cal had hoped that Gavin would forget about that in all the chaos. But he shrugged. “I told you,
I’m God. It’s kind of a long story but the short version is that the Catechism worships this guy named
Nathen only they’ve forgotten his name, and I’m the reincarnation of Nathen. That’s why the
demons and angels are all fucking around with my life.”

He took a bit of a page out of Pax’s book and just sort of put it out there all at once, but talking that
exhaustively was harder than it seemed.

Owen seemed skeptical, which was fair. “You don’t look much like God.”

“Because, what?” Cal challenged, figuring the confidence bit didn’t work if he didn’t keep it up.
“You’ve seen him before?”

“Fair enough,” Owen was forced to admit, though he looked unhappy. A lot of people looked
unhappy. Too bad.

“Calvin is telling the truth,” Bartholomew said, from behind Owen. “Which he really shouldn’t be,
the more people who know about this, the more people are in danger.” He said that with a pointed
look at Cal.

“People are in danger anyway,” Sully snorted. “They have a right to know why.”

“Yeah, they do,” Bartholomew said, sounding resigned and leaving Cal wondering why he’d
brought it up if he was just going to immediately change his mind. “I’ll be leaving shortly. I need to
report all this to the archangel. But we’re very concerned about the Sea King, and I think he’ll be
very concerned about that shadow as well. You’ll likely have our aid in combatting him.”

“Your aid is dubious at best,” Pax said darkly, and Cal kind of agreed. He’d had one job at the
Citadel and he hadn’t managed to pull it off.

“Every effort will be made to defeat the Sea King without hurting Nate, you have my word.”

“Wonderful.” Pax didn’t sound convinced, which Cal wasn’t either. He doubted that angels were
going to care about Nate in the midst of what could be something really dangerous.

“Bartholomew wouldn’t lie,” Sully said, sounding convinced.

“He did tell me his name was Augustus Drake for several weeks.”

“Well…” Sully didn’t seem to have an answer to that. “He’s a bit weird.”

“Thank you for the resounding support, Sullivan,” Bartholomew said, holding back a laugh. “Can
we talk?”

At Sully’s nod, the two of them went off, leaving Cal wondering what they were talking about. Sully
would probably tell him later anyway.

“This is turning into quite the coalition,” Gavin said, looking around at them like they were his court.
“The crown, the navy, God, some angels, some demons, some dragons. I almost feel bad for the Sea
King and company.”

“Don’t make the mistake of underestimating them,” Sharon said, just when Cal had thought she might stay quiet the whole meeting. “The Sea King is very powerful—and I expect that shadow is as well. And the pirate lord is nothing to scoff at either. From what I can tell, he’s got very powerful magic behind him. Even with most of his ships captured, he’s dangerous. All three of them are.”

“Do you know what kind of magic?” Mick asked cautiously.

“No, I’m afraid not,” Sharon told him, and Cal wondered if that were true. “There was too much going on for me to get a good sense of it.” He was watching her carefully, and felt her keeping an eye on him too.

“It felt like necromancy,” Lillian said immediately. “I was distracted during the fight. But it felt like necromancy to me.” Beatrice patted her hand.

“Necromancy doesn’t blast holes in people and walls,” Gavin accused.

“I can,” Lillian disagreed, before Cal could. “If it’s used properly.”

“You must me count me as part of your coalition,” Mathilda announced suddenly. “As a warning. I have things to do and I cannot sit around for months—if you wish to fight the Sea King again, you may call me, but I will only be staying with you until we are off this wretched ship and I can fly home.”

“Flying over water is hard,” Louis clarified. Fair enough, Cal figured.

“Too bad. Having you around is useful,” Owen said, smiling at her.

“I know,” Mathilda said, smiling back. “You are also useful. For a human.”

“I try.”

“It shows.” Mathilda looked at Gavin. “I want my Sceptre back, but I am a busy person. I will give you the means to call me when you need my help again. I trust this will be sufficient.” Cal wondered if Gavin was going to get an imp on his arm. He also wondered what exactly it was that Mathilda had to do. Did dragons have social lives?

But then, she had had furniture in her cave. Maybe she often had guests.

“Yes, it should be,” Gavin said, very graciously. “Thank you.”

Darby put his hand on Owen’s arm and started signing back and forth at him. Mick had been interpreting for him most of the conversation, but it seemed like Owen could understand him pretty well. “What are they saying?” Cal asked Mick.

“Just that Darby wants to help Owen,” Mick muttered.

“Man, you rescue them and then they just go and bond with the first knight they see,” Cal said, shaking his head. “Kids these days.”

“No loyalty,” Wes agreed.

“He said he’s from too far away to get home,” Pax said suddenly, getting Owen’s attention. “And he’d rather stay and help you than return anyway. I think he likes you. For some reason.”
“Did you have to add that last part?” Owen asked, and Cal thought that yes, he did.

“Yes,” Pas said, signing with Darby. He was obviously fluent. Weird. “He says you’re strong, and he wants to help you.”

“Figured we’d adopt kids someday,” Gavin said to Owen, smiling. “Not quite what I had in mind, but okay.”

“He’s a trainee, calm down.”

That wasn’t the vibe Cal was getting.

“So you’re saying yes to him, then?” Gavin asked.

Owen just sighed, signed at Darby again. “Wasn’t expecting a lunkhead like him to know fingertalk,” Cal said.

“Northern sign,” Mick said. “It’s closer to what Darby uses than southern fingertalk.”

Cal nodded, yawning. Okay. “If there’s nothing else pressing, some of us have had a very long day coming at the end of a very long few months and would like to rest.”

“I can offer you all rooms on the Coral Witch,” Natalie said to Cal, but mostly to Gavin. “I know the admiral is about to do that, but he’s got at least five dozen prisoners in addition to his own crew now.” Cal had watched them take prisoners. There were a lot of them.

“It seems far more appropriate for the prince to remain on the Queen Geneva,” the admiral protested.

“Captain Natalie is right, your people are packed to the rafters already,” said Gavin. “I don’t want to kick half your crew out of what’s left of their space. I’ll kick her crew out instead.”

“Surprised he’d be that accommodating,” Wes said as the admiral relented.

Cal shrugged. “He gave up some of his rooms for us when we passed through Techen’s Stand. He’s an asshole, but he’s not an asshole about it, you know?”

Wes laughed, patting Cal on the back. “God, I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” Cal said, barely getting the chance to smile at him before he noticed Mathilda coming over. “Hold on. I’m sorry we couldn’t get your Sceptre back in the end.”

“It is fine,” Mathilda said, looking at the three of them. “At least one of us got what we wanted.”

“We’ll get it back eventually,” Cal promised her.

“I know. Once we are off this wretched flammable contraption I shall contact some friends of mine and track the Sceptre down.”

Oh. Cal narrowed his eyes at her. “And you’ll tell the rest of us when you do, right?”

“Of course.” Mathilda smiled. “As much as it pains me to admit it, I was not able to defeat him even with the minimal help offered by your friends. I would be foolish to attempt it again on my own, and do I seem like a fool to you?”

“You don’t,” Cal told her. But she wouldn’t be trying it on her own.
“Exactly. This dark creature—you’ve met it before.” Mathilda glanced around. “I should like to hear about this, but in deference to your being tired, I shall wait until another day.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you,” Wes said to Mathilda, as she turned away. “For helping Cal. And for not eating him.”

“He was useful. Eating him would be shortsighted,” Mathilda said, joking, before striding off.

“I like her,” Wes said.

“Me too.”

“It definitely worked out a lot better than it could have,” Mick agreed.

Cal nodded, but before he could say anything else he was beset by another dragon, Joey’s arms wrapping around him suddenly and from nowhere. “Uh. Hi?”

“Hi,” Joey said quietly, holding Cal. “I didn’t get a chance before. To say thank you. For helping me get Travis back.”

Cal smiled, hugged Joey back. He was warm. Cal felt warm. “You’re welcome. Thank you for helping me get Wes and Mick back.”

Joey nodded, taking a deep breath before letting Cal go. He wiped at his eyes. “I guess we should hug Sully too.”

“Yeah.”

“Why are we hugging me?” Sully asked, joining them.

Cal and Joey pulled him into that hug. “To thank you,” Cal said. “For your help.”

“I didn’t…do that much, guys…” Sully said, sounding massively uncomfortable. “But you’re welcome. I’m glad they’re back.”

“So are we,” Mick said, and arms were wrapping around them all, both of them and Travis joining into a massive, awkward six-way hug that left Cal feeling very safe and happy. “Thank you.” He kind of wanted to hug Beatrice and Lillian too, but they were over there talking to Mathilda now.

“Okay,” Mick said, not letting go. “I’m kind of starving. Do you think one of these boats has food on it?”

“I hope so,” Joey said. “I could eat a whole cow.”

“We’d better go find a cow, then,” Sully teased. “Before he eats one of you.”

“That would be shortsighted,” Cal told him, as they all broke apart and went off together to get something to eat. He finally felt strong again. He finally felt whole again. And that wasn’t a feeling that Cal ever planned to let go of.
Sometimes Being Whole Again Means Redefining Wholeness

The *Coral Witch* only had two rooms for Cal’s team. Which presented a bit of an issue because Cal was going to have a lot of sex with Wes and Mick, Joey clearly planned to have a lot of sex with Travis, and Beatrice and Lillian—but mostly Beatrice—had somehow talked Mathilda into having what Cal assumed would be lots of sex with them, and the three ladies had taken one of the rooms before Cal could say anything.

Fine. So Cal went in the other room with Wes and Mick, and with Joey and Travis. Sully was outside somewhere. “There’s only one bed,” Joey muttered.

“You two can have it,” Cal told him, as Wes and Mick tossed their bags in the corner. It wasn’t a big room, but there was enough space. At least they weren’t down below deck in the crew quarters. “We’ll sleep on the floor.”

“But…”

“It’s not a big enough bed for the three of us anyway,” Wes said, smiling.

“Maybe we should go somewhere else…” Travis muttered.

“It’s fine,” Cal told him.

“No,” Joey said, sighing. “Me and Travis are going to have sex. A lot. And I don’t want to wait anymore, so we’ll just…”

Mick snorted, kicking his boots off. “We’re going to have sex too, guys,” he said. “It’s really okay.”

“Are…” Travis was blushing. “Are you sure?”

“Are you sure?” Cal asked, looking at him. Seemed a bit out of character for Mick. Cal wouldn’t mind, and he was sure Wes wouldn’t either. “We don’t have to…”

“It’s okay.” Mick smiled, leaning down and giving Cal a kiss. It was everything Cal could do not to just melt into it and never talk again. “We’re all friends. And I want it too much to care overly anyway.”

Worked for Cal, and he wanted it too much to worry about it beyond that. “Then it’s settled,” he said, and he went back into that kiss, putting his arms around Mick and taking it slowly. As he did, Joey pushed Travis into the bed and climbed on top of him, kissing him fiercely.

Cal and Mick kissed for a good few minutes, and Cal became more convinced as they did that Mick had meant it, he was clearly unbothered by doing this here. Which was good, because Cal was really in the mood to have sex. As they kissed, Wes, loosened and took off Mick’s pants, then his shirt. When he lifted that over Mick’s head, he also took Cal into his arms and started kissing him instead, making Cal squeak as he was manhandled.

As he let Wes control his mouth, Mick undressed Wes as well, leaving him in his smallclothes, and once Wes’s shirt was off, both of them smiled at Cal. “You’re a little overdressed,” Wes teased.

“A travesty,” Cal lamented. “Someone should do something.”

Mick and Wes pulled Cal towards them, and the three of them alternated kissing each other, Cal
overwhelmed by their mouths on his, their hands on him. They made no effort to undress him, though one of their hands each ended up sliding downwards, rubbing him until Cal gave in and started moving his hips in response, his pants painfully tight. “Guys…”

“I already undressed Mick,” Wes muttered, pressing his own boner against Cal.

“I already undressed Wes,” Mick added, cupping Cal’s ass in his hand.

“Guys…” Cal whinged. “I’ll do it myself, God…”

“Don’t be silly, buddy,” Wes said, pulling Cal even closer to them.

They didn’t stop their touching, their kisses or their teasing and soon Cal was squirming. “Guys… I’m going to…”

And they made sure he did, right in his loincloth and pants with a gasp Wes and Mick worked together to swallow. “And we haven’t even gotten his clothes off…”

Mick snorted. “Being away from us has made him impatient.”

“S-sorry…” Cal said, though he wasn’t sorry. He was just really horny.

“Have a feeling you can make it up to us,” Wes said, moving them just slightly apart. “How about you finish undressing us?”

Cal nodded, getting on his knees and reaching up, sliding Wes’s smallclothes down, freeing his cock. The fur that ran down his back and arms didn’t cover him here, though the hair he normally had had gotten thicker. His cock stood straight up, pulsing a little. Cal took it in his hand for a second, squeezing. “Aw, he missed me.”

“Well, we’ve got to do something about that.” Cal muttered. He was pretty sure Wes was bigger than he’d been, but it was probably just because it had been a while. He turned to Mick, slid his shorts down, let him step out of them.

“You’re bigger too,” he said out loud, also taking Mick in hand.

“Yeah, seems like there were some positive side-effects of the experiments,” Wes said. “Think you can feel another one, right?”

Cal nodded, giving Mick’s cock a stroke. Under his hand were small bumps all up and down the length of it. “Doesn’t hurt?”

“No,” Mick assured him, hand in Cal’s hair. “Feels nice. It’ll feel nice for you too.”

Cal smiled up at him. “If you guys really are bigger, I’m not sure either of you are fitting in me anymore.”

And that was something he’d have to kill some more demons over.

“Oh, I think we can figure something out,” Wes said, a smirk in his voice. Cal took him in his other hand, stroking the both. “Missed your hands, Cal.”

“Yeah…”

“Just my hands?” Cal asked, and he gave a lick to the head of Mick’s cock before sucking it into his mouth, closing his eyes and listening to Mick whimper. Then he pulled off, did the same for Wes.

Both of them ended up having to sit down after a few minutes of that, which Cal counted as a victory
as he alternated sucking them both off. Joey and Travis provided a background of increasingly incoherent sounds as Cal worked, exciting them both slowly but equally.

Wes and Mick were panting in unison as Cal sucked them closer and closer, until neither of them was going to be able to last much longer. Cal smirked up at them, one in each hand. “Now, which of you should get to finish first?”

They looked at each other, then Wes moved, pressing his dick against Mick’s with one hand and moving Cal’s head with another. “How about this?”

Cal chuckled. “And you call me impatient,” he muttered, but he leaned down again, kissing and licking both of them together—he couldn’t fit them both in his mouth, but he could do this, at least. Wes jerked them off as Cal worked, and it was only another minute before they were making sounds together and then Cal had a mouthful of cum, from both of them, spurting up, mostly getting on his face. Cal shut his eyes against the tide, and let both of them paint him as much as they wanted, swallowing what went in his mouth.

When they were done—after quite a while—they both slumped a little, letting go of each other and pulling Cal up into a cuddle between them. “Missed you so much,” Mick muttered.


Cal nodded. “Me too, guys. I missed you so much, God.” He sighed, letting the hold him for a minute while he idly watched Travis fuck Joey. Those two moved fast. Then Cal shifted, uncomfortable. “Let me get out of these clothes,” he said, reaching down to take his shirt off.

Wes held his hand. “Yeah, we should get him out of these.”

“You’re right. It’s silly that he’s so dressed.”

“Guys…”

“But I’m not going to do it and you’re not going to do it…”

“I can do it,” Cal said, trying to figure out what the fuck this was about. He was enjoying himself, he was. But he’d be enjoying himself more if he were naked.

“You know what we need?” Mick asked.

“Another person?”

“Yeah, another person,” Mick said. He smiled, kissing the top of Cal’s head. “You think Sully’s busy?”

Oh. Cal felt heat rise in his face. “Guys, you don’t have to…” For all that they were clearly down with Sully, Cal didn’t want them to force themselves to go too fast.

“Of course we don’t,” Wes said, rubbing Cal’s belly. “Neither do you. Do you want us to call him?”

“We’re happy to invite him in,” Mick agreed.

“Really?” Cal couldn’t pretend he wasn’t interested. Couldn’t pretend he hadn’t thought about it. A lot.

“Yes, really. When are you going to stop assuming that we don’t mean what we say?” Mick pinched Cal. “I’m calling him.”
“Okay.” Cal grinned. “Thanks. I’ve mentioned that I love you guys, right?” He couldn’t imagine finding better people to be with anywhere.

“A few times,” Wes said, kissing the top of Cal’s head.

“Okay, good, I was worried it had slipped my mind with all the fighting and running away and rescuing.”

“Thanks for that last thing, by the way.”

“I think you already said that.”

It was only a minute later when the cabin door opened, Sully stepping in. “Why are you calling me with…uh.” Sully stopped, took a look at them, at Travis and Joey on the bed, and took a step back. “I can…come back?”

“If you want,” Mick said, tugging at Cal’s shirt. “Cal needs some help. We were wondering if you’d help him out of his clothes?”

Sully looked at Mick for a long moment, then at Wes, and he didn’t say anything, but he must have been communicating something to them with those looks. Then he looked at Cal, who just smiled and waved him in.

That was enough. Sully stepped inside, shut the door behind him. He came over, knelt in front of Cal. “You’ve got cum on your face,” he said, kind of dumbly.

Cal shrugged. “Happens sometimes. Probably have some on other things before we’re done. Probably some of it will be yours.”

Sully snorted, and he started to unlace Cal’s pants. “You think my aim is that shitty?”

Cal smiled, sighing a little as the pants loosened, some of his torment easing. “You think this wasn’t aimed?”

Sully’s eyes flicked up as he pulled Cal’s pants down, “Classy.”

“That’s our Cal,” Wes said, watching Sully over Cal’s shoulder, his cock still hard against Cal’s thigh.

“I’d noticed.” The pants dispensed of, Sully started to untie Cal’s loincloth. “Gross. You couldn’t wait to cum until you weren’t in your loincloth?”

“Nope.”

“Gross.”

“Notice how he went for that first?” Wes asked Mick, as if neither Cal nor Sully were there. “Instead of the shirt?”

“Guess he was pretty interested after all,” Mick agreed.

“Either that or he didn’t want to mess up Cal’s classy facepaint.”

Sully’s face was burning as he affected to ignore them. He untied Cal’s loincloth and tossed it aside, taking a second to inspect Cal’s junk. He snorted.
“Got a problem?”

Sully smiled, giving Cal a poke. “Nothing. It’s cute.” He reached up and lifted Cal’s shirt, and Wes and Mick lifted Cal’s arms for him and Sully pulled the shirt over Cal’s head, which did wipe off most of the cum.

When the shirt cleared his eyes, Sully was face to face with him, and Cal leaned up and kissed him. “Thanks. Being dressed was killing me.” Sully tasted like the fish they’d eaten for supper.

Sully tossed the shirt aside. “You look better this way,” he admitted.

“You can see him like this a lot more often if you do a good job,” Wes told him.

Cal looked up, and so did Sully. “What is this,” Sully asked. “A fucking audition?”

“Maybe,” Mick told him, smiling. “We have another problem we need some help with.”

“What’s that?” Sully asked, suspicious. Cal was suspicious too, but he’d known them long enough to have an idea of where this was going, at least.

“Well,” Wes said, reaching down and stroking his cock. “We’re planning to fuck Cal, me and Mick. But we’re a bit big and he needs stretching first. We could use a hand—or a dick—getting him ready for us.”

Sully looked up at Wes, blinking. Then he blushed brightly. “If you wanted me to fuck him you could just say so.”

“They always do this,” Cal sighed, spreading his legs a little. He grinned, pulled Sully closer and kissed him again. “You’ll get used to it.”

He couldn’t pretend not to be excited, and neither could Sully. He kissed Cal enthusiastically for a good few minutes before pulling off, looking down at him. “Well.” He said. “I guess if I have to.”

Cal smirked, and reached up to undress Sully, which he managed in record time, reaching down and giving Sully a stroke. “Cute.” He was bigger than Cal, but he was normal-person sized, unlike some people. “Come up here a minute.”

“Not sure I can fuck you from up there,” Sully said, though he led Cal pull him by the dick.

“Not sure you can fuck me without something to slick up the process,” Cal said, confident. He had Wes and Mick’s hands on his shoulders. “Come on.”

Blushing again, Sully straddled Cal’s chest, knees on Cal’s shoulders, and Cal leaned forward and took his dick in his mouth, sucking gently, moving it around with his tongue, wetting it thoroughly. One of Wes’s fingers poked around Cal’s hole, opening him up.

Cal only sucked Sully for a minute before pulling back. “There you go,” he said.

Sully was panting, and nodded, a little stunned.

“Look,” Wes muttered, loud enough for Sully to hear. “That’s the face of someone who just got his first Cal blowjob.”

“Just wait until he gets the whole thing,” Mick muttered back. “He might pass out.”

Oh, good, Cal thought. They were going to snark the whole time.
Sully climbed back down, kind of falling as he tried to get in between Cal’s legs. Cal snickered, and helped steady him as Wes’s finger left him. “Ready?”

Sully nodded, took hold of his dick and pressed it to the entrance. “Are you?”

“Yep. Go ahead.”

Sully nodded, and he did, pressing inside. Cal relaxed, letting out a long breath. It had been a while since he’d had anything up there. But Sully went pretty slow, so slow that Cal had to grab his shoulders to speed him up. “This isn’t my first time, Sully. And I’m pretty sure it’s not yours either.”

If Sully was a virgin after four thousand years, that was kind of sad.

That seemed to put some life into Sully. “Just didn’t want to scare you,” He grumbled. He picked up some speed, hands on Cal’s hips, and kissed Cal as he went, almost possessively this time.

“Aww, he’s getting into the swing of it now,” Mick said.

“Toward him long enough,” Wes said, chest moving with laughter.

“Fuck you guys,” Sully grunted, between kisses with Cal. Cal didn’t say anything, too busy experiencing this. Sully was pretty good.

“Some other time,” Wes promised. “Just worry about Cal for now.”

Sully snorted, then yelped as Cal wrapped his arms around him and pulled him down, pressing them together, moving his hips to make Sully go faster. So Sully went faster, moaning as he kissed Cal, ignoring Wes and Mick’s heckling.

It wasn’t long before Sully was getting louder, and his thrusts getting deeper, and Sully gave a pitiful sound, tensing as he came, filling Cal up. He went slack but didn’t stop kissing Cal, much more gently now.

“Looks like someone’s smitten.”

“Glad to know it’s not one-way.”

“Have you noticed that Cal’s crushes never are?” Mick asked.

“Yeah. Wonder what that says about Joey.”

Cal wanted to tell them to shut up, but he was too busy kissing Sully, and he came a moment later, the gentle stimulation too much. Joey was being very noisy, his tail wrapped around Travis’s waist the last Cal had seen.

Eventually Sully had to breathe, and he pulled off, looking down at Cal. “That was…um.”

Cal smiled. “Good?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“Thank you,” Cal told him. “And anytime.”

“Anytime?”

“It’s one of the boyfriend perks,” Wes told him, patting Sully’s head.
“B-boyfriend…”

Mick chuckled. “He’s cute, Cal. You have good taste.”

“I know.”

Mick shifted, sitting up straighter. “Okay, but when he says anytime, he means anytime but now. My turn.”

“Oh, sure…” Sully pulled out with obvious reluctance, and Wes and Mick manhandled Cal together until he was turned around, resting in Sully’s lap, legs spread with Mick in between them. Wes moved around behind Sully, holding him, and judging by the gasp Cal heard, probably exploring him a little.

“Let’s get to know each other a bit better while Mick has his turn,” Wes muttered, and Sully nodded. Mick reached up and stroked Cal’s cheek. “Ready?”

Cal looked at him, at the tattoos that ran down his chest and arms and legs, at the strange bulbs on his body, and he’d never loved Mick more. “Yeah.”

“Good.” Mick started to press in, thicker than Sully, but it wasn’t painful, it was just pleasant. Cal knew Mick had done something, some magic to make it easier, but he didn’t care—he was grateful. He wanted Mick, and he wanted this, and he didn’t want to be distracted from it by some pain.

Mick pressed in farther and farther, and Cal couldn’t help his moan. The little bumps on Mick’s cock added a layer of texture to the penetration that drove Cal insane, made him go crazy with want, made him want it more and more, more of Mick, and Mick gave it to him until there was no more giving, nothing left because it was all inside Cal, every bit of it. And then Mick kissed Cal, groaning in satisfaction as he started to move, started to fuck Cal, his hands running up and down Cal’s body. Cal remained aware of Wes and Sully, of Sully’s breaths on his neck, of Wes whispering in Sully’s ear, of Sully rutting against his back, reacting to what Wes was doing to him. Cal remained aware of all of that because it was about the four of them, not just him and Mick, but through it all Cal focused on Mick, on kissing Mick, on touching every part of Mick he could reach and showing Mick how much he loved him, how much he needed him.

Cal’s need merged with Mick’s and Mick went harder, grunting as he fucked Cal properly. Cal took it and wanted more, more of Mick’s hands, his mouth, his cock, his everything, he wanted Mick’s everything and Mick gave it to him and more, and when Cal came it was desperate, a cry of desire that Cal hadn’t thought himself capable of. When Mick followed him it was hard and fast and with a strong grip on Cal’s shoulders, heat spreading through Cal and emerging in his voice, his cry.

Mick was breathing on Cal’s face when Cal opened his eyes, and Cal reached up and touched his cheek, running a finger down one of the tattoos. “I love you so much…”

“Love you even more,” Mick said, kissing Cal between the eyes.

Behind him, Sully made a sound and came against Cal’s back, kissing Wes as he did.

“Alright,” Mick said, kissing Cal one more time. “Let’s make room for Wes. Hope you can go one more time.”

“I can go twenty more times if I…ahh…” Cal’s boast was cut short as Mick pulled out of him, the bumps feeling just as good coming out as they did going on. “Going to need to get used to that…”
Mick smirked. “Yeah. Nice, isn’t it?”

Cal nodded happily, yelping a little as Sully moved out from behind him, but Wes caught him and pulled Cal into his lap. “You ready for this guy?”

Cal nodded, glancing over at Travis and Joey. Travis was now on his knees with his face in the pillow as Joey fucked him from behind. “Not going to let them show me up,” he mumbled, looking down at Wes’s cock, which was covered in cum and rising between Cal’s legs. “Bring it on.”

“You asked for it,” Wes said, lifting Cal up with hands under his thighs.

“No way that fits inside Cal,” Sully said, on his belly with Mick behind him, facing Cal and watching raptly. “You’ll tear him in half.”

“You should worry about what’s about to fit inside you,” Wes told him, as he pressed the head of his cock to Cal’s stretched hole.

Cal smirked, watching as Mick prepared to enter Sully. “You’re going to like it, promise. And watch how a pro does it, okay?”

“Yeah, right. Ah…” Sully said, as Mick started to slide inside.

Wes started to lower Cal, and Cal relaxed as best he could to let Wes’s thick head inside. There was still no pain, thanks probably to Mick’s spell, but it was still a moment before Wes was able to get it in with a grunt, and Cal moaned. Then Wes started to slide Cal down, Mick and Sully’s cum running down his cock as he displaced it inside Cal.

Wes must have stretched Sully nicely because Mick was already inside him, pumping away, kissing the back of Sully’s shoulders as they both watched Cal get impaled. Wes slid him down more and more, and Cal gasped and moaned and took it, he took all of it until he felt like he would burst. There was so much, it was so big, and he wanted it all but it was so much…

Wes slowed down, bouncing Cal up and down a bit to get him down that last amount. And Cal tried to relax and take it, he wanted it, but it was so big and he wasn’t, he wasn’t used to it, and…

Sully’s mouth suddenly engulfed Cal’s dick and Cal yelled out loud, looking down at him. Mick was still fucking him from behind but Sully had moved forward to take Cal in his mouth, and he looked up at Cal and smiled as he sucked.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Wes let Cal drop the last little bit, getting the rest of himself inside Cal with another gasp from both of them. “There you go, buddy, you took it all…” he said, voice low.

Cal nodded. “I knew I could…Fuck me, Wes.”

“You’re the boss.” And, arms wrapped around Cal’s chest, Wes started to bounce Cal on his lap, fucking him as ordered. Cal was driven up into Sully’s mouth, then down onto Wes’s cock, back and forth in a tide of pleasure that got stronger with each movement.

It was no surprise when Cal came pretty soon, something indistinct passing his lips as he shot into Sully’s mouth. Sully swallowed it all, licked Cal clean as he clenched around Wes, drawing a groan from him, and then Sully pulled off and smiled up at Cal.

Cal smiled back, not able to do much more than that. And as he did, he felt a pressure inside him, a stretching. Something growing, Wes’s cock seeming to expand at its base. “Wes…”

"Wes..."
“I know,” Wes said, pushing farther in, the expanding part of his cock all the way inside Cal, getting bigger and bigger until Cal didn’t think Wes was going to be able to pull it out, or even move. “Side effect… Do you like it?”

Cal nodded. He did, though it was weird. “You could have mentioned…”

“You got it in?” Mick asked.

Wes nodded, kissing Cal’s cheek. “Course.”

Mick nodded too, and he coaxed Sully up, and pressed Sully against Cal, fucking him into Cal while Cal and Sully made out again, Wes moving inside him as best he could.

Sully came, crying into Cal’s mouth, and it took Cal a second to realize that Mick was cumming too. Cal, overstimulated, wasn’t far behind them, clinging to Sully for someone to cling to as he shot a near-painful load onto Sully’s belly. And a moment later, as Cal clenched around him, Wes came with a growl, a torrent rushing into Cal and with nowhere to go.

Feeling as full as he ever had and not able to move, Cal leaned back against Wes, content. They all fell into a bit of a pile, Cal laying on Wes, Mick laying beside them and Sully sort of in between with Mick still inside him. “Love you…” Cal said.

“We love you too,” Wes said, kissing Cal’s cheek.

“Enough to get this thing out of me?”

“Sorry,” Wes chuckled. “Doesn’t seem to work that way. Takes a while for the knot to disappear.”

“Great,” Cal said, shifting a little. He was tired and his boyfriend had fur and a knot. “Could have warned me.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Mick asked, leaning over to kiss Cal.

“Yeah, Cal,” Sully teased. “Besides, you look good like that. You were born to be there.”

“Just wait until this thing goes inside you, Sullivan. Besides, I’m not the only one full.”

“Yeah, well…” Mick shifted. “I might want to go again in a bit.”

Sully sighed. “Bunch of horny fuckers.”

“That’s us,” Wes said, patting Sully’s head again. “Welcome aboard.”

“Thanks,” Sully said, blushing now. “It, uh. Means a lot to me.”

Cal snorted. “Getting all this dick means a lot to you, huh?”

“Fuck off, that’s not what I meant!”

“I know.” Cal kissed Sully. “Means a lot to me too.”

That wasn’t just directed at Sully, and he knew Wes and Mick knew it.

“Think those two are ever going to stop?” Mick asked, looking over his shoulder at Joey and Travis.

“Probably not,” Cal said. “Best just to ignore them.”
“God knows they’re ignoring us,” Wes said.

“Yes, I do.”

“That joke is already getting old.”

Cal smirked, tried to make himself comfortable, which he’d expected to be hard, but wasn’t really. Wes’s fur was soft. “Too bad. You get to hear it for the rest of your life.”

“Good.” Wes held him tight, pulled Mick and Sully closer. “I’m glad. I’m glad we’re all together.”

“Me too,” Mick said. “I’m so happy. I was so worried.”

“You had nothing to be worried about,” Sully said, oddly quiet. “Cal would have torn the world in half for you two. I’m glad you guys are okay, though.”

Yawning, Cal closed his eyes. “Me too. I’ve never been happier in my life, you guys, I swear to me.”

“Cal!”

Cal giggled. He’d figured he might fall asleep, but they all stayed up talking for a good long time.

Cal had meant that. He’d never been happier.
Standing Still Is a Good Way to Get People to Come Talk to You

Chapter Notes

A bit of news that I'm going to share on all my stories is that with Tumblr's new adult content policy, I've decided not to continue posting the story there any longer. If you have a burning desire to interact with me on social media, there's a series Discord server for chatting with me and other readers, my Twitter if you only want me in bite-sized chunks, and my new blog if you want an alternate way to read the chapters. And of course I'll still be posting here first and always! Thanks for all your support!

With that out of the way, here's Cal leaning on a railing.

Turned out that sea legs were harder to grow than they seemed. Cal had only been ill for the first half of the first day on the Coral Witch, but though he'd been able to eat and not throw up just fine since then, he still after a week hadn't quite developed the ability to walk without falling over.

So he was doing a lot of mysteriously leaning over the railing and watching the ocean, because it meant he didn't have to walk anywhere.

If people wanted to talk to him, Cal figured, they could come find him. It wasn't like he was hiding.

“There you are,” Mathilda accused, suddenly appearing beside him. How a tall, naked, hot dragon with wings and a tail could just appear like that, Cal didn't know. Probably some sort of weird dragon magic.

“I’m not hiding,” Cal said, looking over at her. She wasn’t having any trouble standing on the moving ship, though her wings were extended just a few inches more than usual.

“So I see. I have given you sufficient time for even a human constitution to recover from the battle,” she declared. “I will hear your explanations now. What is this dark entity that appeared?”

“I don’t exactly know,” Cal admitted. “I’ve met it before on the other side of the continent. It was possessing a dead child and helping a necromancer try and raise an army of the dead.”

“I see. And now it is here, helping the Sea King.”

“Oh kidnapping the Sea King,” Cal agreed. “I’m sorry, I really can’t say why, except that both times I’ve seen it, it was helping a powerful psycho in possession of a powerful artefact, and it was related to this Theodore guy. As to what it actually is, I don’t even really have a guess.”

“Is that true?” A voice asked from Cal’s other side, and he looked over to see Sharon standing there, veiled in yellow. He could feel her, like a crackling beside him, and wondered why he hadn’t until now. Her power didn’t feel quite the same Rawen’s, but it was similar enough that he could believe they were related. “I think you might have a guess, Cal.”

Cal watched her for a second, wondering. “A guess? I know that the part of me that remembers Nathen reacted both times it showed up. So maybe it’s someone he knew.”

“I suspect it is,” Sharon agreed. “I was far enough that it was hard to tell. But I would be…”
unsurprised if it turned out to be a god, or the remnants of one.”

“Remnants?” Mathilda asked. “This entity is a spirit of some god?”

“Yes,” Sharon said. “It’s very difficult to kill a god, so many of those who were killed in the Catechism Wars didn’t entirely die so much as simply became something else.”

“And you know this to be fact?” Mathilda asked Sharon. Cal just felt like he was in the middle.

“I do. I am a historian of sorts,” Sharon lied. “I have spent much of my life studying the Catechism Wars and their effects.”

Mathilda looked at her for a moment. “I see. So our enemy is a god, then. So be it. How does one kill such a creature?”

“He is only partially inhabiting this realm,” Sharon said. “You will need to force him into it properly, or out of it entirely. A sufficiently powerful magic practitioner should be able to accomplish this.”

Mathilda nodded. “Very well. I shall take that into consideration.”

And she turned and walked away, tail swinging behind her. Cal looked at Sharon, who looked back. “Thank you,” Sharon said. “For not saying anything about me. You might have.”

“I might have,” Cal said with a shrug. She’d very nearly done it herself. “But why?”

“Nathen would have.”

“Nathen’s a creep,” Cal muttered. “The shadow entity—do you actually know who it is?”

“I have a suspicion,” Sharon said. “But I can’t be completely sure.” She sighed, the folds of her veil shifting. “I used to know a god named Derel. He was a god of foresight and the moon. The power I felt at the Sea King’s castle was similar to his, but to repeat, I can’t be sure—it wasn’t identical and I haven’t met Derel in a very long time.”

“Okay,” Cal said. The name didn’t ring any bells for him. “Did I ever meet him—did Nathen?”

“Not to my knowledge, but after Nathen died and the war started, Derel was one of our people who was at the forefront of our defence against the humans and demons.”

“And you think he’s continuing that war,” Cal finished.

“I think it’s very possible.” Sharon looked out at the water for a moment before moving away from the railing. “But I don’t know for sure. In any case, I’ll look into it, but I thought you should know. I’ll leave you to your thoughts now—thank you again for not saying anything.”

“It’s for you to say,” Cal said. “Not me. Unless it starts threatening people I care about to keep it secret.”

“Understood.” Sharon nodded, and walked off, leaving Cal alone again.

Cal sighed, looking back out to the water, his head filled with gods and history. He hated gods and history so much.

A scuffle behind him drew his attention and he looked over his shoulder to see Darby, wearing a long shirt now, sneaking into the cabin that he knew what Owen and Gavin’s. What are you doing? Cal signed at him.
Nothing. And Darby disappeared into the room without another word. He didn’t seem to like Cal much. But he liked Mick and Wes, at least. And he clearly liked Owen. Whatever.

When he looked back away from the cabins, Travis was approaching him. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Cal said. “I can’t tell if Darby has a crush on Owen or just wants to steal his life.”

“I think it’s both,” Travis laughed. “Still can’t walk?”

“Not really. I’m being mysterious to make up for it.”

Travis snorted. “Fair enough. If I didn’t know it was the boat I’d assume there was another reason you can’t walk.”

Cal rolled his eyes. “Someone’s talking.” He was a little sore, but it wasn’t like Wes and Mick had topped him every night. Just almost every night. Joey didn’t top Travis every night either. But he did leave him with more bruises and scratches and bite marks every night, which Travis wore without apparent worry.

“I’ve had a lot of time to get used to it. I know for a fact that your guys got bigger while we were in there.”

Cal raised an eyebrow, and Travis blushed under his scales. “Not like that. I just…saw. Before and after. And we talked about it a bit. Mine did too, so…”

Cal laughed. “Calm down. I’m not getting jealous. I already know you guys didn’t do anything and even if you had, I’d have understood.”

Still blushing, Travis looked at the water. “I know you guys didn’t do anything either, Joey told me. I’d have understood.”

Cal nodded. “Sounds like we both understand.”

“Yeah. Um. Joey told me about what happened with his rut, and with Sully.”

“Yeah?” Cal had forgotten about that, honestly.

“Sully really helped him. Joey kind of wants to, uh. Thank him. I know he’s with you guys, but…”

“Sully’s a grown-up,” Cal said. “We don’t own him. Ask him.” Cal patted Travis on the shoulder. “Considering we’ve all been fucking side-by-side all week, there’s really no reason to be shy. I mean, we’re basically you two falling off the bed away from going form adjacent to orgiastic.”

Travis nodded, and a silence appeared for a long moment. “I would, uh. Be okay with that,” he said, looking at nothing. “Just as a comment.”

“So would I.”

“So would Joey.”

Cal smiled. “I’d have to ask my other guys, but it’s probably a go for them too.”

“Well.” Travis cleared his throat. “Maybe someday we’ll…see how that goes.”

“Yeah. I’d like to get to know you,” Cal said. “Since we never really got to talk before you got zapped.”
“Yeah.” Travis smiled. “Well, I’m not doing anything right now, are you?”

“Nope, just watching the water and trying not to think about history. Tell me about yourself.”

“Not much to tell, I’m an orphan who decided to find a dragon one day.”

Cal smirked. “Were you looking to get dicked down at the time or did that come later?”

“Just a little later.” Travis shifted, his scales shifting to a lighter brown. “How’d you meet Wes and Mick?”

“I was looking for this ring and I’d lost my loincloth,” Cal started, and the two of them spent the rest of afternoon telling stories.
“I feel like we’re in the way no matter where we go on this ship,” Wes said, leaning back against a wall.

“We could hide in our cabin,” Cal suggested.

“And have everyone think we’re rude assholes?” Mick shook his head. “Don’t think so. Even Travis and Joey aren’t hiding.”

“That’s because Joey wants to fight people,” Cal muttered. “And they’re not as antisocial as you think.”

Mick snickered. “I know. I was mostly thinking that they’re not having sex every hour of the day even though they probably want to. Travis told us they were used to going several times a day.”

“I can believe it,” Wes added. “Sharing a room with them makes it clear he wasn’t exaggerating much.”

“About that or Joey’s size not being consistent once his pants come off.”

“I could have told you that,” Cal told them, to raised eyebrows. “What? I shared a tent with him the whole way here, bathed in the same rivers. You see people naked sometimes.”

Mick and Wes looked at each other over Cal’s head. “That sounds like a lot of excuses,” Mick said.

“Quite a few for someone with supposedly no interest,” Wes agreed.

“Oh, for my sake,” Cal said. “Guys.”

“Just saying,” Wes teased, resting his hand on Cal’s head. “Trying to convince us you only looked because it was there…”

“I’d be down to fuck him,” Cal said, just to shut them up. “Okay? In fact, I was planning on bringing it up.”

Wes blinked, and Mick just snorted, scooting to sit closer to Cal. “Knew it. Travis told us that Joey doesn’t share well. Dragons are possessive, or something.”

Cal shrugged. “We could work something out. We don’t have to.”

“I don’t see why not,” Mick said, sliding his arm around Cal. “We like Travis, you like Joey. They like Sully.”

“That’s what Travis told me too,” Cal said, looking at Mick. “If you’re sure you’re onboard.”

Mick smiled at him. “You’ve got to stop assuming that being slightly more conservative than you means that I don’t have a sex drive, Cal.”

“And you?” Cal asked Wes. “You’re quiet.”

“I’m fine with it,” Wes said, smiling. “I have to admit, part of me likes the idea of watching you take that big dragon.”
“Pervert,” Cal accused.

“At least you know you’re not alone,” Wes said, scratching at his arms.

“You itchy?”

Wes shrugged. “Usually. I guess it’s what happens when you grow a body full of fur overnight.”

Cal reached out, tentatively stroked it. “It’s soft.” He kind of liked it, despite knowing where it had come from.

“That’s what I said,” Mick agreed. “Not so bad.”

Wes shrugged, using half his body. “I don’t hate it, I guess. It’s just itchy.”

“Could be worse,” Mick said, looking at his own hand. His tattoo ran nearly to his fingers.

“I like it,” Cal said, touching one of the lines on Mick’s face. “It’s very arcane. Makes you seem like a mysterious mage.”


“I know, I know.” Mick sighed. “Could have been worse. Could have better, but there’s no point getting worked up. I might devise an illusion charm when we get to Pelican Bay, just so people don’t stare.”

It was still bothering him, and it probably would for a while, that was obvious. Cal kissed his hand. “Sully could help you with that. His is pretty convincing.”

“Yeah, it is,” Mick agreed. “Maybe I could learn some demon magic. It would be a half-decent trade off after all they put me through. Where is he, anyway?”

“He’s hiding in the cabin a lot. Avoiding people—or maybe questions.” Cal smiled. “He’s also popped off the ship a few times without telling anyone and thinks I don’t know about it.”

“Thought so,” Wes grumbled. “Where’s he going?”

“Wherever Bartholomew is, would be my guess,” Cal said. “He’s never gone for more than a few hours. I imagine they’ve got a lot of stuff to work out.”

“He’s probably also making reports to the other demons,” Mick pointed out. “Not saying that in a ‘don’t trust him’ sort of way, but I am saying it.”

“Let him,” Cal said. “He’s one of us. Besides, I have a feeling the demons are going to keep their distance for a while.”

“They are,” Sully said, coming around the corner. “Stop fucking talking about me, I can hear you.”

Cal smiled at him, waved for him to sit with them. “Stop hiding and we won’t have to talk about you. We can talk to you instead.”

“Not hiding, I’m just tired or something,” Sully said, evasive.

“A million years and you think he’d be a better liar,” Wes said to Mick, who nodded.

“Four thousand, and shove off, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”
“How’s Bartholomew?” Cal asked.

Sully scowled, a blush creeping up his face. Since he had his illusion on, Cal wondered if it was real or not. “He’s fine. He and I are kind of awkwardly serving as intermediaries between Cameron and Raphael at the moment.”

“How’s Bartholomew?” Cal asked.

Sully scowled, a blush creeping up his face. Since he had his illusion on, Cal wondered if it was real or not. “He’s fine. He and I are kind of awkwardly serving as intermediaries between Cameron and Raphael at the moment.”

“Because they can’t talk to each other like normal people?”

“They’re two of the most theatrical people in history,” Sully said with a roll of his eyes as he settled in. Wes tugged him a bit closer and he seemed a bit surprised, but accepted it. “Anyway, they’re talking. They’re thinking of having a second synod. Which, since we all split up at the first one, is a pretty big fucking deal.”

“You think it’ll actually happen?” Mick asked. “Or are they just posturing?”

“They could be, but for whose benefit?” Sully asked. “Aside from each other’s, I guess. Which honestly might be enough. I swear, they’re a pair of drama queens.”

“I can’t decide if it’s disappointing or heartening to hear that about the leaders of a cosmic war,” Wes mused. “I’m not sure I can even believe it.”

“Fucking believe it,” Sully told him. “Raphael won’t do anything without a backdrop of holy light, and Cameron has a different ball gown for every war.”

“Hearing that makes it hard not to be on Team Demon,” Beatrice said, appearing from somewhere with Lillian. Cal scowled at her. She smiled and sat down with them. “Though I’m guessing that’s not why you picked it.”

“Not quite,” Sully said. “Cameron’s wardrobe actually wasn’t any of the involved factors.”

“No wonder you suck at being a demon.”

“Aside from each other’s, I guess. Which honestly might be enough. I swear, they’re a pair of drama queens.”

“Has anyone ever told you you’re kind of a bitch?” Sully asked, making a face.

Cal leaned over Wes and gave Sully a kiss for that.

“I’m not sure I’d have followed her just for the wardrobe,” Lillian mused. Her pet demon bear wandered over and lay down not far from her. “But the dress she had on in the Citadel was pretty nice, if old-fashioned. With a few alterations, especially to the neckline, it would be really something.”

“Plus you’ve got to respect a woman who swoops into a room and kicks everyone’s ass at once,” Beatrice added.

“You know she was going to kill us all, right? And she orchestrated Wes and Mick’s kidnapping?” Cal asked.

Beatrice shrugged. “That’s in the past. And just because she’s evil doesn’t mean we can’t respect her.”

“Arguably it means we ought to,” Lillian said. “Just in case.”

Mick snorted. “Just in case she decides to kill us again?”

“She wasn’t planning to kill you,” Sully said. “If she’d wanted to you’d be dead.”
“Maybe this second synod is actually just an elaborate plan for her to kill a bunch of angels,” Cal wondered.

“Bartholomew’s mentioned that. It’s being considered.” Sully considered it. “She could kill Raphael. I wouldn’t mind. Prick.”

“He did give me a nice necklace, though.”

“Which he was using to spy on you.”

“At this point it’s a given that anyone who gives Cal anything is trying to spy on him,” Wes said. “He gets points for picking something classy.”

“Yeah, you know who’s never given me a present?” Cal asked. “Cameron. She sucks.”

“I’ll let her know,” Sully said, rolling his eyes again. He looked up at nodded at something.

Cal followed, saw Travis and Joey, and waved them over.

“You were hanging out without us,” Joey accused, dragging Travis over immediately. His voice had the tenor of a pout.

“You were busy,” Cal reminded him. Last he’d seen Joey, he’d been picking fights with more knights.

“I decided to stop practicing for today.”

“Holly almost broke his arm,” Travis explained as he sat with Joey half in his lap. Joey’s tail immediately wrapped around Travis’s waist. “I’m making him take the rest of the day off.”

Joey scowled at him. “You didn’t need to add that part.”

“You should be careful,” Lillian told him. “As a dragon, you might be just as resistant to healing magic as you are to other types.”

“Healing magic is for humans anyway,” Joey said. “Dragons heal from their wounds the normal way.”

“Seems to me you’d be better just not getting hurt,” Mick told him.

“Everyone gets hurt. It’s how you know you’re alive.”

“I doubt Mathilda’s ever gotten hurt,” Beatrice said, before Cal could comment that a broken arm wasn’t quite the same as a scraped elbow.

Joey glared at her now. “That’s different.”

“How?”

“What were you guys talking about before we got here?”

He said it so naturally. Sounded like someone had been practicing changing subjects. “Demons, mostly.”

“And how much we don’t like them,” Sully added helpfully.
“They do kind of suck,” Travis agreed. ‘Except you.”

Sully shrugged.

Wes grinned, arm around Sully so he couldn’t escape. “He sucks too.”

“I can confirm that,” Cal said, enjoying the red on Sully’s face.

“Shut up!”

“When you’ve got your illusion spell on, do you have to consciously make your blush appear?” Cal asked. “Or is it natural?”

“It’s…the spell doesn’t totally hide me, it just alters perception of some of my features.”

“So the blush is real?” Mick asked, leaning over Cal to get a closer look. “You’ll have to tell me how to do it.”

“Blushing is easy,” Travis said. “All you have to do is hear something embarrassing.”

“Something you’re used to?”

“No idea what you’re talking about.”

“Sure you do,” Joey piped up. “Like the time you got your dick stuck in the…”

Travis clamped a hand over his mouth. “He had a fever that day. Hallucinated all kinds of things.”

Beatrice rolled her eyes. “Do men ever think of anything but their sex lives?”

“You talked about the threesome you had with Mathilda for three days,” Cal reminded her.

“Yeah, but that’s because it was awesome.”

“It was pretty awesome,” Lillian admitted. “Turns out dragons are good at sex.”

Joey tried to say something from behind Travis’s hand. It sounded self-satisfied. Cal was glad it was muffled.

“Some dragons,” Beatrice amended with a glance at Joey. Then she looked around as a sailor gave them a wide berth. “You guys notice there’s nowhere on this ship to go without being in everyone’s way?”

“I admit I’m looking forward to Pelican Bay,” Cal said, but he smiled contentedly. He was happy here, like this, talking to all of them. Being together.

His team. All of them.
“You’ll be sticking with us when we get to Pelican Bay, right?” Gavin asked Cal. “Or will you guys leave? I get the impression that staying stationary isn’t your usual preference.”

It wasn’t, but Cal shook his head. “We’ll stay with you at least for a while. I want to see all this Theodore shit through.” He wasn’t going to be satisfied with only knowing half of this story.

Gavin had clearly expected that. “And you, Captain?”

Natalie nodded. “I don’t intend to sail off until I have answers—if this Theodore knows anything about the shadow creature, then he might know where Nate’s body is too.”

“Good. I hope I can count on you to help the kingdom be rid of the Sea King,” Gavin said, in a way that suggested that he might not mean the same thing by that as Natalie did. “Forgive me. I know we all decided all this ages ago, but time passes and I get antsy. I like to make sure people all stay on the same page, you know?”

“We understand, your Highness,” Natalie said, giving a small smile. “You remind me of someone I know in that regard.”

The three of them were having lunch, or rather they’d had lunch and were now talking. It all felt very fancy and important and Cal wasn’t sure he should be here, but here he was. “I think it’s safe to say your anti-whatever the fuck’s going on coalition isn’t going to fall apart on our ends. Or on yours. So it’s probably fine.”

“Probably,” Gavin agreed. He made a little noise in his throat. “I should go. I promised the admiral I’d have lunch with him today. So I guess I’m eating lunch twice.”

“And showing up late,” Cal added.

“Yes, well, it’s a benefit of my last name,” Gavin explained as he stood. “Nothing starts until I get there. It was nice to talk to the two of you. I’ll see you both later.”

“Thank you, your Highness,” Natalie said, remaining on her feet after Gavin had left. “Spoiled little shit.”

“Just a little,” Cal agreed.

“He’s a nice kid, don’t get me wrong. But he’s a pain in the ass and he both knows it and doesn’t have a problem with it.”

“And everyone around him enables him for the most part,” Cal added. “He means well, though. He gave us a lot of help when he didn’t need to.”

“Of course. Doesn’t mean he’s not a shit. If he were my son he’d have been mopping floors every time he mouthed off.”

Cal couldn’t help but chuckle. “So Nate must be very well behaved, then.”

“No, but he knows how to mop a damn floor, which is at least a useful skill.” Natalie didn’t smile back. “Do you think he’d kill Nate if he had to in order to get rid of the Sea King?”
Cal was silent for a second. “Yes.”

“Me too.” Natalie sighed. “I should get to the helm. I’ve been letting Pax and Denver steer too often lately—God only knows if we’re still on course. We could be halfway to Llejan for all I know.”

Cal snickered as he followed her out of her cabin. “You have no faith in your officers.”

“I have every faith in my officers, but they’re also both easily distractible.” Natalie rolled her eyes. “And by the same sorts of things, which isn’t a good combination. Especially,” she added under her breath, giving Denver a bit of a look. He was across the deck, leaning on the railing and talking to Edwin. “With this many horny idiots on the ship.”

“I feel like I’m included in that and I take offence,” Cal said, though he didn’t really.

“That’s because you were and you should. I’m sure if I could isolate all the noises I was hearing every night…”

“Oh, look,” Cal said, suddenly interested in not this. “It’s something that’s not this conversation. Man, sorry to cut this short, but I really have go.”

As he fled, Natalie called after him. “Learn to mop!”

Joke was on her, Cal was the youngest of four siblings. He already knew how to mop.

He moved out of her line of sight, bumping a second later into Mick. “Natalie’s going to make us mop the ship if we don’t start having sex more quietly,” he told Mick.

“Great. I’ll keep that in mind.” Mick glanced over his shoulder. “And, uh, let Joey know. He’s acting weird.”

“Weird?” Joey was always acting weird. He was a fucking weirdo. It was one of things Cal liked about him.

“He’s been growly all morning, and he wouldn’t stop snuggling Travis at lunch. Then he pulled Travis into the cabin.” Mick shrugged.

“Oh,” Cal said, nodding. “Right. Uh, he probably went into his rut.”

“Rut…” Mick narrowed his eyes. “What, is he a fucking deer?”

That made Cal laugh, and he pictured Joey with antlers instead of horns. And a deer tail instead of his dragon tail. “Maybe dragons and deer are related. I’m not sure anything else about dragons would surprise me at this point, to be honest. Anyway, yeah. Dragons have a rut cycle. Joey entered his a couple of days before the Citadel and Sully did some magical whatever to help him hold it off. I guess he’s done holding it off.”

“Might also explain why Sully went in the cabin with them,” Mick mused. “Okay. So, what, how long does this last?”

Cal shrugged. “I think a few days.”

“That’s going to make going in the cabin a bit hard.”

“I don’t think he’s going to care overly.”

“You don’t think he’s going to be territorial?” Mick asked.
Good point. Cal looked around, then up, saw Louis sitting on part of the mast, hidden in the rigging lines. “Hey! Louis!”

Louis shifted irritably, having clearly heard Cal, but didn’t come down.

Cal glared for a second. “Nevermind, I’ll ask Mathilda,” he said, just loudly enough that Louis would be able to hear.

A moment later, Louis flapped down, gusts of wind slowing his descent. Apparently he could fly, or at least sort of fly, even in his humanoid shape. “What?” he asked, for all the world like he hadn’t intended to ignore Cal. He sounded annoyed.

“Joey’s in his rut. If I go in the room while he’s rearranging Travis’s insides is he going to bite me or something?”

“Thought he smelled funny,” Louis muttered. He huffed. “You? Probably. But that’d mean he liked you, wouldn’t it?”

“Would it?” Mick asked.

“Well, I’ve never known a dragon to mark something he didn’t want to keep. Kind of surprised he hasn’t marked any of you yet. You all sleep with him, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah?” Cal asked. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“You don’t know anything about us, do you?” Louis sighed. “Look, you ever see a bunch of dragons living in a house together? The only reason me and the matriarch are on the ship together and I’m not dead is because we’re mostly avoiding each other. The only reason the runt’s not dead is because I like him and she doesn’t care about him. The reason why lizard boy sleeps in the runt’s arms is because he belongs to him. And you guys must too, or he wouldn’t be sharing space with you.”

Huh. “We belong to him.”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it? He’s weird like that. Hoards humans, I guess.”

“Interesting,” Cal muttered, glancing over at the cabin door. “Well, that’s good to know. Thanks.”

Louis shrugged. “You’re not going to be doing a lot of thanking if you go in there. He’s definitely going to bite you. And then he’ll fuck you until you never stop smelling like his cum.”

“Consider us duly warned,” Mick said, embarrassment in his voice perceptible only to Cal. “Thanks, Louis.”

“Whatever it takes to make you stop bothering me.” Louis turned and made as if to jump back up into the air, then paused. “Hey, wait. Pay me back.”

“With what?” Cal asked. Louis didn’t seem to want anything except food every so often.

“You asked me stupid questions about dragons. I want to ask a stupid question about humans.”

“Okay.” Cal smiled at him. “Almost everyone I know is a human. What is it?”

“What do you…like?” Louis asked.

“Like? What do I like?”
“What do humans like?” Louis snapped. He was a little red in the face. “Like if I wanted to give a human something. A present.”

Cal looked at Mick, who looked back. “Well…we don’t all like the same things,” Cal said.

Mick nodded. “You could start by finding out what the person you’re giving the gift to likes.”

Louis frowned, looking mildly distressed. It was actually kind of funny. “But…”

“Most people,” Cal said, taking pity, “like it when you give them something thoughtful. Even if it’s not their favourite thing, if they know you made an effort to think of something just for them, it’ll make them happy. Even if it’s something small. I gave Mick a blanket once because he gets cold in the winter.”

Louis’s tail lashed around behind him, agitated. “And…and it worked? He liked that?”

“Yes,” Mick said. “It was very thoughtful. It showed that he’d been thinking about me and noticed something that might make me happy, so it did.”

Louis glanced over at the wall, though there was nobody there. If the wall weren’t there, Cal thought, he’d be looking in the direction where Denver and Edwin had been standing. And he’d have been able to see them from where he’d been sitting before. “Okay. Fine. Humans are…stupid. Dragons are so much less complicated.”

“Nobody’s stopping you from giving presents to dragons,” Cal teased.

“Well, I don’t fucking want to do that.” Louis let out another huff as if wanting to breathe fire, then turned around again. “Okay. Bye.”

“You’re welcome.”

Louis looked over his shoulder at them, still looking a bit flustered. “Th-thank you.”

And he leapt into the air, wings flapping, and grabbed the post he’d been on and hauled himself up for more sitting. He definitely looked in Denver and Edwin’s direction.

“Cute,” Cal muttered.

“Guess Joey’s not the only weird dragon.”

“Guess not,” Cal said, snickering. He walked with Mick to the stern of the ship, where they saw Wes practicing with his axe. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Joey’s in his rut and fucking Travis and Sully into a puddle,” Cal told him, sitting on a crate. “And Louis said him sharing a room with us means he likes us enough that if we go in the room and he catches us he’s going to do the same to us. Also biting.”

Wes snorted. “No wonder he was acting so weird. Weird little moose dragon. All right, I’ll keep that in mind.”

“To avoid it or to make it happen?” Mick asked.

Wes shrugged. “What do you guys think?”
“I think it’s going to hard to avoid the room for however long this takes,” Mick said. “So maybe there’s no point in trying.”

“Don’t sound too enthusiastic,” Cal teased.

“As if you’re not.”

“He totally is.”

“I’m surprised he’s not in there now.”

“It’s admirable, really, the restraint.”

Cal just narrowed his eyes at them. “We need to get some mops over here.”

They ignored him and kept teasing him over his head. There were probably a few mops around the ship somewhere.
“Third time’s the charm?” Cal asked.

Mick chuckled. “I hope so, because you’re starting to look a little desperate.”

“Please, he was starting to look desperate after the first time this didn’t work,” Wes said.

“You guys are the worst.”

“Really?” Wes asked. “Are we? Because I think if you went up to most other people who were your boyfriend and told them you wanted to get destroyed by a dragon in heat you’d probably have fewer boyfriends.”

“Well…that’s a fair point,” Cal said, though he was flushing a little. “In most ways, you guys are the best. In this particular way, however, the worst. It’s a dichotomy I’m content to wrestle with every day.”

“Just like you’re content to wrestle with a horny dragon?” Mick asked.

“Not much of a wrestling match if he’s trying to lose.”

“I’m going in the room,” Cal said, turning away from them both. “Come on.”

Man, but he loved these two.

Cal opened the door to their cabin and headed inside for all the world like he was just trying to get something. This was the third time he’d gone in since Joey’s rut had started. The first two times, Joey had been sleeping on top of Sully and Travis, who’d both also been asleep, and it had seemed kind of rude to wake them up just so Cal could pretend he’d come in to find some socks or something.

This time, nobody was asleep. Joey was on top of Travis, face buried in Travis’s shoulder, and Sully was sitting on the bed beside them, leaning against the wall. “About time you assholes got here,” Sully said when they came in.

“You…could have mentioned you were waiting for us,” Cal suggested, not sure what else to say. The room smelled like sex.

“Of course we were waiting for you.” Sully glanced at Joey and Travis. “If not patiently.”

“You were right,” Joey said, nearly inaudible. “They came.”

“Told…you…” Travis panted.

Joey nodded, never once stopping fucking Travis. He looked so content like that. “I was hoping…you guys would…”
He stopped, a growl escaping him as he came, biting Travis as he did. “Louis wasn’t joking,” Wes muttered.

“The biting?” Sully asked, shaking his head. “There’s a lot of biting. You’ll get used to it.” He was, in fact, covered in bites.

“Mmm,” Joey said, pulling out of Travis and getting off the bed, still hard as a pole. He was bigger than he seemed soft, and coated in cum. “Can I?” he asked, leaning down and kissing Travis on the cheek.

“Yeah,” Travis said, nodding, eyes shut.

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I love you.” Joey smiled and approached Cal. His eyes were serpentine and his pointed teeth were longer than usual. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Cal said. Wes and Mick had moved to the side a little.

Joey put his clawed hand on Cal’s wrist, pushing him against the door, breathing on Cal’s cheek. “If you guys don’t… want this, please say so and leave now. I won’t stop once I start. I can’t.” He was so warm against Cal.

“We want it,” Cal said, smiling at Joey. “You’re fine.”

“Go for it,” Wes said, patting Joey’s back and earning a growl at the unexpected touch.

“We talked about it,” Mick said. “You’re our friend, and our teammate, and we care about you. Plus Cal’s wanted to fuck you for a while.”

“Hey,” Cal said to Mick. “Don’t make it sound like I don’t care about him too.”

Joey didn’t seem to hear them, sniffing Cal’s neck. He brushed over it with his teeth, making Cal shudder. “You helped me rescue Travis. Travis is the most important thing in the world,” Joey said quietly, eyes shut. “But…”

“It’s hard to hoard just one thing,” Cal whispered.

Joey opened his eyes, a reptilian grin on his face. He nodded. He stepped back, holding up a hand, still ending in a dragon claw for all of his protests that he’d almost figured out how to change it back. And Joey tucked a claw into Cal’s collar and pulled down, easily tearing the front of his shirt. The claw never touched Cal’s skin.

“Uh…” Cal said, as Joey reached down to do the same thing to Cal’s pants, sliding a claw inside the waist, hooking his loincloth as well. “That’s really hot and all, but these are my only clothes…”

Joey grinned wider, pulled his claw down, tearing. “Good.”

Cal couldn’t pretend not to be turned on, not with his erection now exposed to Joey. Joey brushed it with the back of a claw, then stepped forward, pressing his own against it, dwarfing Cal just a little. “That’s better,” Joey said, licking his lips. Then he looked away from Cal, who took the opportunity to let out a breath. “You guys should stretch him for me. Nobody would like it if I did it.” He clicked his claws together.
Snickering a little, Wes sidled over. “Can do.” He took Cal by the arm, got down on his knees and licked his fingers. Mick’s hands were on Cal’s shoulders, spreading something through him. Whatever spell he used to make it so that he and Wes didn’t hurt Cal was going to come in handy soon.

Joey watched them impatiently, shifting from foot to foot. “Hurry up,” he said in a half-growl as soon as Wes slid one finger inside.

“Do me again while you wait,” Travis muttered from the bed, head resting on his folded arms. “Or Sully.”

Joey shook his head, yellow eyes fixated on Cal.

Cal watched Joey, trying to smile reassuringly as Wes slid a second finger in. It had been kind of funny before, the idea of Joey in this state. Like a deer. Joey wasn’t a deer. He was a predator. Cal had never felt more like prey than he did right now with Joey watching him, growling, and it was a feeling that he had to admit he could get behind.

“He doesn’t…he doesn’t like that you’re touching me,” Cal realized, as Wes stretched him as wide as he could. Joey’s hands were clenched into fists, his whole body tensed as he held himself back from them.

“Well,” Wes said, free hand coming around to cup Cal’s dick. “He’s going to have to get used to the fact that you don’t belong to him.”

Mick wrapped his arms around Cal’s middle, watching Joey. “He’s already taken.”

“You all belong to me,” Joey growled, and the possessiveness with which he said it was… astounding. It made Cal shudder. “You’re all mine.”

“He’ll get over that once his rut’s done,” Travis promised quietly. “Mostly.”

“Okay,” Cal said, one hand on Mick’s and the other on Wes’s. “I’m good, guys.”

“You sure?”

Cal nodded, clenching around Wes’s fingers. “Yeah. And he’s about to tackle someone.”

“We’ll have to teach him patience,” Wes muttered, watching Joey, who watched him back and growled.

Cal smiled as Wes removed his fingers, kissed him and Mick, and took a step closer to Joey. “Yours, huh?”

Suddenly Cal was on the floor, Joey on top of him, looking down, claws on Cal’s shoulders. “Mine.”

Cal smirked up at him. “Prove it.”

Joey growled again—it was oddly cute—before rutting against Cal a few times, trying to find the hole. Cal tried to reach down and help him, but got another growl in answer. It took Joey several tries, but eventually he got his dick where he wanted it to go, positioned at Cal’s hole. “That’d be easier if you weren’t so big,” Cal teased.

“Quiet,” was all Joey said before he pressed inside.
Cal gasped. Even with the stretching and Mick’s magic, it was a lot, and it was all at once. Joey wasn’t playing around, driving right into Cal like they’d done this a hundred times. He got pretty far in—it was impossible to tell how far—on his first thrust, then just started fucking Cal, getting further in every time. He panted as he did it, eyes fluttering closed, no sense of rhythm or timing, no worry for his own stamina. No worry for Cal, either. It was clear that he was lost in his own sensation, the heat of his body all the was worried about.

Fine. Cal could make his own fun anyway, going to touch himself before Joey growled and increased pressure on Cal’s shoulder. “R-really?” he demanded, and got another growl in response. Joey fucked him harder, deeper and deeper and though it stung Cal liked that, he really did. Then Joey’s balls slapped Cal’s skin as he got all the way in and Joey came, unleashing a torrent inside Cal, which Cal only vaguely noticed because Joey also bit him on the shoulder. Cal had expected a gentle love bite but that was stupid. Joey sunk his fangs into Cal, drawing blood and making Cal cry out.

Joey finally opened his eyes, looking down at Cal with blood on his mouth. And he smiled, and started fucking Cal even faster, as if he hadn’t just cum. He set a blistering pace as if it were all that mattered in his life, and his growls became rhythmic. Cal was panting hard, feeling his everything filled with Joey in a way he’d never expected. It was so much more than he’d expected, so much more…

Cal came almost at the same time as Joey this time, arching his back, only to be pushed down while Joey kept going, through his orgasm and after, that rhythmic growling still going on.

_He’ll fuck you until you never stop smelling like his cum_, Louis had said. Apparently he hadn’t been exaggerating. Joey just kept going, not slowing down or anything, grip firm on Cal’s shoulders. He never drew blood with his claws, though.

And after a few minutes, Cal really started to hear Joey, started to hear his growls. He wasn’t just making noise, he was saying something. “Mine,” he growled, looking down at Cal. “Mine, mine, mine, mine…”

Cal was sensing a theme.

Suddenly, with a yelp, Joey pulled out of Cal, and before Cal could even ask why, he’d positioned his dick over Cal’s belly and was cumming again, this time on him, an undiminished load of cum coating Cal’s front, some of it even hitting his face.

“Wow,” Cal muttered, smiling up at Joey.

Joey smiled, and he ducked down and bit Cal again, chuckling as Cal cried out. “You’ll get used to it,” he muttered.

“You’re back.”

“I never went anywhere.” Joey said, getting off Cal. He was still hard, and Cal watched him go over to Mick. “Your turn,” he said.

Mick, who’d taken off his clothes, just nodded. “Do your worst.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

Joey took Mick off to the side a little, away from Wes, and Cal crawled over and sat in Wes’s lap. “Knew you’d come crawling back,” Wes said, pulling Cal upright as they watched Joey sink into Mick. “Bleeding and covered in someone else’s cum, but I knew you would.”
“Of course I would,” Cal said, nuzzling Wes. “So, did watching me get impaled by a dragon turn you on as much as you thought it would?”

“More,” Wes said, pulling Cal over. “It was one of the hottest things I’ve ever seen.” His cock was at Cal’s entrance, and Cal spread his legs a little. Why the fuck not at this point?

“That’s going to annoy Joey,” Travis said from the bed, watching them idly. “He spent a lot of time making Cal smell like him.”

“He’s already so engrossed in Mick he won’t even notice,” Wes said, sliding Cal down onto him. Cal made a happy noise.

“He’s got a good sense of smell.” Travis shrugged. “Your funeral.”

Wes chuckled and went about fucking Cal, which didn’t last very long—he hadn’t been joking about being turned on. But his hand on Cal’s sensitive cock felt good and Wes managed to hold out at least until Cal had cum. He pulled Cal off his dick before his knot could swell inside him, setting him back on his thigh. “See, what Joey doesn’t know can’t hurt him.”

“You guys are asking to get fucked until you can’t breathe,” Sully said.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” said Cal.

“You’ve only had it once,” Travis told him. “We’ll see how you feel after twenty or thirty more times.”

“Does he just not run out of energy? Or at least cum?”

“He does. Then he goes to sleep.”

Yikes. “And you’ve done this by yourself before?” Cal asked, as Joey pushed Mick’s legs up further and started fucking him harder.

“Yes. It was…challenging.” Travis smiled. “Part of me wasn’t sure about sharing. But let me tell you that my asshole thanks you for taking some of the stress off.”

Cal couldn’t help but laugh. “Anytime.”

Joey fucked Mick for quite a while until he decided he was done with another pull-out, shooting on Mick. Then he came over for Wes, narrowing his eyes and wrinkling his nose at Cal. “Your turn.”

Wes set Cal down, rose to his full height, towering over Joey and crossing his arms. “My turn, is it?”

Joey nodded and pulled him, only to be pinned to the wall by Wes, who smirked. Joey wrapped his tail around Wes’s leg and pulled him down, falling on top of him. He was able to roll Wes over—Wes let him, Cal could see it, he was only putting up a token resistance—and proceed to ram into Wes harder than he’d been with Mick or Cal. “Wow.”

“It’s okay, we stretched each other while he was annihilating you,” Mick said, sitting beside Cal now. “He figures we should be showing Joey we’re not just going to roll over and do as he says.”

“And how’s that going?” Cal asked, stroking Mick’s arm.

Mick shrugged, and he too tugged Cal into his lap. “He’s not getting exactly what he wants, is he?”

“You guys are just going to frustrate him and then we’re all going to get fucked even harder,” Travis
“Joey’s not actually, ah, very dominant,” Cal said as Mick slid up into him, the bumps on his cock feeling nice. “This’ll help him get better at it. Plus we’re going to get tired eventually and he’ll win, which he’ll be happy with.”

Travis snorted. “Fine. I mean, I guess we wouldn’t be here if we didn’t like his cock, right?”

“The rest of him’s okay too,” Sully said. Travis laughed.

Mick came inside Cal with a hard thrust, gently stroking him. “Looks like they’re going to be at it for a while.”

Cal nodded. Joey was pounding Wes mercilessly, looking somewhat ridiculous for being so much smaller than Wes.

“Hey, let me have a turn,” Sully said, nudging them from behind.

“Sure.” Mick lifted Cal off and then up into the air, levitating him onto the bed.

“I could have done that part myself,” Cal told him.

Mick smiled. “I know.”

Sully was already on his knees behind Cal, who needed no preparation. He pushed inside and started fucking. “Nice to be able to top again,” he grunted as he moved.

“I missed you too, love,” Cal teased.

Joey came with a loud growl inside Wes, but he kept going, pushing Wes to the ground as he picked up speed. He clearly didn’t see anything else.

“You won’t be so cheerful once dragon boy smells you,” Sully said, giving Cal’s ass a smack.

“Neither will you once he smells you on him,” Travis pointed out.

“Whatever. I can handle it.”

Sully took that as an invitation to go harder, and in no time he was shooting inside Cal. “Wow,” Cal said. “Two days of getting fucked nonstop and you still came in two minutes. Good job.”

“Fuck off,” Sully said, pulling out. “Travis, you want a turn?”

“Uh…”

Cal smiled at him. “You can. I’m apparently the team’s asshole over here.”

Travis laughed. “Sure, why not. We’re all in trouble with the boss anyway.” Slowly, he got up, crawled on top of Cal.

“I’m actually the boss,” Cal explained.

“Sure you are,” Sully said, patting Cal’s thigh. Mick reached around and put a hand on Cal’s cheek. Joey was biting Wes’s arm.

Unlike the others, Travis took his time, going slow and making sure that Cal got a lot of rubbing
against the blankets in. He put his arms around Cal’s neck and kissed him while he fucked Cal, both of them watching Joey and Wes. “This is going to be a whole thing,” he muttered. “The two of them.”

“Yeah,” Cal agreed. “It’s going to be hilarious.”

“You think?”

“You don’t think watching Joey and Wes both try to be in charge of the other when they’re the nicest people in the world is going to be hilarious?” Cal asked.

“Good point.”

Travis ended up cumming before Cal, but not much more, and he kissed Cal again when Cal came. “Thank you,” he said. “For, you know. All the things.”

“Anytime,” Cal said, as Joey pulled out of Wes and shot all over him. He had a pattern.

Joey must have decided that he’d sufficiently cowed Wes, because he stood up and looked down at him. Wes rolled over and looked up, and they just sort of looked at each other for a second. Cal sat up once Travis was out of him, and leaned down to kiss Mick on the cheek. “Do you think Joey knows Wes is mentally spanking him?”

“Let’s not tell him.”

Cal nodded, and then looked up when Joey came over to them, sniffing. He growled. “Uh-oh, I think we’ve been caught.”

Joey flipped Cal around and climbed on top of him, sliding back in all in one go, a loud growl filling the room. “Mine,” he insisted.

Cal chuckled. “Yeah, we are, big guy,” he said, winking at Travis. “And you’re ours.”

It ended up being a very tiring few days. Cal wasn’t complaining.
Lots of Meaningful Conversations Are Had in the Nude

Chapter Notes

Who needs pants when you're among friends?

Warm, comfortable and sore, Cal woke up surrounded. They were all sleeping in a big pile on the floor since the bed couldn’t accommodate six people. They were sort of on top of one another, limbs entangled, using each other as pillows. Cal wanted to wake up like this every day for the rest of his life. Joey had tried futilely to sleep on top of all of them, but as with every other night, he’d ended up just curled around Travis, albeit with his tail draped over Sully’s chest and one hand in Mick’s hair.

One hand, Cal noticed as he opened his eyes, not one claw. He’d been trying to fix his hands since the fight in the Citadel, and here he’d gone and shifted back in his sleep.

Cal was awake now and he had to pee, and he wanted to do it before Joey woke up and got going. This was the third day since they’d joined him in here, and every morning Joey woke up energetic and made sure to burn off all that energy before breakfast. Cal needed to pee now, so best to do it before Joey noticed him and decided that Cal needed a dick put in him again.

So he moved off Mick’s chest, freeing his legs from Wes and his arm from Travis, and stepped over all of them quietly, reaching the door without any dragons trying to have sex with him. He had no clothes to wear courtesy of Joey—he was going to have to get some from someone on the ship for the remainder of the journey east—and he didn’t feel like finding any of someone else’s. So Cal just went outside, figuring that if anyone saw him and was bothered he could just say he’d been too tired to notice. He had a feeling nobody would care.

A light rain was falling, just enough to refresh Cal when he stepped into it, though it was also, after the first two seconds, actually really cold. “Shit,” Cal muttered, shifting from foot to foot as he approached the rail. He should have put something on. Whatever, too late now. It wasn’t like this would take long.

It didn’t, but as Cal was in the middle of his business, one of the other cabin doors opened and out stepped Pax, the ship’s first mate. He was rubbing at his eyes and clearly going to pee as well, and like Cal he was also stark naked, though he was wearing that medallion around his neck. “Morning,” Cal muttered.

Pax nodded, reaching the rail, then paused, looking down at first himself and then Cal as if surprised. “Um. Good morning,” he said, averting his eyes. “I’m normally a lot more dressed than this in the mornings, but I’ve had a brief lapse in something.”

Cal shrugged. “Me too, but my clothes got torn apart by a dragon.”

“Hate it when that happens,” Pax muttered.

Cal nodded. Pax was red in the face and obviously kind of shy—though he was perfectly cute, so Cal wasn’t sure why; if he didn’t have a pile waiting for him to get back to, he’d have looked a lot more than was polite—so Cal didn’t bother him beyond that. He just finished what he was doing and turned to head back in his room. “See you later,” he said.
“Are you really God?” Pax asked suddenly, after Cal had turned his back.

Weird time to ask that, but hey. Nudity made people brave, in Cal’s experience. Even shy people. “So they tell me.”

“So they tell me.”

“Everyone who’s an angel, a demon or an ancient god from the dawn of time, or the devil,” Cal said. May as well just put it out there. “I’m the reincarnation of the guy who the Catechism decided was God when they started up, to be precise. Seems like at the time he was only one of a lot of gods.”

“But you’re a human,” Pax clarified. He was still facing away from Cal.

“Yes,” Cal promised. “I make sure to be. Nathen was crazy, and I don’t want him to hurt anyone.”

“I see. This is theologically very challenging for me to understand,” Pax explained. “I’d appreciate it if you could lend Sully to me for a few hours one day.”

Fair enough. “I’ll see what I can do.” Cal was cold, he wanted to go inside.

“What’s the devil like?” Pax asked. “Is he also just some guy? Because that makes sense in the context of a dualistic theistic system, which is what we exist in.”

Couldn’t they have had a naked chat on a warmer day? Maybe he should invite Pax into the room with him. But Cal nodded. “I don’t think he’s human too. But he’s just some guy. He’s a sad monk with a bad haircut and an affinity for birds.”

“What…?” Pax whipped around, making Cal turn to see him. His eyes were wide. “Birds? The devil likes birds?”

“Yeah,” Cal said with a shrug. “Go fucking figure. I mean, I don’t know if he likes them, but apparently he uses them to spy on me sometimes.”

Pax’s entire being seemed to lighten, then tense, a sense of unmitigated, absolute triumph coming to his face. “I knew it! I fucking knew it! Holy crap,” he said, and he suddenly stepped forward, hugged Cal, shyness forgotten. “I have never felt so vindicated in my entire life. I’m having a religious experience, which might just be because you’re God and all. Oh, and you’re God! Nobody can tell me it’s wrong because it came from the ultimate authority on truth!”

“I’m not really…”

“Quiet. I’ve been trying to get everyone to understand this for my entire life, Cal. Thank you so much.”

“You’re…welcome?” Cal asked, not sure why this was that big a deal.

He has a thing about birds. You’ll get used to it.

“Who’s that?” The voice had come from nowhere.

“Oh,” Pax said, stepping back, colour flooding his face as if he’d just noticed what he’d been doing. “That was Nate,” he said, touching the medallion. “He can talk to you if you touch him.”

“Cool,” said Cal. Was hardly the weirdest thing in the world. “Nice to meet you, Nate.”

“He says…” Pax frowned, red deepening on his cheeks. “He’s happy to meet you too.”
“I’m glad,” Cal said. “He might easily have been annoyed by that full-on physical contact just now.”

Pax cleared his throat. “Sorry. I was very excited about having something I’ve always known confirmed. Never tell anyone that happened and I’ll lend you some clothes in exchange.”

“Sounds good,” Cal said. “I should go back in there, though. See you later? Maybe with clothes on?”

“Definitely with clothes on,” Pax said, nodding. “See you later, Cal. If you ever need a High Presbyter or anything, I already have a job, but I could recommend some people.”

Cal smiled, and headed back into his room, grateful suddenly for the small, dark space, just because the rain had been cold. He climbed back into his pile of guys, Wes hugging him as he did.

Joey’s tail wrapped around Cal’s ankle, and Cal braced himself, but when he looked up, Joey’s eyes, open, were their normal grey-blue instead of the serpentine yellow they’d been. “Morning.”

Joey nodded. “You too. I’m going back to sleep. I just noticed you were gone.”

And had been waiting for him to come back. “Just had to pee.”

“Okay. Thank you,” Joey said. “For coming.”

“I think you came a lot more than I did,” Cal teased.

Joey smiled. He looked tired. “I mean it. My rut’s over, I think.”

“Yeah, your eyes are back to normal. Your hands, too.”

Joey looked down at his hand as if surprised. “You’re right. Finally. Anyway, I really appreciate it. Sorry about your clothes.”

“It’s fine. I’ll steal yours.”

Joey grinned. “I can go naked. Travis will be so mad at you.”

“I think if I can handle you trying to impregnate me and biting me, I can handle Travis being exasperated.”

“Sorry if I was weird,” Joey said, running a hand down Travis’s chest.

“You’re always weird,” Cal told him. “It’s one of the things we like about you.”

Joey chuckled. “Thanks.”

“You’re bottoming for everyone for like a week, though.”

Blinking, Joey’s face reddened a little. “Does that mean we can all…”

“If you want. Sleeping in a pile is pretty nice, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Joey agreed, snuggling in between Travis and Sully. “It is. I’m going back to sleep now, I’m tired.”

“I think we all are,” Cal said, feeling a bit sleepy himself. Joey nodded and closed his eyes, clearly drifting off quickly.
Cal could never go back to sleep after he’d woken up, but he was able to lay there for a long while, warm and content, surrounded by his team. It was just as restful as sleep would have been.
People Are Connected in Endlessly Possible Ways

“This is all your fault.”

Cal shrugged, sharpening his sword on the deck. “I’ve come to realize that most things are all my fault at some point in their development.”

“Yeah, but this is specifically all your fault in a really immediate way,” Travis said, sitting down with a sigh to sharpen his daggers since Cal had everything out. And he looked over at Joey, and specifically at Joey’s dick, which was easy to see since Joey wasn’t wearing any clothes. “It took me so long to get him used to wearing clothes.”

“I only borrowed his for two hours,” Cal reminded Travis, gesturing down at what he was wearing now, which were some much cleaner clothes that Pax had leant him, as promised. They were too big, but Joey’s clothes hadn’t been clean. It was a trade-off. “I brought them back. You could have kept him occupied in the room for two hours and he’d never have noticed.”

“He’d just fucked me for a week straight,” Travis complained. “I didn’t have it in me to keep him occupied for two hours.”

Cal raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t have it in you to play cards or something?”

Travis blinked. “Uh…”

“Why, what did you think I meant?”

“You’re…” Travis glared at him. “You’re the actual worst.”

Cal kissed him on the cheek. “Yeah, you’ll get used to that.”

Travis nodded, looking down at his knives and seeming just a little embarrassed, then looked back up when they heard someone hit the deck. Joey was wrestling with Darby, who was also naked as the sky for some reason, and had just won. But Darby got up again, determined, and Wes started to tell him what he’d done wrong, with Mick translating. Normally Owen did that, but he was on the flagship with the captain and Gavin.

“That kid never gets tired,” Travis muttered. He’d been going at it steady since Edwin had foisted him onto Joey a while ago.

“Neither does Joey.” Though Joey was starting to flag a little even as he accepted Darby’s renewed challenge, Cal saw. The rut had really taken a lot out of him. If he wasn’t careful, he was going to lose soon.

Footsteps behind Cal got his attention just before someone cleared their throat. He looked up and saw Denver, the ship’s quartermaster. He was closer than Cal had figured he’d be. Quiet guy. “Sorry to interrupt,” he said.

“You’re not interrupting,” Cal told him. “Are we in your way?” That was always a danger.

“No, I…wanted to talk to you for a minute.” He sat down with them, took a knife from somewhere and started sharpening it. It already looked sharp to Cal. “You’ve got a dragon for a boyfriend,” he said to Travis.
This was not what he’d come to talk about, Cal figured.

Travis nodded. “Yeah, why?”

“How did you get him to stop…” Denver vaguely gestured at Joey. “I don’t know. Trying to own you?”

“Own me?” Travis asked, while Cal thought of Joey’s constant repetitions of mine, mine, mine. “I didn’t. I just got used to it. It never really bothered me, I guess. I also made sure he knew that owning me meant that I owned him too.”

Denver was quiet for a second, rhythmically sharpening his knife with obvious familiarity. “Interesting. How’d you make him understand that?”

“I…told him?”

Denver snorted. “Okay. Thanks for the tip.”

“If Louis is bothering you, I can make him back off,” Cal said, though he couldn’t really. But he could get someone to do it for him.

Denver shook his head. “It’s fine. I’m a big boy and just because he’s bothering me doesn’t mean I want him to stop.”

“I get that,” Cal said, smiling. “So what did you actually come to talk about?”

Denver looked guilty, like he’d been caught stealing. “Was it that obvious?”

“Just a little.”

A sigh. “Fine. I wanted to ask you about this Theodore guy. You said you knew him.”

Cal wondered what that was about. Why did Denver care? “We’re not friends or anything. He hired me a few times to find shit for him, including the Regalia.”

“Right. What’s he like?”

“Why do you care?” Travis asked.

Denver shrugged. “Just curious. If he’s trying to get people I liked killed it seems like I should know about him.”

He was being way too cagey for that to be the real answer. “He’s rich,” Cal said. “Which doesn’t sound like an answer to the question, but it is. He’s one of those people who makes being rich a personality trait. He comes off as very refined in a way that’s obviously intentional. He’s a bit snooty and you can tell from how he’s decorated his house that he wants you to know he has more money than he knows what to do with. I didn’t get the impression he was evil or anything, he just seems to like showing off.”

Denver exhaled slowly through his nose. “I hear he likes little boys.”

“So you already knew who he was,” Cal said, narrowing his eyes.

Denver nodded. “Is it true?”

“Probably. He’s got a lot of half-dressed slaves about your age,” Cal said. “When I say he’s not evil,
I mean that he doesn’t come off like someone who’s trying to destroy the world. Doesn’t mean he’s not a creep, or that he’s not a bad person.”

“Yeah,” Denver agreed. He looked really worried now, hand never slowing on the knife. “I don’t suppose you managed to meet any of his slaves, or hear their names or anything.”

He knew someone, Cal realized. Someone who was a slave, and maybe he knew the owner’s name. He felt bad; he couldn’t help Denver much. “Just one, a guy named Daniel.” The one who’d seemed angry when Cal had mentioned helping him.

Denver fumbled his knife, nicking his hand. “You know him,” Cal said, watching Denver.

He looked down at his knife, just holding it in his hands now. He’d put the whetstone down. “Yeah,” he finally said. “We grew up together.”

“I’m sorry.”

Denver shook his head. “Me too. Don’t be surprised if Theodore’s dead by the time Gavin’s message gets to him.”

Cal blinked, and he stopped sharpening his sword. It was sharp now anyway. “Why?”

“Just don’t be.” Denver stood up, making his blade vanish. “Thanks.”

“Denver, why do you know Theodore?” And why hadn’t he said anything?

“I’ll tell you if you promise not to tell anyone we had this conversation,” Denver said. “At least until we get to port.”

Cal glanced at Travis, and they both nodded. Cal would tell the rest of the team anyway. “Fine.”

“I was supposed to kill him, once upon a time,” Denver said, a smile tugging at his lips. “But it didn’t work out. Anyway, thanks.”

And he left, before they could ask him any more questions.

“You know,” Travis said, after a minute. “The world never stops surprising me. I’ve been a lot of places and it never stops surprising me. People who know each other in weird ways, or are connected in ways you wouldn’t expect.”

“Yeah,” Cal agreed. “Maybe it’s fate or something.”

Knowing his life, that was probably it.

“I just think the world’s really small, honestly.”

“It could be that too.” But the world was huge. It was them who were small.

Over where the others were, Darby succeeded in pinning Joey to the ground, and was wagging his tail wildly while he grinned down at Joey. Being small didn’t mean they couldn’t succeed.

It might just mean losing a few dozen times first.
Sometimes Time Is All it Takes to Turn Enmity to Friendship

It was time for the moment of truth. Cal had been putting this off for a long while now, but he’d cowered from his responsibility for too long. They were a few hours from landing in Pelican Bay, which meant he couldn’t put it off anymore.

Not that he hadn’t tried, but Wes and Mick had forced Sully and Joey and Travis to agree with them that Cal couldn’t dick around anymore. Really, if he was going to have five boyfriends, at least one of them could take it upon himself to be on his side once in a while.

So Cal, trying not to be too dramatic about it as he walked as if to a gallows, headed for the back end of the ship, headed up to the rail, circumventing the giant chimera bear that was sleeping nearby, and leaned against it.

Beatrice looked at him, waiting for him to say something. Oh, so it was like that. “You’re such a bitch.”

“So they tell me.”

Cal snorted. “Sorry, just felt like I was going to have to say it at some point so it may as well be now. You can call me short if you want.”

“Well, you are, but I can’t say as I’m feeling a particularly strong urge to point it out.”

“Generous of you.”

“It’s probably just because you’re so hard to see all the way down there.”

Cal rolled his eyes. “You know, the longer you spend with someone the more you’re supposed to understand and like them.”

“Sure,” Beatrice said, looking back out at the ocean. “That’s why divorce exists.”

“Why does divorce exist?” Cal wondered. “Seems like a bad idea.”

“You think it’s a bad idea for people who hate each other to be allowed to not be married anymore?” Lillian asked him, arching an eyebrow.

“No, I think that’s a great idea,” Cal said. “I just mean, how did I fuck up marriage so much that it’s possible for people who might hate each other someday to get married?”

“Well, knowing you…” Beatrice began.

But Lillian interrupted. “It’s because humans have free will. If we knew how a marriage was going to turn out, what would be the point?”

“I guess,” Cal agreed.

“I think it’s because he sucks at being God,” Beatrice added.

“That too. Anyway, you guys want to get married?”

“What?” Beatrice laughed. “To you?”
“Yeah,” Cal said with a nod. “I mean in the metaphorical way we were talking about. Not like the kind of married where we have to be married and share all our money and have sex and stuff.”

“This is the weirdest job offer I’ve ever gotten,” Beatrice complained, giving Cal a look. “Normally when people hire me they don’t bother to stipulate that we’re not going to have sex.”

“Well you must be used to it being taken as given that people don’t want to sleep with you,” Cal shot back. “No offence, Lillian. You seem nice even if you have shitty taste.”

“That’s what I think about your boyfriends too.”

“Hey, wait, you’re supposed to be the nice one here.”

“I’ve decided to let Carrie be the nice one.”

Cal glanced at the chimera, who was apparently named Carrie. “She’s also the pretty one if Beatrice is the only competition.”

“Are you hiring us just so you can insult me?” Beatrice asked, as if Cal would hire her for any other reason.

But Cal shook his head. “No, that’s why I hired Sully. I’m hiring you because you helped me when you had no reason to and I appreciate that. Also you still need a job and I’ve got a lot of crazy shit on the go and could use someone who doesn’t flinch at crazy shit.” He thought about it. “The insulting you is just a perk, really.”

“I don’t know, how’s the pay?”

Cal shrugged. “You’ll see when we get to Pelican Bay and I can go to the bank.”

“We’re not joining your weird orgy pile,” Beatrice said. “So don’t even ask.”

“We don’t want you there,” Cal assured her. He, at least, definitely didn’t want her there. “Lillian can come if she wants.”

“About six too many men in there for my liking,” Lillian told him. “But thanks anyway.”

“I’m not following your orders. If I’m in I want to be a partner, not an employee.”

“It’s always been a team effort, not a dictatorship,” Cal said. “I tend to decide what jobs we take. But everyone has veto power.”

“Hm,” Beatrice said. “I’ll think about it. Me and Lillian have to talk over our options.”

“Oh, Bea, don’t be difficult,” Lillian said, rolling her eyes. She looked past Beatrice at Cal. “We already talked about it and decided to say yes when you offered.”

“Lil, that’s not how negotiations work.”

“It is now. We’ll take it.”

Cal smiled. “Thanks. You’re hired, then. Probationally, because I reserve the right to fire you if you get on my nerves or steal from me again.”

“Fair enough.” Beatrice offered Cal her hand. “I still don’t like you much.”
Cal shook it. “I don’t like you much either.”

“And I still expect to be paid for the consulting business in the mountains.”

“Fine, but you’re not getting a bonus for the Sea King stuff.”

“That seems unfair. Hazard pay for the fact that we had to fight some magical monster and you didn’t warn us?”

“What did you even do? You hung out with the prince and…”

“Look who’s talking? I at least fought the pirates and Lillian helped with the Sea King. You dicked around in the castle and what? Came here?”

Fair enough, but Cal wasn’t going to say that. “I’d had a really hard day up until that point, okay? I was taking my break.”

“You’re not allowed to take breaks during a crisis.”

“I’m the boss, I can take breaks whenever I want,” Cal said.

“You suck at being the boss.”

“You’re such a bitch.”

“You already said that.”

“It’s still true.”

“When are you guys going to have sex again?” Lillian asked, looking at her fingernails. “Just let me know so I can make other arrangements.”

They both stared at her, scandalized. “Ew,” Beatrice said.

“Me too. Control your girlfriend.”

“How?”

“Can’t say I know,” Cal admitted. “Mine gang up on me all the time. Getting more of them just made it worse.”

“Maybe I finally understand what they see in you.”

“Hey, we’re bonding here, be nice.”

“Why start now?”

“Good point,” Cal grumbled. “I should probably go tell everyone the bad news,” he said, turning. “Plus I’m really tired of leaning on railings. I feel like that’s all we’ve been doing for weeks.”

“Yeah, it’s getting old. The new scenery in Pelican Bay won’t be unwelcome.”

Cal nodded, heading off. “See you later, teammate.”

“Please don’t.”

“Bye,” Cal said, waving over his shoulder.
That hadn’t gone so badly.
“I shall be leaving now,” Mathilda said suddenly, appearing behind Cal like a fucking ghost even though she was a super tall, hot naked lady with great boobs, giant fucking wings, horns and a tail and Cal was supposed to be the divine maker of all fucking creation or something so one would think he’d have a little bit of ability to know what was going on in the part of fucking creation that was in his immediate vicinity, but no.

So Cal gamely tried not to jump five feet into the air and casually turned to face her with all the self-possession of a deity uninterested in human affairs, which he totally was. “Oh?” he asked. “Oh, yes, you’d mentioned something about that before.”

“Indeed,” Mathilda said, eyebrow arched, though whether at Cal or just in general it was hard to tell. “I did not intend to stay this long.”

But she’d been too busy having sex with Lillian and Beatrice, Cal surmised but wisely didn’t say. Or maybe it didn’t matter, since dragons didn’t seem to give a shit about privacy. She’s been in their bedroom this morning.

Thanks to Gavin being Gavin, they were all staying in the manor of the lord of Pelican Bay now that they’d landed here. Cal hadn’t met the guy except when he’d graciously welcomed them all, but he sure had a nice house and most importantly, he sure had a house. Cal and his team had been given two big rooms, one for Lillian, Beatrice and Callie, and one for the six of them with two big beds that they’d pushed together. It was nice for them all to be able to sleep in a bed together.

“All right,” Cal said, nodding. They were outside in the grounds of the big manor house, Cal cold and wishing he had gloves and Mathilda naked as if it was summer. Joey was also naked somewhere. Dragons were fucking weird. “I’ll call you when we’re ready to have the meeting with Theodore. I assume you still want to attend that.”

“I do,” Mathilda confirmed. “You must call me at least a day beforehand. I will be some distance away.”

“Okay.” Cal hoped they had a full day’s notice before the meeting happened. Gavin hadn’t heard back from Theodore yet as of now, though he’d sent his letter a few days ago. “Just piss off the imp again, right?”

“That’s correct. Call it by name and it will do as it is told.”

Cal frowned. “That would have been useful to know in the mountains. What’s its name?”

“Ayrkanumone,” Mathilda said, and Cal was pretty sure there was a vowel in there he couldn’t pronounce or even hear properly.

“Don’t tell him that,” said a voice from Cal’s arm. The little yellow imp appeared, clinging to him. “Now he’s going to call me all the time.”

Cal turned his frown on the imp now, lifting his arm to see him better. “For what, help lifting up my bootlaces?”

Ayrkanumone punched him in the arm, which actually kind of hurt. “I’ll have you know I’m highly venomous, asshole.”
Cal rolled his eyes. Like he needed another weird magical creature threatening him. “Okay. I’m going to call you Arky.”

“They’re going to call you Cockhole,” Arky told him. “I watched you get reamed by all your friends before, you were born for it.”

Cal cleared his throat in the hopes that would stop heat from creeping up his face. “Get off on watching, do you?”

“Yeah, what of it?”

“I should have known you two would get along,” Mathilda said, stretching out her wings. “I’ve better things to do than stand here. I will see you in some days.”

“See you,” Cal said. “And thank you again for your help at the Citadel. I’m sorry about the Sceptre.”

“No worry. One day I will have it back, and the other pieces to go with it.”

“Just don’t try to wear them,” Cal told her. Given how frightening the Sea King was when inhabiting the human body of some sailor, he could imagine how bad things would be if Mathilda ended up possessed. They’d all just die, probably.

“Please. As if some semi-conscious wad of leftover human psyche would be powerful enough to subsume me.” Mathilda snorted. “The Regalia is no safer anywhere than it will be in my care. In any case, I have many more important things to do. Goodbye. And thank you for the…interesting few weeks.”

Cal smirked. “I’ll pass that along to Beatrice and Lillian.”

“I already did. I am looking forward to seeing them again. You may wish to step back.”

“She fucking means that,” Arky told him, leaping up to tug on Cal’s ear. “She’ll turn you into a God-shaped smear if you’re too close when she transforms.”

Cal had no doubt about that, and he did step back. Mathilda stretched out her wings to their full extent for a second, looking up. Then she leapt straight up into the air, wings flapping as she rose ten, twenty, thirty feet into the air, clearing the trees, the house, the walls, before rolling sideways and transforming, her huge blue form blotting out the sky in a roar or wind that knocked Cal on his divine ass onto the frozen ground.

He didn’t bother trying to get up, just sitting there and watching her while her wings blew gales into the grounds, snow and ice and bits of tree flying everywhere, covering Cal and everything else. Mathilda lifted into the air, up and up until she was no longer a danger to all of Pelican Bay’s topiary, and circled around until she was facing south, flying out of sight far more quickly than anything of that size should be able to move.

Cal sighed, stood up, wiping snow from his everything. “Well, good thing she didn’t do anything that will cause a panic or anything. That would be crazy.”

“I’m not sure she understands the emotion of panic,” Arky said, dancing from foot to little foot on Cal’s shoulder. “She’s a dragon. I’m not sure she understands any emotions aside from pissed, possessive and horny.”

Cal sighed again for effect. Probably not. “So you could have been talking to me this whole time and you just, what, weren’t?”
“Yeah, pretty much,” Arky agreed, pushing a shard of ice from Cal’s shoulder and sitting down.

“You were worried that if I knew you were there I’d find a way to stop you watching me have sex, weren’t you?”

“You were barely having any sex the first while I was here! Two hot guys in your tent and you were barely even touching yourself. The fuck’s wrong with you?”

“My boyfriends were missing,” Cal explained. “I was sad.”

“You know what makes you happy? Orgasms. You could have been having interspecies threesomes every night the whole fucking way to the Citadel and instead I had to jack off to fantasies like a fucking tool.”

Cal squinted, turning his head and trying to see him properly. “Do you even have a dick?”

“Fuck off, do you? I really thought God would have a bigger cock, you know?”

“It’s bigger than your entire everything.”

“Oh yeah, let me see.”

“It’s cold right now,” Cal muttered. “I’m beginning to realize that Mathilda just wanted to get rid of you. Do you have powers? What can you actually do aside from be a pervert?”

Arky snorted, crossing tiny arms. “I can cross vast distances in an instant.”

“Yeah, it’s called teleportation. Mick and Sully can do that. I think Lillian too.”

“I can walk through walls and other solid surfaces.”

“Wes can do that, thanks to the demons.”

“Uh…” Arky’s face was inscrutable to Cal, but Cal was pretty sure he was scowling. “I can become invisible at will.”

“Travis is a chameleon now.”

“I can shapeshift into a larger form briefly and…”

“Joey can do that too, in theory, if he’d ever figure it out.”

“I’m, I’m a great thief, I can sneak places and snatch stuff before anyone…”

“You saw me hire Beatrice, right?”

“I’m really strong! I can knock down a wall if I try!”

“Mm,” Cal said. “We do have Callie for stuff like that, though.”

“Fuck. I’m… I’m a vast repository of historical knowledge, okay? My soul is ancient and I’m way more powerful and dangerous than I look; I’m an incomprehensible force beyond human understanding.” Arky was jumping back and forth now in his irritation.

“Same,” Cal told him. “So basically you can’t do anything that someone I know isn’t already doing. In Daolo we call that being useless.” He was walking as they talked, hoping that this wasn’t one of
those things where only he could see Arky.

“I…fuck you, okay? Wait, the venom! I’m venomous, none of the cocks you like to suck can do that!” The imp sounded quite smug.

Cal rolled his eyes. “Fine, you can stay. If I need to poison anyone you’ll be my go-to mote of light.”

“I’m as corporeal as the next guy! You just need to broaden your fucking horizons. Speaking of which—have you considered double penetration? I think it would look good on you. Or in you. You could start with the two smaller cocks and work your way up to your bigger guys. Oh, and it’s a good stepping stone to triple penetration!”

“I liked you better when you were pretending you couldn’t talk,” Cal muttered, seeing Joey hurrying over with a bundled-up Travis. Louis was with them.

“Plus two dicks in your mouth. You could make them all happy at once, Cockhole. Oh, you should fuck that guy too. He’s hot.”

“Go away. Hey,” Cal said to the dragons and Travis, who was also a reptile now. Maybe that was why he was so bundled up. Cal wondered if the demons had made him cold-blooded. “Mathilda left.”

“We noticed,” Travis said. “Did you talk to her?”

“Yeah, she’ll be back. She left me an annoying present,” Cal said, glancing at his shoulder. Arky had vanished. “Nevermind. She’ll be back.”

“Unfortunately,” Louis muttered, arms crossed.

“Are you leaving too?” Cal asked him. “You must also have dragon shit to do in the mountains, right?”

Louis shrugged. “Not really. Dragons don’t do much but hoard and fuck and eat, and I can do at least two of those things here. May as well hang around until the rest of this all gets sorted out or you’ll just be crying for me to come back.”

“He’s staying because he’s in love with a human,” Joey told Cal, grinning widely. “It’s really funny.”

“Oh, fuck off, runt,” Louis said, snapping out his tail and pulling Joey’s leg out from under him, pulling him down into the snow. He was red in the face now. “I’m staying because you can’t be trusted not to fall off a cliff and die if left unsupervised.”

“We’re supervising him,” Cal said, while Travis helped Joey stand. “He’ll be fine.”


“And after we leave Pelican Bay?” Travis asked, with a smirk.

Louis looked away. “I never said I’d babysit the runt for the rest of his life.”

“Got to stay here so you can suck your human’s dick,” Joey teased.

Louis growled, reaching out and putting Joey in a headlock. “I happen to know you got fucked by this entire lot of them last night, runt.”
That was true. Joey had been an enthusiastic bottom for a while now to make up for his rut. They would probably let him off the hook in a day or two. Arky giggled in Cal’s ear.

“What of it?” Joey challenged, struggling to break free. “I never said it was a *bad* thing.”

Louis let him go, snorting. “Just watch it or you’ll find out what a real cock feels like up there.”

Travis put his arm around Joey, pulling him closer. “I heard you bottomed for one of the prince’s bodyguards.”

“Where did you hear…” Louis snapped his mouth shut, tail wrapping around his waist. “You’re on the list too, lizard boy. The fuck list.”

“That sounds like a pretty good list to be on,” Cal mused, brushing more snow off his clothes and not looking at Louis’s dick. “Not all of us have an internal fireplace. I’m going to go inside and warm up. You guys have fun with that.”

“Fuck it, I’m going in too,” Travis said. “It’s too cold out here. See you when you come in, Joey.”

“Bye.” Joey kissed Travis on the cheek. Then, after a second’s hesitation, he kissed Cal as well. “Me and Louis are going to wrestle and talk about dragon stuff like how to keep a human properly.”

“Have fun,” Cal told them, walking back to the house with Travis, who looked like he might be white under his bundles. “Let’s get you something warm to drink before you freeze to death, okay?”

Travis nodded. “Probably should let the others know that Mathilda left.”

“I have a feeling they know. It was pretty eventful.” But he was right, they should find Wes and Mick and Sully. And Beatrice and Lillian. Cal was going to have to start remembering to include them.

He put an arm around Travis to help keep him warm, ignored the imp whispering to him that he should put a hand down his pants to make it warmer, and went inside, thinking that he was doing a pretty good job settling into this new normal, all things considered.
“Well, that was something,” Cal said, after the wedding.

Had he planned to go to a wedding today? No. He’d planned to go shopping with Mick and Wes, and then Sully when he’d appeared from wherever he’d been hiding. But then Gavin had just shown up out of nowhere, reminded Cal that he’d helped rescue Cal’s boyfriends when he didn’t need to and now he needed witnesses at his secret wedding.

Considering last night Cal had dreamed about walking through what was clearly Pelican Bay before people had lived here and destroying what he had known at the time were devotional shrines to people he hated, it wasn’t even the strangest thing that had happened to him today.

It had been a nice wedding, and short, which Cal appreciated. He’d been to his oldest brother’s wedding as a kid and it had seemed to drag on for hours. This had taken about ten minutes and then Owen and Gavin had left, Edwin trailing behind them a respectable bodyguard distance.

“What do you think would have happened if you’d gotten up at the part where Bartholomew asked if people didn’t want them to get married?” Wes asked. “Like, if you said they couldn’t get married, I feel like that would pretty much have to mean that they can’t get married.”

“I feel like they’d have done it anyway,” Sully said. “I don’t get the impression they care much about what God says. And not going to lie, neither does Barty, so it probably wouldn’t have mattered much.”

The wedding had been at Saint Lyra’s, with Bartholomew conducting the ceremony.

“I think it’d have been better if they’d consummated the marriage on the altar right after,” Arky said in Cal’s ear, invisible. “With a celebratory orgy after that.”

Cal ignored him. “How are you and Bartholomew doing?” he asked Sully.

“Better,” Sully said, watching him talk to Darby. “We’ve been talking a lot. They’re going ahead with the new synod—I’ll be disappearing for three or four days when that happens, as a warning.”

“Should I come?” Cal asked. A huge synod with all the angels and demons sounded kind of cool. And kind of terrifying.

“Absolutely fucking not.”

“You’re going to be talking about me.”

“And you being there will make it worse,” Sully said. “You can keep your ass right here in Pelican Bay and I’ll tell you how it goes. I’m tasking you two with babysitting him and making sure he doesn’t fuck off. Travis and Joey too.”
“We’ll make sure to keep him entertained,” Mick said, putting an arm around Cal. Sully had shown him an illusion spell he liked, so he looked like he’d used to now, though he’d kept the marks on his wrists, just peeking out under his sleeves, weirdly. Wes also looked fully human, though with shaggier hair and a beard. “We’ll buy him drawing paper and fruit juice.”

“Careful, buy me drawing paper and I might draw a world where I have boyfriends who aren’t assholes,” Cal warned, tuning out Arky’s suggestions once again.

“Then what would you do with your time?” Wes asked, ruffling Cal’s hair. “We should go, unless Sully’s planning to talk to Bartholomew.”

“I talk to Bartholomew six times a day,” Sully grumbled, standing. “We’re fine.” He waved at Bartholomew, who waved back, paying serious attention to something Darby was saying. The four of them headed for the exit. “After all that, do we still have to go shopping?”

“Yes,” Cal told him, pushing the doors open. “We need…”

He felt it as it happened, a tug under his feet, the world trying to move. “Someone’s trying to teleport you,” Arky warned.

Cal nodded, stepping back, something inside him pulling against the tug, and with a yank, it stopped. He fell backwards into Wes, who caught him. “Cal! What’s wrong?”

“Just some metaphysical crap,” Cal said, steadying himself. “Someone tried to teleport me when I opened the door.”

Mick put his hand on Cal’s arm, his other hand on the door. “You’re making me feel obsolete here,” he said, concentrating. “This is supposed to be my job.”

“I don’t know how I stopped it, if it makes you feel better.”

“I’m not sure you did,” Bartholomew’s voice said, joining them. “At least not the part of you that’s you.”

“Yeah,” Sully said, coming around Cal’s other side and touching his cheek. He looked worried. “I don’t think it was you either.” Wes held him tighter.

“It’s okay,” Cal said to them all, feeling…something. Not sick, not quite. “I’m still me. He’s not here.”

“Someone definitely tried some big magic on this door,” Mick said, shaking his head. “I don’t recognize it.”

“I do,” Sully said, arms crossed. “Saw it once before.”

“When?”

A knock on the door interrupted all of them, cutting into the church. It was hesitant, quiet. But Cal knew who it was.

Bartholomew probably did too, and he moved in front of them, opening the door. There was, quite suddenly, the suggestion of a sword on his back, the impression that he was wearing armour instead of priest’s robes.

Darby was peering around Wes, ears perked and sniffing the air. He made a face and signed
something at Mick.

Bartholomew pulled open the door. “Can I help you?” he asked.

Outside on the street stood Rawen, shuffling his feet. He was wearing regular clothes and had longer hair than last time Cal had seen him. “Could I come in?”

Darby growled, low in his throat, ears flat. Cal wondered if he realized he was doing it.

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea,” Bartholomew said.

“I just…want to talk,” Rawen told him. “For a minute.”

“We talked about this last time,” Cal said. “About the summoning thing, remember? How you weren’t going to do it again?”

“I’m sorry, I just…need to talk to you.”

Cal sighed, stepped back and waved the others back too. “Let him in,” he told Bartholomew. “Unless it’s going to burn the church down or something.”

“Sully being here hasn’t started any pyrotechnics,” Bartholomew sighed, stepping back. The idea that he might have a weapon didn’t leave. Sully, now that Cal was looking, also had his hands near where knives would be if he were wearing them.

“Is that Rawen?” Mick asked as he came in, eyeing him carefully. Wes looked like he might try to fight him.


“In person,” Rawen agreed, giving a half-smile, glancing at Bartholomew as he signed at Darby. Darby looked confused, making a sign that looked like horns.

“I don’t usually wear those out of the house,” Rawen explained. “They clash with all my outfits.”

“What do you want?” Cal asked.

Rawen turned that smile on Cal. “Careful. You sounded like him there for a second. And you felt like him when you refused my invitation.”

“It wasn’t an invitation, you were trying to abduct him,” Mick said, while Cal swallowed. He hadn’t felt any different, and that was almost the most worrying part.

“You really have to get away from this guy,” Arky muttered. “He’s bad news.”

No kidding, Cal thought. “Will you answer the question? My friends just got married and I think they might be annoyed if we start the apocalypse on their wedding day.”

“Contrary to what you might think, I’m not actually interested in starting the apocalypse,” Rawen said, taking a seat in a pew. “I think if you read scripture really carefully, you’ll see that’s your job.”

“Well, I’m not going to do it,” Cal insisted, refusing to sit. If he sat, he wouldn’t have Wes and Mick and Sully surrounding him.

“Good. I’d much rather we not have one of those. I like people, actually. I’m glad you managed to
rescue your friends.”

“Thanks for the help with that,” Cal said. “You showed up without me asking. Don’t think I’m planning to give you anything in return.”

With a shake of his head, Rawen surveyed all of them. “No. It was my fault that it happened, it was only right that I help.”

“It was Cameron’s fault that it happened,” Sully said, inching closer to Rawen. “What are you talking about?”

Rawen spread his hands. “Why do you think they started calling me the devil? Not just because they started calling Nathen God. The process by which Klaus got his powers, and learned to give them to all of you. That was me. I showed him how to do that. It’s my fault that any of you exist in your present forms, including Cameron.”

“Why the hell would you do that?” Wes asked quietly, hands still on Cal’s arms. “Why would you turn people in demons?”

“Because your people were losing the war,” Rawen said. “Because you were nearing extinction. It was the only way to save you. Klaus agreed.”

“And you just get to decide that for everyone?” Wes demanded.

“Everyone who became one of us consented to it,” Sully said, looking uncomfortable. “It wasn’t like what they did to you guys. We all agreed to it.”

“We were fighting a war against gods,” Bartholomew agreed. “We felt we didn’t have a choice.”

“So when did Klaus betray you?” Cal asked, getting everyone’s attention. “You said before that you don’t think you had the same goals even when you were working together. When did you stop?”

“He didn’t betray me,” Rawen said with a shake of his head. “I betrayed him.”

Darby growled again.

“Why?” Mick asked quietly.

Rawen shrugged, nodded at Cal. “Nathen’s first reincarnation. She showed up about thirty years after I’d helped Klaus. Which was just under a hundred years since Nathen had died.”

“So you gave up your plan to save the human race so you could chase your boyfriend around,” Wes growled.

“Your people were in good hands by them, and yes. I wanted to see my friend again. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.” Rawen’s voice was quiet, hard, as he said it.

Arky tugged on Cal’s earlobe. “He’s lying.”

Cal nodded. “And I think you know getting that would start the apocalypse, don’t you?” Cal asked. There was no way Nathen was going to come back and not try to kill everyone again.

“I know.” Rawen sighed. “That’s why I just…wanted to see you again. Just for a minute. I’m sorry.”

He was lying about that too. “You were going to teleport me across the world just to say hi?” Cal asked. “I don’t think so. Tell me what you want.”
Rawen snorted. “You’re too smart for me. You always were. I want you to kill Klaus.”

“So he is still alive,” Sully said. “For sure.”

“For sure,” Rawen agreed. “I don’t know exactly what he’s planning, but I know it’s going to get Nathen killed. Permanently. And I’d rather have you as a human who hates me than not at all.”

“That’s a bit pathetic,” Wes said.

“Yeah. Well, I guess I’m a bit pathetic.” Rawen stood up. “Cameron and Raphael aren’t your real enemies. Klaus is. Kill him; I’ll help.”

“And how the hell are we supposed to do that?” Mick asked. “Nobody even knows this guy’s alive, nevermind where he is.”

Darby signed something at Rawen, who smiled. “They probably can, but you don’t have to worry about that. He’ll come after you eventually. He won’t be able to resist showing himself to gloat. Call me when he does and we can get him.”

“Just like that.”

“Just like that. Call them too,” Rawen said nodding at Sully and Bartholomew. “Cameron and Raphael may hate me, but they hate Klaus more. Between all of us we shouldn’t have any trouble.”

Cal watched him carefully. “You’re way too confident. I don’t believe you.”

“I know.” Rawen smiled, shaking his head one last time. He headed for the church doors. “I can’t remember the last time you trusted me. I also can’t remember the last time I lied to you.”

“Do you expect me to believe that?”

Rawen chuckled, pulling open the door. “I’ll see you later, desh’nej.” And he walked through the door, disappeared.

With one last growl, Darby trotted over to the door, checked outside, and slammed it shut with a nod.

Cal sighed, sat down, comforted by Wes pulling him right into his lap. Mick and Sully sat on his either side. He wished Joey and Travis were here. He just wanted to sit and be held by his people. “Fuck,” he muttered. Even Darby came over and sat with them, tail drooping.

“We have to tell Raphael and Cameron about this,” Bartholomew said, sitting on the pew in front of them.

Sully nodded. “Later. Not right now.”

“Yeah.”

“What are we going to do?” Cal asked nobody in particular. “I don’t know what to do.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Mick promised, holding Cal’s hand.

“We’ll be fine,” Wes said, arm around Cal’s middle. “Promise.”

“Yeah,” Sully agreed, hand on Cal’s knee. “He’s right.”

Darby signed something at Bartholomew, who smiled. “He says he’ll bite anyone who tries to hurt
you. He’s got strong teeth.”

Cal smiled, reaching over and pulling Darby closer too. “Okay. Thanks, guys. I love you.”

“We love you too, Cal. You know that,” Mick said.

“I do,” Cal said, feeling much better. “I do know that.”

And since he knew that, he knew he’d be okay.
“I feel like at some point we told you to be careful about getting hurt,” Cal said, trying not to sound accusatory.

Joey glared, his tail swishing as he walked, cradling his left arm. “It’s not like I tried to get hurt.”

Cal shrugged. “I mean, you picked a fight with a fully-grown knight in armour while wearing nothing but half a boner. I just mean that you’re the only one who’s surprised that you broke your arm.”

“Pretty sure he broke my arm,” Joey disagreed. “And I didn’t pick a fight. We were sparring. It was fun.”

“Until you broke your arm.”

“That part was fun too, except that I lost. I don’t like losing.”

Cal sighed. “And I don’t like you getting hurt.” He didn’t like any of them getting hurt.

“Oh, I’m fine,” Joey protested. “It’s just a broken bone. Mick or Sully or Lillian can heal it.”

“See, remember the thing about dragons being immune to magic and healing spells possibly not working on you?” Cal asked.

Joey looked away. “Maybe. You know what would make me feel better instead?”

Cal had a feeling he knew. “What?”

“A blowjob.”

Smirking, Cal nodded. “I can see how that might help. You want to do it now or wait until we get back to the room?”

Joey blinked, seemingly surprised. “I… I guess we can go back to the room just so no humans see us and get mad.”

“Alright, well let’s go then. Maybe we can even fuck,” Cal offered casually, hand on Joey’s back.

Joey grinned. “I knew I’d like being with you. We’re, um, allowed to do that, right?”

“Do what? Have sex?” Cal asked. “What do you think we’ve been doing every night?”

Chuckling, Joey shook his head. “No, I mean just you and me. Like, should we get everyone else?”

Oh. Fair enough. “We can if you want,” Cal said. “But I think everyone probably agrees that all
dating each other means we can have sex with whatever number of people we like. Even when it was just me, Wes and Mick we’d sometimes do it just one on one.”

“Oh, okay,” Joey declared, walking faster and then wincing. “Ow.”

“This is why we’re going to the room, remember?” Cal asked him, rolling his eyes. Himself, but he hated it when they got hurt. “Mick is there.” He thought about it. “So there might be two blowjobs in your future, actually.”

Joey brightened. “That sounds even better than one.”

“I think so too.” They weren’t far from the room, fortunately. They got there before anyone had to get a desperation blowjob in the hallway, Cal pushing open the door and letting them both in. “Oh, good,” he said.

Mick was there, fortunately, sitting on the bed, sewing. It looked like he was altering a pair of Wes’s pants to have a hole for his tail. He looked up. “Hey…fuck, what happened?”

“Joey was having fun,” Cal explained, walking him over to the big bed. Or rather, the two regular sized beds that they’d turned into a big bed.

“It doesn’t even hurt,” Joey protested, sitting down tenderly and making a face when his arm jostled. “A blowjob would make it feel better. I only came because Cal said I could have one if I did.”

Mick snorted, kneeling in front of Joey, gently touching his arm while Cal sat there and tried not to seem worried. What if Mick’s magic couldn’t heal it? “Did he? Or did he agree that a blowjob would happen without telling you who’d be getting the blowjob in question?”

“He…” Joey scowled suddenly, glaring at Cal. “Wait a minute.”

Cal grinned. “What? You don’t think sucking me and Mick off would make you feel better?”

“You suck. No, shut up, you’re going to say that I’m going to be the one sucking, I’ve heard that joke before.”

“He’s already onto your only joke,” Mick told Cal, smiling as he prodded Joey’s arm. “What will you do now?”

Cal shrugged. “Get a blowjob, I guess. Probably make me feel better.”

“You’re not the one who broke your arm!”

“You’re not the one who broke your arm, either, Sir David is.”

“You’re the worst,” Joey growled.

“You scared him,” Mick said quietly. Cal wished he’d glow or something so it was obvious he was doing magic.

“What?”

“Cal hates it when we get hurt. It scares him more than anything. He always gets distracted on missions if one of us gets hurt, he can’t help it.” Mick smiled at Joey. “So even though it’s not a big deal to you and even though he knew I’d be able to fix it, he’s scared. And Cal’s a snarky asshole when he’s scared.”
“Cal’s…a snarky asshole all the time,” Joey muttered, looking at the floor. “I didn’t…I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, I’m just overprotective,” Cal said, hand on Joey’s leg. “Just…be more careful, okay? I know you’re strong, but you’re not unbreakable.”

Cal wasn’t unbreakable either. And if one of them died, he’d break.

“I know,” Joey said, making a funny noise and then lifting his arm. “It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“I know,” Mick told him, standing up. “Go easy on it for a day or two. That was very weird. The regular healing spell didn’t work at all.”

“Because of dragons being magic-proof?” Joey asked, flexing his arm. It looked in good working order. Cal was relieved and tried not to be too dramatic about showing it.

“Must be. I ended up doing something more like a transformation spell on you. Your body is really malleable—I guess because of the shapeshifting.” Mick was looking at Joey curiously.

“So you…transformed my arm into a not-broken version of it self?” Joey asked, while Cal took his arm and prodded it gently.

“Yes.” Mick smiled now. “Might be fun to play around with someday, see what else I can do to you.”

Joey shied away a little, closer to Cal, looking warily at Mick. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” Mick said. “I can think of a few things. Like…” he put a hand on Joey’s shoulder, and a second later Joey yelped, looking down. “That?”

“No!” Joey said, shaking his head and reaching down to tug at his dick. His very little dick. It was suddenly half the size of Cal’s at best. He pulled it as if to stretch it back to its usual length. “Put it back! Mick, that’s not funny!”

Cal was laughing, though. “I don’t know, that fits your stature a lot better. It’s cute.” All he could think was that Wes would fall over and die if he saw it. And then wake up and just never let Joey live it down. He could practically hear Arky pouting, but the imp wasn’t here. Theodore was supposed to be arriving in Pelican Bay tomorrow, so Cal had sent him to go get Mathilda.

“It is not,” Joey pouted, tugging on Mick’s arm. “Come on, put it back.”

“Okay, okay,” Mick said, touching Joey again and trying not to chuckle. They watched as Joey’s dick grew back to its regular size. “There you go.”

Joey sighed in relief, holding in both hands. “That’s better. You’re…going to do that again, aren’t you?”

Mick patted his shoulder. “Probably some night, yeah. Just for fun.”

Joey huffed, that huff he had that made it seem like he should be expelling smoke. It was adorable and he obviously thought it wasn’t, which made it more adorable. But then he blinked, looked up at Mick, a smile creeping onto his face. “You could…also make it bigger, couldn’t you?”

Cal had been wondering the same thing.

“I wondered how long it would take you to ask that,” Mick asked, smiling. “Of course I could.”
“Do it, do it!” Joey was beaming, his dick hardening as he bounced. “Come on, do it!”

“All right,” Mick said, licking his lips. He was hard in his pants. “Here we go.”

For his part, Cal just went ahead and took his pants off while Mick put his hand on Joey’s leg again, concentrating. Joey kept his eyes glued to his dick while Cal undressed, and it started to grow, getting fully hard as it rose, up past his bellybutton, reaching his chest, thickening until his hands didn’t fit around it. Joey just watched, grin widening more and more as his cock grew, until it reached his chin, and he giggled as his cockhead bumped him.

“Look, you can both give and receive that blowjob now,” Cal said, palming himself while he watched.

“I could do that anyway,” Joey said happily stroking his now-huge cock, his giant balls forcing him to spread his legs. “ Haven’t I ever shown you that?”

Eyebrow raised, Cal shook his head. “No.”

“I will once I’m back to normal later.” Joey thought about it. “Though it would be okay if I just stayed like this.”

“You can’t walk like that,” Mick told him, taking his hands off Joey now. His dick was easily longer than his leg now, and reached to his nose.

Joey beamed, wrapping his arms around it and honestly snuggling it. He licked his own cockhead, shuddering a little. “I’d learn.”

Cal also reached out and touched it, running his hand down the length. “You can also never top again. It’s too big to ever fit inside anyone.” Arky was going to die when he heard that he’d missed this.

Joey paused, looking between Cal and Mick, then at his dick again. “I guess that’s true. Maybe another dragon. A big one. But not you guys. Oh well, I guess it can go back to normal then. Or maybe…just a little bigger than normal?” he asked Mick. “Just so it’s bigger than Louis. But don’t tell him! I want him to think I just grew.”

Mick laughed, taking off his own clothes now. “I can probably manage that if it’s that important to you. You know what I’d like?”

“What?”

“I want to see you cum like this.”

Joey grinned again, giving himself another lick. “Me too. Can you guys help?”

“Why would you even ask that?” Cal asked, pushing Joey back so he was laying down, and then laying beside him with Mick on the other side, both of them angled partly on top of Joey. He mouthed his own cock, but couldn’t get the whole head in his mouth so he just sucked on the head in parts, licking it all over, and Cal and Mick both helped him, kisses and licks all over it, all three of them taking turns sticking their tongues in the slit on top.

While he did that, Cal angled himself so that his own dick was pressed against Joey’s and started humping him, Mick doing the same but to Joey’s balls, the heat of Joey’s cock warming Cal’s skin until he was flushed in the face, rutting against Joey, who was moaning and whimpering as he licked himself all over, kissing Cal or Mick occasionally.
When Joey came it was an eruption, his dick hardening so much under Cal, and he cried out and splattered his face with it, getting big globs in Cal’s hair and on Mick’s chin, spurting up and hitting the wall and the bed behind him, drenching it all in cum. Seeing that was enough to make Cal cum too, squirting on Joey’s dick with a whinge. Beside him, Mick was already doing the same.

When he was done Joey giggled, reaching up and wiping it out of his eyes, off his mouth. “There’s so much,” he laughed. “I think I ruined the bed.”

“I’ll clean it after,” Mick said, watching Joey raptly, not wiping the cum off his own face. “That was awesome.”

“Yeah! I want to do it again!”

“Here,” Cal said, turning Joey on his side, getting behind him, taking some of the copious cum on Joey’s face to lube up his dick and line it up against Joey’s hole. “Suck on Mick.”

Joey nodded and took Mick in his mouth when Mick crawled up the bed to meet him, sucking happily while Cal slid into him and started fucking, reaching around to help Joey jerk off his huge dick while he did. The three of them moved together, Cal and Mick fucking Joey from both ends, Joey moaning in the middle, his dick twitching and leaking against Mick’s thighs, leaving huge trails.

When Cal came, he did it suddenly and with a hard thrust inside Joey. When Mick came, it was with a groan. When Joey came, Cal made sure it was all over Mick as he pulled away, absolutely coating him in cum. He smiled as Joey finished spurting. “There we go. That was what you wanted, right?”

Mick didn’t even look abashed. Not that it was possible to look abashed wearing enough cum to drown a person. “How’d you know?”

Joey giggled, but Cal just shook his head. “Divine powers.”

“Did your divine powers tell you that I want it for you too?”

Cal smirked. “Joey, roll over. Looks like Mick wants a turn behind you.”

“You guys are never going to stop smelling like my cum,” Joey said, clearly very pleased about that. “I want to stay like this until Travis and Wes and Sully come back. I want them to see.”

“I think we can arrange that,” Mick said, pressing inside Joey’s ass while Cal held out his dick for Joey to suck.

By the time Cal was covered head to toe in dragon cum, he was totally over being upset from before, and he felt pretty good about himself overall.

Even if he was never going to stop smelling like Joey.
Chapter Notes

Time for a meeting.

Cal braced himself against the rush of wind and snow as Mathilda flew lower. He didn’t fall over this time, which was nice. He was going to pretend it wasn’t because Wes was holding him.

When she was only about a tree’s height above them, Mathilda transformed, dropping the rest of the distance to the ground slowly, flapping her wings to control her descent. She looked around at all the mess she’d kicked up. “This house needs a proper landing spot.”

“I’ll bring that up with Lord Draughten,” Cal said, wiping snow from his face. “How was your flight?”

“Windy. You’d better not have started without me.”

“They haven’t started yet,” Cal said, waving her towards the house. “Theodore’s on his way now.”

Mathilda nodded. “Very well.” She followed them into the house, glaring into submission anyone who didn’t think that a huge dragon ought to have flown over the city, terrified everyone, and then landed on the manor’s grounds after damaging the trees. They were, as a party, being very disruptive to Draughten’s staff.

“They say he’s going to be here for a few days,” Wes said as Cal led them to the room, running snow through the house. “I hope you didn’t have plans.”

“I did,” Mathilda told him. “But they will wait for me.”

“Because if they don’t you’ll eat them?” Cal asked.

“Hardly. What do you take me for, some glutton?” Mathilda asked in a scoff. “They’ll wait for me because they think I will eat them.”

“Maybe I should try that,” Cal said. “Make people think I’m going to divinely smite them.”

“No one would believe you,” Mathilda said simply.

“Yeah!” Arky agreed, invisible, and back now. “Because you look like you’re more likely to divinely suck their cocks. Speaking of which, did you have much sex while I was gone? Tell me about it.”

Cal just rolled his eyes while Wes snickered at Mathilda’s comment. “No respect. Why did I even create this world?”

“You were probably drunk,” Wes offered.

“I think the other guy made you.” Cal pushed open the doors to the dining room and led Wes and
Mathilda inside, to where everyone was gathering. Theodore wasn’t here yet. “The annoying one who bothered us in church.”

“Your ex?” Wes asked.

“No, my ex is the annoying one who keeps spouting weird prophecies at me.” Cal wondered how Meryan was doing, but then he quashed that thought. He didn’t care.

“Your romantic history is nowhere near as interesting as you believe it to be,” Mathilda told him.

“I’m pretty sure my romantic history is the reason why society exists,” Cal told her back, taking a seat partway down the table next to Sully. Wes sat on his other side. The rest of them weren’t here yet. “Is Bartholomew coming?” he asked Sully.

Sully nodded, cleaning his nails with a knife. “Yeah. We’re supervising. A warning, though. This is supposed to go over a few days, right?”

“That’s what I hear.”

Sully nodded. “Okay. The synod is starting the day after tomorrow, so both of us will be at that all day. It’s three full days.”

“Okay. We’ll fill you in on anything that you miss.” He smiled. “And have to think of a proper send-off for you.”

Sully rolled his eyes. “I’ll be coming back at night. Unless I don’t. I might stay with Bartholomew if we end up being really late.”

“That’s fine,” Cal said, not that Sully needed permission. As he said it, Bartholomew wandered into the room, waving at them. He came over at sat opposite Sully, beside Mathilda. He gave her a wary look.

All the sailors were already here, Cal noted, Natalie, Pax, Denver and Sharon sitting with Elias Aerchon and someone who must have been his secretary. Lord Draughten was near the head of the table, and Gavin’s bodyguards were lining the room, but the prince and Owen weren’t here yet. Louis was standing against the wall behind Denver and Pax, arms crossed, tail around his waist, apparently asleep. Beatrice and Lillian had just now come in behind Bartholomew, and sat down with Mathilda, nodding at Cal.

Just as Cal was taking a moment to think on the fact that apparently everyone’s first reaction to finding out that dragons could look like humans was to want to fuck them, Mick came in with the dragon that he liked to fuck, who cast a pointed look at Louis, seemed annoyed when he didn’t open his eyes, and came over with Travis to sit with the rest of them. Mick sat on Wes’s other side. “Seems like Gavin wanted to have a balance between summoning Theodore into a room full of people and wanting to make him wait,” Mick said. “He’s being kept in a sitting room down the hall while we wait for the prince to get here.”

“We’d better not have to wait long for him or Mathilda’s going to start the meeting without him,” Cal said.

“Nonsense,” Mathilda told him from across the table. “I fully understand humans and their petty need to feel important.”

Cal held in a laugh, and fortunately at that moment Gavin came in before Mathilda could insult him anymore, trailed by Owen, who Cal had to admit looked very intimidating in his black-red
dragonscale armour. They stood waiting together at the head of the table and a minute later Sir Elaine brought Theodore into the room alone. He walked in as if he owned it, glancing cursorily at the rest of them before making his way up to the prince, bowing. “Your Highness,” he said, fake-charming as Cal remembered. “I am Theodore Silver, at your service.”

Gavin nodded. “Thank you for coming so quickly. Please, sit, we’ve much to discuss.” He waved at the table.

“Do we? I admit I remain curious as to what we plan to discuss today, your Highness,” Theodore said. So Gavin hadn’t told him. Smart idea.

“I’m sure if you look around and count familiar faces, you’ll be able to glean a hint or two,” Gavin said as he sat, gesturing for Theodore to do the same. Owen loomed behind him. “How was your trip?”

Theodore didn’t answer immediately. He met Cal’s eyes just briefly, and Cal saw surprise there. Cal nodded at him. “It was as well as can be expected in this weather, your Highness. The roads are icy.” Theodore was giving Pax a similar look now. Pax just smiled at him. Interesting.

“No doubt the cause of your delay,” Gavin answered. His voice was icier than any road.

“I do apologize for making you wait, your Highness,” Theodore lied.

“Not to worry, we’ll find a way for you to make it up to me.” Gavin made it sound like the joke it probably wasn’t. As he said it, Darby came into view, tugging on Owen’s arm and signing at him urgently.

Theodore smiled. “Whatever I can do to be of service,” he said, watching Darby. Cal remembered the slaves in his house and tried not to glare at him. It would be nice if he could say it was just because of the ears and tail. But Theodore hadn’t visibly batted an eye at the dragons in the room.

“Be careful what you promise to royalty. We’re likely to take you up on it.”

“I assure you, I am a man of good faith,” Theodore said, hiding what had to be annoyance when Owen suddenly leaned down to whisper in Gavin’s ear. “I would never make a promise without intending to keep it.”

Gavin waved to dismiss Owen, who left the room with Darby. “I do hope nothing is wrong,” Theodore commented blandly.

“Probably not,” Gavin assured him with a smile as Owen shut the door behind them. “Sir Owen dotes on his son, that’s all. Now, let’s get to the reason why you’re here.”

“I have to say I would greatly appreciate that,” Theodore said, letting that go, obviously reluctantly. “Your summons has me most curious.”

“I can’t believe you let this smarmy asshole hire us,” Wes whispered in Cal’s ear. “Twice.”

“He’s got a lot of money, okay?” Cal grumbled back. And he’d seemed less smarmy when not in royal presence.

“I want to talk to you,” Gavin said, “about a collection of magical stones, and about the Sea King’s Regalia.”

Theodore blinked. “I see. If you’re trying to find them, I can tell you what I know, but…”
“I’ve already found the Regalia,” Gavin interrupted. “The person wearing it attacked me and my people in rather dramatic fashion.”

“A person?” Theodore asked.

“Cal?” Gavin asked, waving at him.

Cal nodded. “We found the Regalia, like you asked us to. Or I should say it found us. We stole the Sceptre from Mathilda here, and then had a brief detour, after which we and the Sceptre were all teleported out to the middle of the ocean. The remainder of the Regalia was being worn by a person called the Sea King, a magic-user of immense power. You might notice that we don’t have the Regalia here with us.”

“Someone was wearing the Regalia?” Theodore asked, face creasing in concern. “That’s very worrying—and exactly what I was hoping to prevent by collecting it.” Now he looked at Pax. “At risk of sounding accusatory, I am quite certain that Pascal here was the last person in possession of the Regalia’s Crown. May I ask how it came to leave your possession?”

Pax smiled at him. “It and the rest of the Regalia possessed my fiancé, which I have to say I really don’t appreciate. Which brings me to the actual main point of this whole discussion. When we escaped from the Sea King he was taken away somewhere by a very ominous shadow monster that appeared from nowhere and we all think you know something about it.”

“A…shadow monster?”

“Yes,” Mathilda said with a curt nod. “It had no form, but it appeared at the end of the battle and teleported the Sea King away. We are given to understand that this is not the first time that this creature has shown interest in something you are involved in.”

Theodore seemed a bit distracted by Mathilda, so Cal picked up. “It’s the same creature that attacked us when we went to the swamp to get the stone for you. That’s twice in a row that we’ve been attacked by the same entity while trying to recover an artefact for you. It leads me to believe there’s something you didn’t tell me when you hired me.”

“And it leads me to believe that you’re involved in something that potentially threatens my kingdom,” Gavin added. “So I’d like for you to tell me now what it is that you know about this creature and why you’re so interested in all the same things as it.”

Theodore hesitated for a long and obvious moment. “I’m afraid I don’t know anything about this shadow creature,” he said, carefully. “At least not specifically. I do know that there are powers in the world that seek magical artefacts to use for nefarious purposes, and I assume this is one of them.”

“That’s a very long way of saying absolutely nothing,” Gavin said.

Theodore quirked a smile. “My apologies, your Highness. I cannot tell you what I do not know, as much as I might like to. I make it my goal to collect magical artefacts to keep them out of the hands of people who might use them.”

“Use them for evil.”

“Use them at all, your Highness. I feel rather strongly that regardless of a person’s intentions, nobody should have the power to destroy a city in their hands.” Theodore spread his hands. “I possess no magic, and a great deal of money. I have the ability to gather these objects and put them where nobody can use them, keeping the world safe from them. That is all I desire.”
“That’s all you desire,” Gavin repeated, voice empty of emotion.

“It is.”

“I know the north has interesting ideas about its relationship to the ven Sancte monarchy,” Gavin said, fixing Theodore with a look more severe than what he’d been using earlier. “But I would like to remind you that lying to a prince is a very bad idea, regardless of whether you harbour delusions of independence.”

Theodore and the prince looked at each other for a long moment, a staring contest that Gavin won. Theodore folded his hands on the table. “It is not my intention to deceive, your Highness. Of course I desire money and power like anyone else, but I acquire those things elsewhere. I prefer to use what I’ve acquired to do something good for the world, not just myself.”

“Which is, I presume, why you hire thieves to steal things for you instead of procuring them legally?” Pax asked.

“Certain items cannot be procured legally,” Theodore said smoothly, obviously having expected that. “It is no more complicated than that.”

“Saving the world is more important than laws, is it?” Gavin asked.

“Do you disagree, your Highness?”

“As the person whose family wrote the laws? Of course not. It’s whether you’re on the side of the angels that I question. Would you care to tell the rest of us how it is that you came to know about all these magical items in the first place? What are your sources of information? How can you be sure that putting them in your house is what’s best for them? Surely some of them are already being guarded.”

“Not well, as Calvin can attest,” Theodore said.

“Answer the question.”

“Which one, your Highness?”

“All of them.” Gavin was clearly getting annoyed. Cal was too.

So he leaned forward. “How did you find out about the Regalia?”

Theodore looked at Cal for a moment, then sighed. “From a friend of mine. I don’t know where he found out about it. But I did later discover that he was working for an enemy of mine—a sorcerer named Solomon, and his son, Samson.”

“The Sorcerer King,” Bartholomew said suddenly. “You claim to be an enemy of the Sorcerer King?”

“I do. I’m afraid I don’t know who you are?”

“Is that also why you wanted the stones?” Bartholomew asked, ignoring the question. “To keep them away from him?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. They’re far safer in the hands of someone who can’t use them.”

“Or they were until they were stolen from you,” Pax muttered, as if to himself.
Theodore narrowed his eyes. “And how do you know about that?”

“Friends and family,” Pax said. “Your robber is here in Pelican Bay at the moment, did you know that?”

“In that case, all efforts must be made to find him,” Theodore said, nodding. He sounded suspicious. “He’s very dangerous.”

“I know. I’ll look into it.” Pax smiled in a way that told Cal he’d already looked into it. Which, since he already knew about the theft, he must have. “I have a lead.”

“If you share it with me, I can perhaps lend some…”

“I’m okay, thank you,” Pax interrupted.

“If we could get back to the topic at hand,” Gavin said, pulling Theodore’s attention back to him.

“I’m afraid I’ve told you what I know, your Highness,” Theodore said, spreading his hands. “I do not know the location of this shadow creature. If you would like my guess, I’d posit that it is a servant of the Sorcerer King.”

“The creature is the ghost of a god,” Cal said, ignoring the hush that fell suddenly. He felt Sharon’s eyes boring into him. “It’s nobody’s servant.”

Theodore and Cal had a staring contest this time. Theodore was clearly thinking very hard. “A god, is it?”

“That’s what I said.” Everyone was looking at him now.

After a long moment, Theodore spoke again. “I have…an informant. The man who told me about the stones, and thanks to whom I ended up doing all this in the first place. He said something to me once about the old gods. Perhaps…I could speak with him and see what he knows.”

“This man,” Cal asked. “His name wouldn’t be Klaus, would it?” Now Bartholomew and Sully both looked like they might kill him. They could try it. He’d come back.

“No. The name he gave me is Adam. I don’t believe it’s his real name.”

Neither did Cal. Theodore’s strings were being pulled by some powerful creature, just like the rest of them. The question was which one.

“How quickly can you get in touch with him?” Gavin asked. “I want a plan going forward before you leave town.”

“In that case, I shall do what I can to contact him in the next few days, your Highness,” Theodore said, inclining his head.

“Fine. I’d like him to come to our next meeting, if possible.” Gavin sighed. “That’s all for now. We’ll be back in a few days and talk about solutions.”

“Very well,” Theodore said, nodding. “Thank you for your time, your Highness.”

Gavin just nodded back. “I’ll see you soon.”

People started to get up. Cal didn’t move. “I don’t like this at all,” he said quietly.
Wes rubbed his shoulder. “Yeah. Me either.”

“This man is a puppet,” Mathilda agreed. “He is unimportant.”

“Yeah. And if he brings his benefactor to the next meeting I’m worried it’ll be someone I know,” Cal said.

“Paranoia isn’t going to get you anywhere,” Bartholomew warned.

“Cal is usually right when he’s paranoid,” said Mick.

“I’m not convinced it’s not Klaus,” added Sully. “This is the sort of bullshit he’d pull.”

“You assume,” said Beatrice, pointing at him. “This guy’s been absent for a zillion years. You don’t know what he’d pull.”

“Nevertheless, it is the benefactor we must concern ourselves with,” Mathilda said, standing. “I must rest. I shall speak with you later.”

“And I was so looking forward to meeting you properly,” Theodore said, having come over to them after being excused. “I’m most curious about you three. I’ve never seen people quite like you before.”

Mathilda smirked. “Nobody has ever seen someone like me before.”

And she turned and left, leaving the rest of them with Theodore. “Alas,” said Theodore. “Perhaps someone else can explain the mystery to me.” He glanced at Joey, who glared.

“I’m sorry for ambushing you,” Cal said, to make him stop doing that. Next time Joey was going to wear clothes, Cal decided. “As you can see, my team has been somewhat absorbed into a larger purpose.”

“Indeed. I don’t blame you. To make your job easier, I am happy to release you from your obligation to bring me the Regalia. And I apologize for the unforeseen complications.” Theodore smiled.

Cal smiled back. “I think that’s the nicest way I’ve ever been fired.”

Theodore chuckled. “I do hope I can retain your services in the future, Calvin. You’re a very interesting young man.”

And he left, heading for the door.

Joey growled. “I don’t like him.”

“Join the club,” said Mick. “He’s a creep.”

“Whoever’s using him as a shield is counting on people seeing a creep and not taking it too seriously,” Sully warned. “Don’t take him lightly.”

“I agree,” said Bartholomew. “I think I’m going to have someone keep an eye on him.”

Sully nodded. “Me too.”

“What, are you guys just in charge of your respective teams now?” Cal asked.

“Cameron forbid,” Sully sighed. “Can we go get lunch instead of sitting here angsting about
“something we can’t know yet?”

“That’s not a bad idea, for once,” Beatrice said, standing.

“Hey, what did I ever do to earn that?”

“Well, you fucked Cal, so your decision-making skills are questionable at best.”

Sully rolled his eyes. “Bitch.”

“That’s me. Let’s go get food, I’m starving.”

“You up for that?” Mick asked Cal as they all stood.

“Yeah.” Cal wasn’t sure he was, but he nodded. “It’s…good. That nothing phases them. It’s easier not to be worried when everyone else just takes it in stride, you know?”

Mick nodded, flanking him with Wes. “Yeah. I know what you mean. Come on, then, let’s feed you.”

And so they went. Cal ate way too much and lunch and tried not to think about which of his old buddies was about to fuck up his life this time.

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