



the HANGED MEN
book 1

BLOOD SPORTS

DANIEL MAY

Blood Sports

The Hanged Men, Volume 1

Daniel May and Augustus Roth

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BLOOD SPORTS

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For: Shinjaninja, Jimmy, Янчик-баначик, Nye, Cherish, Serene,
Liselle, Diplodonkus, Angie, Qilins in Rainbow, Kymibabe,
Beloved Couch, Inconvenience_store, Hugseverycat, Nairin,
Alexander Sauvage, Roadie, and Villainous Friend. You are all my
babies. Thank you for existing.

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CHAPTER ONE

Jove

The horses called from deep inside the stable, and Jove stood on a jut of dirty concrete under the entry overhang, watching the drizzle come down and enjoying his allocated once-per-season cigarette.

The horses kept calling, expecting breakfast fifteen minutes ago, and Jove kept standing in the entry, delaying it.

As long as he stood there, the whole establishment was in disarray. Stablehands were paralyzed, unable to bring horses in or turn them out. Wealthy traders, come all the way from Europe to sell lame jumpers to naive Americans, sat sweating in their shitty little sports cars in the blocked-off parking lot.

Jove's people sat in their row of featureless black sedans and waited.

Their leader stood in the doorway and exhaled smoke, inhaled the smell of horses and a hint of whatever shitty coffee this place served its employees.

He could imagine without seeing the stained pot, the permanent black crust of scalded coffee on its base, the filter uncleaned and the coffee grounds ladled out of a suspect tupperware next to similar tupperwares full of horse supplements.

He smiled faintly.

The smell brought him back.

When he had been fifteen and pretending to be twenty-one, he'd slept in a hayloft in a place just like this. He'd drunk that shitty, scalded coffee. He'd worked from four every morning to nine at night, turning out and bringing in horses just like the ones he could hear screaming now. Thoroughbreds fresh off the track, thick with muscle and still trembly from the rocket fuel they were fed. Hunter horses flown in from Ireland, jumpers from France, dressage-bred stock from Sweden. Wild-eyed, gigantic things, with only enough brain cells to know when dinner was late.

Forty years later, the horses hadn't changed.

But he had.

Jove Alms had grown from a tall boy to a taller man and, despite the silver infiltrating his dark hair and beard, had never lost the muscle from putting up hay all summer.

Well but conservatively dressed, he wasn't totally out of place in the upscale barn. He could have easily been mistaken for the father of some aspiring jumper queen, here to watch a lesson, or one of the many older gentlemen who still liked to foxhunt, gamboling through brambly fields with flask in one hand and crop in the other.

One thing differentiated him from both his past self and the usual stable fare.

His right eye was frank and blue.

The left, opaque gold.

When it came to choosing a prosthetic, the once-leader of the notorious Hanged Men hadn't gone for subtle.

He hadn't even bothered with the realism of a dark pupil or white sclera. The gold sat in its socket, lanced through with a single long scar, blaring out an advertisement of his old injury.

A stablehand dared to squeak by, mumbling what must have been a fearful apology. Jove watched him go, a sliver of a smile curling up one side of his mouth almost imperceptibly. He blew out another mouthful of smoke, and the mist of the early morning swallowed it.

Another man emerged from that mist. Wearing a heavy coat, the collar pulled up to his ears, he gradually took form as he approached.

Curly red hair. Curly red beard. Nose pink from the cold.

About the same age as Jove, his right-hand man had better escaped the early creep of silver, but the bags under his eyes told the tale of someone who had lived life the hard way.

"We found him," said Bialy.

"Where was he?" asked Jove, tapping ash off the end of his cigarette and eyeing what remained of it. Hardly more than a hot pink cherry.

"Hiding in the hay barn."

Jove's gaze flicked down to see the evidence stuck in bits and pieces all over Bialy's coat. The corner of his mouth twitched again.

"He made us drag him out," said Bialy, picking at his sleeves in the perfect picture of disgruntlement. "I've got hay in everything but my asshole."

Jove took the final puff on his cigarette and knelt to put it out, grinding it into the concrete.

"How does he seem?"

“Scared shitless,” said Bialy. He eyed his boss for a second before asking, “Should he be?”

Not many people were in a position to ask Jove questions, not even ones as casual as ‘How are you?’ or ‘Did you catch the game last night?’ Very few people were in a position to speak to him at all.

Bialy had been around a long time. He’d caught a couple of bullets. Jove had given a few words at his wedding. That was as cemented as a bond could get in their old line of work, so Bialy had a certain amount of leeway.

Particularly now that Jove had settled into retirement.

He hadn’t gotten softer by any means, but he didn’t sharpen his edges to quite as vicious a point these days. It wasn’t kindness, but apathy. Why work so hard, with three sons to carry on the family business?

But today was about more than business.

Jove waited for the crushed-out end of the cigarette stub to cool, then straightened up, casting his eye around for trash cans. Seeing none, he pocketed the butt.

He didn’t say whether or not their man should be scared. He only said, “Man should have found a better hiding place.”

—

Jove stepped into the back of the stretch car and sat down, perching one ankle on the opposite knee and picking a single fleck of hay off his dark jacket.

Across from him sat a shivering man. Eyes bloodshot, he was dressed for sunnier weather. His tan betrayed a recent change in hemisphere, a transition from the tropical to this dreary place.

“You thought Nerva wouldn’t follow you up here,” said Jove, observing the frantic twitching of the man’s face. “You were right.”

The man broke. He dropped off his seat to the floor, on his knees, holding his hands up and beginning to beg.

“Please,” he said. “Please, it won’t happen again, I beg you—”

The car began to move, rocking the man. He almost toppled over, and reached out instinctively for balance.

His hand landed on Jove’s leg.

He recoiled immediately, but too late.

Jove's arm shot out and seized the man's wrist with knuckle-cracking force.

Before the man could even yell, his fingers were broken, bent back and snapped, left dangling.

He held the hand to his chest and howled.

Jove leaned back in his seat, looking on with no reaction, and said mildly,

“Fasten your seatbelt.”

—

The train of black sedans persisted through the increasingly gray morning, wiper blades coming to life as one as the mist turned to rain.

The road coiled through back channels of broadleaf trees, many of them barren, a handful hanging onto their red and gold plumage. The rain would probably turn to snow soon — perhaps that night. Then the last gasp of autumn color would disappear under a sheath of white, and not reemerge for another year.

Gazing through the tinted window, ignoring the quiet sobs of the man he'd just mutilated, Jove thought on the coming winter.

This far deep inland, and up north, it was hard to picture his old tropical stomping ground. He knew that at that very moment, his sons were probably spilling blood or champagne on white beach sand — not dissimilar to the snow he could expect in a matter of days.

The snow would end up spattered with blood here, too, he was sure.

His retirement was not quiet.

He didn't seek trouble, but the itch persisted... that itch that kept him at the stable, watching his horses run. Kept him in the saddle. Kept him in the gym.

Kept him busy.

Busy, but not satisfied.

The train of cars finally broke from the main road and began to file down a private one, crossing under a wrought iron archway onto crunching gravel.

On either side of this drive, trees had been cleared and the space converted to pasture. Horses grazed. Jove's eye slid critically over them. His mind automatically registered pedigrees, damsires, stud fees. In

particular he eyed one chestnut mare. He didn't gamble, not even at poker — making him no fun at the usual soirees — but if he did, he would have won big on her. Only twelve starts, but never placing under third, ending her career with a streak of five firsts... and a fractured cannon bone.

Breeding sound. Due in the spring.

There was something almost poetic to be contemplated there. The death of summer, the hibernation of growing life over the winter. The promise of new life in the same place that the sobbing man was going to end his.

The cars crawled to a halt, gliding one by one into the parking slots that lined the exterior of an enormous white stable. One of a handful Jove owned.

This was the least lavish; he kept mostly breeding stock here.

Breeding stock, and a few specimens that needed secreting away in the broadleaves.

“Get up,” said Jove, and exited the car without another glance at the sobbing man. As he walked down the drive, boots crunching over gravel, two others dragged the man from the car.

Bialy rejoined him on the walk up to the stable, still flecked with hay.

“I called Nerva,” he said in an undertone.

“Oh?” Jove's lips curled at the mention of his oldest son, but not in a smile.

“He sends his apologies,” said Bialy.

“I see.” Jove's expression didn't suggest he was inclined to accept them.

“He had another message.”

Jove's gaze flicked sideways, taking in Bialy's wary expression.

He stopped to lean on the fence a moment, waiting to see if the chestnut mare would give him any notice. She lifted her head from browsing the ground and looked over at them. She swished her tail once; she was definitely considering it.

“What is it?” asked Jove.

“Izawa is moving again,” said Bialy.

Jove didn't say anything. He watched the mare. She watched him. After a long moment's standoff, she dropped her head and went back to snuffling the ground, and he turned back to his right-hand man.

“Is that Nerva's excuse for incompetence?”

Bialy seemed to bite his tongue — then took a risk. Maybe he was banking on his boss being in a good mood.

“It sounded real,” said Bialy. “After moving headquarters last year, they’re more centralized. If they start pushing out, Nerva won’t be able to handle it on his own. And the other two...”

“No, his brothers certainly won’t help.” Jove dismissed his sons with a flicker of distaste in his voice, thrust his hands into his pockets and continued on down the drive.

The drizzle flecked his hair and beard as he went. It could hardly be called rain, and he registered it as only a small irritant, but it was a steady, prickling reminder of the changing seasons.

The earlier pleasantness of the day dissipated with every crunching step.

He was getting older, but the cycle persisted.

Fall. Spring. Life. Death.

Old enemies.

Constants.

As he passed over the threshold of the stable entrance, he reached into his pocket, pulled out the wasted butt of his once-a-month cigarette, and dropped it into a trashcan.

The horses here were silent. They’d already been fed.

There was nothing to break the sharp sound of the man wailing, the scabbling of his shoes on the aisle concrete as he made them drag him.

Jove reached into his pocket again, and pulled out a key.

Bialy paled at the sight of it — a little silver thing — as if Jove had pulled out a torture device.

“Are you—” Bialy finally wavered short of asking a question he didn’t want an answer to.

Jove flagged down a stablehand coming out of a stall with a full wheelbarrow. She didn’t blink at the sight of him, or the sound of the howling man. She had worked there a while.

“Have the new fillies settled?” he asked.

“They got a handful of soaked pellets each, AM and PM,” she said, after a pause. “But nothing substantial. The directive didn’t say what they’d been eating so we decided to start them slow.”

“They were eating full meals at Daphne’s,” he said. “Put them back on half portions tomorrow, three quarters the day after, full portion by the weekend.”

“Yes, sir.”

She had turned back to her wheelbarrow when he stopped her, adding, “Except the gray. Fast her tomorrow.”

She looked at him — then down the aisle, as the dragged man’s feet disappeared around a corner.

“I’ll make a note of it, sir,” she said.

Jove left her to her duties.

The corner took them to an enormous set of steel doors, where his men waited for him and his key, with their sad burden finally going quiet between them.

Bialy hung back as Jove opened the padlock, reluctant, but stepped forward in servile instinct to push the actual doors open for him.

The stable continued inside, not visibly different.

But a metallic smell rushed out at them.

Jove led the way now. They passed stalls without normal doors, with thick mesh and metal grilles cloaking the animals within. All that could be seen inside were flashes of color, ripples of movement.

Chestnut, bay, black, silvery gray.

There came the sound of hooves and snuffling noses. Curious, investigative noises.

They came to the end of the row, and Jove’s men deposited their burden at the base of a stall door.

The man lay there huddled, sniffing.

Hardly worth a lecture.

Not even an audience around to hear it.

Maybe it was just for nostalgia’s sake, maybe it was to keep himself from getting rusty. Maybe he had just reached the point in his life where he talked to hear his own voice.

Jove gave the lecture anyway.

He knelt, eye-to-eye with the man, and reached out to poke his flinching forehead.

“You know what they used to do to horse thieves, back in the Wild West?”

Of course this sad little... urchin of an underling had no idea. He was probably five steps lower down the totem pole than anyone Jove had threatened in decades.

The urchin just looked back at Jove with weepy eyes, like maybe there was some correct answer that was going to save him.

“They—” he blubbered. “They hanged them.”

“Correct,” said Jove, and watched watery hope beading up in the man’s eyes. “Do you see any nooses dangling around here?”

“N-no.” That watery hope glistened.

“That’s because this isn’t the Wild West,” explained Jove, listening to the old words as they rolled off his tongue, and finding himself mildly surprised when they came out different from every other time he’d given this speech.

“Some might say that we’re more civilized now, these hundreds of years later,” mused Jove, contradicting the ‘him’ of twenty years ago. “However... I haven’t found that to be the case.”

The urchin stared at him.

“You see,” continued Jove. “Back in the Wild West, a horse wasn’t just a pet. A horse was transportation, it was livelihood. It was the thing that got you home in a snowstorm when you lost your way, the thing that remembered the pass through the mountain when you were blinded. A horse was *everything*.”

Jove could see the urchin beginning to realize he’d been wrong to hope.

“But now?” Jove glanced back over his shoulder in the direction of the main barn, and shrugged. “What’s a horse? A six figure plaything for your spoiled kid. A senator’s conversation piece. A swaybacked nag sitting in some field along the highway, just three bad years and a trip to Mexico away from being dog food.”

Jove cupped his chin in his hand and considered his own words, barely registering the upscale of the man’s gibberish in the background.

“Where’s the dignity in that?” Jove wondered aloud.

He wasn’t an old man, but he could all too easily see himself in that swaybacked nag, just thirty bad years and a fall down the stairs away from some prison or a hospital.

Oh, his sons would make it a luxurious prison, he was sure.

But where was the dignity in that?

“I’m sorry,” blubbered the man. “But I—” He hiccuped. “I didn’t steal a horse.”

Jove’s single blue eye flicked back onto the weeping man’s tan face. He noticed for the first time the telltale signs of bronzer, fake tan wrinkling around the man’s eyes.

Jove’s boredom turned from near-sympathy to disdain.

“No,” he said. “You didn’t.”

He straightened up and looked in through the metal grille, meeting a pair of black eyes set in a gray face, a pair of flaring red nostrils.

“You stole something worse.”

The thing inside that wasn’t a horse double-barreled the wall with its hooves and screamed, demanding more than a handful of blood-soaked pellets for breakfast.

Jove’s two men stepped forward and slid open the first set of doors, revealing a recessed little antechamber, not unlike a standing coffin made of metal bars.

That was where they thrust the little urchin of an underling, the little nothing under Jove’s heel, the lump of roadkill you glance at in your rearview after feeling a bump.

They slammed the door.

One of them pulled a dangling cord, and there came the grate of opening bars.

The pair of dark eyes behind the grille disappeared in a flash of grey mane.

Crunch.

The final scream was cut instantly short — as swiftly as if they had hanged the man.

Some things, Jove reflected finally, did not change at all.

—

They walked out into the rain, stopped, and took a shared step back into the shelter of the underpass.

“It’s really spitting now,” said Bialy.

There was no tremor in his voice, but Jove had known the man long enough to know when he was shaken.

“Lose your iron stomach?” he asked. He gazed out at the gray, the rain which refused to either become a stream or turn to snow, and instead insisted on flinging down icy little needles.

“I don’t love your new hobby,” said Bialy. “Whatever happened to cement shoes?”

“Speaking of the beach,” said Jove, the corner of his mouth suggesting a fraction of a smile. “Will the wife miss you if you disappear for a bit? I

think some time on the coast will do me good.”

Bialy eyed him with wary familiarity. He picked another bit of hay from his coat and let it drop. “Back to the old hobby?”

“Old dog, old tricks,” said Jove. “Old hobby.”

“So much for retirement.” Bialy gave up on his coat, shaking out the sleeves one last time. “Which coast? Belmont? Del Mar?”

“Whitecape,” said Jove.

“Whitecape?” Having just witnessed an atrocity, Bialy had shaken off some of his polite reserve, and questioned his boss more freely now. “We missed stakes season.”

“Stakes season is over,” Jove agreed. “But the horses are still running, the people still betting, and the sharks still hungry. Izawa is always hungry.”

There was something sharp in his single blue eye — a sparkle that held no kindness, but was reminiscent of the creature back in its iron stall.

Bialy saw it, and knew it.

“The racetrack, then,” he said.

Jove blew breath out into the cool air, watching it cloud up like the exhale after a drag off a cigarette.

“The track.”

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CHAPTER TWO

Tobias

The sun rose in a truly odious fashion that morning, casting a pale and ugly light over the morning steam of the track.

The steam couldn't properly be called 'fog', though it dispersed in the sun like fog. The hope of cooler weather barely dipped below fifty at night, and the clouds puffing from the horses' nostrils gave off more of an impression of a smoking machine than of hot air escaping into cold.

The trough was still ice cold when they dunked his head in it.

Tobias, who had the tragic habit of optimism, reasoned to himself that he'd definitely had worse awakenings. Once, he'd been sleeping in a horse's stall and awoken by the splash of its piss in his face.

But Jesus, at least that had been *warm*.

The two men who had dragged Tobias out of his bed and dunked his head now pulled him out (by the hair, of course) and threw him to the ground.

The mare whose trough had been repurposed for his suffering watched with interest over her stall door. Normally, this time of day someone would be coming around to turn her out into the run. The lack of any sign of such a person, and the fact that all the horses in the row seemed to still be inside, suggested to Tobias that the someone had been paid for their absence.

That alarmed him more than the assault itself.

His boss was basically a police dog turned man, quick to fury and perpetually eager to chomp the ass of anyone who deviated from the rules. Nobody would willingly break those rules without one hell of a payoff.

Tobias blew water out of his nose and squinted up at the two men.

Identical denim, identical polos, identical windbreakers. The light clothing suggested they weren't natives to the area; anyone accustomed to the local climate would have been swaddled in layers. Tobias, a born northerner who rarely wore anything heavier than a hoodie himself even in a southern winter, recognized that these had to be out-of-towners.

Not a good sign.

He imagined they weren't here to visit the beach.

"Gentlemen," said Tobias, tongue automatically trying to dig him a grave, as it was wont to. "How can I help you?"

One of the men squatted down in front of him, smiled, and patted his knee in a friendly way.

“Tobias Nimh, right?” he asked.

“Speaking,” said Tobias.

“You should be thinking about helping *yourself*, Toby,” said the man. “Do you know who you’ve pissed off?”

“Firstly,” said Tobias, figuring he was going to die and deciding he may as well be a bitch about it. “Literally nobody calls me Toby. I get ‘Pip’ as in pipsqueak, ‘Lil’ as in lil shit, and just ‘Nimh’ when people are feeling formal, but never Toby. Secondly—” He sighed, spread his hands in a ‘what can you do’ shrug. “Everybody is generally pissed off at me, all of the time. You could say ‘the KGB’ and I would say ‘that’s weird, I thought they were disbanded’ but I still wouldn’t be surprised.”

The man gazed at him for a moment, poker face betraying a flicker of ‘is this brat serious’ before saying, with emphasis, “So. *Toby*. I see you’re not terribly concerned, and I want to apologize if we’ve given you the wrong impression. If you’ll just allow me to fix that.”

Good job, me, thought Tobias, right before the man’s fist slammed right into his mouth.

It was a thick, bony fist.

It instantly popped one of Tobias’s lips against his teeth, sending blood spattering across his face and then dribbling in a nasty rush down his chin.

The men were polite enough to wait out his spinning head, making small talk while he clutched his face and moaned.

“—rewatching the X-Files on DVD again.”

“Seriously, DVD? I gave you my Netflix password.”

“They cancelled the last two shows I actually liked, dude. I give up at this point—”

Tobias put up a hand and waved it, flagging down their attention with his bloody fingers.

“Okay,” he said, his voice sounding far away and sandy, like it was on the beach. “I give up. Who did I piss off?”

And more importantly, how?

It wasn’t like he was a bastion of good behavior; he sold his piss to jockeys getting drug tested, he lied to his mother about taking online classes, and yeah, he spat in his boss’s coffee pretty much every time he had to bring it, but he never *hurt* anybody.

And his life definitely wasn't interesting enough to get him entangled in whatever this situation was.

"Are you sure you have the right Tobias Nimh?" he asked, voice thick from the swelling lip.

"Let's see," said the man, and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a picture and dangled it in front of Tobias's face. "This you?"

It was a picture cropped from an article, one he vaguely remembered.

The trainer he'd been working under at the time had been caught palming a jockey an electroshock device right before a race. They'd made up some bullshit about how it was the jockey's own TENS unit, therapy for a BSed medical condition, and avoided actual consequences. Still, the scandal had created an image problem, and for that, the trainer had scorched-earth cleansed the barn of anything suspicious and invited reporters in to take pictures of whatever they pleased.

One of the things they'd taken a picture of was Tobias, pitchfork in hand and half a sandwich stuffed in his mouth, staring down the camera with the same vacant alarm as a starlet caught getting out of a strange man's car sans panties.

A twenty-something, string bean of a youth who looked like he should be carded just for existing. Dirty blond hair, curly and disheveled like a rogue lamb's. Big hazel eyes.

He would have looked like some baroque cherub if not for the Black Sabbath t-shirt and barbecue-sauce stain on his cheek.

He didn't even *like* Black Sabbath, or barbecue, but both the shirt and the sandwich had been free.

And if Tobias had one consistent world philosophy, it was 'hell yes, free stuff.'

Looking at the picture now, Tobias wished he'd been a little more particular.

It was one thing to have that image of himself splashed all over the internet.

It was something else entirely to have it waved in his face by a man who was *probably* going to kill him.

"Yeah," he said, defeated. "That's me."

"Great," said the man. He straightened up and turned to his compatriot. "Bring the trailer around."

The trailer was a four-horse slant into which they loaded three horses, and Tobias.

He lay trussed up in the hay in compartment one, wrists and ankles bound, mouth full of a rag with duct tape slapped over it. The trailer rumbled around him. The horses stomped, their feet visible under the separators, agitated by the rocky motion.

Thankfully, it seemed to be either a new or a well-cleaned trailer. Tobias was going to be covered in straw but at least he wasn't rolling around in shit.

They drove for long enough that he had an unfortunate amount of time to contemplate where he was going to end up.

And in how many pieces.

He tried to distract himself by listening to the horses, watching their feet and trying to guess things about them. The closest had lost one of its padded shipping boots, giving him plenty of time to check the limb out from the cannon bone down.

At first glance, the leg was plain, chestnut with only a little circlet of white above the hoof. However, after a good chunk of time on the road, Tobias realized the little bit of white was hiding something interesting.

Well, interesting to a groom hog-tied at hoof level for what felt like was breaking a half hour.

An old scar encircled the pastern, a neat and even slice of missing hair hidden in the white. It had to be old, because it looked like it had been deep, and there was no sign of trauma beyond the scar itself.

As someone who had, for years, witnessed horses trying to kill and maim themselves with whatever mundane objects made up their day-to-day life, Tobias was well acquainted with injuries like these.

If he had to bet, he would have guessed the thing had put its foot through a fence and gotten stuck.

Gotten stuck, and panicked.

Horses were smarter than people gave them credit for, but they were also fundamentally antsy about having control of their own bodies. A saddle they couldn't buck off, the surprise of halter pressure for the first time, a trapped leg — all things he'd seen make a horse flip itself over.

He wondered if this horse had flipped itself over.

He wondered if someone had witnessed the accident and quickly gotten the thing free, or if it had been trapped for hours, giving up on escape and being found lying still and bloody.

Or maybe Tobias was being morbid — on account of presumably going to his death — and the dumb animal had just taken the skin off in a rope burn and been completely fine.

Who knew?

He rolled onto his back, gazing up at the roof and the sliver of window instead.

Beautiful blue sky.

Suddenly, the sky disappeared.

Darkness fell, and a thump and change of sound under the tires suggested a tunnel.

He heard the horses snorting their surprise in the dark, and thought, *Fuck.*

There was only one main road out of the city, the circle of civilization that held the track and its stables, and it dipped down under a coastal inlet. He'd always found it a little eerie, knowing about all that water lurking overhead.

It was much more eerie going under it while bound hand-and-foot in a horse trailer.

Tobias counted in his head, and after exactly three minutes and seven seconds, light flooded back in.

A moment later the trailer slowed and made a left-hand turn.

Tobias made a muffled groan.

He knew what lay in that direction, and it wasn't civilization.

—

They unloaded the horses first, leaving Tobias lying in his compartment long enough that he wondered if they had forgotten him. His hands, already tingling, began to feel numb. The rest of his body began to protest the position it had been trapped in for over an hour. A small person, he was used to squishing himself into uncomfortable places, and had spent plenty of nights sleeping in between tack trunks or hay bales. But even he had a limit.

Finally he heard the thump of boots on the ramp, and the last compartment swung open.

Tobias rolled over and looked up.

One of the men from before looked down at him, the same one who had waved the picture in his face. He wore a much more irritated expression now, and had a fresh cut on his forehead.

“Stupid horses,” he said by way of explanation, and bent down, whipping out a knife and slicing through Tobias’s bonds before he had time to flinch at the blade. Hauling Tobias up to his feet, he continued on in a commiserating tone, as if Tobias were a coworker and not someone he’d kidnapped. “Thousands of years, you’d think that someone would have thought to breed brain cells into them.”

“They don’t run on their brains,” said Tobias, quoting his first boss.

The man made a “Hmph” sound that didn’t agree, but couldn’t argue with his point, and he grabbed Tobias by the collar and dragged him out.

Tobias blinked as he stepped into the sunlight, stumbling a little on the threshold of the trailer ramp, and turned his head left and right, getting a look at his new surroundings.

He had expected a dank warehouse in the middle of nowhere, the kind of place where someone could be beaten ferociously and nobody would be able to hear them scream.

Instead, he found a craggy old barn. Tall, made of dusty-gray wood. Looking around, he saw a long row of parked horse trailers. A loooong row. On either side of the barn were hay fields as far as the eye could see, broken up by the occasional line of trees, and a single gravel road.

No visible house.

Horses, but no turnout. Trailers, but no cars. And too late in the season for cutting hay.

This was nobody’s home, and there would be no one coming by. It was just a pick-up and drop-off point for horses.

And, apparently, the country equivalent of a dank warehouse where someone could be beaten ferociously and nobody would be able to hear them scream.

“I still don’t know what I did,” Tobias began to say, but was given no time to finish. His captor jostled him on, towards the black mouth of the open barn doors.

For a moment Tobias contemplated either running or flinging himself to the ground — anything to make this as difficult as possible for these men. He didn't because... frankly, his brain had turned off a little. He hadn't been fully awake when they dragged him from his cot, and the trailer ride had been surreal enough that his mind couldn't quite catch up to the reality happening around him.

And because honestly, he hadn't *done* anything.

He might have snapped out of it given the chance, but the man shoved him on, and before Tobias's brain could fully gear up, his body was passing under the shadow of the doorway.

His eyes took a moment to adjust to the dusty interior.

It was an ordinary barn, one more reminiscent of his childhood than the million-dollar tracks he'd spent much of his life working at. The smell of horse sweat and alfalfa, drifting down from the lofts, was deeply nostalgic. The sound of horses munching lulled Tobias's mind into even more of a false sense of safety, almost dreamlike.

And then the smell of *something* hit him like a slap.

Tobias wrinkled his face, grabbed his nose, and coughed. It was an iron smell, yet somehow natural. Animal.

He realized it was the smell of blood.

The man grabbed him by the shoulder and dragged him off to the side, into a little wash bay. Shelves with horse shampoo products, conditioner, combs, and sponges lined the walls. The concrete floor tilted in on itself, leading to a drain at the very center.

There was a chair perched right on top of that drain, and the man shoved Tobias down onto it.

Tobias sat there with fear finally awaking in his gut.

Hung alongside the products for bathing horses were what looked like welding tools.

"I really didn't do anything," he said, voice small.

The man didn't reply right away. He pulled out another chair, a folding metal thing that shrieked as he opened it, and sat down facing Tobias — between him and any escape from the wash stall.

The man took a napkin out of his pocket and began dabbing at his forehead cut.

"How long did you work for Mr. Blay?" he asked.

“I...” Tobias tried to measure years in his head, going by stakes season. He remembered winning horses, he remembered the ones that had achieved success under his care, but the exact timeline of his career eluded him.

“Only a few months.” He finally hazarded a guess. “Just for a bit, after the whole—” He waved his hand in an ‘I shouldn’t say’ manner. “The whole scandal. I think they just needed to hide their regular staff for a bit. You know, stick them in a closet until people stop poking around, before someone notices the felons, that kind of thing.”

He laughed half-heartedly. The other man didn’t laugh at all.

“I don’t disbelieve you,” said the man. “But here’s the thing, Toby. Mr. Blay up and vanished with a lot of shit that didn’t belong to him. Dough. Assets. Horses. We’ve been poking around in a lot of closets, but so far, haven’t come up with anything. Last we heard, Mr. Blay was headed for the islands. Some think he’s gone for good. Others think he might have snuck back around to say good-bye to a certain little twink. Sounds like Mr. Blay was quite the romantic.”

Tobias stared at the guy for a good thirty seconds before the words clicked.

And then Tobias gaped angrily, struggling to speak through the sheer offense of it all.

“I sucked his dick at *one* Christmas party!” he said, holding up a finger for emphasis. “Romantic?” He sputtered. “He lasted *three minutes*, and his cum tasted like cough drops.”

“Cough drops,” repeated the man, wrinkling his cut forehead and seeming to listen intently.

“And then he tried to *pay* me,” said Tobias, becoming as infuriated now as he had been when it happened, forgetting where he was and the fact that his fucking life was as stake. “*Forty bucks*. Literally just what he had in his wallet. I don’t know the going rate for head, but it’s got to be more than that, right? He spends hundreds of thousands of dollars a year on horse semen, and cheaps out on oral?”

“Three minutes’ worth of oral,” the man pointed out.

“That was *his* fault,” said Tobias heatedly. “Not mine.”

“I see.” The man pulled out his phone, glanced at it, and asked, “Did you take the money?”

“I—” Tobias blanked for a moment, then snapped, “No! He stuffed it in my hand, but I left it on the table.”

“So if you weren’t paid,” the man said pointedly. “One could argue that it was romantic.”

Tobias groaned. He put his face in his hands. “Can’t we just say I’m slutty?”

There was the sudden blare of a car horn from outside. Tobias automatically jumped up, but the man shoved him back down in the chair.

“Wait,” he said, with cold authority.

Tobias heard tires coming fast over gravel and another car horn, this time closer. Finally came the rough, cascading sound of a car braking hard on rock, and doors slamming.

Then the sound of men, of footsteps.

Lots of them.

The second man Tobias had met earlier reappeared, coming around the corner with a number of others. They all had the same look — unsavory. Muscular. Hard-eyed.

Tobias was so busy staring at them, wishing himself back asleep on his shitty cot, that he didn’t see the person they carried until they tossed him down onto the floor.

The man dropped facedown, and didn’t move.

The back of his head was a crater. Tobias didn’t have to look close or long to know that he was dead; no one could have survived that kind of damage. He didn’t know if it had been a gunshot or a bludgeoning, but it had punched a hole so neat Tobias was forcibly reminded of a pitted avocado.

Blood immediately began to creep down from the man’s hidden face, following the incline of the wash stall floor, all the way to the drain under Tobias’s seat.

He felt himself get very cold.

He had seen a dead body once before — an accident at the track when he was twelve. A horse spooking suddenly into the field mid race, sending its jockey flying over its head and into the dirt. Right in front of the oncoming pack.

It had been far enough away that he didn’t see any gruesome details, only the chilling stillness of the man lying on the track.

This was so much closer, so much more gruesome, that Tobias couldn’t even wrangle up an emotion about it.

He just felt cold.

A bald man built like a bouncer wiped his palms on his pants, leaving bloodstains.

“Did you get a location?” he asked Tobias’s questioner, who shrugged.

“He doesn’t know anything.”

The bald man focused his eyes on Tobias, taking in his un-maimed state, and said, “Are you sure?”

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CHAPTER THREE

Tobias

It turned out that Tobias didn't need to be alarmed by the welding tools, because the bald man pulled a pair of pliers directly out of his pocket.

Another one of them held Tobias down while a third wrested his left boot off.

As always — not that it mattered now — Tobias couldn't keep his mouth from running.

“At least go for the right foot,” he pleaded. “That side's already fucked up.”

“Shut up,” said the bald man coolly, and grabbed him by the ankle. Yanking Tobias's sock off, he asked, “When did you last hear from Mr. Blay?”

“I haven't spoken to him since he creampied my tonsils at the Christmas party.”

Some of the men exchanged looks.

But the bald man was unfazed.

“You're the third person I've had this conversation with,” he said. “Why don't you save us some time, keep your dignity and your toenails, and tell me what I need to know?”

Tobias vowed never to get drunk and give head at a Christmas party ever again.

The bald man leaned over to scrutinize Tobias's toenails like he was picking among rings at a store, a contemplative look on his face — and then his phone rang.

At the sound of the tone, his expression changed completely.

He dropped the pliers, released Tobias's foot, and put the phone to his ear.

“Sir?”

There was a moment of silence on his end, and then he lowered the phone and put it on speaker.

The voice that came from the phone was surprisingly mild. A man's, but not gruff. Nothing like the ones that had surrounded Tobias all day. It was more... educated, was maybe the word. Not refined, but refined-adjacent. A voice that made each word sound carefully chosen.

“The Hanged Men are on their way,” said the voice. “The king and the rook among them.”

A rustle of apprehension went through the crowd. The bald man’s face went pale.

“Sir—”

“Leave no sign,” said the voice. A pause, and then, in suddenly clipped tones, “They are upon you.”

A click. The beep of a dial tone.

And the sudden sound of tires, gunning it down the road towards the barn.

Things fell to chaos immediately. Nearly all the men drew weapons, and half pelted around the corner. Tobias was dropped back into his seat, but carelessly, and it toppled over, taking him down with it.

He landed on his ass on the hard concrete, hands slapping down into the dead man’s blood. He recoiled with a sound of revolted horror.

Gunfire rattled through the air outside.

Tobias wasn’t used to guns, kidnapping, threatened torture, or dead bodies, but he was used to acting very quickly to avoid ending up under a panicked horse’s hooves.

Those instincts came in handy now.

In their moment of mutual distraction, he split. Before he even realized he was doing it, his feet had picked him up, and he had bolted past the men — snagging his boot off the ground on his way.

Shouts went up behind him, and that instinct of self-preservation told him he was being pursued without having to look. He darted around a corner, racing for the light of an open doorway. He didn’t know where the hell he was going to run, where the hell in the countryside he was, but he knew he was *out of there*.

Before he could reach the doorway, it suddenly filled — with two new men, each holding a shotgun.

Tobias noped to the left, grabbing the handrail of a set of stairs he hadn’t even noticed himself noticing, and bolted up the skinny stairway towards the hayloft. The steps were slippery with straw; it was only by virtue of his one bare foot that he managed to make it up at top speed without falling and breaking his neck.

There were shouts from below. Tobias reached the top and glanced over, then immediately ducked back at the sound of gunfire.

He heard bullets thud into the rafters and saw the successive shower of dust come down, creating a golden waterfall where it dropped through a swath of sunlight.

He threw a fleeting glance behind himself, and did a double take to see someone darting pell-mell up the stairs after him.

They didn't have an expression of pursuit, but of panic, fleeing the new arrivals as clearly as Tobias was fleeing his original captors. The expression changed at the sight of Tobias — flashing rage.

Instinct grabbed hold again.

Tobias seized the nearest hay bale — hefting it up by the strings in the smooth, practiced arc of someone who had put hay up hundreds of times — and threw it down the stairs.

The man charging the stairs had enough time to develop a cartoonish look of surprise before the bale hit him.

Tobias watched the man wipe out, then crouched by the stairs, risking another peep at the aisle below.

Jesus.

It was total war.

Whoever his kidnappers were, they were becoming past tense. 'Had been.' The invaders swarmed in like boiling water into an anthill, enough of them that he could only imagine they'd arrived in some kind of militaristic convoy. Neither faction did him the courtesy of wearing team colors, so he quickly had no clue who was who, as most of the individuals fell into the category of 'terrifying huge man not to be fucked with' without many distinguishing factors.

Only a few figures stood out. One was the bald man who had threatened to yank out Tobias's toenails.

The other was, undoubtedly, the leader of the invaders.

He emerged when the chaos was already in full swing. A tall, bearded man, straight-backed, he was either a prematurely silvering late-forty-something or a handsomely-aged closer-to-sixty type. He had a gun visible but hadn't drawn it, observing the battle with an expression adjacent to boredom — not unfocused, but clearly someone who had seen more interesting barn warfare.

And he was definitely in charge, because as soon as he walked in and ordered, "Don't shoot the horses," his men immediately switched from bullets to bludgeoning.

Bludgeoning was not better.

Tobias's instincts had switched from flight to freeze, keeping him crouched mostly out of view, brain still not caught up to the reality of what was happening.

Suddenly, that reality grabbed him.

The man at the fore of the violence looked up and spotted Tobias in the loft.

His expression didn't change — and yet it did.

Where that expression had been nearly bored, it sharpened. An almost imperceptible narrowing of the eyes.

No.

Eye.

The man had only one. The right.

There was something in the left socket, but it wasn't an eye. As the man stepped forward, and a ray of sunlight hit his face, that 'eye' reflected light back in a radiant gold, a brilliant spark that suggested something glassy and inhuman.

Tobias immediately ducked back under cover with a muffled F-bomb.

He switched gears back to flight, remembering his original plan of running out into the countryside and gunning it. He went — brain still not working at full capacity, forgetting about his boot still in hand.

He hugged the hayloft wall, grateful that the barn was well-supplied, giving him plenty of bales to hide behind as he crept along. The loft continued over all the stalls, across nearly the whole expanse of the barn. Tobias could see an empty doorway not too far away. All he had to do was make it to the end of the loft, down the stairs, and then, boom. Gun it.

He made it to the bottom of the stairs — and then his thirty-second streak of luck ran out.

The man from the very beginning, the one who had helped dunk Tobias in the trough, the one who had pulled him from the trailer and began his interrogation, grabbed Tobias by the back of his shirt not five steps from the door.

Where the man's temper had been mild before, now he was transformed. Blood was running down his face from a gash in his hairline, coloring the warped fury in his expression.

"How did you get the word to them?" His voice came out in a snotty snarl. It was the snarl of someone with blood in their nose.

“I didn’t—”

Tobias didn’t even get to defend himself before the man cracked his fist right into Tobias’s face for the second time that day.

Tobias felt the cut on his lip open again. The taste of blood flooded his mouth, and he spat in instinctive revulsion. Blood spattered both of them.

“Shitheel,” said the man, almost calmly.

His next punch neatly knocked Tobias’s lights out.

In the dark, Tobias heard the bang of a gunshot.

It could have been the gunshot that snapped him back to consciousness, or the sensation of suddenly hitting the ground. His eyes popped open. He found himself face down, tasting dirt as well as blood now.

Feet away, his captor lay on the dusty floor as well, head turned towards Tobias. Eyes open wide, but unseeing. All of him unmoving.

Dead.

Footsteps crunched over the scattered straw, and the leader with the golden eye came to stand over the body.

He scanned it for an impassive moment, and then looked at Tobias.

The guy made a strong second impression.

He had seemed tall from far above. Now, up close, Tobias realized he had to be a full hand over six feet, and that height was the only reason he didn’t look as muscle-bound as the other men. Muscle stretched over that much man created an illusion of leanness.

This close, Tobias thought he could also better place the man’s age. The touch of silver in his hair and beard was a mismatch with the face; he wasn’t *young*, but he couldn’t have been much older than fifty.

Strong features. Cold ones. As they fixed on Tobias, he felt like an insect pinned to a board for inspection, something smushed and flattened under a slide to be examined by a microscope.

His real eye was blue ice.

He turned from the body and began to walk towards Tobias.

Immediately Tobias jerked up from the ground, scrambling backwards until he hit a stall door. There wasn’t enough time to get up, and nowhere to go.

Tobias could only shrink as the man advanced — walking up slowly. Tucking his gun back into his belt. Bending, with the faint wince of a body well-used, to pick something up off the ground.

The man crouched down in front of Tobias to offer him his boot.

Tobias stared at it. Stared at him.

Both the fake golden eye and the real blue one bored into him like drills into ice, questioning Tobias's presence without a word.

Tobias's body acted on its own.

He reached forward as if to take back his shoe — and instead, plunged his hand forward, seizing the man's gun and whipping it out of his belt before he could act.

The man didn't move. His expression didn't change. His blue eye ticked over Tobias's face.

And Tobias lifted the gun and shot over his shoulder.

The man who had been advancing silently, a crowbar held high overhead, took the bullet and dropped.

He sputtered and thrashed for only a moment before going still.

The one-eyed man listened to the death happening behind him without turning around, and then, silently, held out his other hand.

Sheepishly, Tobias passed the gun back over, trading it for his boot.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Jove

Hours before the attack at the barn

It took Jove less than an hour to reach his old stomping grounds via private jet, an abrupt transition that left him feeling less like he had flown and more like he'd stepped in and out of a time machine.

His first step down onto the tarmac, he smelled seawater, and was immediately plunged into sense memory.

The sweet sting of bloody knuckles. Cigar smoke at twilight. Seagulls crying hungrily, and the weight of a body hauled along in a golf bag.

“Sir?”

His eye slid left to find Bialy watching him.

His second in command had changed out of the woollen coat, the pre-winter layering, and into a suit. He was off to begin boozing, knocking elbows with the old crowd. Starting with brunch at La Côte Blanche. He still didn't look quite the part, face chapped from the cold, but his appearance was less important than the message: that Jove had returned.

Meanwhile... Jove had actual work to do.

“Keep your eyes open,” he said simply.

Bialy nodded and trekked off over the tarmac towards one of several waiting private cars. One for him, one for Jove, and two more as decoys. They probably didn't need to be quite so cautious, but the old routine felt comfortably familiar.

As Jove got into his own car, something approaching a smile grew on his face.

He hadn't been sure at first.

He'd spent much of the flight gazing out the window, waiting for the first hint of a gleaming ocean, trying to reconcile memory with current feelings. Though inscrutable to others, Jove rarely found his own feelings anything but straightforward. In his own mind, his motivations and desires, his fears, his wants and needs were as clear as glass.

Typically.

On the trip, he'd found those feelings obscured for the first time in decades.

It was only now — settling into his seat, watching the driver dodge his eyes in the rearview, tapping the window down a notch in order to smell the saltwater air — that Jove grew sure of himself once more.

He *had* missed this.

—

His first call was to Nerva.

The driver dutifully rolled up the partition just as Jove's son answered with a clipped and respectful, "Sir."

'*Sir.*'

They exited the final lanes of the airport, merging into traffic amidst concrete islands of palm trees and bay laurel. Though the sun was barely up, cars already flooded the road. Jove's driver ducked expertly in and out between them.

The city was as electric as the day Jove had left it, as if he had only pushed pause.

Only Nerva's polite tone betrayed the years that had passed.

The last time they had spoken in person, Nerva had been fiery, full of that vitriol of youth. Frankly, he'd been pissed. The filial quality in his voice now wasn't a statement of forgiveness, but a sign of maturity.

Years ago, Jove would have been pleased to hear his son call him 'sir'.

Now, that desire struck him as somewhat pathetic.

"I've just landed," he said, making a mental note to address fatherhood later.

"Oh." Nerva sounded surprised. "I didn't realize you were coming so soon. I'm not at home."

"That's fine." Jove didn't waste time. "Are we still using that old barn on Mangrove?"

Nerva paused, then said, "No. Rent lapsed over a year ago."

Jove knew he had pulled that number directly from memory; Nerva had always had a mind like a ledger.

"It's too good a location to leave empty," said Jove, thinking aloud, as he only ever did with his sons. He had started it when they were very young, intentionally trying to teach them what they needed to know, teaching them how they needed to think. The habit had never quite left him.

"If we aren't using it, they are."

“I can assemble some men and be there in two hours,” said Nerva, primed and ready as always. Not a single question for his father.

“No,” said Jove. “Assemble the men, but stay where you are.”

Nerva paused, transparently stopping short of asking a question.

“I’ll go,” said Jove, and ended the call.

—

Two new cars and one change of clothes later, Jove was barreling down a back road with an armed convoy, as if those many years of absence had never happened.

It gave Jove a faint sense of unreality, which simplified things a great deal.

It was all muscle memory.

When they pulled up to the old barn, his men leaping out and beginning to swarm the place, Jove stepped out and took a moment to scan the building up and down.

He inhaled, smelled the familiar presence of horses and the out of season waft of the hay fields. Aside from aged paint and a drive that desperately needed re-rocking, the spot was the same. The same place he’d sat around playing cards with the like-minded, the same little island of warmth and light in the middle of a desolate, creaking nowhere punctuated by swampland.

They’d moved so much through this barn.

Guns. Bikes. Cars. Zebras. Once upon a time, the tack room had served as a forgery hub. Another time, they had packed it wall to wall with priceless paintings, sandwiched by talented forgeries.

But eventually, they had stumbled upon the most profitable racket of all, and it happened to be just what the place was built for.

Laundering money through horses had been Jove’s favorite side racket.

Cars, guns, and paintings didn’t have nearly as much charisma.

He smiled faintly now to see that its new owners had apparently agreed with him on that point. The lot was full of trailers, and he could hear the goods whinnying their alarm inside.

His faint smile gave way to a frown at the sound of gunfire.

Jove emerged into the chaos without drawing his own weapon, casting his eye over the scene. His instincts had been good; the place was full of

rats. He couldn't immediately identify them as belonging to any one faction or another, but his gut knew.

Some enemy had been at work here.

The battle was already won by virtue of numbers, so Jove said a dispassionate, "Don't shoot the horses," directing his men to put their firearms away.

Let them leave a handful alive to talk, anyway.

Jove scanned the aisle, eye skipping from stall to stall, taking in the alarmed horses frantically circling and calling to one another. At first glance, all he could see was mundane horseflesh. Thoroughbreds, it looked like, and it didn't take more than that first glance to see how well-muscled they were. Track-ready.

Jove was wondering idly if they had been taken to rig races, for a ransom, or for actual sale, when his gaze wandered high enough to catch sight of something unusual.

His eye narrowed.

A youthful face peeped out of the hayloft. All Jove could see were a pair of wide eyes, staring directly at him, and a tousel of blond hair.

A stray gunshot punched a hole in the ceiling, and a ray of sunlight punched right back, searing down and bouncing off of Jove's vision. He turned, blinked the light away, and when he turned back... the face was gone.

Jove suspected a stablehand caught in the wrong place, wrong time. He was probably working for fifty dollars a day with no clue *who* he was really working for. An innocent bystander.

He was still going to need questioning.

Jove looked down the aisle and saw where things were headed, saw the game coming to a close in what would only be minutes.

He left his men to their work and went looking for the witness.

He knew this building better than almost anyone, and knew there were only two ways out of the loft — two sets of stairs, one on each side of the barn. The witness had bolted the way of the other set, so he could only go so far. If he didn't come down those stairs, he would be hiding.

Jove was prepared to climb up and drag the kid out of the bales if he had to... but he didn't have to.

He rounded the corner to the sight of rage.

A man — not one of his — had the kid by the collar and was in the process of landing a punch on an already-bruised face. The man's expression was wild, hinting at the kind of fury that came from helplessness. A man who already knew that his time on the stage was over.

The kid made the best of his beating and spat blood all over his attacker.

Jove was struck with nostalgia again — a wave of sense memory as powerful as the smell of horses, the hot tarmac, the unseen but ever-present ocean. It had been a long, long time since he'd spat blood on an enemy, but he could remember the taste as well as if it were yesterday.

The man retorted with another punch, this one serious. It landed with a sickly sound — a kind of meatpacking sound, flat and hard and all flesh.

Jove's witness went limp.

And, before he even noticed himself drawing it, Jove's gun was in his hand, and a bullet was leaving the muzzle.

Even separated by years from serious practice or anything approaching battle, his aim was good. The man was dead before he hit the ground.

Jove still checked him.

Standing over the corpse, Jove examined his own actions, and was... perplexed. Perplexed and a little off-put. As a rule, impulse had never moved him. His mind moved rapidly enough that his actions often appeared spontaneous, true, and he was in touch with his gut and let it guide him, which also often appeared spontaneous. He had even been called hot-headed, early in his career, before the world became familiar with him. Before they understood how truly calculated he was.

Shooting the man hadn't been calculated.

It hadn't been a bad choice, and he might have decided to do it anyway, but he *hadn't* decided to do it.

He hadn't even thought about it.

He inspected the corpse a moment longer, then turned to the boy he'd rescued.

'Boy' was definitely the right word. The kid couldn't have been older than Jove's youngest, who had been a later-in-life accident. Jove would have guessed nineteen, then immediately aged that up to twenty-three, because the kid had an air of racetrack polish about him, and none of the local trainers would work a kid under eighteen.

Jove ticked off all the telling traits about him. Deceptively petite — thin, but with working man's muscles stuck to his bones. Not tan, but

freckled to excess, suggesting the beach. Suggesting the track. The calluses on his hands, too, suggested the track.

One thing that did *not* suggest the track, and the thing that Jove found most galling, was the dopey innocence on the boy's bloody face.

He had a split eyebrow, split lip openly bleeding, friction burns on his wrists, and one bare foot, and yet his big hazel eyes asked, '*What just happened?*'

They asked *Jove* specifically, '*What did you just do?*'

As if the situation weren't clear. What had the kid been expecting? A heroic uppercut to the villain's chin?

Jove stowed his gun away as he approached, a gesture not unlike approaching a strange horse from the side, going to the shoulders with a harmless scratch to show you meant no harm before attempting to halter them.

As he did, another old habit came back to life in Jove's head.

He'd met many people in his line of work. So many tedious parties, so many even more tedious battles. No time to catch everyone's name. He labeled people in his head according to first impressions and relevant information.

Looking at the kid sitting braced against the stall, eyes huge, mouth slightly agape, Jove found a number of traits worth labeling.

But for some reason, his mind stuck on that bloody mouth. In this darker corner of the barn, the blood looked softer than it should have. Glossy and dark. Recognizable as red, but not necessarily the gory kind. Paired with those big eyes and the long eyelashes, it could have been mistaken for lipstick.

Jove's mind settled on the word 'red' and turned it into a name.

He knew better than to name something that would probably have to be disappeared in a swamp somewhere, and yet, the kid was 'Red', and Jove's instinct at that moment wasn't to interrogate as much as it was find a clean towel and wipe that dumb face.

Jove's single eye found a boot to match the bare foot, and he picked it up.

He crouched down in front of the kid to offer him his boot, like offering a slipper to damn Cinderella, and 'Red' grabbed the gun right out of his belt.

If Jove had died right there, he would have deserved it for the astonishing lapse in his reflexes.

As luck would have it, the kid wasn't aiming at him, but at some goon creeping up behind.

Jove felt the bullet whistle past his head and heard someone drop to the ground and start sputtering.

At least Red could aim.

Jove silently put out his hand, and the kid gave the gun over, taking back his boot.

It was only then, tugging his boot back on and starting to lace it up, that the kid seemed to grasp something of his surroundings.

"I don't know those guys," he said suddenly, and kept going. "Honest. They grabbed me out of bed this morning, I haven't been here longer than an hour, I swear."

In Jove's experience, the easiest way to interrogate was often to sit in silence and let the other person talk themselves to pieces.

And Red could *talk*.

"I don't know where Mr. Blay is," he went on. "And if I did, I would rat him out in a second, trust me. He didn't pay any of us before he bailed and I'm pretty sure he ratted out a bunch of undocumented grooms. Not that I knew that before I — nevermind. But I was drunk anyway. But I would never. So no, I wasn't his secret boyfriend, and ask anyone who worked there! Hell, put up a giant 'Have you seen this man?' poster anywhere near the track with an anonymous tip line and a picture of his face, I guarantee someone will give him up in a second. They'd do it for ten bucks. Hell, they'd do it for free."

Jove supposed this would have been very useful information if he knew or cared who Mr. Blay was.

The kid had no off switch. He kept going.

"Not even dogs liked that guy. My *mom* didn't even like him, and she likes everybody. This is a woman who sends handmade Christmas cards to felons she's never met, every single year, because she feels bad that they're locked up during the holidays, and this woman met Mr. Blay once and said he gave her 'bad vibes.' *Bad vibes*. No shit, Mom! Thank God none of her penpals are ever seeing parole—"

Jove wondered idly if the kid had a head injury, or if this was his normal state of being. He decided to try something.

“Shut up,” he said.

Red shut up. His big hazel eyes went all wide and alarmed again.

“The men you say grabbed you out of bed this morning,” said Jove. “Do you know their names?”

“I—” The kid faltered. “No.”

Jove nodded back at the dead men in the aisle, in the general direction of the finished battle and all its casualties. “Do you know the names of any of those men?”

Red shook his head.

“So...” Jove took it slow, let the kid think about it. “You don’t know them. You don’t know where you are. They grabbed you this morning, and now it’s only...” He checked his watch. “Not quite ten. Probably no one is looking for you yet, right?” He watched the kid’s face go paler under its freckles. “And now,” he continued patiently. “You’ve just witnessed a murder. Several murders, in fact.”

There was something almost adorable about the way the light of ‘*oh, I’m fucked,*’ dawned on Red’s face.

Jove didn’t actually intend on disposing of him, not without making damn sure his presence couldn’t be wrangled into something useful first. The kid had technically saved his life from that goon sneaking up behind.

Jove didn’t hold himself accountable to life debts by definition, but he also didn’t take them lightly.

“Did I mention I have a mom?” Red asked quickly. “Real sweet woman, prison abolitionist, her uh, great grandpa was a bootlegger, actually, and she raised me in that fine tradition. She claims my first words were ‘snitches get stitches’. My dad said it was ‘applesauce’ but you know, who knows, maybe that’s what I meant, my enunciation just wasn’t there yet.”

Jove was beginning to resent how charming he found this kid.

How was he supposed to disappear someone who followed ‘I would rat him out in a second’ with ‘snitches get stitches’, speaking both with his entire chest, not a whole two minutes apart?

“All right.” Jove straightened up with a little wince at his knees. “Get up.”

Red just started speaking more rapidly. “Okay, I know, I was joking about the first words but seriously, I’m not stupid, I know how to keep my mouth shut—”

Jove doubted that.

“Get up,” he said again, less nicely.

This time the kid listened, though he got up somewhat wobbly. Watching him brace himself against the stall, Jove eyed him and wondered if he had taken more of a beating than was externally visible.

“Can I—” The kid’s voice faltered, and he swallowed, and then asked, “Can I at least leave a message with my mom? I don’t want her to think I just went away for work and never came back. You know, my dad—”

Oh, good God.

“I am not going to take you out back and shoot you in the head,” said Jove, fighting to keep his tone level. “I’m going to sweep this place, and you’re coming with me.”

“Oh,” said Red, looking up at him with as much doubt as confusion. “Um. Why?”

“As a body shield,” said Jove, in no mood to explain his mercy.

It made for a petty excuse. He was over a foot taller than the kid, who was either a jockey or had missed his calling as one at an easy five-foot-nothing.

“Come on,” said Jove, before Red could interrupt with another burst of disarming nonsense. “Can you do stairs?”

“Stairs?” echoed Red.

“If I recall it correctly,” said Jove. “The passage to the secret cellar is a steep one.”

—

Jove took the kid and two of his men.

He hadn’t been given the time to get to know them, and had other priorities on the rocky drive up, so they got rapid label nicknames as well.

One was Glasses, for a serious wire-rimmed pair that fit a surprisingly scholarly face.

The other was Hickey, for obvious reasons. The left side of his neck was almost entirely purple. Jove would have assumed bruises from a fight if there hadn’t been clear teeth marks.

He noticed the marks had gained lividity since he’d first noticed them on the ride down. Probably because of the heat of combat. Increased blood flow.

Despite his namesake, Hickey was professional. He went first down the stairs, making good time but testing every single step with the utmost caution. Arms full of firearm, he held a flashlight between his teeth.

It looked like the secret cellar had been in use.

Not only were the narrow walls headed down clean, but the steps themselves were new — well, new to Jove. They looked like they had been put in several years ago, long enough to gather a fair amount of boot dirt. But they were sturdy.

Hickey still tested each one with a tap, a sweep of his foot, a stomp, and then a careful step down. A pause, pulsing his weight. Then onward.

It was a little excessive, but Jove could guess how the man's mind was buzzing. Hickey was young enough he had probably only ever known the rule of Nerva, only heard tales of his father. Those tales had already been legend when Jove was directly in power. After years of his absence, the stories had probably only ballooned in their mythic proportions.

The man was probably eager to impress.

Jove followed behind him, holding up a second flashlight. Behind him came Red, with Glasses in the rear, sandwiching the kid cartoonishly between the two much taller men.

Jove glanced back once or twice to check the kid's expression, but Red seemed to be carefully watching his step, looking down the whole way.

Jove noticed that his limp persisted. If there had been signs of pain, a wince in his step or a harsh breath, he would have stopped and sent the kid back up. But there was no indication that the hitch in Red's gait was anything more than a mild inconvenience.

So they went on, until Hickey paused.

"Last step," he said.

"Step down and to the left," said Jove.

Hickey obeyed, his boots making an odd click on the invisible ground. The light of their flashlights didn't go far enough to define anything out in front of them.

Jove reached the bottom of the stairs and reached out, fingertips skimming a dusty wall until they found a familiar set of switches.

He flipped them, and the lights flooded on.

All four of them had to shade their eyes and blink until they adjusted.

The lights were brighter than in Jove's memory — they must have replaced those old, shuddering fluorescents — but the cellar wasn't much

changed.

‘Cellar’ wasn’t exactly the right word.

There were proper stalls down here as well, pocketed into the wall and half hidden by crate upon crate of what Jove had to assume were the usual stolen goods.

“Don’t touch anything,” he said, directing his words and a hard look at the kid. The other two would know better, but Jove didn’t trust someone who spontaneously grabbed strangers’ guns not to put his hands where they shouldn’t go.

The kid immediately put his hands in his pockets.

Jove let him be and continued his look around.

The ‘cellar’ had either been originally built as a hurricane shelter for expensive horses, or as a storage place for bootleggers. Jove didn’t recall which came first, but it had been used as both. Once upon a time, the dark passage off to the left had held an actual hidden tunnel, used to send illicit this-and-that back and forth between this barn and a shack hidden back in the hills.

That part had collapsed years ago, but there were still the narrow stairs, and a much wider and accessible ramped entrance — currently blocked by one of the many horse trailers parked outside.

Hickey and Glasses eyed the crates, but that wasn’t what Jove had come looking for.

He approached the half-hidden stalls with an appropriate caution.

These were unlike the stalls up above. They were built more like enormous dog kennels, solid wood braced with metal, and had thick iron bars along the top, rising all the way to the high ceiling. The doors were solid steel, with grilles around eye height giving a limited view within.

Jove didn’t have to look inside to know they were empty.

He would have smelled blood, would have heard those things rustling in anticipation of being fed.

But the deadbolts on the doors were clean, and glided smoothly as he opened each one. Rust-free. Recently oiled.

They had been using these stalls.

He felt the kid creeping up behind him, and slid the door open wide enough to let him see inside.

Red stuck his head in, fearless.

“Kind of intense,” he remarked. “Did they keep studs in here? Or quarantine stalls, maybe.”

His clear ignorance satisfied Jove; he didn't think the kid had the guile to play dumb, and if he had been working here, he would have known about these stalls.

About what was kept inside them.

Jove knelt down, ignoring the protests of his knees to pinch a bit of hay up off the ground. The stalks were clumped together with something dark and sticky.

“Is that blood?” asked Red.

Jove ignored him, sitting back on his heels to think. He turned the bit of hay over in his fingers.

If the blood had been fresh when they were fed — and fresh was the preferred way to feed them — then it couldn't have been more than forty-eight, seventy-two hours since they were moved.

That confirmed it in his mind.

Squatting there, Jove knew he was exactly where *someone* had planned for him to be.

The man fleeing north, the one that had met a crunchy end at Jove's stable, had been pointed in that direction. He may as well have been packaged and delivered to Jove's doorstep. A 'horse thief' plundering around in one of Jove's remaining hobbies, someone effectively harmless, someone so easy to kill, someone who inspired no pity whatsoever... how could Jove resist?

Bait.

Bait, just as this place had been bait.

And whoever laid the bait knew Jove well, knew his old habits and familiar haunts. Knew that he would come here first. Made sure that there was enough excitement to get his blood up, but no resolution.

And his blood *was* up.

He needed to know who wanted him back in town, and why.

He straightened up and turned to find Red digging through a tack trunk. Jove's ire flared, but then the kid turned back holding something up.

“Is this a grazing muzzle?” he asked.

'Grazing muzzle.'

Jove almost snorted.

He took the contraption from the kid — a muzzle, yes, but not made of the soft plastic to keep horses from overgrazing. Instead, the cupped end dangling from the halter noseband was made of curved steel bars, closely packed together, with barely enough room to push a finger between them.

Not that you would ever want to put a finger in there.

Jove turned the muzzle over in his hands, eyed the kid and his expectant expression. Fear seemed to have given way to a truly incessant curiosity.

“Have you heard of a Saturday horse?” asked Jove. “A zatertag, a samstag? The sonnabend, sometimes.”

He got a blank look back.

Jove searched Red’s face for any hint of deception, feigned ignorance.

He found none.

The kid must have truly been an unfortunate bystander if he didn’t know the names. It looked as if he had never even heard the words.

And yet, Jove wasn’t convinced that his witness was truly useless.

He came to a resolution in his head.

“Take count of everyone,” he said to Glasses, voice clipped and issuing familiar orders without having to think of them. “Living, dead, injured. Collect and photograph IDs and send them on to Nerva. Post a guard at the top of these stairs and send two more down the road. No one touches anything. Watch only. I’ll call my man to break down the scene.”

“Yessir,” said Glasses, rushing the two words together in his urge to get them out.

Jove’s eye clicked back onto the kid.

“You,” he said. “Come with me.”

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CHAPTER FIVE

Tobias

Tobias sat in a black SUV the size of a small tank, eye level with what looked like a failed bullet hole in one of the windows, feeling absolutely shrimp-sized in the huge seat.

Outside, his... rescuer? New captor? Whatever and whoever he was, he walked along the edge of the poorly rocked lot and spoke into a phone.

Funnily enough, with a bit more distance between the two of them, he looked even bigger than he had up close.

The handful of times Tobias had worked in a dressage barn, he'd been baffled by the bigger warmbloods, the eighteen-hand stock that could barely fit in the cross-ties, big enough he needed a ladder to tack them up. He'd always wondered what exactly the point was. How did anyone have enough leg for those things? How did you even coordinate something so big around an arena with any amount of grace?

Looking at this man now, Tobias thought he finally understood who they were breeding those horses for.

The fact that he had a gun, cronies, and muscle to boot just seemed like overkill.

Tobias slouched back in his seat and contemplated how he was going to survive this.

He hadn't been killed yet, and that was so far so good. But he didn't exactly feel safe. He got the feeling of being a tiny mouse stuck in a tiger's cage, currently being investigated by the big cat itself, who was too curious to snarf down this novel entertainment right away.

But a tiger was a tiger, and Tobias wasn't going to stay adorable and interesting forever, if his past relationships were anything to go by.

He had a *very* brief window before 'endearingly verbose' became 'noisy bitch I want to strangle', and he had to capitalize on that window.

His heart jumped when the man turned and began to walk back to the car.

He shook his mind like an upside-down piggy bank, praying for some piece of valuable intel to drop out, something he could trade for his life.

And there was *nothing*. Why hadn't he paid more attention? Had he really managed to make it through that whole nightmare of a kidnapping

and interrogation without catching a single name, a telling birthmark, a reference to ‘oh by the way, remember we’re picking up some heroin for the big boss later!’

He was screwed.

He had no concrete plan, but his sense of self preservation managed to kick in and wrangle up something at the last moment.

The man had barely opened the car door and put a foot up when Tobias thrust a hand in his face.

The man stared. His expression was impassive, his single eye piercing and... unimpressed.

“I’m Tobias Nimh,” Tobias blurted out.

Humanizing yourself. That was how people escaped serial killers, right?

“Just Tobias,” he said. “Not Toby, nobody calls me that. I mean, you can call me that, if you want.” Nervous, forced laughter. “You can do whatever you want. Not that you need my permission.”

The man kept staring. Tobias couldn’t tell if he was being waited out, and it honestly didn’t matter — his body was frozen, hand staying where it was regardless of where he wanted it to be.

Finally the man simply put his own hand up — to push Tobias’s out of the way, surprisingly delicately. He sat down, slid the door shut.

“Jove,” he said, and didn’t offer a surname.

The name rang as somewhat familiar... which was a bad sign. Tobias was typically oblivious to details about other people. He was immune to barn gossip, took months to learn a face properly, and never held a grudge — not out of a kind nature, but out of sheer obliviousness. He could pick a single plain bay mare out of a field of twenty identical plain bay mares, knowing her by her tail length or footfall, but recognize the billionaire owner in the parking lot? Impossible. And that was why the trainers kept him working behind the scenes.

The fact that the name ‘Jove’ rang any kind of bell meant that he must have heard it many times before.

But in what context?

That part was missing.

Tobias put on his best attempt at a winning smile.

‘Jove’ didn’t seem impressed. Possibly because in his effort to smile, Tobias cracked the dried blood that was attempting to turn into a scab on his lip, and started it bleeding again.

He winced, touched his mouth, and looked at the blood on his fingertips. Resigned, he took the edge of his sleeve to dab the blood away on it.

Jove seized his hand.

His fingers easily overlapped Tobias's wrist, looking cartoonishly oversized next to his skinny arm and small hand, like someone restraining a doll.

Tobias froze in instinctive fear — and then was taken aback.

The grab had *looked* rough, and the obvious strength of the much larger hand could have turned things rough in a second, but it *wasn't* rough.

It was the grip of a good horseman. Firm, but no pull. Soft so long as Tobias didn't introduce any resistance on his own.

Good hands. The kind of hands that would invite a horse to yield instead of pulling back. Hands that inspired confidence.

Tobias still flinched when the huge man suddenly rose up.

Jove didn't pay the flinch any mind, leaning over the seat — and looming over Tobias — to pull a white box out from a compartment. He let go of Tobias's wrist to open the box, which turned out to be a first aid kit.

Jove ripped the packaging off a piece of sterile gauze and, before Tobias could flinch away again, leaned in to press the gauze to his bleeding lip.

Okay, Tobias flinched a little.

Jove ignored the second flinch just as he'd ignored the first. Dabbing the gauze, he inspected the wound with a critical eye.

Even bleeding, Tobias's mouth couldn't stop itself from running.

"What's the prognosis?" he asked, and joked, very unfortunately, "Am I gonna live?"

"This cut isn't going to kill you," said Jove, with a delicate but specific stress on the word 'cut'. "Keep pressure on it."

He left Tobias to hold the gauze in place on his own, leaning back into his seat and letting that critical eye settle over Tobias's general person.

"Other injuries?" he prompted.

Tobias gave the good-natured shrug he defaulted to when he was sore as hell but knew better than to complain. "Just a little banged up, but I'll live. If you let me, that is."

What in the genuine fuck was wrong with him?

He resisted the powerful desire to punch himself in the face.

Jove didn't react, only said, "The limp?"

“Oh, that’s old,” said Tobias. “You know the saying, everyone on the track limps.”

“The track?” Jove repeated.

Why don’t you just write down your full name, address, favorite foods and worst nightmares and hand it over? Tobias asked himself. *You dumb fuck.*

“Which track?” Jove asked, eye sharp.

Fuck it.

“Whitecape,” said Tobias.

For a second, he could have sworn he saw a flicker of amusement on Jove’s face.

He didn’t find it very reassuring.

“Who do you ride for?” asked Jove. “Whitman? Cassidy?”

“Uh, neither.” Tobias found himself suddenly clamming up, tongue tying itself together as it always did around this topic. “Not a jockey.” He evaded it. “I work for Oskar. Stenberg. He’s—”

The name was scarcely out of his mouth before Jove seemed to pluck the man’s description from some internal rolodex, describing him bluntly. “Tall. Swedish. Chainsmoker. Hates the climate but refuses to move. Horses never win. That Oskar Stenberg?”

Tobias had few good things to say about Oskar, but the remark about the horses had him opening his mouth in protest — then wincing as his lip stung. So he only nodded.

“You know him?” he asked, hoping beyond hope that the answer was yes and that the two of them were best friends, going way back, and Jove would be so happy to reunite employer and employee.

Jove seemed to contemplate that question a moment, then answered simply, “Enough to fiddle while his house burns.”

Well.

“So,” said Tobias half-heartedly, giving up. “Is there, um... is there a reason you haven’t killed me yet?”

Jove sat there and looked at him, exactly as expressive as a mountain.

Tobias’s anxiety emerged as aggravation. “I’d rather you just do it, you know?” he burst out. “Like, it’s not easier, waiting around wondering when it’s going to happen. If I need to beg for my life, just tell me, and I’ll start begging. Otherwise, I’d like to go home.”

“You can’t go home,” Jove said simply. “You’ve seen too much.”

“I have work,” protested Tobias weakly. “I’ll get fired.”

Jove looked at him for another long moment, then said, “I don’t see a point in killing you. It could be a waste.” He perched his chin on his hand and continued his intense perusal. Then, in a tone more like personal musing, he went on. “It would be impulsive. You’re harmless.”

Something about the way he said it galled Tobias, for two reasons. One was the way the man said ‘harmless’ with absolute confidence. Hadn’t Tobias *shot* someone in front of him? How was that harmless? Sure, it was the first time he had ever hurt a person in his life, and if he thought about it for more than a second he was going to throw up, but *Jove* didn’t know that.

The second galling thing was his tone, which wasn’t conversational. It was a ‘thinking aloud’ tone. Like Tobias wasn’t even threatening enough to warrant keeping his thoughts private.

“That,” said Jove. “And you saved my life. Didn’t you.”

Not a question, but Jove still eyeballed him, waiting for acknowledgement.

Tobias swallowed.

He didn’t want to think about it.

He still wasn’t sure why he had acted as he had, why he had grabbed and pointed the gun. In the moment, all his mind had been focused on was the Enemy versus Him, and he knew that man was the enemy.

He hadn’t known what Jove was.

He still wasn’t sure.

“Does that mean you owe me?” he found himself asking.

Jove delayed for a moment before saying, “It’s a factor in sparing your life.”

Tobias swallowed hard again.

“I won’t kill you,” said Jove abruptly. “But you can’t go home. I want you to think hard, Red. Think about how you can be useful to me. Think on what you saw. What you remember.”

He got up, and this time Tobias was too puzzled to flinch, watching him open the door and exit.

“Sit tight,” said Jove. “Don’t run. They’ll shoot.”

And he shut the car door behind him.

Tobias sat there, perplexed.

Had the guy called him ‘Red’?

Tobias had the stablehand's gift of being able to sleep anywhere, at any time, but he hadn't expected it to carry over into times of actual crisis.

So when he woke up and found himself in the back of a moving car, sandwiched between two terrifying types — a man with glasses, and another with hickeys all over his neck, both of them built like MMA fighters — his moment of shock was briefly eclipsed by total exasperation at himself.

He jolted upright, and the man with glasses put a surprisingly polite hand on his arm.

"We're almost there," he said. "Relax. You're not in danger."

Almost where?

Tobias looked out the window and saw not countryside, but buildings. Lots of them. Skyscrapers rippled overhead, jaunty silver spires poking holes in a blue sky. Instead of scrubby trees, there were huge palms.

He recognized the city, if not the neighborhood, and felt a whiff of relief. They hadn't abducted him to some mysterious elsewhere, but taken him home after all.

Though he doubted they were going to stop and drop him off by the track.

"Where's..." Tobias's voice trailed off when he realized he didn't have a full name or any kind of title for Jove, who didn't seem like the sort of person you just called casually by their first name.

"Don't talk," said the behickeyed man in clipped tones.

Tobias shut up.

Looking out the window, he saw that they weren't in the same phalanx of black cars that had rolled up to that barn in the middle of nowhere. All around was ordinary midday traffic — businessmen visibly screaming over their phones while diving in and out of lanes, rich kids in foreign cars bucking the speed limit, wealthy retirees with the top down on their convertibles, sun bouncing off their bald heads.

Tobias didn't have much time to wonder what kind of car Jove was in.

Their driver deftly exited the main road, taking a slow spiral off into a decidedly lush part of the city. An impressive building with a skirt of gardens rose up in front of them, and the car drew closer and closer until the building filled up the window entirely, and then slid to a halt.

A bellhop immediately popped up out of nowhere, and the driver got out to speak with him. The hickeyed individual got out, too — with a warning look at Tobias — and leaned against the door from outside, arms crossed.

Tobias was looking out the window at the parking lot, feeling a little pathetic and forlorn, when another car rolling up caught his attention.

He didn't even try to recognize make and model, mind substituting 'fast and expensive' as it always did when walking through the track parking lot during peak season. He was absorbed by the color — an iridescent almost-purple, ostensibly black but revealing its true colors in the brilliant sunlight.

It slid in just ahead of them, and the driver emerged.

If it hadn't been for his monstrous height, Tobias might not have recognized Jove, he was so transformed.

Sunglasses hid his missing eye, giving him an overall less Bond-villain appearance, but the approachability that lent to him was immediately abolished by the arrogance of the car and the almost-matching two piece suit.

Tobias couldn't be sure from the distance, but he thought it looked like Jove had even somehow gotten both hair and beard trimmed in the short span of time between the barn assault and now. Everything appeared neat and tidy, tamed from the wildness of before. Sunlight touched the threads of silver in his hair and the watch on his wrist, which he checked as he tossed his keys to the valet without looking.

Jove looked towards them, and even through the distance, the sunglasses, and the tinted glass of the car, Tobias felt very seen.

"Okay, let's go," said Tobias's remaining attendant, and before Tobias could react on his own, he was being hustled up out of the car.

The men walked closely on either side of him, somewhat blocking his view and probably intentionally blocking other people's view of him. Unlike Jove, Tobias had not been magically transformed, and still wore dirty clothes and prominently featured a punched-in face. He couldn't really be surprised when the men hustled him rapidly through the lobby and into an elevator.

Tobias looked at his reflection in the shiny walls of the elevator as they ascended, and grimaced even as he wanted to laugh.

His track 'uniform', an emblazoned polo and pair of jeans, had already been in poor shape when he fell asleep in it the night before. Now, the shirt

collar was torn and nearly dangling off, and even the dark hunter green color couldn't hide a big, fat bloodstain that had soaked right into the logo.

Tobias looked down at the ragged bottom of his jeans and realized for the first time that, while he'd gotten his boot back, he was still missing one sock.

He laughed.

His glasses-wearing guard looked at him funny.

The elevator reached their floor after what felt like a long time — bigass hotel — and again the two men hustled Tobias rapidly to a door. One swiped a card while the other watched the hall, then the door opened, and hustle hustle hustle, Tobias found himself in what looked less like a hotel room and more like a luxurious home.

The ceilings were high, the three visible rooms connected by wide, empty doorways. Directly before Tobias was what might have equated to the living room. A sitting space was sunk into the floor — a long table surrounded by sleek black couches except on one side, which featured a fireplace with live but muted embers glowing behind tempered glass.

Off through the left doorway, Tobias could see part of a kitchen, glimpsing what looked like marble counters. To the right, the final visible room was lit by a massive window, taking up the whole wall.

Tobias didn't have more of a chance to ogle, because the couches below were not empty.

Two men, who had been in the middle of an intense conversation, broke it off to turn and look up at him.

One had curly red hair and a beard to match. His face had a hint of pink, suggesting sunburn, and his forehead creases suggested long-term consternation. He struck Tobias as being around Jove's age, and it wasn't hard to jump to the assumption that they were colleagues in... whatever their line of work was.

The second was much younger, young enough that he couldn't have been a peer. In fact, he couldn't have been much older than Tobias.

That one didn't fit the bill of 'colleague' in any other sense, either. His dark hair was some middle ground of slicked-back and tousled, which gave him an unsavory appearance, as did the sneer on his face and the enormous skull badly tattooed on his neck.

"Who's this?" he asked, a snigger in his voice.

The other gave him a sour look and got up, stepping up out of the pit to stop short of offering Tobias a handshake.

“Bialy Bezruc,” he said, and held up his hands, explaining, “Caught a cold from the kids before I came.”

His voice did sound scratchy, and genuinely apologetic. Tobias got a trustworthy impression of the man — not that his impressions mattered. He was sure anyone in the room would gut him at a word from Jove.

And speaking of.

The door opened behind Tobias, and he turned automatically, just as everyone else did, an element of deference in the motion.

Jove closed the door behind him, inserted his hands in his pockets, and looked upon the room.

Sunglasses off, that golden eye and the sliced scar rendered him ominous all over again.

He didn’t look terribly impressed by the accommodations.

His eye finally landed on them, each in turn, and settled on the sneering youth still sitting in the pit by the fire.

Jove frowned.

Tobias felt a chill shoot down his spine. So far, he hadn’t seen much expression from the man, and the blunt frown was deeply foreboding to look upon.

“Hadrian,” Jove said flatly. “Your classes.”

“Hey, Dad,” said the youth, sneer transforming to a brilliant smile, disturbing in how swiftly he turned it around. He jumped up from his seat to come join them.

“Why are you here?” Jove did not meet his enthusiasm.

“You came home so suddenly,” said Hadrian, smile never wavering. “I was worried something had happened.”

“He’s been here for a week,” Bialy informed Jove. “Horse shopping.”

Hadrian’s smile transfigured into something hideous as he looked at Bialy.

“Get out,” said Jove flatly. “Go back to school. If you’re still in town in two days I’ll have you committed again.”

Hadrian eyed his father, seeming to seek some soft spot of mercy. Finding none, he gave up all pretext of friendliness, and his eyes jumped onto Tobias.

That gave him another chill. Jove's son had his father's eyes — but two of them. Doubly alarming.

Tobias swallowed hard.

"Who's this?" asked Hadrian.

"Get out," said Jove again, a fraction louder. That fraction was all it took to make everyone in the room look down or away — except Hadrian.

"Fine," he said, and made for the door. Halfway out, he paused with a last nonchalant remark. "If you're looking for a rat, you don't kennel your best terrier. Just saying. Peace, Dad."

The door clunked shut behind him.

"He's been going on about that conspiracy theory," said Bialy, rubbing his face wearily. "He thinks you have a traitor in the ranks."

"He's right," said Jove, and asked, "Where's Nerva?"

Bialy blinked at him for a moment before replying. "Last-minute meeting with that Saudi breeder. What do you mean, he's right?"

"You." Jove spoke to the two others, who snapped to attention. "Out. Send in the doctor, then wait in the lobby."

They quickly obeyed, and as soon as the door closed, Jove began speaking with Bialy as frankly as if Tobias weren't even there.

"There was evidence of sonnabend in the cellar," said Jove. "Moved within the last day or two... just before we arrived."

"Bread crumbs?" Bialy furrowed his brow.

"Seems to be," said Jove. "No trap. None of the men there knew we were coming. They were bait."

"Pawns..." Bialy mused. "They have men to spare." He thought for a moment, looking at the ceiling, then back at Jove. "You don't think it's Izawa?"

"If it were Izawa, the barn would have been a trap designed to kill me," said Jove. "Not entice."

Tobias decided he was fed up.

It had to be barely noon, and he'd slept through part of the morning, but he was already exhausted again. His body ached. His face hurt. Most importantly, his *feet* hurt, and that was where he found his limit.

He sat down on the floor.

Sticking his bad leg out in front of him, he settled with his back to the wall.

When the two men stared at him, Tobias gave them a thumbs up.

“If you decide to kill me, I’ll be right here,” he said. “Just give me a shout if you need me to turn around, let you shoot me execution style, whatever works best for you.”

He gave them a second thumbs up.

Jove stared.

His lip twitched.

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CHAPTER SIX

Jove

The doctor examined Red with an expression of complete disinterest, checking only for any hint of internal injury, broken bones, and lacerations. Though Jove didn't know the woman — Nerva had sent her — she was clearly well-acquainted with the Hanged Men, and unimpressed by the kid's relatively mild bumps and bruises. She probably dealt with gunshot wounds and stabbings fairly frequently. Jove suspected she looked just as unimpressed at those times, too.

Red didn't seem disturbed by her cool bedside manner. He sat on the edge of the couch and let her poke, prod, pull his shirt up and palpate around. He winced a few times, but only reflexively. He winced much less than the treatment he'd received should have warranted.

And yet Jove knew the kid wasn't stoic.

No one who opened their mouth *that* much, alternating between complaining and begging every other breath, would hold their tongue about pain.

Unless they were used to it.

Jove reconsidered the kid's bad leg.

'Everyone on the track limps.'

Jove knew that life on the track could be colorful bordering on harsh, could even be brutal, depending on who you worked for.

The way the kid reacted — or rather, didn't react — to pain and medical attention was telling.

"He'll live," the doctor finally concluded, straightening up from her examination. "Get some food and fluids in him. His face will look worse before it gets better, but he doesn't need stitches."

"Thank you," said Red, with a politeness so quick it had to be automatic.

Jove recalled him talking about his mother. This certainly looked like the attitude of someone who had at least one good parent.

He knew his sons wouldn't have been so quick to say thanks.

The doctor looked at Red a moment, expression somewhat odd, and then her eyes skipped sideways onto the other two.

Jove had stood quietly watching the whole time — looming, he now realized. Meanwhile Bialy had begun sampling the bar, swilling a shallow glass of bourbon off to the side, frowning at nothing in particular and probably deep in thought.

The two of them were not reassuring people to look at, and Red clearly did not fit the bill of cold-blooded mobster.

Jove met eyes with the doctor and saw her doubting his intentions.

It might have been amusing as a misunderstanding, but for some reason, Jove didn't find it amusing at all.

“Double rate if you stay through tomorrow,” he found himself saying. “I can get you an adjacent room.”

That got Bialy to raise his head and tune in.

The doctor kept her eyes on Jove. “You want him checked on again?” she asked, voice suggesting none of what her face had.

“Once again tonight, and in the morning,” said Jove.

“That's very cautious of you,” said the doctor.

The kid looked on, seeming perplexed. “I'm really fine,” he ventured. “I've been beat up worse than this.”

Jove wasn't surprised to hear it.

“Seven tonight,” he said. “Seven in the morning. Give my name in the lobby.”

The doctor finally seemed satisfied. She nodded. Picking up her case, she left — taking her crude assumptions with her.

Jove abhorred the dirty business most associated with his line of work. Drugs. Human trafficking. As a rule, any of his men caught dipping so much as a pinky into abominable business had forfeited their lives.

Plenty still assumed that they were pushers, pimps.

Predators.

Generally speaking, the assumptions didn't bother Jove, and even aided him occasionally.

He wasn't sure why the assumption now made him cold.

Cold, approaching furious.

He clamped down on it, turning back to Red, who sat there still looking mystified, oblivious to the doctor's assumptions.

“There are bedrooms back there.” Jove pointed him in the right direction. “Pick one. Clean up. There are towels, bathrobes. Order whatever

you want from room service. Don't bother telling them you're being held hostage. They won't care."

"Last meal?" asked Red, giving Jove a sidelong look that still wanted an assurance of mercy.

Jove wasn't in the mood.

"It might be," he said acidly. "Go."

Red picked up on his tone that time and went, surprisingly quick for someone with a bad leg and dwindling adrenaline.

As soon as he had gone, Bialy cleared his throat.

"So," he said, and seemed to think carefully about his words before giving up on treading lightly. "New pet?"

Jove followed Bialy's lead and got himself a drink, settling down to sit in front of the fireplace with it.

"He may know something," he said, and didn't elaborate.

Bialy didn't join him right away. Jove could practically hear him thinking, could see without looking the pensive expression on his face.

Finally his second in command went to the bar, topped off his bourbon, and sat down by the fire.

"You think he knows your 'rat'?" asked Bialy, echoing Hadrian's earlier choice of word with a touch of sarcasm. Jove wondered how long he'd had to babysit the boy, and didn't envy the time spent with his son. Of the three, Hadrian easily beat out his brothers in unpleasantness.

But Hadrian had good instincts — a good nose, just like the terrier he had claimed to be.

"I don't think he knows the rat," said Jove. "He didn't know who I was, or what a sonnabend is. I'm not sure he knows long division. But he was there."

Bialy paused a moment before echoing his words, with significance. "He was there."

Jove eyed him.

"You find him suspicious?"

Bialy turned a little wincy, looking away from Jove's cold eye and taking a hasty drink.

"I don't think *he's* suspicious," said Bialy after a long moment. "Only the circumstance." His voice, already raspy from whatever bug he'd picked up, was low enough that Jove barely caught the words.

Jove finished his drink.

“Maybe the doctor can take a look at you, too, when she comes around again,” he said.

He left his empty glass on the table and went to go order room service.

—

Red’s food arrived at the same time as his and Bialy’s, and Jove stood for a moment looking at the unloaded contents of the cart, wheels squeaking behind him as room service dipped swiftly back out of the room.

He and Bialy had a dish apiece.

The kid had five.

Jove silently lifted the lid on each, finding pasta, steak, what looked like a peanut butter and jelly sandwich (an item that was not on the menu), and two desserts.

If he hadn’t already known that the kid worked on the track, and worked *hard*, this would have made it obvious.

Along with his five dishes came two bottles of water and one of ibuprofen.

Looking at them, Jove felt an odd plunge of guilt. Thinking of it now, he realized it hadn’t even occurred to him that the kid might need them. An oversight. Jove didn’t often take prisoners, and when he did he typically wasn’t the one responsible for them. Every other time, he had passed them on to someone like Bialy.

He was suddenly reminded of a blistering lecture he had once given Nerva after finding his dog’s water dish empty.

It had been an oddly traditional moment for a very non-traditional family — the ‘if you can’t take care of an animal, you shouldn’t have it’ speech.

Now Jove felt like a hypocrite.

And the feeling annoyed him.

But this wasn’t a dog — it was an asset in a holding pattern. The kid would survive without painkillers and water for a few hours

“Want me to take them in?” asked Bialy, who stood waiting for Jove to finish ruminating.

“No,” said Jove.

He gathered the kid’s things on a tray and carried them to the room.

He rapped his knuckles on the door. “Food,” he said loudly.

No reply. Jove heard the muffled sound of running water and figured the kid was making the most of the steam shower. He imagined the best the kid got at the track was five minutes in a wash stall between times when a horse was using it. What Jove recalled of Oskar Stenberg didn't suggest his barn help enjoyed a luxurious existence.

Jove let himself in, putting the tray on a table and eyeing the room. It was the biggest of the three attached to this suite; Jove wondered if Red had considered all of them and actively picked the largest.

Nothing had been disturbed or rifled through, everything left exactly as if it were still waiting for an occupant — except for the pile of raggedy clothes piled by the shut bathroom door.

Jove sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the pile. In his head, he had thought they would send the clothes to be laundered, then walk the kid out in his own style. Nothing suspicious or unusual about that.

Now he realized that was impossible. He didn't know how much of the dirt and wear had accumulated that day and how much had been there already, but the rags were beyond saving.

He was reaching for the phone to call the concierge, to arrange for new clothes to be delivered, when the water shut off.

Jove paused to listen.

For a moment he was wary of the silence — and then he heard the kid start to whistle.

Jove lifted his eye to the ceiling in a half-roll and picked up the phone.

He was in the middle of the call, requesting someone pick up the clothes and judge fit from that (he didn't need anyone measuring the kid and seeing bruises), when the bathroom door opened.

Red stood there with a towel wrapped around his waist and a toothbrush in his mouth.

He froze mid-brush, staring at Jove.

Without thinking, Jove found his gaze dropping from the kid's face, drawn irresistibly to the myriad bruises on his torso... and what lay underneath them.

Jove hadn't been looking closely during the doctor's examination, so he hadn't seen the scars. One looked like a fairly obvious appendectomy — but distorted. Badly healed. Another scar suggested burns, but it was mottled as well. Hard to tell what was initial injury and what was neglect.

He'd been through the wringer.

Jove didn't realize the intensity of his stare until he looked up and saw the kid's face red under its freckles.

The moment was only that, a moment.

And then Red silently walked backwards into the bathroom and closed the door.

"Sir?" said the concierge on the phone. "Sir?"

Jove finished the call and hung up.

When Red reemerged a minute later, he was submerged in a fluffy bathrobe much too large for his tiny frame. It may as well have been a parka.

Jove had moved from the bed to one of the chairs. He gestured silently at the tray of food.

The kid's eyes lit up.

He made a wordless beeline, eyes bouncing over each option before settling on — just as Jove had guessed — the piece of chocolate cake.

Red grabbed the cake, the water, and the ibuprofen, and climbed onto the huge bed to inhale all of it. It took him only seconds to chug the water, the bottle crunching under the force, and then about a minute and a half to blow through the flourless torte.

He set that plate aside and put out a hand, pointing at the pasta with a glazed-over rudeness he probably didn't even register.

Jove handed it to him and sat back again to watch the demolition continue.

It was impressive.

Red got halfway through the pasta before he breathed. Anticipating his needs, Jove tossed the second bottle of water onto the bed.

Down the hatch it went.

Red polished off the pasta and finally came up for air. Wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his bathrobe, automatic as anyone used to getting their clothes dirty every day and not fussed about keeping them clean, he sat back and turned his eyes on Jove.

"I know why you shouldn't kill me now," he said with no preamble. "I remembered something in the shower."

"Oh?"

"A voice," said the kid. "On the phone. Someone called to warn them... someone who seemed important. That could be your 'rat', right?"

He looked at Jove hopefully — but also with some confidence.

Jove considered that.

Useful? Probably not very. Useful enough to give him an excuse to keep the kid in one piece? Maybe.

“What did they sound like?” he asked.

“It was a man,” said the kid. “He sounded...” He paused, thought about it. “Not like nobody,” he finally said. “He was *someone*. I know that kind of person... how they talk. People who park wherever they want, don’t check prices on things. Someone who went to school somewhere. Buys horses, doesn’t ride them. Nice watch. That type.”

Total non-information... but. The kid’s sense of people seemed keen. The impression might be accurate.

“What did he say?” asked Jove.

Red looked up, squinted at the ceiling in an attempt at remembering. After a minute, he spoke. “‘The Hanged Men are on their way.’ Something about a king. And then he said to leave no sign, said, ‘they are upon you,’ and hung up.”

He looked back at Jove. “Is that useful?”

Not particularly.

But.

“Would you recognize the voice if you heard it again?” Jove asked.

Red thought about it. For the first time he looked a little green, maybe like the adrenaline of the day was crashing in on him now that he’d had something to eat and drink.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted. “I think so. But I’m not sure.”

He looked at Jove again.

The kid’s expression suddenly revealed the age his small size concealed — it was the expression of someone who had seen bad endings. Probably seen horses break down on the track. Maybe even people break down. There wasn’t much hope in that face, only a grim realism.

“Is it enough?” he asked.

He didn’t even crack a ‘last meal’ joke, and he didn’t beg.

Something about it dug right into Jove’s chest. Maybe he had been away too long. Maybe retirement had made him soft.

Jove had not been born merciful, and life had not encouraged the habit.

But now, somehow, his usual callousness hit a wall it couldn’t get around.

Fine, he thought.

He hadn't really wanted to see the kid dead anyway.

"Even a five percent chance of identifying them is valuable," he said. His tone was still cool, betraying none of his internal difficulties. "So you'll live. But you can't go home, and you can't reveal anything you've seen or heard to any person. We have a code. Rules. Fail to follow them, and your life is forfeit."

For some inexplicable reason, Red actually brightened at those words.

"A code," he echoed, sounding charmed. "Does that mean I'm part of the gang? Do I get sworn in? Is there a secret ritual? Is there hazing?"

How did you respond to that?

It did raise a question — was he counting Red among their ranks now? Was the kid a prisoner? An outside consultant?

Jove thought of what Bialy had said — 'New pet?' — and grew irritated.

"Finish your food," he said, getting up abruptly enough that Red flinched. Which also somehow irritated Jove even more. He had just explicitly spared the kid's life. What more was he supposed to do to be non-threatening?

"Put your clothes in the laundry slot," he said, already opening the door. "Someone will send up new things tonight. The doctor will come back at seven. If you need food, order it. If you need anything else, call the concierge. If you need anything the hotel can't provide, it can wait. Watch TV. Sleep. Unless it's life or death, don't bother me."

He meant to sound cold, authoritative.

The words came out sounding maddeningly thoughtful instead.

Jove shut the door before he could see the kid's reaction and scowled all the way back to the main room.

Bialy looked up from the table, plate empty, chewing on a toothpick and considering a quarter glass of bourbon.

"He know anything?"

"Probably not," said Jove, sitting down and pulling his own food over. The steak was still warm from being covered, but he didn't find it particularly appetizing. He thought he would have rather had the charred steak and eggs from a diner back up north, the one always half empty, in the small town at the foot of his estate.

"So..." Bialy carefully examined Jove's face, and then fell silent, apparently concluding he wasn't in a mood to be questioned.

Jove answered the silent question anyway. "I'm keeping him around," he said. "He heard a voice on a phone."

"Whose voice? The rat's?"

Jove privately glowered at Hadrian for introducing that word into the conspiracy.

"Maybe," he said. "So he stays. Just in case."

Bialy nodded in a way that suggested 'wise idea.'

"What'll be the story, then?" he asked. He made an offering gesture towards the bourbon, but Jove shook his head. "People will ask about him. Obviously he can't pass as a bodyguard."

Jove put down his steak knife for a moment to massage his temple. It was beginning to ache.

Then it came to him.

His lip twitched. The movement could almost have been mistaken for a smirk.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Tobias

“Buyer’s agent?” Tobias echoed, inspecting himself in the mirror with a frown. More specifically, inspecting his new duds. They were... something.

“You’ve probably seen them on the track and not known it,” said Jove on the other side of the door. He had elected to stay outside while Tobias changed — a gesture that felt a little over the top, like Tobias was some sort of chaste maiden, but was also welcome after being practically walked in on naked.

“I’m getting back into the racing game, and you’re helping me identify the best stock,” continued Jove. “It makes sense.”

Made sense to him, maybe.

It wouldn’t make sense to anyone who *knew* Tobias, and how his usual reaction to moneyed horse owners was a vacant stare. He didn’t know how to talk to anyone who didn’t have dirt firmly encrusted under their nails. Even now, the only reason he was (by a certain definition) comfortable talking to Jove was because they’d met in an equitably grimy situation.

That, and mortal terror apparently made for a great social lubricant.

“These clothes,” he said finally, not knowing how to cushion his social ineptitude and not sure it actually mattered... because what was the alternative?

“Do they not fit?” asked Jove. Tobias could hear the frown in his voice.

“No,” he said quickly. “Just, um. Never mind.”

They fit. The hotel staff was good at what they did. He wasn’t sure how they found men’s clothing in his size so quickly; on his own he usually ended up buying women’s or kids’ items. When it came to working gear, the sort of jeans and boots you found at a Tractor Supply, most things leaned androgynous anyway. No sequins on the asses or strategic hidden elastic there.

He didn’t remember the last time he had worn pants that weren’t heavily-scuffed jeans or breeches with pockets.

Seeing himself in slacks, with a belt that was clearly designed to look nice instead of holed up ancient hand-me-downs, and a *fresh* polo shirt also

clearly designed to look nice, all of which fit, all of which were comfortable and *not* scratchy despite being new...

Okay, he had to say it.

He opened the door and stepped back.

Jove stepped in and gave him a quick, inscrutable once-over.

“These clothes are too nice,” Tobias blurted out.

He managed to catch Jove off guard. The man stared at him, then repeated, “*These* clothes?” with an almost snooty surprise. He gave Tobias another once-over and said again, with clearer skepticism, “These clothes?”

Ah, that was right. Tobias had been so busy being scared for his life, Jove’s obvious wealth had failed to register.

Tobias felt his face heat up, but insisted. “Okay, maybe not to you, but these are nicer than anything I’ve ever worn. Nobody at the track is going to believe me in them.”

“That’s fine.” Jove dismissed his concerns, walking past him into the room and reaching down to inspect one of the jackets laid out on the bed — one of many. The hotel staff had delivered a veritable closet. “What your people think doesn’t matter. My people won’t believe you if you’re wearing rags. They know I have standards.”

Woouooooow.

‘*Your people.*’ ‘*My people.*’ ‘*Rags.*’ ‘*Standards.*’

Tobias tried to conceal his eye roll behind Jove’s back, but forgot about the mirror. Jove caught the look and turned.

His one eye fixed coldly on Tobias.

“Do you intend to cooperate?” he asked, a slight chill in his voice.

“Yep,” said Tobias immediately. “For sure. Don’t worry about it.” To demonstrate his willingness, he grabbed one of the jackets and started pulling it on.

Jove sat down in the armchair and watched him.

“I’m joining some old friends in a private box at Whitecape today,” he said. “We’ll be watching claiming races, and you’ll be there to point out any horses you think I should buy. Keep your mouth shut otherwise. If you think anyone sounds familiar, say nothing until afterwards. Do nothing suspicious. Just sit there and listen.”

Tobias waited for him to ask something like, ‘*Can you do that?*’

Then realized Jove wasn’t going to ask.

Because if he *couldn’t* do it, that was going to be it for him.

“Got it,” said Tobias, and zipped the jacket all the way up to the top, tucking his chin under the collar. It was cozy — cozier than Tobias was used to. At least he wouldn’t die chilly.

Still watching him, Jove abruptly got out of the chair.

Tobias looked up at him — *up* up. With Jove close enough, Tobias actually had to crane his neck to look him in the face. The way Jove gazed impassively down, the angle highlighting his beard and that one intense blue eye, Tobias got the impression of some kind of mountain god.

Jove reached for his jacket zipper.

His knuckles touched Tobias’s chin as he unzipped it — and kept unzipping it, all the way down. His hand brushed Tobias’s stomach for a fraction of a second. Bumped the top of his belt.

That fraction of a second was all it took for a cold spot in Tobias’s stomach to leap up his spine, climbing all the way to the back of his neck in a powerful shiver and grabbing him there.

His mouth was suddenly dry, his head warm.

Jove pushed the jacket off his shoulders, pulled it all the way off... and turned back to the bed, tossing it down.

“This one instead,” he said, and handed Tobias another. “And don’t hide your face in it. You’re playing a professional today.”

He walked out.

Tobias waited a few seconds, then buried his burning face in his hands.

Jesus Christ.

He’d thought the moment from the night before had been a blip.

Coming out of the shower, wrapped in only a towel, emerging to find, frankly, a giant and hostilely handsome man sitting on the bed.

That hostilely handsome man *checking him out*.

Of course, Jove had only been looking at the mess of scars and bruises, and who could blame him? It was honestly impressive. Tobias had been in rough shape before, but he’d never been quite so colorful. The trailer ride had left a bunch of smaller bruises, leaving him almost spotted.

Anyone would have looked. Hell, the doctor had looked. She had even touched him, poked around all kinds of sensitive spots.

But the doctor wasn’t Jove.

And yes, Tobias was definitely deflecting some of his mortal terror by using libido as a coping mechanism, but knowing that didn’t stop him from imagining Jove had an eight-pack under that suit. Didn’t stop him assuming

all that intensity translated to a truly wild time in the sack. Didn't stop him speculating that Jove was hung to the point of putting risk of internal injury on the table.

And that thought wasn't even horny, it was honestly just a fair assumption. Jove was well over six feet tall and carried himself like a man with a third leg. That was just fact.

In Tobias's situation, who *wouldn't* choose to fantasize about being ravished instead of imagining being tied to an anchor and dropped off a yacht?

He was only human.

He made a face at himself in the mirror.

"Stop it," he told himself. "Stop. Being. Slutty. Be normal."

'*You're playing a professional today.*'

He could do that, he told himself. He could totally be professional.

—

He could not be professional.

Tobias had been in a private box once or twice, just for a split second to deliver a message, but apparently those had been lower-tier boxes.

He didn't realize that Whitecape even *had* luxury suites like these. While he'd been there for big race days, seen the crowds and the evidence of affluent spectators, he'd never been privy to this kind of scene.

Lounge. Private bar. Wait staff. Trackside view. Balcony.

Tobias stayed glued to a seat by the glass, watching the horses run and pretending to make notes on a little flip pad, privately writing things like 'shit' and 'fuck' and 'fuck!' over and over again.

They'd driven up in Jove's car, the ostentatious iridescent purple thing, and Tobias hadn't had the opportunity to enjoy its luxurious interior because Jove piloted the thing like it was a fighter jet. Fast. Expert. Terrifying.

Upon arriving, Jove had tossed his keys to a valet — something else Tobias hadn't realized they had on the track, but it seemed like valets just materialized wherever Jove went — and strode up the steps toward the wing of the track Tobias rarely saw.

Tobias was used to the underbelly of the place. The grimy passing tunnels he shared with regular staff on his way to the barn, the barn itself,

the muck piles and the old rusted-out equipment retired out of view. Not dirty as in *unclean*, just dirty as in not polished up. Not upper crust. Normal, working humans and animal dirt.

The private box was a different world. He didn't feel like he'd come home at all.

Only the actual track itself, the long circle of beige footing and the animals running on it, felt familiar.

So he didn't need Jove's reminder to stay out of the way and keep his mouth shut.

What would he have said, anyway?

He snuck a glance over at the social circle.

There weren't a ton of people; this not being stakes season, there weren't too many who came to the track aside from actual racing enthusiasts or gambling addicts. The handful of men and women lounging about — not even watching the horses run — seemed to be there for Jove.

It wasn't subtle.

The man sat at the center of it all, not appearing to pay any mind to most of them, silently holding, but not drinking, a cocktail. Even in silence he was magnetic — huge even when seated, intimidating even with sunglasses on over his missing eye. He wore another two-piece suit, looking somewhat casual compared to everyone else, who all appeared... prim?

None of them gave Tobias the quietly dangerous impression he'd gotten from Jove, Bialy (who wasn't in attendance, oddly), or even Jove's sneering, unpleasant son.

Tobias kept his ears open, but he didn't really expect any of these people to match the voice he'd heard. They didn't even match up with what he'd expected when Jove had said 'my people.'

Shouldn't there have been more tattoos? Scars? Broken noses?

Someone sat down in the chair next to Tobias. He thought '*fuck*' and pretended not to see, gazing more determinedly out the window.

"Kid," said a gravelly voice.

He turned, surprised, and found that Bialy had arrived after all. The man looked a little haggard, and sounded it.

"Ah," said Tobias, trying to think of the proper form of address. What had his last name been again? "Mr..."

"Spot any good horses?" asked Bialy, gesturing with his drink at Tobias's notepad.

Realizing his profane scribbles were obvious, Tobias quickly flipped over a fresh page and cleared his throat.

“There are a few that I—” Tobias began, and then found he didn’t even have the words to put up a front. He gave up. “I don’t know what I’m doing here,” he whispered in a rush. “I don’t think it’s any of these people. But I don’t know if I would *know* if I knew. You know?”

“Relax,” said Bialy. He pulled out a cough drop and offered another to Tobias, who declined with raised hands. Tugging the wrapper open, he said, “Whoever it is, they’re not just going to show themselves. Particularly not at this piddly little event.” He tossed the cough drop into his mouth and bit down on it with a loud *crack* that made Tobias wince. “He didn’t expect them to.”

“Then why am *I* here?”

Bialy shrugged. “Practice? Maybe he wants to see how you blend in before he puts you in the real game. Maybe it’s just convenient to have you in sight. I don’t know why. He doesn’t tell me everything.”

Tobias paused, looking at Bialy’s face and wondering about how casually he’d spoken.

“That doesn’t bother you?” he asked, probably being overly bold, but deciding that Fuck It. “You trust him?”

Bialy, watching the next string of horses head to the starting gate, glanced back at Tobias.

“Trust is the wrong word,” he said — and then didn’t clarify what the right word was. Instead, he leaned back to point out someone in the crowd. “See that man, with the green tie?”

Tobias looked. The man Bialy indicated was currently seated next to Jove, saying something to him and laughing as he did. “Yeah?”

“Lawyer,” said Bialy. “One of about three that have been keeping Hadrian out of jail since he was old enough to be tried as an adult. Glorified babysitter. See the woman next to him?”

Said woman looked either drunk or very bored, wearing all white except for a very severe red necklace. She gazed towards the window but didn’t seem to be watching the horses.

“Daughter of one of Jove’s old—” Bialy paused before a second before deciding on the word, “—business partners. That guy is effectively retired. Sends his daughter around in his place, she basically tells him when he needs to show up where and for what.”

Bialy got comfortable in his seat again and concluded, “Nobody of importance is here.”

“So... why is he here?” Tobias glanced at Jove again. It was odd seeing him interact casually with other people — normal people. As if he wasn’t the terrifying thing Tobias had met back in that barn.

“This isn’t a life you just cannonball back into,” said Bialy. “First, you test the waters. Test them where they’re shallow.”

Tobias didn’t know how the hell a guns-blazing battle and a kidnapping counted as ‘testing the waters’, but then, he wasn’t a mob boss.

“Shit,” said Bialy under his breath. Tobias looked back and saw him checking his phone with a frown.

“What is it?” asked Tobias, but Bialy was already out of his seat. Like magic, he’d caught Jove’s eye, and Jove began excusing himself to the circle.

“Stay put,” said Bialy. “Don’t do anything.”

And then Bialy left — meeting Jove by the bar, conversing for a second, then walking out the door.

Jove went with him.

Leaving Tobias sitting alone by the window, in a luxury private box with a bunch of rich strangers.

He quickly turned back to the window and began talking fake notes again, hoping to continue to go unnoticed.

He barely had time to scribble a random spiral on his flip pad before someone new dropped into the seat next to him.

Another dropped into a seat across from him, and another beside them.

Tobias slowly looked up at his three new companions.

None of them were individuals Bialy had pointed out, or that Tobias had taken notice of by himself. He thought they must have just arrived while his back was turned, because he recognized one of them.

Hadrian smiled from the seat next to him, a smile that didn’t reach his ice-blue eyes.

He wasn’t dressed up like the rest of the crowd; he wore the skeleton of a suit, but covered it with a well-used, rough-looking leather jacket. He had tucked his pant legs into scuffed combat boots, their laces tied haphazardly, like a monkey had done them up. He wore rings on most of his fingers in a playful suggestion of brass knuckles.

“I hear you’re helping my dad buy horses,” he said, and propped his hand up on his chin, smiling emptily. “You know, I’ve been looking for a horse myself.”

Tobias swallowed. “Oh. Uh. For racing?”

“Nope,” said Hadrian, immediately dismissive, lifting his lip in an exaggerated sneer. “I’m an actual sportsman. Eventing.”

Though Tobias had spent most of his life on racetracks, and only occasionally worked at barns that practiced other sports, he knew enough to not be surprised. Eventing — a sport comprising three days of dressage, treacherous cross-country jumping, and finally arena jumping, all with the same horse — was popular among thrill-seekers and adrenaline junkies.

Hadrian seemed like the type.

“Cool,” said Tobias, blanking on anything else to say. He was barely qualified to help Jove with *his* pretend search. Was Hadrian actually asking his help, too?

Somehow, Tobias doubted it.

Someone snorted.

Tobias glanced over at the other two — a suave looking black man with a hot pink pocket square, and a girl who resembled Marilyn Monroe down to a beauty mark, plus several facial piercings.

The man was the one who had snorted. “You aren’t really a buyer’s agent, are you?” he asked.

The girl butted in before Tobias could answer.

Leaning over, eyes gleaming, she said in an undertone, “We’ve all been wondering about you. You’re so tiny — are you a jockey? What happened to your face? Hadrian says he knows you but won’t say from where, which *usually* only means one thing.”

The two of them looked at him significantly, and he looked back at them. Blankly.

“It wasn’t Grindr,” said Hadrian drily from beside him.

Ah.

Tobias looked helplessly past him, hoping to see either Jove or Bialy reappear, but no luck.

All he could think of was to leverage the only constant he knew — the universal fear of Jove.

“You don’t believe I’m a buyer’s agent,” he said. “Are you calling him a liar?”

He put a light emphasis on the word ‘him’, and nobody had to ask who he was talking about.

They all shut up.

Hadrian smirked and waved down a waiter.

“Another vodka martini,” he said, handing them an empty glass. “What are you drinking, Toby?”

“Tobias,” he corrected immediately. “And nothing, thanks. I should probably go...” He trailed off. Go do what? Find Jove? He didn’t know where the hell the guy had gone.

“What *did* happen to your face?” asked the man with the bright pocket square, leaning in.

“A horse hit me with its head.”

The girl leaned in too. “But how do you *really* know... you know, him? Didn’t he just fly in a day ago?”

Tobias gave up.

“Grindr,” he said, and, “Excuse me.”

Not knowing where he was going, he extricated himself from the corner and made a beeline for the door.

He hadn’t realized he was panicking until he actually made it out — and couldn’t slow down.

He had *meant* to just stand and wait outside, knowing Jove or at least Bialy would return eventually, but once his feet got moving they refused to stop.

It wasn’t an escape attempt. He wasn’t *stupid*.

But his body knew where home was, knew where his bed was, where familiar horses were, knew where to find the peanut butter and jelly he had crammed into a mini fridge next to the banamine.

There was nothing comfortable about his life on the track, but his body still raced anxiously for the familiar.

He crossed the building in minutes, descending the back stairs past the kitchen, heading for the exit into the stables.

And then he was there.

Down a narrow stair, out the door, closing it behind him and sinking his back up against it.

Tobias inhaled.

Hay, horse sweat, leather tack.

He exhaled slowly. Shakily.

Things weren't quiet. Were they ever?

The stairway exited into a slim, dusty hallway between feed and tack room. Up ahead, Tobias saw someone leading a horse past, a quick flash of bay.

And then he heard a familiar voice bellowing.

Oskar's accent came out the most when he was angry, and right now it was thick enough it may as well have been Swedish outright. Tobias didn't understand the words themselves, but he understood their meaning. Some poor hand was getting reamed for missing a stall.

Tobias found a smile on his face and quickly banished it.

He needed to get in, and get out.

Now that he was back in the familiar, his mind had settled on an agenda. He had only a few small personal effects stored in a lockbox under his cot, and a phone, though the phone was an afterthought. It was so old it was only good for getting yelled at by Oskar and playing Tetris. Even when Tobias called his mom he preferred to borrow someone else's phone.

But maybe she had tried to reach him.

Tobias didn't intend to tell her — or anyone, for that matter — a thing about the insanity of the past twenty-four hours, but he didn't want her to think he was dead, either.

He poked his nose out into the aisle, glanced both ways, and didn't see Oskar or anyone else with the authority to nab him.

He quickly ducked out and headed down the aisle.

There was enough traffic coming and going that he had plenty of cover, and the hands and exercise riders who saw him were all too busy to do more than frown in confusion.

What the hell was Tobias Nimh doing dressed up like that?

He made it to the far east tack room, to the cot wedged in the very back behind crammed rows of saddle racks.

He made a face at the sight of it.

After spending the night in the absurd luxury of that hotel, his usual digs looked especially pathetic. The cot had never been meant to be permanent; Oskar had promised on-site room and board in their original agreement over a year ago. However, the promised room had developed a surprise 'plumbing issue' right before Tobias arrived.

Oskar had apologized for the cot perfectly kindly the first month, but cooled rapidly once Tobias was settled. After that, Tobias's questions about

the room had been met with increasingly short responses, then irritable ones, and finally Oskar had made it clear that there wasn't going to be a room, so Tobias may as well shut his mouth and just do his work.

Tobias had ultimately shrugged it off. He had slept in more questionable places.

That, and after reassuring his mom repeatedly that he was going to be well taken care of, he couldn't bring himself to leave and have her learn the truth.

She was happy, and he could suck it up.

Or so it had all worked before.

Tobias made a face and bent down to fish his stuff out from under his cot.

Sad laundry bag, pest-resistant snack tote full of dry cereal, water bottle...

Ah. Phone.

He detached it from its battery pack, sat on the edge of the cot, and gave the thing a second to wake up.

Twenty-five missed calls from Oskar, seven from his mom.

Fuck.

His mom had left one voicemail — Oskar, twenty-five. Tobias assumed they were all progressively incensed versions of 'where the hell are you', and opened one to check.

He put the phone to his ear and, yep.

Blistering.

He was about to check his mom's when a hand grabbed him by the collar.

He didn't even feel alarmed so much as resigned. Maybe he was getting used to this treatment.

He figured it was a fifty-fifty chance who had found him, kidnappers or employer.

It was the latter.

Oskar pulled Tobias off his feet to snarl directly into his face, breath stinking of cigarettes.

"Where... the *hell*... have you been?"

Oskar blew hot air out of his nostrils like an angry bull, and he didn't not resemble one. Big. Beefy. *Nordic* beefy, like wrestle a bear to death with just your hands beefy.

Tobias's mouth registered a threat and started running without consulting his brain.

"I have a business opportunity for you," he blurted out.

The choice of words was baffling enough to stop Oskar's rage blinking in its tracks.

He was used to screaming at his hands for being sick, for being injured, that kind of thing. He had *once* caught Tobias coming in late after a night with a gentleman caller — a twat who hadn't even bothered to drive Tobias back to the track — and ever since then, generally accused Tobias of being a slut any time he was remotely off task.

Oskar had a verbal assault ready for all of the above.

He did not have one ready for 'business opportunities'.

"I met a guy," Tobias said, and hastily added, "A guy who wants to buy horses! A rich guy. He hired me to — as — as a buyer's agent."

Oskar stared at him, long and close enough that Tobias could count each vessel in his permanently bloodshot eyes.

And then he slowly set Tobias back down on his feet.

Tobias exhaled in relief — only to yelp when Oskar grabbed his chin in one huge, hard-fingered hand and jammed his thumb up against Tobias's swollen lower lip.

"What's this, then?" he demanded. He gave Tobias's whole head a shake. "Sure you didn't break your mouth sucking cock?"

"Let me explain," said Tobias, voice muffled, pulling ineffectually at Oskar's thick arm. "Come on, Oskar, just let me explain—"

"Yes," said a new voice. Cold. Familiar. "Let him explain."

Tobias twisted to look at the person standing in the doorway, already knowing who it would be.

Fuck meeee.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Jove

Jove had expected the little brunch to be tedious, but he had vastly underestimated exactly *how* tedious.

Nobody who was anybody was in attendance, which had been his intention, but left him bored nearly to tears as well as irritated. They were all schmoozers — people with just enough connections to know a big fish when they saw one. They crowded around him with transparent thoughts towards social gain.

He spent most of the time listening to one of the men from Hadrian's revolving door of a lawyer team. The man was oddly unambitious; it seemed like he was more interested in reporting all of Hadrian's misdeeds than talking up his own skills and hinting at how he could be 'more useful.'

The man would have been tolerable... if Jove wanted to hear about his son's innumerable wrongdoings.

At least, he thought to himself as he listened with half an ear, at least there were no real atrocities. Hadrian had stolen three cars (which had to be nothing but an adrenaline kick, as he had seven of his own), been drunk and disorderly at any given opportunity, and stolen meth from a biker bar, but no more stabbings. Apparently he had left that bad habit behind in his teens.

Jove was pretty well resigned to his sons' activities at this point. Yes, he had definitely failed as a father, but none of them were rapists and none of them were selling drugs, and that was the best he could hope for.

He found his eye straying continuously towards the tiny companion he'd brought with him.

Red sat by the window, watching the claiming races and scribbling in a notepad. Jove hadn't actually expected him to do his fake job. Maybe, Jove thought, he would buy some horses after all. He was happy with his own stock back home, but thoroughbreds were always good cover. An easy way to shift a few million around.

Though, maybe not these horses. Jove didn't have to see more than a few races — playing on big screens at the sides of the room for those who wanted to lounge and watch at the same time — to know that there weren't any diamonds in the rough running today.

Though maybe Red would feel differently.

He did have more intimate knowledge. Watching horses run was one thing. Being there to hot walk them, groom and tack them up, see their condition on a daily basis — that was how you spotted potential.

Jove found himself wishing he could excuse himself from the very people he'd come to socialize with and go join the kid by the window. Ask him which of the horses were worth their claiming price.

He interrupted his own thoughts, cutting off Hadrian's lawyer to turn to the woman on his left. Lucille 'Lucy' Vaughn was his age and, unlike most women with her wealth, hadn't bothered to hide that fact with surgery. She was one of the few he'd actually come to see.

Lucy Vaughn didn't like him at all, but she knew why he had reached out to her, and she was an effective businesswoman.

"Lucille," he said, very clearly and intentionally erring on the respectful.

She glanced at him. She resembled her adopted namesake, Lucille Ball, in severely arched eyebrows and slightly overdrawn red lips. Persian, thirty years and two divorces separated from her home country, she was one of the best-connected and shrewd women he'd ever met. Her expression now said that she hadn't changed since their last business foray, and she definitely didn't like him any better.

"Mr. Alms," she said, her form of address just as respectful, but tone decidedly more frosty.

Her voice suggested that he had better be quick, put the money in her hand and be done with it.

He was quick. And delicate.

"Are you still involved in the Saturday trade?" he asked, and lifted his drink to his lips.

She eyed him a moment before saying a tight, "I am."

"I'm looking for more stock," he said.

He kept his voice low. Hadrian's lawyer had turned to bicker with his girlfriend, and most eyes had focused on the screens for once, as a horse trailing in the back of the pack suddenly made a dramatic move for the lead. No one paid the two of them any mind.

"I thought you were buying racehorses," she said coolly.

"I have plenty of room in my stable," he said.

She considered that for a moment, eyes on the screen, and then gave a nearly imperceptible nod.

“I’m meeting a broker tonight,” she said. “He’ll have a catalogue. I have first choice. I take a commission.”

“Of course,” he said.

She lifted a lip as if to say she didn’t need his agreement.

Just then, Jove glanced back over to Red’s corner. He frowned.

The kid wasn’t alone.

It took a moment for Jove to recognize the red hair as Bialy’s, and in that moment, he felt a particular kind of spark in his chest. Something like anger.

Then he saw, and he relaxed.

Relaxed until Bialy suddenly got up out of his chair, gaze flashing across the room to grab Jove’s.

“Excuse me,” said Jove, and left his seat.

The group looked up in confusion. They didn’t have time to say their plaintive ‘where are you going?’s before Jove was gone, meeting Bialy at the door and following him out into the hall. They walked down a ways, far enough to be out of earshot of the door, before Jove turned back to Bialy.

“What is it?”

“Dio,” said Bialy.

Jove sighed. He ran his hand over his face.

Of his three sons, Nerva (the eldest) was the stoic rock of his father’s old business, and Hadrian (the youngest) was the one hellbent on graying the rest of Jove’s hair.

Diomedes, the middle child, alternated between the two extremes.

“Is he safe?” asked Jove.

“Safe in police custody,” said Bialy. “Or as safe as someone can be in police custody after punching a cop in the face.”

Had his sons just been waiting for him to get into town to cause problems?

“Go get him out,” said Jove in clipped tones. “I’m done here.”

Bialy paused, then said, “Oh? Did you...?”

“Nobody here is our rat,” said Jove. “They can barely look me in the eye.” He ran a frustrated hand through his hair, then made up his mind. “I’ll fetch the kid. You wrangle my sons. There’s an auction on some yacht tonight; I want Nerva to be there. I want Hadrian on a plane and Dio locked up somewhere he can’t get into trouble.”

“On it,” said Bialy.

Jove turned on his heel and walked back towards the box.

He shouldn't have been surprised to see Red's back disappearing down a staircase just as he came into view.

He would have been surprised if the kid *hadn't* attempted to run, honestly.

He was still irritated.

Turning his back on the private box, Jove followed after his 'buyer's agent', keeping enough of a distance to go unseen.

He was curious to see where the kid would go.

Right out the front doors? Find a phone, call the cops? Beg a stranger for help?

They passed the main path to the front doors, passed the public phones and a number of promising-looking strangers.

Jove realized that the kid wasn't making an outright run for it.

He was going back to the barn.

To what end, Jove couldn't imagine. Maybe he had a gun hidden somewhere, or maybe he thought ol' Oskar Stenberg would be able to help him.

Jove continued, less irritated, more curious now.

As he tracked Red out of the main building and into the attached stables, Jove had to resist the urge to stop and take a look around. He did have a weakness for thoroughbreds hot off the track — wide-eyed, jet fuel propelled things made up of muscle and a singular desire to gun it.

Jove could have spent an afternoon window shopping.

But he had a rogue agent to track down.

Almost everyone glanced at him as he passed, bafflement in their eyes, but the bafflement lasted only a second. They were all busy people, and the huge man in a suit, obviously out of place, waltzing along like he owned the place, was the least of their concerns.

And as far as they knew, maybe Jove did own the place.

He trailed Red all the way to a tack room. The kid cornered himself by going in, and Jove hung back for a moment, deciding to wait and nab him when he emerged.

A somewhat familiar face subverted that plan.

Jove hadn't seen Oskar Stenberg in many years, but the man hadn't changed a great deal. Still tall, still built like a bear — the animal, not the gay phenotype — and apparently still bad-tempered. Possibly tipped off by

one of the stablehands, he stormed into the tack room after his absent employee.

It might have been entertaining if Jove didn't have secrets to keep.

When he walked in the door, secret-keeping was all he had on his mind — until he saw the two of them standing there in the dark corner.

Stenberg was cupping the kid's face, holding him close. Jove heard Red take a ragged breath.

For a moment, it looked like a kiss in progress, and in that moment, Jove felt ice-cold murder surge inexplicably in his chest.

He hadn't felt such pure *hate* in decades.

Hate was a young man's game — an impetuous emotion Jove thought he'd left behind a long time ago.

And yet his gut *raged*.

Then Stenberg spoke, and it was the spitting voice of anger untouched by lust or romantic feelings.

“Sure you didn't break your mouth sucking cock?” jeered that voice.

Jove's inexplicable hate ebbed... but the feeling left in its stead was still not friendly.

Pulling off his sunglasses, he saw Red trying to free himself, tugging at the much larger man's arm and protesting.

“Let me explain! Come on, Oskar, just let me explain—”

“Yes,” said Jove icily. “Let him explain.”

He slid his sunglasses into his breast pocket, letting his missing eye and scarred socket be the first thing Oskar Stenberg saw when he turned around.

Stenberg dropped the kid and squinted at Jove. “Who the hell are—”

Then he must have realized who the hell Jove was, because he shut up fast.

While he was frozen, Red rapidly grabbed up an armful from the cot and practically darted to Jove's side.

“I was just getting my things,” he said, speaking very quickly. “I was going to be right back in just a few minutes. Swear it. I'd pinky swear, but, haha, my arms are full—”

“Swear on your mother?” asked Jove coolly.

That shut the kid up, too.

“I'm buying horses,” said Jove, voice blunt and assertive. “You weren't my first choice, Mr. Stenberg, but your employee was insistent — your animals are the best, he said.”

Stenberg stared at him. Jove doubted he'd ever heard those words before.

"My apologies for keeping Tobias from his work," he said. He couldn't quite keep sarcasm out of the word 'apologies', but it was a delicate sarcasm. "I'll compensate you for the inconvenience."

Stenberg kept staring. His expression suggested both wariness and internal calculation — maybe crunching the numbers for what constituted proper compensation.

"Jove Alms," said Stenberg finally. "Buying racehorses?"

'Racehorses.'

The simple query, innocent on the surface, wasn't at all subtle.

Stenberg knew about the Saturday trade, then. He must have moved up in the world. Jove doubted he deserved it.

"We're perusing a few barns in the area this week," said Jove. "After that, you'll hear from me. Or you won't."

He resisted the urge to put his hand over the back of Red's neck, to clamp down and physically haul him out of the room. Instead, he turned and walked out — and of course, the kid was right after him. Probably knew that ol' Stenberg would show less mercy than the mob.

The supplication started immediately.

"I didn't tell him anything," said Red, hurrying along at Jove's side, half-jogging to keep up with his long steps. "Honest." He insisted. "I didn't say shit and I didn't even run away, not really, I was *just* getting my stuff —"

"What stuff?" Jove interrupted.

"Just some, um, personal things, and my phone—"

Jove did grab Red by the back of the neck then, and, finding his skin soft and warm there, dug his fingers in hard almost *because* it was soft and pleasant to the touch. Resenting it.

He dragged the kid off to the side, into an empty stall, where he thumped him up against the wall, making all of his things fall out of his hands and cascade into the fresh hay.

Red spun around to look up at him, and Jove pressed him back. One hand flat on the top of his chest. So close to the base of the kid's neck. Close enough Jove could feel his nervous gulp.

"Phone?" Jove repeated softly.

"I didn't call anyone," said the kid. "I swear."

He looked up at Jove, and his expression was just as soft as the nape of his neck had been. Soft and petulant — almost hurt. As if Jove were in the wrong to be lobbying accusations. To so much as hint that some stablehand he didn't even know and had kidnapped a day ago might have tried to escape, to lie.

Jove found it infuriating.

He took a step closer, watched the kid's eyes grow even bigger in his shadow — and held out his hand.

“Phone,” he said again, even more softly.

Silently, Red reached into his pocket and handed Jove... a flip phone.

For a moment all Jove could do was stare at it.

More than everything he'd seen so far, the patheticness of the worn-out flip phone punched Jove with a sympathy he did not want.

The thing was not just ancient, but much-abused. It had clearly been dropped hundreds of times, probably stepped on by a horse at least once. The letters and numbers were almost worn off the keys. The screen barely worked. It lit up only half-heartedly after several seconds.

“There aren't any texts,” murmured Red, watching Jove with that look of still-wounded nerves. “They don't work.”

Jove didn't remark on it, only checked the outgoing calls.

Nothing.

Not from today, not from yesterday.

Nothing from last week.

In fact, Red had only made one call in the past month, and it was to his mother.

Checking incoming calls and voicemail, Jove found that nobody had been calling the kid, either. There were a number of missed calls from ‘Oskar’ and ‘Mom’ from the past day, presumably after finding him missing, but nothing else. No other family. No worried friends. Just his mother and an abusive boss.

“See?” said the kid. “I told you. I didn't call anyone.”

Jove looked back down at him, and was surprised.

He had expected more fear, and he had expected something like shame. Some acknowledgment of the sad state of this existence. Doe eyes, vulnerability.

Instead, Red's face had a faint flush to it. Jove could feel the beat of the kid's heart under his palm, and it was quick. Anger?

“Why did you want your phone back so badly?” Jove asked. Blunt. If he had been anything but blunt, his words would have come out sympathetic. “No one calls you.”

The kid rolled his eyes. “I know,” he said. “I didn’t go back for my phone.”

Jove took his hand away to let Red collect his things from the ground. He didn’t intend to go through them — no one was bugging an impoverished stablehand’s belongings — but Red still thrust them one by one into his hands as if insisting on it.

So Jove looked.

The first was a ragged, dog-eared book — a collection of Walter Farley stories, *The Black Stallion* and a number of its sequels.

Next was a small photo album, only big enough to fit one picture on each page. Jove gave it a quick skim, making sure nothing suspicious fell out of its pages, and got a few brief flashes of its content.

A fat, shaggy pony. A snowy farmhouse. A cat frozen in the middle of a yawn.

Last was a wallet. Jove gave this one a quick skim as well, finding nothing more than an ID, a debit card, a single crumpled dollar bill... and a napkin with a phone number and an obscene comment scrawled on it.

Jove lifted the napkin and raised an eyebrow.

Tobias grabbed it from him, face turning red under his freckles.

“Satisfied?” he demanded.

“Satisfied enough,” said Jove. He returned the kid his book and photo album, and pocketed both wallet and phone, ignoring the glare he got for it.

“If you wanted to stop and get your personal effects, you should have asked,” he said, giving Red a look that should have wilted him. Giving a subtle reminder that he should be *afraid*.

Red wilted only a little.

“If I’d asked, would you have let me?” he returned.

Jove didn’t even dignify that with an answer.

Instead he turned and walked out. He didn’t tell the kid to follow, knowing he would, and sure enough, Jove heard the tap of boots hastily coming after him.

Red drew even with him with some effort — Jove did not attempt to slow down and make it easy on him — and spoke in a stage whisper of an undertone.

“I didn’t recognize anyone’s voice up there,” he said.

Jove didn’t say anything.

They came to the end of the row, following the tail of a horse being led out of the barn and into a sudden rush of sunshine.

Jove stepped out of the way of oncoming horses, thrust his hands into his pockets, and turned to look up at the building.

Red did the same.

Standing beside Jove, looking up at Whitecape, he asked in his loud undertone, “Do you think it was any of them?”

He was genuinely earnest. Glancing at the kid just barely out of the corner of his eye, Jove wondered just why he was so quick to play ball. It didn’t even seem like a lifesaving ploy at this point. If the kid really wanted out, he would have booked it in the opposite direction, not go where he could be so easily traced.

Was it boredom? Some kind of Stockholm syndrome-esque loneliness?

“It wasn’t any of them,” Jove said finally. “They wouldn’t show up here. They might show up tonight.”

“Tonight?” repeated Red.

“I have somewhere else to take you,” said Jove. “We have other horses to look at.”

Red eyed him suspiciously, probably guessing that Jove wasn’t being totally straightforward, but didn’t question it.

Instead, he rolled his eyes again.

Jove texted Bialy to send the car around to the back and gave the kid a poke between the shoulder blades, sending him on down the path away from the stable. The kid went, setting an obstinate pace even with his bad leg.

Following him at a more leisurely pace — he wouldn’t get too far away — Jove found himself suddenly wishing he’d held on to that photo album, too.

He was curious.

He wanted to go through it more thoroughly, wanted to find out if there were any pictures of a curly-haired kid on the fat pony he’d glimpsed. He wanted to see the snowy house, pull out the picture and look on the back to see if there was a date or town scrawled there.

And then he suddenly became aware of his own thoughts, like walking face-first into a spongy wall of uncalled-for sentiment.

Why did he care?

Just as suddenly, he remembered the dragon that had reared up in his chest when he stepped into the tack room, when he saw Red and that man standing so close together.

Jove wasn't stupid, or inexperienced, or blind. He knew what intimidation looked like.

He couldn't understand why, as his eyes adjusted to the dark room, his brain had filled in the blanks with intimacy.

He didn't know why the imagined kiss had turned his veins to violent, stabbing ice.

Some old grudge against Stenberg?

Anger that the kid had gone to give up secrets to a boyfriend?

Ridiculous.

Retirement had touched him for sure.

He would have to be careful, he concluded, watching Red walk on ahead of him. Age had made him wiser, distance had given him perspective, but it was possible he had lost some of his razor edge.

Jove resolved to sharpen it.

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CHAPTER NINE

Tobias

When Jove said ‘yacht’, Tobias had pictured a boat, not a particularly buoyant hotel complete with wait staff, a dress code, and enough rooms to get lost in.

It was fascinating, and also a nightmare.

At first, Tobias was just grateful not to be seasick. The first time he’d ever gotten on a boat, he’d been sick worse than with any hangover before or since. Trying to warn Jove got him nowhere — the man had only given him a black look and pointed him back towards the clothes laid out for him.

Dressing up, looking at himself in the mirror, Tobias had prayed not to throw up on what were probably the most expensive things he’d ever worn.

The shirt was, of course, white — the most easily stained color — and not just white but almost sheer. It *was* sheer, really, but had enough solid-white pattern woven subtly into the base fabric that it passed for solid altogether. Somehow it also passed the nipple test; no matter how much Tobias contorted his body and arms — staring intently into the mirror, *swearing* that if the tiny sheer spots revealed a thing he would absolutely refuse to wear it — his nips remained covered.

He still resented the shirt. Part of him resented the fact that he was definitely going to stain it before the night was through, another part of him resented the obvious expense, and a final part resented that it looked *good*. ‘Good’ as in eye candy. ‘Good’ as in he looked ready to hunt sugar daddies. The see-through hint was already something, but the shirt also fit snug — snugger than he thought shirts were supposed to, probably because he had never worn anything that fit him properly.

The way it clung to his body, highlighting the lean muscle he’d accumulated from years of hard labor, felt more like lingerie than formal wear.

...or what he imagined lingerie felt like.

He wasn’t cold, but he’d still grabbed a royal blue pullover from the pile and yanked it on, letting the peeking-out collar and tie do the heavy lifting of appearing formal.

Apparently Jove hadn’t let Bialy get away with subtle, either; he’d met them at the dock dressed head to foot in burgundy, looking just as happy as

Tobias to be getting on a boat. He was especially pale in burgundy — or maybe his cold was worse.

Jove didn't wear a suit.

He stood out among all the other men on the yacht, not just because of his height or because he was wearing sunglasses after sunset, but because he had bucked the trend entirely.

He wore all black. Head to toe. No jacket, looking impervious to the light chill of the coastal evening. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows and his shirt unbuttoned just *one* button too low for propriety. It would have been a casual outfit if it hadn't been for the unrelenting blackness of it, and the watch on his wrist that probably cost more than most people's cars.

His pants were tight. The shirt was tight.

It was a little hard to look at.

...Tobias looked anyway.

He suspected the tightness of the clothes had more to do with advertising 'I'm not packing a gun, try me' than 'I still work out, a lot', but it didn't *not* suggest personal trainer and expensive home gym.

Walking behind him, Tobias kept his eyes between Jove's shoulder blades, determined to a) avoid eye contact with anyone in the huge crowd milling on the yacht and b) avoid looking at any major muscle groups.

He also hoped it might keep him from getting seasick.

However, it wasn't too long until he got temporarily dislodged, glanced towards the rail, and realized they had already set off without him feeling a thing.

Apparently the boat was just too big to prompt seasickness.

Was that how it worked?

"Recognize any voices yet?"

That hoarse voice was a familiar one, and Tobias turned from the rail to see Bialy holding out a tray of... somethings on a toothpick.

"Nothing yet," said Tobias, and looked around to realize he had somehow lost Jove in the crowd. He nearly stomped on his own foot. How did you lose someone *that* huge? "Where—"

"The bidding starts in a few hours," said Bialy. When Tobias didn't take anything from the tray, he began to eat the toothpicked somethings himself.

"I thought we were looking at horses," said Tobias. He couldn't quite disguise the unhappiness in his voice. He was small enough that the crowd

on the deck may as well have been a mosh pit, and it was only a matter of time before someone stepped on his shoe.

Bialy gave him an almost amused, almost sympathetic look, and set the tray aside. “Here,” he said, and took Tobias by the upper arm to help him through the laughing, chatting, boozing crowd.

They exited the deck into the main hall. Bialy let Tobias’s arm go and led the way. Tobias got a glimpse of something from each room as they passed it — a champagne fountain, an ice sculpture, a pair of women kissing on a red couch. He almost stopped by a door with live piano music coming through, but Bialy made a kind of clucking noise as if to hurry a horse along, and Tobias followed.

They stopped in the last doorway, right before the hall let out into a back deck. Tobias looked in and frowned.

Every inch of the yacht had seemed extravagant, but this comparatively quiet chamber held a different energy.

A small main stage faced what might have ordinarily been a dance floor. Tonight, however, it had been repurposed, filled with chairs. Overhead were golden chandeliers, their underbellies tinted pink by their own light, reflecting off the floor and walls.

The whole room was red.

The floor, the walls, the chairs and the stage. The only parts that weren’t red were golden accents — chair legs, a few rolling carts waiting to tote food and drink, the solid base of the stage — and they failed to significantly cut through the dominant color.

There were no windows.

The overall effect was like being inside of a giant mouth.

Tobias was so unnerved, he didn’t pay any mind to what was *on* the stage until Bialy passed him and made another ‘hurry up’ clucking noise.

Tobias hurried up mostly to avoid being left behind in the odd room.

However, when he caught up to Bialy, he wished he hadn’t.

He understood what Jove had said now, about having ‘other horses to look at’. Not real horses, but paintings. And *awful* paintings.

Whoever the artist was, they had an excellent sense of equine anatomy and a talent for realism, which they chucked right out the door as soon as they reached the head of the animal. Each horse — some with full spots like a leopard Appaloosa, a few dun with primal leg striping, and many in shades of gray from near-black to silver-white — bore a pair of cunning

eyes, set farther forward on the head than was normal, and an open mouth full of pointed teeth.

Brilliant, white teeth.

The whiteness was what disturbed him the most; these weren't the yellowed teeth of ordinary horses turned sharp, but the pearly white of predators kept clean by grinding flesh from bone.

That touch of realism was just as disarming as the rest of the painting was beautiful.

Tobias held up his hand to cover one of the heads and examine the rest of the horse. He heard a chuckle behind him.

"You don't like them?"

Tobias looked over his shoulder to find Jove standing there, having materialized with a glass in each hand and an odd smile on his face — odd because it was there at all, and because it looked genuine. Slight, but relaxed. Carrying a light of amusement. He'd taken off his sunglasses — tucking them into the suggestive rift of his a-little-too-unbuttoned shirt — and the smile even reached his eyes.

Tobias realized Jove was a few drinks in.

How was that possible? He'd *just* seen the guy. Either Jove had been drinking from an unseen flask before they embarked, or he'd slammed something as soon as Tobias had lost him in the crowd.

He handed one of his drinks to Tobias, who got one whiff and understood immediately how Jove had gotten tipsy so quickly.

"You look cross," said Jove. "Not enjoying the party?"

Tobias felt his eyebrows knit together — not because he had *been* cross, but because now he *was*, a little.

"Am I supposed to be enjoying the party, or listening for the rat?" he asked. "Or am I supposed to be looking at these stupid paintings?"

"Stupid paintings?" repeated Jove. He looked at Tobias, then at the art, and actually laughed. It sounded like a private laugh — a laugh at Tobias's expense.

Before Tobias could be 'cross' about *that*, Jove stuck a finger between Tobias's shoulder blades and directed him a few feet down, stopping him in front of one particularly garish portrait.

Tobias was strongly reminded of George Stubbs's famous painting of the Godolphin Arabian, one of the three founding stallions of the thoroughbred horse. He'd seen prints of the near-mythical stud on the walls

at any track with an educational bent to its tourism. The animal depicted here had a similar crest, thick and huge through the neck, with a surprisingly delicate head hanging off the end of it.

However, the muzzle of that delicate head was tipped with blood.

The horse itself was a dark gold, echoing the accents of the room around them.

“This is my favorite, I think,” said Jove.

Tobias took a step back — and thumped into Jove’s chest. The man didn’t push him away, or move back himself, but actually leaned over Tobias’s shoulder.

“Years ago, I visited Morocco to watch the Fantasia,” he said. “Dozens of horses, charging in a line. The riders firing their rifles, all at the same moment... one single shot. The horses looked much like this one.”

Tobias would have found it a relief to know that Jove rambled about horses when he drank instead of turning violent, except that he could feel Jove’s breath on his ear, and it was turning his brain to champagne. All bubbles.

Tobias got the hell out from under him in the most dignified way possible, turning and marching to the end of the stage, pretending to inspect each garish painting.

Jesus Christ.

He focused on the bloody grin of a white stallion, trying to forget what the tickle of Jove’s beard felt like.

It wasn’t working.

“I have to pee,” he announced, and practically ran from the room.

Neither Jove nor Bialy pursued him. They didn’t have to. They were on a boat, after all. Where was he going to run off to?

—

Tobias found sanctuary in a back corridor where kitchen staff were coming and going. He found an upturned bucket and sat on it, and apparently looked so pathetic that none of the servers did more than glance at him, didn’t ask him to move, and certainly didn’t ask if he was all right and if he needed anything.

They could probably smell the ‘doesn’t belong’ wafting off him.

And he definitely didn't. Most of the dishes he saw coming and going were unrecognizable, weren't anything he had ever managed to wedge in a rat-resistant tupperware and hide under his cot to eat after a twelve-hour shift.

He hadn't eaten anything back at the hotel — his captors had probably assumed he would indulge just like everyone else here. They likely hadn't anticipated he would instead find a secret corner to hide like a sulky teen.

He wasn't even sure why he was hiding.

The reasonable part of his brain immediately pointed out that it was probably because hey, he was being held prisoner by an absurdly wealthy criminal kingpin, who was using him to suss out a rat in the organization, and so maybe that was a good and rational reason to hide in a corner.

Except that wasn't it.

It took Tobias a while, sitting there with stomach rumbling, to finally admit to himself that it was a slut problem.

Work had always kept him busy, and busy meant he couldn't be picky. The impermanent state of his work, always jumping from track to track, town to town, also meant that forging long-term relationships wasn't his forte — and if he did the nasty with someone he shouldn't, he could just skip to the next job and boom. Problem solved.

Throwing himself around incautiously had — surprise surprise — ill-prepared him for close proximity with an absurdly hot mobster who somehow managed to keep it *more* than tight while simultaneously approaching silver fox territory.

It shouldn't have been possible, and yet there Jove was.

The fact that he was a murderer, a kidnapper, and who knows what else, was probably just the universe balancing things out.

Which was why Tobias had to absolutely stay in his sad little corner, because if he *left* it, he was going to end up acquainting his tonsils with Jove's dick in some *other* corner, and he knew that for a fact.

He had sucked much uglier guys off at much lamer parties.

He put his head in his hands and groaned.

"Tobias Nimh?"

He looked up.

The hallway in front of him had emptied, the kitchen beside him gone quiet without him noticing. They must have switched over to serving the main meal.

There were only two people around now.

Him, and a strange man, leaning one shoulder against the wall and looking down at Tobias.

The man was Asian, older — maybe about Jove’s age. He and Jove both had dark hair starting to give way to silver, though this man was clean-shaven. Also like Jove, the man was underdressed compared to most of the partygoers. He wore a print shirt, salmon pink with white flowers, the sleeves rolled up, jacket dangling over his shoulder, hanging from one fingertip.

He looked very ordinary, kind-eyed with light humor in his face. The sort of guy who wouldn’t be out of place picking kids up from soccer practice. He probably played tennis, or golf, or both.

Then he smiled, and he had two sharp, gold teeth on each side.

The canines.

He straightened up, put his hand out, and introduced himself. “Izawa. Friend of a friend.”

Resigned, Tobias got up off his bucket and shook the man’s hand.

“Jove’s friend?” he asked.

‘Izawa’ leaned back up against the wall and regarded Tobias with clear amusement — but not at his expense. “Jove Alms? Does he have friends?”

The gold of his teeth flickered almost imperceptibly behind his lips as he spoke.

“Bialy, then?” Tobias guessed. He only knew so many people.

“Bezruc is charismatic,” said Izawa. “Man has many friends.”

‘Charismatic’? Bialy? If Tobias had to pick a word, he might have landed on ‘phlegmatic’, both in terms of temperament and continuous head cold.

“You’re missing the party, Tobias.” Izawa didn’t ask, but his eyes said that he was curious why.

“I’m not really a party person,” said Tobias. “I have social anxiety sometimes.”

What he really had was Ginormous Slut Disorder, which was the *opposite* of social anxiety, but he wasn’t going to tell a stranger that, even if the stranger professed to being a friend of a mobster he happened to be familiar with.

As if tired of Tobias ignoring it and finally calling out for help, his stomach gave an enormous rumble.

Izawa's eyes twinkled.

"You like calamari, Mr. Nimh?" he asked. He thumbed over his shoulder. "There's a plate of it left unattended in the kitchen."

"I will eat literally anything you put in front of me," said Tobias. "Bring me a garbage can and a spoon and I'll make it work."

"I think we can make it work with better than that," said the man.

—

There were, it turned out, a number of things left unattended in the kitchen.

Tobias's new friend of a friend returned with a full tray. The spread included the promised calamari, half a lemon cake, a big wedge of spanakopita, and lamb kebabs with big chunks of bell pepper that Tobias unrepentantly picked off and left on the side.

Tobias was hungry enough, he procrastinated asking the obvious 'hey, why are you talking to me and bringing me food?' question — which he *probably* didn't even want to know — until he'd had the chance to dig in, and then the food was good enough he almost forgot.

Izawa was the one who ended up popping the bubble.

"You don't find me suspicious?" he asked, rolling a spent skewer between his fingers and watching Tobias eat.

"Listen," said Tobias, wiping his mouth and crumpling the napkin. "With the week I've been having, I've kind of given up on self-preservation, but I'm still not stupid. I'm not gonna ask you any questions. I doubt it's in my best interests."

Izawa seemed charmed, and was charming himself. Even with the pointed gold teeth, the obvious implication that he was a member of this dangerous scene, Tobias still found him very comfortable to sit with.

"What if I told you," said Izawa, "that I was Jove's worst and oldest enemy?"

Tobias paused.

He looked up from his lemon cake to take in the man's expression.

Izawa, examining Tobias's reaction as much as Tobias was examining him, genuinely seemed curious.

Tobias knew that, rationally, he ought to have been terrified.

He'd seen Jove's enemies.

Seen what happened to them.

And now here he was, far from the party and Jove's watchful eye, alone in some back corner with that enemy.

The worst enemy.

And yet... Tobias had good instincts.

He could tell a horse was going to colic with a glance. He'd once seen a mare stop eating and develop a funny face, standing there quietly with the horse equivalent of a furrowed brow, a slightly pinched lip.

He'd set a timer, gone to finish another chore, and when he'd returned ten minutes later he'd found the mare kicking at her belly and lying down to roll with the pain.

Good instincts.

He wasn't *quite* as good with people, but he measured the fear he'd felt of his *original* captors against the lesser fear he'd felt upon meeting Jove, who had proved to be almost kind to him.

Tobias measured his feelings now.

"I'm not scared of you," he said. "Should I be?"

This time, the man smiled wide enough to reveal his shining golden teeth once more.

"I wouldn't have gotten far in this world, going out of my way to stomp every ant I saw," he said. "I'm only curious about what role you play in this."

"This," echoed Tobias, a question in his voice.

"The whole coast is abuzz," said Izawa. He had stopped eating altogether — and, looking at the tray, Tobias realized the man had barely touched any of it in the first place. "Jove Alms returns without warning after years of retirement. You're young, and seem unfamiliar with all of this, so you don't know how ominous of a sign that is."

"Oh," said Tobias, realizing something, a little surprised. "You're worried."

Izawa examined him a second, then sighed. "You *are* young."

Well, Tobias didn't know what the hell that meant.

He wondered if *this* man was the 'rat' they were looking for, or at least involved in the conspiracy somehow. Tobias didn't recognize his voice, but he supposed the person he'd heard on the phone could have been disguising theirs.

"You didn't tell me," said Izawa mildly, "what role you play in all this."

For the first time, Tobias felt an inkling of worry, a little shiver in his spine. The man's eyes had sharpened.

"We're fucking," said Tobias.

He listened to the words come out of his mouth and considered them.

On one hand, what the fuck was wrong with him?

On the other hand... it wasn't a bad excuse, honestly.

Maybe Jove was straight, at least straight enough to have three kids, but plenty of people hung out in the closet until later in life. It wasn't outside the realm of possibility that he might have grabbed himself a boytoy for the same reason he was ostensibly back in town buying horses — boredom. Thrill-seeking.

And maybe Tobias was the impulsive kind of stupid, maybe he was a little beat up from his lifestyle, but he was absolutely cute enough to play a realistic boytoy.

Izawa seemed to consider that. He forked up a bite of lemon cake, mulled it over.

"That's not very romantic phrasing," he said after a minute.

"It's not romantic," said Tobias, spotting the hostage potential a mile away and veering rapidly away from it. "He's terrible in bed, really inconsiderate. Insists on all kinds of weird positions, never makes me come, fell asleep on me once. If you're ever tempted by the whole enemies-to-lovers thing, trust me, try another enemy. I'm sure you have plenty."

He probably should have shut his mouth about halfway through all that, but Izawa didn't seem offended.

"I don't have terribly many, actually," said Izawa. "Not anymore. See, I retired, too. About the same time as your inconsiderate lover."

Tobias felt his face twitch at the phrasing.

"It was nice to meet you, Mr. Nimh," said Izawa. He wiped his mouth on a napkin and got to his feet, shouldering his jacket on before picking up the well-depleted tray. "We'd both best be going. The bidding is about to start."

"For the paintings?" Tobias felt a little queasy remembering them.

"Paintings?" Izawa looked at him a moment, then smiled a little smile, one that Tobias didn't wholly understand.

But it gave him an uneasy feeling.

Tobias had nearly reached the red chamber when Bialy popped out of a side door and grabbed him.

“Where were you?” he asked, looking a little frazzled. Tobias felt suddenly guilty, wondering if Bialy had been sent looking for him.

“I was just eating in a corner somewhere,” he said, and he wasn’t lying.

Bialy took only a heartbeat to look exasperated before opening the door wider and ushering Tobias in. In a low voice he said, “Bidding’s just started.”

The room, before ominously quiet with its many empty chairs, had filled with people. It looked like nearly a third of the partygoers had crammed in — and that was no small number.

Bialy led him along the side, all the way up to the front where Jove had, predictably, claimed the best seats in the house. Two chairs sat empty beside him, but the one to his right held a new face.

For a second Tobias thought it was Hadrian. This man looked much like him — the same arrogant bone structure, the same dark hair and icy blue eyes.

But it wasn’t Hadrian. This man had a much neater haircut, a crisp suit, and horn-rimmed glasses. The overall effect was very Clark Kent.

Nerva.

Tobias realized the man had to be Jove’s eldest son just as a hand took his wrist and tugged him down into a seat.

Jove clearly hadn’t sobered up, but his grip was still like Tobias first remembered it — decisive but surprisingly gentle, ready to either hold or release at any resistance.

Tobias sat, and Jove let him go, and leaned over.

“You’re just in time,” he murmured. His mouth came far too close to Tobias’s ear.

Nightmare, nightmare.

Tobias focused his eyes on the stage. He focused them so hard that it made his head ache, but Jove was sitting like a king with his legs sprawled open, and it took all of Tobias’s willpower not to glance over and satisfy his curiosity through the lens of Jove’s tight pants.

Nightmareeeee.

Thank god, the artwork was nightmarish enough that it did manage to distract Tobias.

The first one displayed was of a spotted horse, depicted standing in a grove, head lowered as if about to drink from a shallow pool.

The pool was a gory red.

Grotesque.

Tobias tried to find someplace to look that wasn't either the stage or his captor's crotch, and that's when he noticed the little screens every seated person had in hand. The devices showed the currently displayed painting as well as what must have been the current bid.

When Tobias saw where the current bid was sitting, he gulped.

A cool twenty million.

The auction went on in silence, each person submitting their bid electronically. There was no auctioneer up front, only a woman standing by to switch out the paintings. The only noise was little social murmurs. Occasionally a low call for the drink cart.

"Do you want a drink?" asked Jove, abruptly leaning over again. Tobias caught a whiff of bourbon on his breath and a truly devastating cologne.

He absolutely did *not* want a drink. Sobriety was the only thing stopping him from burying his face in Jove's low neckline.

"Nothing alcoholic," he said instead of a straight 'hell no', hoping that giving Jove a task might keep him away so Tobias could *breathe*.

Jove did turn away — to speak to the man who *had* to be Nerva, who now that Tobias could get another look at him, actually resembled his father a great deal. If he hadn't been clean-shaven and wearing glasses, Tobias thought he would have been a carbon copy.

While Tobias was staring, Nerva's eyes suddenly jumped over and focused on him.

Nerva's face didn't reveal much outright, but Tobias suddenly had the sense of being perceived very critically.

Dislike. Suspicion.

Then Nerva turned away, waving for the drink cart, and Tobias turned away, too. He sank back into his seat and wished for the auction to end quickly.

It did not.

There were dozens of paintings, and bidding was at first extremely energetic. The prices jumped in 'small' increments of five hundred thousand here, a million there, and kept climbing until the main throng surrendered to the most determined.

Jove only bid on a few, but when he did, he ended it quickly, stamping five or ten million on top of whatever insane price had already accrued, and immediately silencing his competition.

At one point, he handed the device suddenly to Tobias.

“Win me this one,” Jove said. He took Tobias’s non-alcoholic drink — something blue and fruity — and held up a hand to keep him from returning the screen. “Win it,” he said again. His single eye was shiny with amusement, his expression warm from what was probably a combination of booze and successful bids.

“I don’t know how,” protested Tobias in a low hiss, trying to stay under the quiet of the room.

“Easy,” said Jove. He took Tobias’s hand to place it over the screen, holding it so his pointer finger hovered over the numbers. “Every time someone passes your bid, press this button. I programmed it for you.”

At least if that Izawa guy was in the room, this exchange would definitely pass as Tobias’s cover.

They didn’t *not* look like two people who were fucking.

Tobias helplessly accepted the device, looked up, and recognized the painting.

This was the one Jove had waxed poetic over. Thick, crested neck. Delicate head. Muzzle dripping blood.

The number on the screen jumped, and Tobias automatically hit the button Jove had programmed for him.

The number jumped by five million.

A wave of cold went through Tobias’s body — he suddenly wanted to chuck the bidding device away from himself.

It wasn’t just that it was more money than he would ever touch, or that it was terrifying to be responsible for that number, though it was definitely both of those things.

It was the sudden feeling that this was blood money.

The man with the shining gold teeth had reminded him, Nerva’s cold look had reminded him, and the crimson muzzle of the horse reminded him.

He had seen men mowed down at Jove’s order. Had learned intimately the feeling of a gun in his hand.

He had adjusted so quickly, shrugged it off because he was just trying to *survive* over here. Now, his mind suddenly threw speculation at him, questions he didn’t know how to answer or if he *wanted* the answers to.

Where had this money come from?

And where was it going?

Tobias was suddenly positive that the number on the screen had nothing to do with the painting, which seemed more like a vile joke than a real work of art. There were so many of them, all so similar, that they couldn't possibly be worth so much.

And where was the artist?

There wasn't even a name attached to the works.

Tobias didn't realize his fingers had frozen until Jove pressed them down again, hitting the button for him.

Tobias looked up and met Jove's gaze.

Even up close, the scarred socket and golden eye didn't look so alarming anymore. Maybe it was the change in Jove's expression. What was that? Increased drunkenness? Sobering up? It wasn't kinder. In fact it was almost the opposite... more intense.

Looking at that intense, scarred, dangerous face close to his, Tobias wondered why he wasn't more frightened of it.

The shiver in his gut had nothing to do with fear.

Tobias had to drop his eyes before he became obvious, hitting the button again. A ripple went through the crowd — laughter?

Tobias realized no one had raised the bid. He'd done it on his own.

His face went hot with embarrassment, but suddenly the price leapt up.

By ten million.

The titters fell silent, and Jove finally released Tobias from that intense gaze, scanning the room with a frown that said he didn't welcome the interruption.

"Izawa," murmured Bialy.

Jove turned to look down the front row, and Tobias leaned forward to look after him.

There at the very end sat Tobias's new friend. One ankle hooked over the opposite knee, his wingtip bobbed cheerfully. He had shed his jacket once again, floral button-up standing out in a room of formalwear.

When he saw them, Izawa smiled and raised his hand in a little wave.

Jove settled back into his seat.

"Win it for me," he said, voice and face suddenly transformed again. Cold. He almost sounded sober.

Tobias hit the button.

Izawa returned a volley from the other side of the row.

The entire room had gone silent.

Thirty million.

“Go on,” said Jove calmly.

Tobias pressed his button, and Izawa matched it.

Forty million.

Again, Tobias upped it, and again, Izawa matched him.

Fifty million.

Tobias glanced at Jove, who didn't look at him, eye fixed on the painting itself.

They danced their way up to eighty million.

Tobias cracked. Finally more anxious about the bidding than worried about his own slutty tendencies, he touched Jove's arm. When Jove looked over, a flicker of surprise approaching admonishment on his face, Tobias met that look with a pleading one.

A pathetic one.

Jove stared at him. For a second he seemed stuck, fixed on Tobias's face, unmoving.

Then the device popped up a little alert, a polite warning that ten seconds remained.

Jove took it from Tobias's hands.

Tobias didn't see what he countered Izawa with, but he did hear a shocked murmur go through the crowd.

Leaning forward to look over, Tobias saw Izawa shaking his head. There was still a smile on his face. And then suddenly, he was getting out of his seat.

Another murmur went through the room as Izawa crossed the floor over to them.

Standing in front of Jove, he put his hand out to shake.

“Wonderful to have you back,” he said.

“Nerva,” said Jove sharply.

Izawa and Tobias's eyes both slid over to see Jove's son with a hand at his side, ice cold behind his Clark Kent glasses, deadly intent on his face and probably hidden in his coat.

Izawa's smile didn't falter.

Slowly, Nerva pulled his hand from his side.

Jove stood.

He was considerably taller than Izawa, but he didn't loom. Instead, he took the handshake.

"I didn't realize you'd developed an interest in the arts," he said.

"I haven't," said Izawa. "I was just saying hello."

He dropped Jove's hand, gave the rest of them a final smile and nod, and turned to walk away.

The room was still until he left it, and then there was a sudden exodus, casual partygoers all around getting up and hurrying out.

Tobias wanted to be one of them, but his legs were too jelly to escape.

Instead, he looked down at the screen displaying the winning bid.

A hundred and fifty million.

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CHAPTER TEN

Jove

Jove's body hummed with the music of old habits.

The moment he stepped onto the yacht, years of disuse fell away from him like a discarded cloak.

He hadn't expected to stumble, hadn't expected to be out of place, but he also hadn't expected to slide so effortlessly back into his old self.

Those he knew, he greeted, and those he didn't, he met.

Those who had crossed him at some point, no matter how small or how long ago, he acknowledged with a cold, lingering look that said he hadn't forgotten.

Nerva remarked on it not long after they reconnected.

At the top of the deck, with the party and its light at their backs, Jove and his eldest stood against the rail and watched the waves roll in the darkness.

"I didn't expect you to come yourself," said Nerva. They hadn't exchanged more than a brief greeting before plunging bluntly into business.

Nerva didn't say 'you didn't need to come' or ask 'did you think I couldn't handle it?' but the suggestion of the words hung between them.

And Jove didn't say that he knew Nerva was more than capable, because he knew any coddling would be taken as an insult.

"Has Hadrian shared his 'rat' theory with you?" he asked instead.

Nerva was quiet a moment, then said, "Hadrian has good instincts."

Jove spoke too glibly, saying, "Hadrian has a rap sheet a mile long."

He knew he had been too glib because of the way Nerva's jaw tightened — only a fraction, imperceptible to anyone who didn't know him well, but an obvious tell to someone who did.

Out of everyone in the family, Nerva had always been Hadrian's most staunch defender. Hadrian had been conceived not before, not after, but *during* a contentious divorce, and born into a life of split custody between two emotionally inaccessible parents. The timing made for a significant age difference between him and the other two boys.

Nerva had taken it upon himself to be the best possible older brother for Hadrian, down to insisting on cooking dinners himself, chasing the chef out of the kitchen so he could better exercise his creative power to make

macaroni and cheese with lobster and food coloring. Jove remembered coming home covered in someone else's blood, going to the fridge in the middle of the night praying for cold cuts, and finding that mess.

After learning the story of Nerva's hard work, Jove had been both touched, amused, struck with guilt... and proud. He had always been able to rest easier, knowing that Nerva could be there for his brothers when Jove wasn't.

Hadrian had repaid his older brother by stabbing him with a screwdriver at the age of twelve.

Jove suddenly wished he had a cigarette.

'Good instincts.'

Nerva wasn't wrong, but Hadrian had been the most accurate when he referred to himself as a terrier. Something that followed its nose, found its prey, and then went mad tearing it to pieces.

Instincts were only as good as they could be controlled and directed.

Jove didn't say that, either.

He skipped the subject entirely.

"I have a possible witness," he said. "The boy I'm with. He heard a voice on a phone, giving orders. It's possible the person he heard is..." Not a rat. "...a potential problem."

"A boy?" Nerva frowned faintly. He looked back over his shoulder, but Jove had left the kid under Bialy's watch. He found Red distracting. It was easier to brush shoulders with old acquaintances without having to keep an eye on him.

"Twenty something, curly hair," said Jove. "You'll see him. He was working at Whitecape under Oskar Stenberg."

"A jockey?"

"Just a groom."

"How did he get mixed up in this?"

Jove considered the dark waters, his drink, and how much of the story he wanted to tell. There were some embarrassing elements to their meeting: Tobias catching him unawares, grabbing his gun, saving his life. The way the kid had begged for his life in the most confusing, disarming ways possible. The fact that Jove had let him live less because he seemed useful and more because he was... interesting.

"He was being held at the barn on Mangrove," said Jove. "Wrong place, wrong time. We picked him up when we took their operation down."

“Wrong place, wrong time?” repeated Nerva. His frown had deepened, and Jove knew why. He had always impressed upon his sons a disbelief in coincidences and the need to tie up loose ends before they strangled you.

“So you do think he can identify whoever it is.”

The answer had to be yes, because if it was no, then Jove was hanging on to the kid for nothing

“That’s why I came,” said Jove, tossing back the last of his drink. “To bring him along. He’s playing my agent, helping me buy up horses. Get back into the game in my old age. If our ‘problem’ is on board, he’ll be able to identify them.”

He said it as if it were fact.

Nerva didn’t question him, but he didn’t seem confident about his words, either.

“What’ll you do when you find them?” he asked.

That desire for a cigarette kept nagging at Jove.

“Find out what they want,” he said. “Solve the problem.”

The fatal meaning of his words went unsaid, like so many other things.

—

Despite things being tense with Nerva — which he had anticipated, and wasn’t exactly unused to — Jove’s time on the yacht wasn’t just enjoyable, but productive.

If he had been returning for good, the transition would have been so easy.

He reconnected with the man who used to forge all his important documents, the woman who used to get whatever weapons they needed over any given state’s line. Most of his old standbys were ostensibly ‘retired’ and just hanging around the scene because, well, that’s where their people were, but every one told Jove they would do him a ‘favor’ in a heartbeat.

He had left things on very good terms when he passed the torch to Nerva and disappeared to the north.

The transition of power had been seamless, too, with Nerva picking up right where Jove left off. Nerva may have resented his father, but he’d clearly internalized all of his teachings. Everyone Jove reconnected with

spoke of his son with respect, even though Nerva was at least half their age, if not younger.

Jove settled deeper and deeper into his good mood, with only one thing keeping him from total contentment.

Well, two things.

The continued restless desire for a cigarette, and the fact that Red was making himself scarce.

When Jove had finished the first round of schmoozing and gone in search of him, he'd almost grown concerned, until finally finding the kid perusing the gallery of paintings.

He didn't seem to be a fan.

Amused, Jove let the kid take off again. They wouldn't dock until morning; there was plenty of time to wrangle Red for investigative purposes.

Still, Jove continued to catch himself glancing around for the kid, to the extent that he grew irritated with himself. There was something about Red he preferred to the company of all these familiar and predictable faces. The kid was a handful, but he was frank, and he definitely wasn't predictable.

Jove found himself growing short with his companions, and had to take a leave.

He stood at the rail again. Watched the dark waters roll. He thought about the depth of those waters, knowing that although they hadn't gone far from land, there was a significant drop-off at the very edge of the coast. A plummeting cliff unseen underwater.

He wanted to drag the kid out to the rail and tell him about it, see the look on his face. It would probably be a look of either horror or disgust — Red had no small emotions.

He wanted a cigarette.

—

Jove didn't really worry about the kid's absence until the deck parties dissipated.

The night air had finally grown cold enough for most people, and they all funneled into the dining rooms or lounges, a few sneaking off to the private floors for lascivious reasons.

Everyone who was anyone headed for the gallery to begin bidding.

Jove almost didn't join them.

He stalked the halls and rooms with a stormy face, growing increasingly irritated with the kid. His absence was beginning to feel like intentional avoidance. Jove recognized and ignored the fact that he felt *personally* slighted, focusing instead on the reason for them being there at all. Was Red not even making an effort to identify the owner of the voice he'd heard?

Bialy found him scowling near the ice sculptures, and Jove knew he must have been visibly drunk by the way his second in command took him by the elbow. Normally, Bialy never would have dared touch him, let alone gently tow his boss out of a room.

"I'll find Tobias," he said. "You should be at the auction."

Jove let Bialy be right. He made his way back to the red room, where Bialy left him at the door to go do as promised.

Inside, the seats had almost filled — but for a handful at the very front.

Nerva sat there, as usual having anticipated his father's needs and saved the spots unprompted.

He had his eyes on the paintings, and didn't change his focus when Jove sat next to him.

Jove didn't voice his approval.

Instead he asked, "Are you bidding?"

"I have no interest in those things," said Nerva.

Jove wasn't surprised. He had forbidden his sons from involvement in the Saturday trade for most of their lives. At Nerva's age, Jove couldn't have forbidden him anything he really wanted to do, but Nerva's tastes were set in stone.

Dio and Hadrian had both followed in their father's footsteps as avid equestrians. Hadrian seemed to have funneled his most violent impulses into riding, taking unhinged thoroughbreds off the track and turning them into unhinged cross country jumpers. Dio was a little less suicidal, sticking to normal jumps, the kind that fell down when you hit them instead of flipping your horse over. However, his horses were just as unhinged.

Nerva had had a pony when he was younger, a fat and rude thing that Jove had refused to replace. At the time, he'd thought that rude ponies built character. Jove had grown up with sour, cold-backed animals that did their best to throw him at any given opportunity, and he'd still emerged a horseman.

With the miserable hindsight of all fathers, Jove knew now that Nerva wasn't a clone of him, but his own person.

No one would have guessed it to see him now, but Nerva had been a sensitive kid.

Maybe he had needed a more forgiving pony.

Now, that 'sensitive kid' sat coolly observing the room, dispassionate behind his glasses.

"Where's your consultant?" asked Nerva. "Shouldn't he be here to help you pick?" He inclined his head toward the stage and its rows of paintings.

"He'll come," said Jove.

If he didn't, Jove was going to make him swim back to shore in the morning.

God, he wanted a cigarette.

He got another drink instead.

He was a drink and a half in when, scanning the crowd once more, he saw Bialy squeezing in through a door in the back.

Jove's whole chest lightened to see Red was with him.

He hadn't realized until that moment that concern was mixed in with his irritation. The kid's absence hadn't just been an inconvenience.

Jove hadn't *allowed* himself to think the ridiculous, to worry that someone had caught up to the kid and harmed him, or that Red might have gotten sloppy and fallen into the ocean. He'd considered killing the kid himself. Why should he care what happened? If Red disappeared, that would be no great loss.

And yet a warmth invaded Jove, mingling with the pleasant heat of the booze gone to his head.

As soon as Red was in reach, Jove reached for his wrist, tugging him down into the adjoining seat. The kid didn't look too pleased, which Jove found incredibly amusing. He'd treated the kid to all kinds of luxuries, brought him to an event not even world leaders could have bought or bullied their way into, and still he wasn't impressed.

That was what Jove had been missing the past hours without him.

That adorable, somewhat bewildered disdain.

Jove let go, but couldn't resist looming over to invade Red's space. The kid winced away appropriately. Jove found it a gratifying reminder that while Red was bold, he was still someone Jove could handle as he liked.

"You're just in time," he said.

The kid almost shrunk in his seat. The reaction was strong enough that Jove felt a beat of guilt — what was the point of intimidating him, anyway? — and relented.

Though Jove left the kid alone, he could still feel tension emanating from that side of him. Even as the auction began, and the atmosphere of the room brightened, Red didn't relax. He sat right in the middle of his chair, limbs clamped together, staring straight ahead.

Jove would have guessed fear, suspected Red had found someone suspicious on board, but he had seen Red scared. If the kid had been freaked out, he would have been in Jove's lap, shaking him by the shoulders and telling him exactly what was wrong.

Maybe the kid just didn't like being on the ocean.

Or maybe he had guessed that something was off about the paintings.

Jove decided to leave Red alone. *He* was going to enjoy himself. This was the bait that had been set for him, after all. The Saturday trade had been his enthusiastic hobby for many years now, and this was the holy grail of an auction for 'hobbyists' like him. Even knowing it was bait hadn't given Jove a moment's pause.

But now, for some reason, the much-anticipated moment fell oddly flat. He was bored.

He bid on a handful, winning them all, but didn't even take the time to play out the game of rising numbers. Instead, he threw an absurdly high amount on each one, killing the momentum.

He won, but he was also alienating the people he'd spent the evening forging fresh connections with. He didn't allow them even the illusion of a chance.

It was rude, and it was out of character. He could practically feel the room growing colder. Even Nerva reacted in his small way, giving his father a sideways look, a sliver of a frown on his face.

Jove didn't care.

He kept drinking, and kept throwing money until the feeling grew stale.

When the final item came up — the one he'd so admired earlier — he almost didn't bother to bid.

And then an idea occurred to him.

A smile disrupted the apathy of his expression.

Stealing Red's drink, Jove pushed the electronic bid card on him.

"Win me this one," he said.

The alarm on Red's face was worth whatever he ended up bidding.

"Win it," said Jove, putting a firmer touch of authority in his voice to make it clear that this was not optional.

He could sense both Nerva's and Bialy's judgment, and ignored them.

He'd set the bid card to go up by five million at a time, making it simple and guaranteeing a winning bid. All Red had to do was press the button until everyone else gave up.

Red still looked like Jove had handed him a ticking bomb and told him to defuse it.

Jove hid his amusement, watching the kid's struggle in his face. Jove didn't know if he was alarmed by the number on the screen, by the competitive atmosphere, the pressure of doing as he was told, or something else altogether.

Red looked at him pleadingly. The expression was so pathetic, over something so small, that Jove couldn't help but think of the moment they'd met, the way Red had shot someone behind him before bothering to say hello.

And yet *this* got him all doe-eyed and looking to Jove for help.

Something about that look made Jove feel especially drunk, especially heated. He wanted to do *something* about that reaction, wanted to respond, but didn't know what with. Not empathy. Not anger.

The kid apparently gave up on getting help, dropping his eyes and hitting the button again.

...countering his own bid.

Jove heard muffled laughter, and *that* spiked his anger.

Then the number changed.

Red countered, and so did the other bidder, matching him without hesitation. Whoever it was, they were serious.

But maybe still playing a game.

Jove scanned the room, looking for a face standing out among all those looks of surprise, confusion, consternation.

Bialy redirected his attention.

"Izawa," he murmured.

Jove went very still for a moment, then turned, following the line of Bialy's eye across the room to a familiar face.

William Izawa sat there waiting for his attention, and met it with a friendly smile and a wave.

A beat of nostalgia went through Jove like a lance. Sharp. It went directly through his head, landed in his empty eye socket, and throbbed with memory.

Jove turned quietly back to the stage.

He looked at the painted stallion, the gleam of sunlight on its haunches, the blood on its mouth.

“Win it for me,” he told Red.

The kid didn’t argue.

He played back and forth with Izawa, who countered him every single time. No small bids. The number continued to escalate.

Jove didn’t even read it.

His absent eye ached, and like a phantom pain, he could almost see through it, watch the memory of the last thing it had seen playing in his head.

A feather-light touch broke through the reverie.

Jove snapped out of it and looked down, and found Red’s hand on his arm. Jove’s instinctive flare of anger over being touched abated instantly at the sight of the kid’s pathetic expression.

He couldn’t leave it to a kidnapped stablehand to war with the enemy.

And he couldn’t look at that face for another second.

Jove took back his bid card and ended things.

The crowd stirred at the number. He heard the rustling of disbelief, unease, confusion.

Much of the confusion abated when Izawa got up out of his seat, and the whole room realized who had been battling with whom.

The old enemy came to greet him, hand held out to shake.

“Wonderful to have you back,” he said.

Nerva went for his gun. Only his father’s voice checked him; at the warning, Nerva looked at him in disbelief.

Jove returned the look with an utterly uncompromising one — a flat, black warning to obey. It ordered Nerva to bend, or be bent.

It lasted only a fraction of a moment, and then Nerva yielded. Likely no one around them even registered what had happened.

Nerva would remember.

...but Jove had something bigger to handle.

He stood and shook Izawa’s hand.

It was a perfectly civil handshake, firm on both ends, neither squeezing or testing one another, and their hands dropped easily away in unison.

“I didn’t realize you’d developed an interest in the arts,” said Jove.

He didn’t bother to try and read Izawa’s expression; the man had always and would always be indecipherable.

The single time Jove had cracked him open, it had been like splitting an atom.

Catastrophic.

“I haven’t,” said Izawa. “I was just saying hello.”

Jove believed him.

Izawa’s words could always be taken at face value. The man didn’t lie, especially not when it mattered. He was a demon, but he was straightforward.

It made sense that Izawa would check and see why the adversary had resurfaced.

Made sense that he would want to say hello.

His very presence was caustic, and standing in front of him unarmed made Jove feel as naked and primed for violence as a berserker.

He thought faintly that his teeth would have done the job.

Izawa likely read it all in his face, and understood it. His final smile and nod was genuinely polite; Jove thought there was even a note of apology in it, a suggestion of, *‘I’m sorry for ruining your evening.’*

Jove watched him go.

He barely noticed the emptying of the room, and didn’t look at either his son or his second in command. He waited for the violence to drain out of his head, sink slowly down his body until it reached his feet and passed into the floor.

It was only then that he realized he had at some point passed from tipsy to drunk.

Izawa’s hello had been an icy shower, but when it washed away, Jove had to reckon with the fact that he’d been slamming drinks for well over an hour.

Standing was not going to work for him.

He ran a hand over his too-warm face, through his hair and realized he was tired.

“I need a room,” he said.

“I’ve got one,” said Bialy right away. “Nerva, do you...”

When Bialy's voice trailed off, Jove turned just in time to see his son's back as he walked out the door.

Fine, thought Jove dully.

Finally he glanced down at Red, finding the kid still in his seat, the only one left sitting in the nearly empty and suddenly very quiet room.

His face held all kinds of trouble in it.

Too tired and too drunk to be patient with his feelings, Jove reached down and flicked the center of the kid's forehead.

"Up and at 'em, Red," he said. "Since there are all sorts of creatures on this boat tonight, you get to stay somewhere I can keep an eye on you."

He pulled his scarred eyelid down, showing off the gold prosthetic to the kid's blank face, and tapped his fingertip right on its surface.

—

There weren't the same number of rooms as guests, partially because many of them intended to party through the night, and partially because a certain amount of promiscuous room sharing was inevitable.

Jove had no clue which rooms were nicest or best located, and was not sober enough to care.

He walked in the door Bialy opened for him and kept walking until he hit a bed, where he flopped facedown and lay there silent and unmoving.

He heard the sounds of footsteps moving about, the thump of objects and some voices, and ignored it all. He had glimpsed a sofa in a connected room and figured Bialy would see to it that Red was comfortable where Jove could keep an eye on him. He was tiny; he would fit on a sofa.

Jove lay there until silence fell. Figuring all were settled, he began contemplating whether or not he should undress. Rotating to lie on the bed properly already felt ambitious, and getting under the covers more ambitious still, but his watch was digging into his wrist. That at least needed to come off. Shoes, too. At least that would take little effort.

"Jove," came a voice. He felt a small weight sink onto the bed. "Hey. Are you awake? I need to talk to you."

You have got to be kidding me.

Jove ignored him.

The kid persisted. "I'm serious. Really serious. You aren't asleep, are you? Aren't you just drunk?"

Jove felt a small, pointed finger jab into his shoulder.

He turned his head to stare down the idiot *stablehand* who apparently thought his life was important enough he could get away with *insisting* on the attention of the famed, terrifying one-time leader of the Hanged Men.

Red looked back at him with an expression between concern and scowl.

Nowhere near respectful enough. Jove had really let him get away with too much.

“Go away,” he growled. “Or I’ll throw you in the ocean.”

“It’s about that Izawa guy,” said Red.

Jove stood up.

Red recoiled, but Jove ignored him, walking past and out of the bedroom. Passing by the sofa room — and noting it was empty — he found a tiny, squished kitchen and its stocked fridge.

He returned to the bedroom with a bottle of water. Red was still perched on the edge of the bed, staring at him.

Jove kicked off his shoes, uncapped the water bottle, and walked towards the bed only to slide down to the floor beside it. Sitting with his back to the mattress, legs splayed out, he slammed half the bottle of water and put a hand up to wave Red down.

The kid slowly slid off the bed to sit beside him.

Starting to take off his watch, Jove said, “Go ahead.”

Red paused for a second, then said, “I talked to him.”

The alcohol cast a delay over everything, and it took a moment for Jove’s stomach to go cold, to clench.

He turned to look at Red, and his face must have been terrible, because the kid immediately began to insist, “I didn’t tell him anything! Swear to god. I only told him what our story already was, and, um—”

He had misunderstood Jove’s look.

It wasn’t anger at him, but a terrible dread at what might have happened if Izawa had been here for different reasons.

“I just wanted to tell you,” said Red, speaking more hastily. “It wasn’t his voice I heard on the phone. I know it wasn’t. I know it wasn’t because —”

“William has a very slight Boston accent,” said Jove. “He was born there.”

Red blinked at him.

“I would believe you even if it weren’t for the accent,” said Jove. He rubbed his face, contemplated dumping the rest of the water on it to wake up but decided he didn’t particularly want to be wide awake for it. “This isn’t his move. If he were the one who had called me back to town, he would have concluded his intentions in that room.”

There was a reason Nerva had gone for his gun.

Red seemed to hesitate for a moment, watching Jove closely and picking his words carefully for once.

“Is he really that dangerous?”

Jove cast him an amused look.

“Did he charm you?”

Red’s cautious look flickered into a scowl. “He stole me food from the kitchen,” he said defensively.

Jove could all too easily see it. “His kindness is what makes him especially horrible,” he said, half to himself. Eye ticking back onto Red, he thought he saw something else flicker — something like a secret. He grew suspicious. “What else did you say to him?”

The kid hadn’t been exposed to much while in Jove’s custody, and definitely no secrets, otherwise Jove would never have let him out of sight.

But there was *something* hiding in Red’s mouth.

“He maybe didn’t totally believe the cover story,” said the kid, watching him nervously. “So I made something else up.”

Jove prepared himself to be pissed.

“Say it.” His voice was cold.

Red let it out in a sudden rush, words crammed together in a fearful burst.

“I-might-have-told-him-we-were-fucking,” he said all at once.

Jove stared at him.

The kid stared back, wilting. Clearly waiting for the hammer to fall.

And Jove burst out laughing.

He laughed hard enough that he spilled the water, long enough that Red had time to get mad, glaring at him.

“It was a good cover,” he said, glowering. “It’s believable! The best excuses are always that kind of thing, because half the time they’re true. Seriously, the number of grooms I’ve seen sleeping with the trainers twice their age—”

Jove interrupted the kid before he could really get going, shaking his head. “Never let it be said that you don’t think on your feet, Red.”

“Why do you call me that?” the kid asked suddenly, brow pinched, not letting go of his irritation. “That’s not even close to my name. It’s Tobias, remember, not ‘Toby’, not anything else. I don’t even have red hair.”

Jove snorted. He had barely even noticed himself doing it, and it hadn’t occurred to him that ‘Red’ himself might think it was odd. The realization was amusing — almost as amusing as the kid’s impulsive cover story, or the increasingly agitated look on his face. Jove couldn’t keep the grin off his own face; he was too drunk to stop it, and Red was just so *small*, the kind of small that made anger look adorable.

He grabbed Red playfully by the chin, giving his head a little shake back and forth.

“It’s because the first time I saw you, your mouth was covered in blood,” he said. “Looked just like lipstick.”

The kid tried unsuccessfully to yank himself away, glowering more viciously. He reminded Jove of a feral kitten trapped in a towel.

“Let go,” he complained, adding, “It’s a stupid nickname,” as if that were supposed to be some kind of vicious jab to Jove’s ego.

“It’s not so stupid,” said Jove, ignoring Red’s attempt to pry his fingers off. “Your face is red now. You should see it.”

Something popped in whatever remained of the kid’s restraint. “You should see *your* face,” he stormed. “All dopey and drunk. Do all your bad, dangerous mafia friends know you turn into an idiot when you drink? I’ll tell them.”

“Are you threatening me?” Jove asked, delighted.

“You’re a dick,” swore Red, and kept swearing. “Asshole. No wonder you’re filthy rich and still single. You can’t pay anyone enough to stick around, can you?”

He was clearly trying his best to be unkind, and had also clearly made a point not to say unkind things before in his life, because he was absolutely terrible at it.

“Single?” repeated Jove. “I thought we were fucking.”

Red gave up on prying at Jove’s fingers and punched him directly in the chest. It bounced off with all the force of a muffin tossed across the room.

“I think your cover story is better than mine,” said Jove. “Except... if I can’t pay anyone enough to stick around, that means you must be around

for other reasons, which raises questions. Is it because you find me charming, like Izawa? Or maybe it's because you're a size queen?"

"No one *would* believe it," said the kid, bouncing another fist fruitlessly off Jove's chest. "They'd see I obviously thought you were a giant *dick*. Which you are."

"Perhaps," said Jove. "But you should have thought of that before you told the most dangerous man I know that we're an item. The only thing we can do now is suck it up and practice."

"You—" The kid seemed to run out of vocabulary, face flushed with rage, skin hot under Jove's tightly-gripping fingers.

Jove bent over and pressed his mouth to Red's before the kid's brain could conjure up another curse.

As soon as their lips touched Red stopped squirming, stopped punching. He let out a short, hot breath of shock against Jove's mouth. A gasp that turned into a shudder.

And suddenly Jove wasn't laughing at all, either.

He realized, with a buzz that originated somewhere deep in his drunken brain, that his earlier urge for a cigarette had been a desire for something else entirely.

He found himself laser focused on the softness of Red's mouth. The warmth of his slightly parted lips.

The fact that all of Red's resistance had evaporated.

The kid breathed against him, deep and rushed at the same time, one hand left flat on Jove's chest but not pushing. Not moving.

Trembling just like his slightly open mouth.

And suddenly Jove couldn't resist opening it wider. He couldn't stop himself using his tongue, gliding in over the kid's lower lip into that warmth. Deep. Pressing their mouths more tightly together, creating a seal of tongue, and breath, and heat.

Red moaned low in the back of his throat.

Jove's entire *body* reacted, like lightning had spouted in every nerve.

He released Red's chin to grab him by the back of his head, dragging him in closer and holding him firmly in place. Probably too firmly. Roughly, even. They weren't far removed from the kid having been punched in the mouth, and it had to hurt. Jove could *feel* that it was swollen, feel it on his tongue.

But he couldn't stop.

A cattle prod couldn't have compelled him to let go.

Luckily, it seemed like Red didn't want him to.

Where Red had seemed paralyzed, now he suddenly came to life. He made a sound in the back of his throat — high, eager — that made Jove dizzy with need, and grabbed back.

Touching Jove's chest. His arms. Grabbing and even pulling as if to somehow get Jove even closer.

Then Red's hands slid over Jove's chest, up the back of his neck into his hair, and suddenly Jove had to have that entire slight body pressed against his, *rubbing* up against his. He seized the kid by the hips, yanking him up into his lap, and Red did the rest of the work by wrapping his legs around Jove's waist.

The heat was incredible. Jove felt fever-riddled and even fever-stupid, barely aware of his own hands gliding all over the kid's body, not looking for anything in particular but stroking, rubbing.

The kid moaned against his mouth again, legs tightening around his waist in a convulsive squeeze as Jove's hands found and gripped his ass.

"Please," Red managed to beg, his broken words muffled between hard, forceful kisses. "Oh *fuck, fuck, please—*"

Jove's brain did him a favor, allowing a single constructive thought.

He dropped his head, abandoning Red's mouth to press his own against Red's throat. He felt the pulse of blood under the skin, the wild pounding of it, and bit down.

Red made a sound of such tormented arousal it was almost painful to hear.

"Come on — oh, god—"

Jove tormented his throat mindlessly, not even meaning to torment, only acting on hungry instinct that wanted to hear Red's voice broken to pieces like that.

"Let me — come on—"

Red didn't manage to break Jove off his neck, but he inched back far enough to start going for buttons. Working rapidly. Finishing their shirts, and then...

Red's hand, plunging in past Jove's belt to grab greedily, shocked them both.

Jove was shocked because he had been so focused, he'd almost forgotten about the logical end game.

Red, shocked for other reasons.

The look of near-horror on his face suddenly gave way to a glazed-over, vacant need.

“I want it in my mouth,” he said.

Jove grabbed him around the waist again and hefted him up. Throwing him down on the bed, he descended on top like a vampire on its prey.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tobias

Tobias was pretty sure that his death was finally going to come at Jove's hands, just not in the way he'd been fearing this whole time.

If Jove's weight didn't crush him, and if Tobias's heart didn't give out, that thing in Jove's pants was going to do the job.

Tobias worked with horses. He'd held mares for live cover, stood there almost bored while one thousand pound animal climbed on top of another and went at it. He'd seen bored stud colts slapping their erections against their stomachs. It took a lot to impress him.

Now, he thought he understood how those mares must have felt.

But Jove was ruder than any stud, was the kind of aggressive that needed a chain, all muscle and teeth and sheer dominating weight.

It made Tobias lose his mind.

Even with Jove's body bearing down crushingly on top of him — mouth abusing his, hands making Tobias's bruises sing — there was no fucking way Tobias was going to do anything but grab back at him and whimper-moan in a way *guaranteed* to provoke a truly devastating dicking-down.

All best practices flew out of his head.

He should have twisted his way to lying on top, should have directed Jove's mouth back to his neck and away from his bruised lips, should have could have and did *not*.

He had absolutely no desire to be on top. No, he wanted to be crushed, he wanted to be thrown about like a doll, he wanted his health and safety to be thoroughly disregarded, he wanted Jove to wear him like a fucking condom, use him like a flashlight he didn't mind replacing.

The *only reason* he didn't just work his pants off and let Jove split him like a log was because of a truly rabid need to *suck it*.

The iron will to deepthroat seemed to lend Tobias a nearly supernatural strength, the kind of adrenaline that let a mother lift a car off her trapped child.

It was only via such inhuman strength that he managed to extricate himself from Jove's anaconda-arms.

"Come here," growled Jove.

His voice had devolved with lust into a barely-human rumble. Tobias had never heard anything so terrifying or so aching hot.

His face was just as frightening — eye utterly fixated, expression utterly without mercy or consideration.

Hoooot, hot hot hot.

Tobias slapped a hand flat on Jove's bare chest, screaming internally at the bulging of his pec and fighting not to stroke it.

"Wait," he said.

To Jove's drunk, lusting, criminal credit, he did wait. He wasn't a rapist. But he also looked like he might turn into a murderer and pull Tobias's head off if made to 'wait' for more than ten seconds.

Tobias persisted.

"Let me suck you," he said, and the words tasted like candy in his mouth.

God he loved sucking dick, and god he did not get many quality opportunities. He was going to seize this one or spend the rest of his life an empty shell of a man.

Jove rolled wordlessly onto his back and reached for his belt.

"No!" Tobias practically slapped his hands away. "Let me do it."

He didn't even say 'please'. It was a miracle Jove didn't retaliate.

They'd worked shirts off but not pants, and Tobias approached this second stage of undressing with the reverence of a saint.

And he did feel truly blessed among men to be the one unbuckling that belt.

Normally he would have put on more of a show, given the lucky fella a few hickeys around the belly button and maybe mouthed through the fabric a bit until both parties were sufficiently teased.

Tobias couldn't have exercised that kind of restraint now if his life depended on it.

He raced Jove's belt and fly open, tugging the waistband down and reaching inside in one fluid motion, and unearthed the... well, *it*. The monster. His doom. His Christmas present come early.

It wasn't just big, it was *perfect*, in every way a cock could be perfect. Eight inches if it was a centimeter, girthy enough to defy the wrap of one hand's fingers, it had a factory-perfect arc ideal for a smooth slam in and out, and a lovely bell-shaped head that Tobias knew would stretch his lips *gloriously* as it slipped into his mouth.

He gave it a single appreciative up-and-down with his hand, then touched his tongue to the base and licked. Slow. Flat. Firm. All the way up to the tip.

He looked at Jove — an instinctive, fleeting check for approval and permission — and kept their eyes locked as he parted his lips and pushed them down.

Gooooo, the lip stretch.

So thick, so warm, so fucking filling. Tobias didn't break eye contact as much as he felt his eyes unfocus, losing all brain function that wasn't dedicated to slow sucking.

He'd mentally prepared himself for deepthroating, ready to impress Jove with his total absence of a gag reflex, but pure physical logistics got in the way. Maybe he could have gotten it down his throat with a little care and practice — he *was* a little rusty, after all — but his throat wasn't the immediate problem.

It was his damn mouth. Already tender before, Jove's animalistic kissing had rendered Tobias's lips swollen all over again, and he could barely keep a tight seal over just the head. The width of the shaft was an absolute no-go.

Tobias slipped his mouth off and looked at Jove again, meaning to apologize that he couldn't perform his best magic trick.

But Jove didn't look disappointed.

He looked somehow more drunk and more sober at the same time, face flushed and mouth slightly open, but eye absolutely focused on Tobias.

Bolstered, Tobias gave the head another once-over of warm, wet attention, and watched Jove shudder.

Taking the shaft in hand, Tobias paired his next suck with a quick, hard stroke of his fingers.

Jove made a sharp sound. He thrust up into Tobias's mouth, maybe not intentionally, but suddenly. The thrust jammed more of the beast into Tobias's mouth than he had managed alone, shaft forging painfully between his lips, the thick head of it sliding over his tongue to the very back of his mouth.

Tobias grabbed Jove's leg with a choking sound — not in protest, but to hold on. Trying to keep his head down and mouth full. He felt it throbbing with both his tongue and the roof of his mouth, and the sensation was both ecstatic and extremely painful.

His eyes filled with water and blinded him.

Tobias would have stayed there indefinitely, gamely packing his cheeks with cock like a squirrel storing nuts for winter, if Jove hadn't pulled him off.

Tobias coughed, remembered to inhale, and wiped his watery eyes.

Looking down to see the monster's tip gleaming with his spit, Tobias automatically stroked it down the shaft, getting the whole thing wet enough to tug without friction.

Jove grabbed him by the back of the head.

Tobias half expected to get jammed mouth-first back on the cock, but instead he found himself getting kissed again, dragged back up to lay on top of Jove's broad chest.

Before Tobias could get his more-than-a-handful back, Jove grabbed him between the legs.

Tobias gasped. Jove didn't let him out of the kiss, one arm wrenched around the back of his neck like a reverse chokehold, and he covered Tobias's moans with tongue as he rubbed. Squeezed. Thoroughly, flat-palmed, running back and forth between Tobias's legs to grab ass, grab the bulge of his cock, grab and let go and slide all over rough and careless.

Tobias's body contorted, legs curled up, and Jove took the opportunity to yank his pants down and off in one swift, one-handed gesture.

Naked, suffocating with heat, Tobias couldn't see. Couldn't focus on anything but Jove's mouth.

He didn't hear Jove working down his own pants, dropping them off the edge of the bed. Didn't realize the danger until he felt eight inches of lethal intent press up hard against his thigh.

The moment for self control was gone — not for him, but for Jove.

Tobias heard it in Jove's rough breath, felt it in the hands grabbing and manipulating him with a single-minded intent. Tobias didn't know if Jove had ever fucked men, but he had definitely fucked, and his body said so, knew what it wanted, knew how to do it.

Jove rolled them over, crushing Tobias under him once more, and his body was already trying to fuck, was seeking in violent thrusts against Tobias's.

Tobias saved himself from probable hospitalization by grabbing Jove's cock and leading it in between his thighs, squeezing them tight around it.

And that was good enough for Jove's drunken lust.

He grabbed onto Tobias's waist and fucked between his thighs viciously hard, the force of it rocking Tobias's body and making him yelp even without being actually penetrated. Jove lay atop him, suffocatingly heavy, without an inch between them except for the breadth of space it took to thrust back and forth. Otherwise he gave Tobias no breath, no quarter. Grabbing him up closer, crushing them together. Lip to lip. Forgetting the niceties of kisses in the wild heat but still insisting Tobias taste him, take his tongue, open his mouth for it.

Tobias clung glassy-eyed to his shoulders.

Each move of Jove's body pressed Tobias's cock against his stomach, the rocking motion rubbing it, grinding it.

Tobias didn't have to give himself a hand, didn't need more than Jove's weight and aggression and feeling that huge thing between his thighs.

He came relatively quietly — whimpers lost in Jove's harsh panting, shakes lost in the ongoing momentum.

Jove came more violently.

He seemed to get there faster than he'd planned and, feeling it begin, fought through his own pressure to keep going. Thrusting faster and faster between Tobias's legs, kissing with a kind of desperation.

Tobias wrapped his arms around Jove's neck, held his thighs together as tightly as he could, and kept kissing him even when Jove's breath turned to static and his huge body went hard and still, only the smallest tremors betraying his orgasm.

Tobias kept softly kissing his mouth.

He couldn't stop himself.

He felt regret hit him for the first time.

His excitement had faded into that postcoital chill, and normally at that point he would have been happy to extricate himself and take off...

...but he was having the hardest fucking time working up the will to unwrap his arms from around Jove's neck.

He should have wanted the bulk of huge, sweaty man *off* of him, ASAP.

He wasn't really the 'stick around for seconds' type, let alone a cuddler.

But when Jove went still on top of him, breath slowing to something resembling sleep and *trapping* Tobias where he lay, Tobias didn't feel the need to scream in the man's ear until he woke up or at least rolled over.

After examining his feelings for a bit in the aftermath — staring at the ceiling, wearing a two hundred pound mobster as a blanket — Tobias

realized he was happy.

When the fuck had that happened?

Tobias woke up sprawled out in a huge bed, facedown in a pillow that smelled faintly of lavender detergent. His first coherent thought wasn't about where he was, how he had gotten there, or with *who*, but instead an absolute certainty that his hair looked *crazy*.

He didn't have to lift his head to know Jove wasn't in the bed with him. If he was, the mattress would have been sunk down another two inches with his weight.

That, and he could hear a shower running somewhere.

Tobias hadn't had anything to drink, but *still* managed to feel hungover. Maybe he had given himself a headache trying to jam Jove's no-less-than-eight incher down his gullet. Maybe it was a mental hangover.

He'd woken up at least once in the night and been totally perplexed by the presence of another person. Even after remembering 'oh yeah, I dry humped with a mob boss' he'd remained perplexed. He hadn't shared a bed with someone since... who even knew when?

Having watched plenty of sitcoms, Tobias knew that he probably should have been feeling mortified, or scandalized, or flustered in a good way. However, sitting up in bed and seeing the mangled sheets, touching his hair and finding it just as mangled, all he could muster up was a 'let's file this emotional reaction for later'.

He was hungry again and he was — quelle surprise — sore from getting slammed up against over and over again during the act.

Tobias had managed to get his pants back on when he heard a knock at the door.

Fuck.

He personally didn't mind being ID'd as a giant slutbag, but would Jove care about keeping the whole naked writhing thing a secret?

What if it was Bialy out there? Would *he* judge Tobias for being a giant slutbag? God forbid, what if it was Nerva? The guy had already looked at Tobias like he was some kind of rancid slug. Tobias couldn't imagine he would be pleased to know that slug had gotten its slime all over his father.

Tobias left his white shirt in its shame puddle on the floor — too many buttons — and grabbed his sweater instead, pulling it quickly overhead and going cautiously to the door.

“Who is it?” he asked.

“Is Mr. Alms there?” asked a strange man’s voice.

Tobias paused.

It only occurred then that he’d mostly interacted with people who knew Jove on a first name basis. The ‘Mr. Alms’ was an awkward reminder of just who Tobias had let wreck his face.

Remembering, Tobias touched his mouth, wincing when he found it predictably swollen. He supposed if Jove wanted to lie they could chalk that one up to violence. No one would be surprised to hear Jove had finally popped him in his very loud mouth.

“He’s in the shower,” said Tobias. “Can you come back later?”

“I have an important message for him,” said the voice. “Nerva sent me.”
Balls.

Tobias couldn’t imagine either Jove or Nerva would be pleased about him disrupting communication. He would have to risk the horny reveal.

“It can’t wait?” he asked, hanging on to hope.

“It’s urgent.”

Tobias reluctantly unlocked and opened the door.

The man who stood there was unfamiliar to him. Dressed in a three-piece suit that made him look more like a butler than a partygoer, he had an exceptionally normal face, his only distinguishing features being a set of sparse and nearly-invisible eyebrows.

“He’ll probably be out soon,” said Tobias, closing the door as the man scanned the front room. Belatedly he put a hand on his neck, wondering how bad the hickey situation was.

However obvious the hickeys were or weren’t, the swollen mouth or tousled hair, the no-eyebrows man didn’t seem to notice. Or if he did, he didn’t react.

Instead, his eyes continued to slide around the room, before settling on the bedroom door Tobias had left open.

Without a word he went through it.

“Hey!” Tobias hurriedly followed, too late to get in his way but still compelled to protest. “I said he’ll be out soon.”

But the man ignored him, standing beside the door and looking around here as well. He barely acknowledged Tobias or his glare.

Tobias had an odd feeling in his gut. A bad one.

“He’s going to come out naked and be pissed,” he pointed out. “You should wait out there.”

“It’s urgent,” said no-eyebrows again flatly.

Tobias wasn’t sure what to do.

Knock on the bathroom door and tell Jove he had a guest? Keep trying to insist that the guy leave?

It occurred to Tobias that he might have made a mistake.

He was barely over five foot and had all the combat skills of a beanie baby. If this guy turned out to be bad news — which he could very well be, given the mobile state of conspiracy — Tobias would be useless.

It also occurred to Tobias that the three-piece suit had plenty of places to hide weapons.

Not knowing what else to do, he sat on the edge of the bed between the man and the bathroom, pretending to examine his nails as if bored, and listened to the water run.

And then it stopped.

In the absence of the sound of water, Tobias could hear his heart pound.

He lifted his eyes with dread and found the man looking directly at him, blank stare betraying no information, no intent, but making a horrible suggestion.

He jumped when the front door opened again. He’d forgotten to lock it, he realized.

And then he heard Bialy’s voice.

“Sir?” it called sharply. “Nerva’s gone missing from the boat—”

Bialy rounded the corner, saw the man, and stopped.

For a fraction of a second there was stillness all around. And then the man spun, hand flashing in and out of his jacket quick as a whip, gun gleaming as he pointed it directly at the shower door.

BLAM. BLAM.

He was on the floor before the sound of the shot had finished ringing, Bialy crossing the floor and throwing him down with a speed and strength Tobias hadn’t realized the sickly man had.

For a second all Tobias could see were the two perfect, round holes punched through the bathroom door.

And then time moved very fast.

Bialy and the other man grappled on the floor. Another flash of metal — a knife, twisting up out of Bialy's pocket and *thunking* into the floor directly next to the man's head. The man retaliated, taking advantage of the moment of Bialy's extended arm, bringing his gun up again.

BLAM.

The shot slammed into the ceiling, missing Bialy's head by inches.

Bialy wrestled him down, fingers digging into the man's wrist until the gun dropped. Then Bialy's eyes flashed up. They locked onto Tobias, and suddenly Tobias realized he was sitting frozen and trembling, unable to move.

Then Bialy looked to him for help.

Tobias's body unfroze. Jumping down from the bed, he kicked the gun away. His body cooperated only for that moment, then gave out, and he dropped to the floor.

Bialy yanked his knife out of the carpet.

The man's eyes bulged in mortal human fear, and then Bialy brought the blade down like a butcher knife against his throat.

But it wasn't a butcher knife.

There was no clean chop — there was a sudden spray of blood, an animalistic noise. Bialy slammed his elbow down against the blunt edge of the blade and drove it in.

Tobias crawled away backwards, until the bed blocked out the view of all but their struggling feet.

The noises followed him. He clapped his hands over his ears but he could still hear the crunching brutality of it — one man panting, the other gurgling.

Tobias had watched men die back in that barn, had killed a man himself, but it had all happened in such a rush, and he had already been in such a panic, that those events barely felt real. Since then, Jove and Bialy had been honestly so kind to him, so careful. He had almost forgotten. He had been too busy for any of it to sink in. And everything that had happened had happened so *fast*. It had been over quickly.

This was not quick.

It couldn't have been more than minutes — Bialy was clearly good at what he did, was clearly shockingly and disgustingly well practiced — but

it felt like an hour until the choking, wet gasping sounds stopped, and all Tobias could hear was Bialy's panting.

The pair of feet sticking out lay still.

The bathroom door opened and Tobias numbly looked up.

Jove stood there with a towel around his waist, hair wet and dripping on his broad shoulders. He looked down at the gory scene half-hidden from Tobias, expression neutral, only a faint pucker between his eyebrows suggesting a frown.

Then he looked over and saw Tobias squished back in the corner, and his expression changed.

Jove immediately went to him. Bending over, he turned Tobias's head from side to side, scanned him up and down, then pulled his hands away from his ears.

"Get up," he said.

Tobias only stared, so Jove grabbed him by the arm and hauled him to his feet. Before Tobias had the chance to see whatever mess Bialy had made of the no-eyebrows man, Jove had grabbed up his discarded shirt and covered Tobias's head with it.

"Don't look," he said in clipped tones.

Tobias could see only vague shapes through the half-sheer material of the shirt. He thought he saw Bialy stand up. Jove put an arm around him, not in comfort but to steer, directing Tobias through the room, taking a wide berth around a vague red shape on the floor.

He got Tobias out into the front room, pulled the shirt off his head, and turned his chin up to stare him in the eyes.

"Are you injured?" he asked. There was nothing like normal concern in his voice. It was blunt, almost harsh.

When Tobias only looked blankly back at him, Jove stopped asking and instead patted him down, even lifting his shirt to look. Finding nothing, he steered Tobias again, sitting him down on the sofa.

"Stay here," he said. "Don't move."

He stared Tobias in the face, eyes hard, fingers tightening on Tobias's arms until the pain finally sparked a reaction.

"Okay," he said.

Satisfied, Jove got up and headed back to the bedroom.

It was only then, looking after him, that Tobias saw the blood soaking through the white towel, wrapped snug around the brilliant red circle of an

exit wound.

—

“It was a clean through-and-through. The bullet lost some velocity when it went through the door, and it only hit soft tissue. No organ, no bone. No problem. A quick flush, some bandaging, that’s all it needs. He’s had worse.”

Bialy’s words of comfort did very little for Tobias.

The fact that he was *being* comforted felt particularly absurd — the fact that Jove and Bialy seemed more concerned about Tobias freaking out than they were about a literal gunshot wound.

“‘He’s had worse,’” repeated Tobias. “Like what?”

Bialy paused. He looked over his shoulder.

They were back in the red room. Jove sat on the edge of the stage with a partygoer who had turned out to be an old medic for the mob, who chatted cheerily at the stony-faced Jove while tending to the ‘clean through-and-through’. The process had to be painful, but Jove showed no sign of feeling it. He showed no sign of any kind of feeling at all.

Also with them, taking up two rows of seats, were an assortment of Hanged Men. Some had attended the party and still wore formalwear. Others had arrived after docking and came in street clothes or combat gear, spooking the hell out of all the socialites and rich civilians as they’d scattered off the yacht.

They waited in silence to be addressed.

Bialy knelt in front of Tobias — who sat in the same chair he had the night before — and spoke in a low tone.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, and hesitated before cautiously changing gears. The low voice seemed to strain his sore throat, which sounded especially hoarse when it was quiet. “Do you remember anything else about the man? What he said?”

Tobias wasn’t surprised that Bialy’s aim in reassuring him was only to coax out information.

“No,” he said. “He said it was a message from Nerva. That’s all.”

Bialy fell silent, an inscrutable look on his face.

“That’s it,” Tobias heard the doctor say. “You know the drill, Mr. Alms. Keep it clean, change the bandage as needed. Any pus, any heat or swelling

—”

“Thank you,” interrupted Jove, utterly cold.

The doctor hesitated, then did the smart thing — nodded, grabbed his things, and got the hell out.

Jove got down from the stage, pulled his shirt back on, and began to slowly button it back up.

Everyone in the room waited in obedient silence. Bialy got up to take the seat next to Tobias, eyes focused on his leader, expression intent.

Jove finally spoke.

“Did anyone speak to Nerva this morning?”

Silence. He didn’t look surprised.

“Has anyone seen Nerva since last night?”

More silence.

He crossed his arms and leaned back against the stage, showing no signs of pain or even mild discomfort.

“Did anyone speak to Lavigne?”

Tobias supposed that must have been the gunman Bialy had minced on the bedroom floor.

“I spoke to him.”

All eyes flew to a man standing at the back — Tobias realized it was one of the men he’d met at the very beginning, recognizing him by his glasses. He had been there to accompany him and Jove into the barn cellar, and escorted Tobias to the hotel afterwards.

Now his face was pale.

“Lavigne wasn’t on the original detail,” he said. “I asked him about it when he arrived. He said—” He paused for just a moment, then admitted, “He said he had been called in at the last minute, when your attendance came up. Said they wanted additional security. I believed him. It made sense.”

Jove didn’t criticize, only asked, “Who called him in?”

The man was quiet for another moment, then opened his mouth.

A pleasant, lightly accented voice interrupted him.

“I imagine it was Nerva.”

William Izawa stood leaning in the doorway, looking in with a civil smile. He didn’t stir when the men did, even when several reached transparently for hidden weapons. His eyes casually browsed the room.

They lingered for a half-second on Tobias, warming in silent hello, and finally landed on Jove.

“I’m surprised you didn’t come directly to me. Blaming your absent son would have been convenient cover for my attempt on your life, no?”

“Everyone get out,” said Jove flatly.

His men left in a hurry. None hesitated, even those who had reached for their weapons — clearly more intimidated by their leader than concerned for his safety. Only Bialy and Tobias remained. Tobias didn’t even attempt to get up and go. He still felt frozen, shock coating him like a thin layer of ice. He didn’t want to move and risk shattering it and letting the panic in.

Izawa pulled a chair out of the neat rows, turning it around to straddle backwards, and faced the three of them with arms crossed casually over the top.

“You didn’t think for a second it was me?” he asked. “I feel a little dismissed.”

“Why are you here?” asked Bialy. While Jove still wore a neutral face, Bialy looked ready to use his knife for a second time that day.

Izawa’s eyes flicked sideways, from Jove to Bialy. They settled there with a catlike amusement. “Why are *you* here, Bezruc?” he asked, echoing the accusatory intonation, but with enough humor to soften it to a joke. “We’re all invested. I stand to gain or lose a great deal if the empire falls, depending on the conditions of its collapse. I’d be a fool not to watch the news.”

“You’re a fool to show your face at all,” said Bialy, heated enough that his rough voice cracked.

“Bialy,” said Jove, giving a low but concrete warning.

Bialy shocked Tobias by refusing to listen. Instead, he rose to his feet, face flushed with an anger that might have seemed out of character before Tobias had listened to him kill a man.

Bialy pointed an accusatory finger at Izawa.

“How can you let him sit there and let him blame your son, after all he’s done?” he demanded, voice cracking. “Nerva is a good man. A good son. You raised him well, and he has never once failed you.”

Tobias’s ice couldn’t withstand his sheer incredulity; he felt his eyes getting very big. He looked at Jove, waiting for his anger at being questioned.

Jove's expression never changed. His eye seemed a little distant. Thinking.

Finally he said, "Nerva is not perfect."

Bialy stared at him for a long moment, then sat again, in a heavy thump down next to Tobias.

Izawa broke the silence cheerfully.

"What's your stake in this, Mr. Nimh?"

Tobias looked up to find Izawa looking at him. He still couldn't quite place the man as sinister. Even after so many warnings, after seeing everyone's violent reactions, he couldn't bring himself to feel afraid.

Though maybe that was just because he was out of fear.

"His stake is none of your concern," said Jove before Tobias could answer. "Don't let him worry you, William."

Tobias couldn't read whether his words were genuine, sarcastic, or threatening. Where Jove had begun to make sense to Tobias just the night before, seeing him at his most human, now it seemed as if Jove had erased his humanity entirely, becoming stone.

"I know where Nerva would go," said Jove.

Izawa smiled. "I know it, too," he said. "Shall I give you a ride?"

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Jove

The last time Jove had seen the island, the sky had been blue and the waters the same, making the dollop of green appear like a brilliantly opening eye on the horizon.

Today the sky was gray, and so too were the rocks of the north side of the island — the first thing Jove glimpsed out the window of Izawa's small, private plane.

He'd spent the short flight numb with thought, and the numbness persisted at the first look at what should have been a welcome sight.

He looked away.

His eye fell on Red, asleep in his chair — or at least, Jove hoped he was asleep. Hoped he had dozed off and gotten some respite, and wasn't curled up in a ball of silent fear.

Jove should have been thinking about his deadly puzzle. His sons. His enemies.

Instead, all he could think about was the look on the kid's face in that bedroom,

The raw horror.

After the drunken night, the hideous morning, what was there for Jove to say to him?

He'd already been unprepared to give the apology that had been in his head upon waking, seeing the signs of his abuse all over Red's neck, the freshly swollen lips. He'd delayed in the shower thinking on it, not knowing how to word it. Not knowing how to deal with the feeling of shame. He hadn't been ashamed in what felt like centuries.

The bullet had been a nice distraction.

He'd gotten lucky — not just with the bullet, but with the fact that Bialy had been there.

What would have happened if Bialy hadn't come?

Would Jove have stepped out of the shower to find the kid a bloody mess on the floor instead?

He couldn't even let himself think about it. There was too much wrapped up in Red. Secrets. Conspiracy. Desire. Jove *needed* him, needed

him as an ally and a secret keeper, as a friend and as relief. Relief from the people he knew either too well, or not enough.

Bringing Red along now that things were deadly looked selfish, and he knew it. The kid probably thought it.

Jove should have stowed him away someplace safe, *wanted to*.

But he couldn't be certain of any safe places. Any safe people.

Red's cover story — the one Jove supposed he had proven true the night before — came with a deadly consequence.

The kid was not safe. He would not *be* safe until Jove had identified and stamped out the unknown enemy. Until then, their eye would be on Red as someone, something valuable.

Jove had stamped him as valuable with that ring of hickeys around his neck.

When the plane set down, the kid jolted and sat upright, gripping the seatrests and gazing about in confusion. It was only when his eyes landed on Jove that he seemed to remember where he was.

Jove's impulse was to say something comforting, but he didn't have anything comforting to say.

Instead, he filled Red in as they disembarked.

They exited onto a landing strip shiny with recent rain, tromping down the steps and almost immediately loosening layers as a group. This island bordered on the tropical, and the mound of ominous green that rose up in a small mountain before them was jungle.

"This was part of the bootlegging industry, once," said Jove. "A stopping place between bigger islands, between coasts. I bought it to use in much the same way, a long time ago."

Red gazed out at the ridge of green for a moment before huffing softly, "Of course you have an island."

The return to that familiar tone, somewhere between awe and total disgust, flooded Jove with relief.

The kid had life enough in him to have a mouth, too.

"It's been a while," said Bialy, having descended just after them. He surveyed the view with a wrinkle of nostalgia in his brow.

It had been longer than a while, thought Jove.

Izawa came last, chatting with his pilot. Jove paid little attention to the conversation, which was just small talk about the pilot's daughter and her first day at kindergarten, except to consider Izawa's humanity afresh.

If he was truly responsible, this was a bold move, but that wouldn't have astonished Jove and so it spoke to neither guilt nor innocence.

It occurred to Jove that he was much more familiar with the motives and behavior of his worst enemy than he was about his own sons'.

The soft beep of a horn announced a driver and his sleek car coming around a bend on an unseen forest road.

"If you like the island," said Jove in an aside to Red. "You'll love the estate."

He silently treasured the kid's resulting look of disdain.

—

The estate took up comparatively little of the island, having been built on only what flat parts could be converted into farmland, but was still easily the size of a town. The main house sat in the center, and radiating out from it were other, smaller buildings — storage, utilities, staff — and an outer ring of stables.

The stables and pasture fencing had been custom built, and for good reason.

When they came even with the first pasture and began to pass alongside it, the kid frowned.

"Do you keep horses here, or dinosaurs? Looks like Jurassic Park."

Jove glanced out the window.

Eight feet tall, made of galvanized steel mesh with posts sunk into concrete, the fences looked like they were being well-maintained.

"Hurricane safe," said Jove simply, and the kid looked dubious for a moment, then seemed to take his words at face value. He probably compared it to the rest of the odd things he'd seen of late and thought 'why not?'

On a clear day, rolling up to the house would have made for a glorious view, sunlight gleaming off the expansive white roofs. Modernist ranch style, built on a skeleton of hydraulic concrete blocks and steel-reinforced walls, Jove had dug up the most intense bunker-builders he could find and paired them with a wildly eccentric architect to create the thing.

Looking at it now, seeming dull against the gray sky, Jove was unimpressed with his old ambitions.

He also found he didn't particularly want Red gawping at them.

He leaned forward to speak to the driver.

“Take us to the west entrance.”

The driver nodded, and turned off the main drive.

On the west side of the mansion, the house tied into an attached stable. It was there that Jove had started many days in his prime, going from bed to table to barn and riding out onto the property.

He knew a few of the horses here. Though he hadn't been to the island in some time, leaving it as a center of operations for his son, he had sent on a few particularly sane animals with the hope Nerva would ride them.

That was where they stopped.

Getting out of the car into crunching gravel, glancing up at the familiar line of the buildings, Jove inhaled the smell of hay and horses with relief.

It was a grounding inhale, better than any drug.

Watching Red emerge, he saw the kid take the same deep breath and brighten.

Bialy came next. Shutting the car door behind him and meeting Jove's eye, he nodded.

Much of the staff here had been on for their lifetimes. Jove or his right-hand man had personally vetted almost all of them. If Nerva was truly trying to depose his father, the staff he'd been living alongside likely couldn't be trusted... but neither could they trust the men they might have brought with them as extra security.

Bialy at least would be able to sniff out deception in these people he was familiar with.

He turned to Izawa with the beginning of an invitation on his face, lip curling with dislike, but Izawa saved him having to say it.

“Shall I accompany you as a body shield?” He smiled, eyes crinkling at the corners. “In case Nerva's men rush out, guns blazing.”

Bialy turned away with an ugly look, and the two of them went.

Leaving Jove to wait until it was announced safe.

He never in his life before would have permitted it, never would have sunk to that level of cowardice and self preservation... except that it wasn't self preservation.

“Red,” he said.

The kid's eyes jumped to him again, a tinge of pink appearing in his face, under those freckles. Probably remembering — just as Jove was remembering — their last discussion of that nickname.

“Let me introduce you to an old friend,” said Jove.

—

Angel was a half draft, half quarab mare built like a tank and standing just under eighteen hands. A medicine hat, all white but for black ears and a black patch on her side, she could have been a beautiful horse if she hadn't had her ears pinned flat against her neck at any given moment since birth.

The second they came into view, Angel stuck her head far out the stall door and glowered with two blue eyes. It was a look suggesting that if they came closer, she'd be happy to relieve them of their fingers.

And then Jove pulled a cough drop he'd stolen from Bialy from his pocket.

As soon as she heard the telltale crinkle of a wrapper, the mare's ears shot forward and she let out a lovely, velvety nicker.

Jove had been unable to coordinate a smile on his own, finding his face tricky and numb all day, but now a smile fell into place unprompted.

He offered her the cough drop flat on his palm, and she lipped at it curiously — then pinned her ears flat again and flared her nostrils in disgust. Expecting peppermint. Betrayed.

Jove glanced at Red for his opinion.

He wasn't disappointed.

Undeterred by the mare's witchy expression or the fact that her head was the size of his torso, the kid went right up and offered her both hands. She lipped his palms suspiciously. His face glowed.

He looked back at Jove with a grin. “I was expecting some shiny white stallion. An Andalusian.”

“That's really what you think of me?” asked Jove. The question sounded offhand, almost sarcastic. It wasn't. He found that he really wanted to know — that the answer mattered to him.

“Have you seen your own house?” countered Red.

Touché.

“She was used on the track by outriders, “ said Jove. “Ponying racehorses up to the gate and catching them when they got loose on the track. She was a beast at it — barely needed a rider to tell her to chase a horse down. She'd go after them with ears pinned like a cowhorse after a loose steer. One day she got kicked just right, and that was it. Out of a job. I

took her with me into retirement as a trail horse for a while, and when her leg was up for more than walk-trot again I sent her on to Nerva.”

Red almost looked like he wasn't listening, too busy squishing the mare's nostrils in a way that made her lip flare. She was too busy being confused and curious about it to bite at him.

But he was listening.

Jove knew it.

The kid was young, he was impulsive to the point of exhausting, hard to wrangle and somehow a handful despite his small size — but he was thoughtful, and he was considerate.

He didn't look at Jove when Nerva's name came up. Didn't palpate the wound.

Watching him toy with the horse's nose, Jove felt he'd lucked into knowing Red, the same way he'd lucked into finding the mare.

He'd learned a long time ago that looking for the *right* horse was folly. No matter how strict your criteria were, a complete match to them somehow never measured up to the horse that bounced into your life despite checking off several boxes in the dealbreaker list. He'd never wanted a paint horse, a witchy mare, or anything with a drop of Arabian in it. But Angel had been exactly what he'd needed.

If Jove had been made to list off the things that attracted him to a person, the first thing on that list would have been 'woman'. After that probably would have been quiet, good-natured, someone low maintenance and relaxing to be around.

And yet here was this kid.

“Red,” he said.

The kid's ears colored at the nickname again. He looked up.

Jove didn't know what to say or how to say it, so he went with a blunt, “I'm sorry.” The words carried him on, and he continued. “It wasn't my intention to drag you into real danger—”

He broke off. Red had climbed up onto a bale stacked next to Angel's stall, carefully bracing himself against the wall as his bad leg wobbled on the hay. Jove watched him, mystified — and a little annoyed at not being listened to — until Red settled his footing.

Having gotten to a height where such a thing was possible, Red grabbed the front of Jove's coat for balance and kissed him on the mouth.

Jove calmly picked him up, sat him down on a higher stack for better positioning, and pulled the kid's legs around his waist.

Red exhaled hard against his lips and wrapped those legs tight around him.

The previous night had been a drunken blur interspersed with certain vivid snapshots. Jove had remembered with total clarity that gasp, the shudder of arousal as he kissed back.

He resisted the urge to go right back down that path again.

It would have been all too easy to take Red into the tack room, to disregard their circumstances in the name of making him moan, and if not for the present dangers, Jove would have done it.

But there were words to be said.

Jove pulled back. Before he could continue the apology he was determined to clarify, Red interrupted, busting out with a, "Aren't you in pain?" and flattening his hand right over the site of the gunshot wound.

Jove gritted his teeth and yanked the kid's hand away. "Yes, when you touch it."

"Sorry, sorry," said Red hastily, putting his hands back on Jove's shoulders and giving him a smile that seemed to be apology and a promise of 'I won't do it again' Jove neither trusted nor believed.

He felt his eyebrow tic.

Nothing was ever going to be simple with this kid.

"I'm sorry," he began again, with a glower and force of words that meant 'shut up'. "I put you in danger, and I'm sorry you had to see what you saw this morning, and I'm sorry for—" He had to pause before settling on the words, because they were galling, shameful. "—for aggressively coming on to you when I was drunk."

He might have been apologizing for assault if he didn't distinctly remember the kid practically wrestling him down to the bed in order to suck him off, and if a look in the bathroom mirror that morning hadn't revealed a wild array of hickeys in many questionable locations.

"Oh," said Red, seeming surprised enough by his words to actually shut up for a moment.

Jove took advantage of the opportunity to speak without interruption.

"I can't promise to keep you safe," he said, and stared the kid directly in the eye for emphasis, a look bordering on intimidation. "because I don't know what will happen. I don't make empty promises." Red stayed quiet,

seemed to internalize his words appropriately. Good. Jove moved on. “That said. I owe you a life, since you saved mine. I’ll return that life to protect you, if that’s what’s necessary. It’s what’s fair. Beyond that, I promise not to climb drunk on top of you again. If you’re willing, I’ll be considerate. And after this is all over—” He paused, feeling for the first time truly out of his depth.

He hadn’t had this kind of conversation since before his failed marriage. He felt much too old to be having it now.

“After this is all over, if you’re interested in pursuing this further, I’d be happy to have that conversation.”

He said it flatly, his tone more appropriate for business than romance.

Red looked at him with big, round eyes.

Exasperated, Jove said, “You can speak.”

The kid didn’t need encouragement.

“First of all,” he said. “For the record, it was awesome when you drunkenly climbed on top of me, and I encourage you to do it literally whenever you want. Let the record state that my legs are open.”

Jove thought he was going to end up developing a migraine.

“Secondly,” said Red. “Most people just say ‘I love you’ or ‘will you go out with me?’ instead of ‘a life for a life, something something’. What’s wrong with ‘tonight we fuck, tomorrow we die’? I feel like that’s a little more action movie.”

Jove once again contemplated his own tastes, and wondered why life had thrown him such an exhausting curveball of an attraction.

“Last thing,” said Red, finally looking a little awkward himself, a little embarrassed. “If I cared whether I lived or died, I wouldn’t have picked a career with horses. I’m...” He hesitated. “Well, I’m not happy to be dealing with beheadings and all that, but I am happy I met you.”

He stopped, looked at Jove, and for a second they were both quiet. Red’s face was close enough Jove could almost feel the warmth coming off of it, the heat of that embarrassed pink.

He realized Red didn’t really know what to do on *his* end of their odd relationship, either.

Jove leaned in.

This time, for the first time, his kiss was gentle. He pressed his lips to Red’s softly. With care. Letting the kid take the initiative of reaching for his

face, deepening the kiss on his own. The heat didn't boil right up like before, but built up slowly.

Jove wanted so badly to relive the events of the night before, but sober.

He wanted to be fully present for the kid's orgasm, to see his face, watch his eyes roll back and his back arch up off the bed.

Jove had never slept with a man before, but he thought he had a good idea of what to do.

He was more than ready to experiment.

Red seemed to be on the same page, making a soft but unmistakable sound in the back of his throat, hands twining up into Jove's hair.

Then came the sound of footsteps.

Neither of them made an effort to suddenly hide what they were doing; Jove turned his head and Red glanced up over his shoulder to see Bialy approaching with a grim expression.

"It's Hadrian," he said.

"Hadrian?" repeated Jove.

"He's here," said Bialy. "And he's not cooperating."

—

At the center of the house was the atrium.

One of the features Jove had been most particular about, it broke up the building's structure like the eye of a hurricane, perfectly round and just as quietly peaceful

An artificial stream trickled through it, crossing under the entry bridge and coming to pool in the very center of the chamber. The pool had once held a few dozen koi fish; Jove remembered how thickly they'd swarmed when he came by to feed them.

Now, there were no koi.

The rest of the atrium was filled with plant life — that much hadn't changed. Tree ferns, bamboo, hostas. One enormous banana plant and a few small rubber trees.

Hadrian lounged in a beach chair next to the pond, wearing sunglasses and staring up at the sky as if it weren't getting grayer and grayer. A performative cigarette with a long ash trailed smoke from his left hand, clearly untouched except to light it.

“He claims not to know anything,” said Bialy in a low voice. They stood in the entryway looking in, Jove feeling his chest tighten with anger at just the sight of his youngest. “He says he arrived yesterday and hasn’t seen or spoken to anyone but the staff since then.”

“I’ll deal with him,” said Jove. His eyes slid back to where Red and Izawa stood in the hall looking companionably silent. They both seemed to be taking in the art mounted there — an enormous pointillist painting of a horse — Izawa with appreciation, Red with a critically raised eyebrow. “Have you found any inconsistencies with the staff?”

“They’re all either ignorant or were well-prepared for questioning,” said Bialy. “They haven’t seen Nerva since his departure earlier in the week. They said there have been the usual planes coming and going on the west side, but nothing to indicate it was anything other than normal business.”

Jove nodded. “Have the kid taken up to my room, given whatever he needs. Feed him whatever he asks for.”

Bialy paused, before asking unpleasantly, “And Izawa?”

Taking another look at his old enemy — pointing out the artist’s signature to Red, saying something about the painting’s qualities — Jove wondered why he couldn’t bring himself to suspect the man. Izawa could have easily disguised his voice on the phone.

Was it because Red didn’t find the man suspicious? Did Jove trust the kid’s instincts that much?

Or was it because Jove didn’t trust his own instincts?

Was it because he couldn’t bring himself to suspect anyone at all, couldn’t open up the question in his own head, because he didn’t want to address the real possibility that his son had betrayed him? That his son wanted him dead?

And maybe not just Nerva.

What was Hadrian doing here? Was Dio really accounted for?

Jove ground his teeth together.

“Give William whatever unused room he wants, anything else he asks for. If he wants to strike it won’t make a difference if he’s locked in the cellar or in a guest room.”

Bialy didn’t look pleased, but he did as he was told.

Jove watched him go, watched him speak to them, and then Red looked back directly at him.

There was a faint unhappiness on his face, one that made Jove feel guilty. Guilty, and worried.

'I'll return that life to protect you.'

Red had been right to judge his choice of words, but Jove didn't say what he didn't mean. Watching Red walk away, knowing the kid would be out of physical reach of his protection, made Jove's stomach muscles clench.

His wound throbbed.

Gritting his teeth together, Jove went to confront his son.

Hadrian didn't lift his head when Jove approached. He continued to lay there as if tanning with his clothes on, as if the sky was sunny and he didn't have a care in the world.

Jove had less than no patience for it.

"Sit up," he snapped.

Hadrian lifted his sunglasses to peer at Jove, affecting surprise as if he'd only just noticed him.

"Why, Father," he said, sitting up and tossing the cigarette into the pond. "What are you doing here? It's been so long."

Jove watched the dirty butt float in the clear water.

"You didn't return to school," he said coldly.

"And what, you came to fetch me?" Hadrian sneered outright. "Are you that worried about my academic career? Concerned about the state of the world if they run out of twats with philosophy degrees?"

Jove knew the anger he felt wasn't for his son, but he had never so much wanted to grab Hadrian and physically shake him.

"Do you know why I'm here?" he asked.

Hadrian shrugged. "Honeymooning with that twink?" Seeing his father's face change, he laughed. "Ohhh. You didn't realize you were going to fuck him, did you?" He gleefully dug in with the sharp end of his perception. "How old is he again, Dad? Exactly my age? A little bit younger?" A light came into his eyes, one Jove hadn't seen since the last hospitalization, when Hadrian was strapped down swearing and spitting like in an exorcism.

"You know what you have, Dad?" he asked. He propped his chin up in his hand, grinning up with a kind of calm, glassy dementia. "You have whatever the opposite of 'daddy issues' is. You know you fucked up as a

father, but it's easier to dip your dick in twink than show up for a birthday ___”

“Do you know what your brother did?” Jove asked suddenly. All of his calm control dissipated as he yanked up his shirt, revealing the patch of bloody gauze taped to his stomach. “Disappeared this morning, right after this occurred. The man who pulled the trigger claimed to be delivering a message from Nerva. Whether or not he was responsible, what does it say that I have to ask myself the question? That I have to wonder?”

Rage peaking, he demanded, “Do you think any of you were easy to raise? Do you think I count myself lucky to have not one, not two, but *three* children who would rather thief than spend my money on an education?”

Hadrian seemed as untouched by his father's words as ever. “Oh, I see,” he said, with a lazy smile. “You didn't just come to catch me playing hooky. You came to catch Nerva at patricide. Well, you're wrong. Nerva isn't trying to kill you.”

Without changing expression, voice as pleasant as if delivering good news, Hadrian clarified, “It was all *three* of us.”

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tobias

Standing under some seriously amazing water pressure, Tobias wondered if he was ever going to be able to shower without replaying the sound of gunshots in his head.

He didn't *feel* terribly traumatized in this moment, but he was pretty sure once this was all 'over' (whatever that meant) he was going to have a meltdown.

Hopefully he came out of it with a rich boyfriend. Then he'd be able to afford the therapy.

He wracked his brain.

He replayed the voice he'd heard over and over again, and wondered if it meant anything. At the time he'd heard it, he'd been on the verge of having his toenails ripped out — not exactly a recipe for focus. Maybe he hadn't remembered it correctly. Maybe all this time Jove had been relying on something useless.

Tobias reached absentmindedly for the soap — which he'd already enjoyed twice, and smelled like fruity sandalwood — to read the label, hoping to distract his brain with whatever bougie ingredients were in it. Whale puke? Crushed pearls?

The label was in French.

He scowled.

Returning the bottle to its shelf, he happened to glance across the room, and nearly had a heart attack.

A man stood in the doorway.

If the shower hadn't been a (huge) walk-in with clear glass for a door, Tobias *would* have had a heart attack.

Instead, recognizing Jove, his heartbeat went all funny for a different reason.

During their last — how to put it? — *interaction*, Tobias had been naked, but Jove hadn't exactly stopped to take a look. He'd also been wasted.

Being naked in front of Jove *now*, when both parties were presumably sober, suddenly made him self-conscious.

Tobias had always preferred to fuck in the near-dark. Drunk was a bonus. It wasn't that he thought he was *ugly* — he just didn't feel like taking the time or mental energy to explain his scars. They gave off an annoyingly tragic impression that really dampened the mood.

Jove didn't give him the chance to feel self-conscious for more than a moment.

Without a word, Jove stripped in the middle of the room, setting his clothes aside in a loose pile.

He pushed open the shower door, shut it behind him, and pressed Tobias up against the wall in a hard, needy rush.

Bending way down, turning Tobias's head up to kiss him.

All of Tobias's thinking, worrying brain turned off.

He hadn't taken the time to fully appreciate naked Jove the other night, either. He'd mostly been hyperfocused on finding out what his dick looked like.

During the wild grinding, Tobias had been so overcome that in hindsight, he'd thought maybe he misremembered how big Jove was. Not just his dick, but *all* of him. All the height. The muscle. The just, big, manly, firm, all of it.

He hadn't misremembered a thing.

Feeling all of that body pressed up against his, the sheer heat, Tobias didn't have words. He could only moan.

Hearing him, Jove took a deep and ragged breath. Kissed him hard once more and then pulled him through the water, under the stream to the built-in bench. He sat, dragging Tobias down with him, and their height difference ceased to be a problem.

Tobias's hand went right to Jove's dick, obviously.

He wanted the thrill of feeling it get hard between his fingers.

Jove was already halfway there, and Tobias greedily helped him the rest of the way, stroking, feeling it swell and hearing Jove's breath get rougher.

Yep. He was gonna have to get it in his mouth again.

But as soon as he went to get up, Jove yanked him back down.

"Hold still," growled Jove.

"Let me blow you," said Tobias. "Come on — I didn't get a good chance before."

"I want you to stay right here," said Jove, and as cold and uncompromising as his voice sounded — which was *wildly* sexy and made

Tobias want to ask for a hand around his throat — it still gave Tobias pause.

The ‘I want’.

Not a simple order. Almost a request.

Almost an ‘I need’.

Tobias wondered if something had happened.

He silently leaned in to kiss Jove again, letting himself be hauled back into place. One hand still rubbing, he slipped his other arm around Jove’s neck. Soft. As good and pliant as Tobias could make himself be.

Jove broke the kiss. Tobias felt a flash of annoyance, brain not catching on as Jove licked his fingers, and settled back into the kiss with satisfaction a moment later.

Then Jove’s knees parted, spreading Tobias’s legs, and he reached a hand up between them.

Tobias broke the kiss himself at the first brush of fingertips. The first explorative stroke. His mouth opened to gasp, but didn’t make any sound.

Jove sank a finger gently in, and Tobias’s mind went hazy.

“Is it—” Jove began.

“Keep doing that,” said Tobias before he could even finish asking permission. “Two fingers is fine. Fuck it. Three fingers.”

Annoyed, Jove pulled out, spat in his hand, and gave Tobias two fingers.

He sank them deep, and just the pressure of their presence was so good, Tobias knew he could have come like that. Easy. Just a little more time, giving himself the *lightest* of featherlight strokes, and it would be over.

Then Jove started to just fucking fingerfuck him.

He meant business.

Tobias didn’t know if Jove was just in a mood, if he was irritated with Tobias for being a demanding little twerp, or if he was just used to a different type of equipment, but he went at it rough.

Dazzlingly rough.

Tobias grabbed Jove’s shoulders, clenched his teeth together, and tried not to spasm up off the bench. Legs locked over Jove’s knees, he felt his body going numb with a telling loss of control.

“I—” He couldn’t even get the sentence out. His voice was little more than a vibration.

“Here,” said Jove, calm. Knowing exactly what the fuck he was doing. He peeled off one of Tobias’s hands, took it down and wrapped it around

both of their cocks, pressing them together.

“Oh.” Tobias barely breathed the word.

“Grind on it,” said Jove. “Come on me.”

He gave Tobias the third finger he’d asked for.

Pummeled him with it.

Tobias came like a bashful virgin getting dick for the first time — legs shaking, eyes rolling, clutching onto Jove and making absolutely pathetic noises. His mouth couldn’t decide between whimpering and moaning, and settled on a pornographic middle ground.

Even when he’d collapsed onto Jove’s chest, the man didn’t give him a break, slowing down but continuing to drive those fingers deep. Twisting. In and out and making Tobias convulse a little every time.

He finally let up when Tobias shut up, and maybe that had been his goal.

Tobias lay flat against his chest sucking air.

Jove let him lie there, but clearly wasn’t finished. He freed his cock from Tobias’s trembling grip and, scooting Tobias forward on his lap, pressed the huge, hard thing right against where he’d been fingering.

He didn’t try to put it in, but let the head rub in a way that made his intent clear.

“Is it too big?” he asked bluntly.

Oh, you son of a bitch.

Obviously it was too big, but what was Tobias going to do? Say ‘no, I couldn’t possibly, I’m a selfish coward and also a giant pussy’?

“No,” said Tobias sarcastically, sitting up to look Jove in the eye. “It’s the perfect size. Unrelated question, do you happen to have emergency medical staff on hand?”

Jove’s eye narrowed.

“I haven’t fucked men before,” he said, voice bordering on poisonous. “If it’s not realistic, just say so. You’re the expert here.”

“By ‘expert’ you mean slut, right?” Tobias blatantly procrastinated the ‘just say so’. “What, you’ve never done that with a woman before?”

“No,” said Jove coolly. “They all said it was too big.”

Wise women.

Tobias reached back, felt the girth with his hand. He was only measuring, but he felt Jove respond, saw the way his jaw tightened and Adam’s apple moved.

Fuck.

He really couldn't say no.

"I'll give it a try," he said, giving it another stroke, this one with a teasing twist.

Jove responded with a hard kiss.

Tobias felt that hint of something new in it, something that wasn't just horny — something that felt like need.

He felt a whisper of dread and pushed it away.

"I hope to god you have lube," he said.

—

What Jove had was the Vaseline intended to keep his *gunshot wound* from drying out.

Tobias had forgotten about the wound altogether, to his shame. Seeing it now, he saw a light stain of red through the bandage, which at least had been taped over well enough that it didn't get wet in the shower.

He let Jove get as far as toweling off and shoving him down on the bed before protesting.

"Did the doctor say it was safe to exert yourself?" he asked, slippery enough from the shower to wriggle free of Jove, climbing up to the head of the bed out of reach.

"I've fucked with bullet fragments floating around my ribs," said Jove calmly.

"Yeah, well, you probably shouldn't have done that," said Tobias.

Jove grabbed him by the ankle and dragged him down, but Tobias seized a pillow, shoving it in Jove's face as a barrier.

"I don't want to be the reason you die of septic shock," he insisted.

"That's not how septic shock works," said Jove, yanking the pillow away and throwing it off to the side. He didn't blink when it knocked a lamp to the ground with a crash. "If you're that worried about my dick, say it.

"I'm worried about you," insisted Tobias. "You made the mistake of making me come already; now my head is clear and I'm thinking rationally ___"

Jove lifted Tobias's legs over his shoulders and bore down out of sight with his tongue.

Tobias yelped and grabbed at Jove's head. The man ignored him, even when Tobias's legs clenched involuntarily and fingers curled tight in his hair.

Jove clearly had experience here.

Tobias went from 'thinking rationally' to effectively brain dead in about five seconds.

"God," he breathed. "Fuck. God and also fuck."

Jove rolled his tongue in a very specific way, and Tobias gasped, accidentally giving Jove's hair a serious pull.

Jove lifted his head to look Tobias in the eye, seeming to measure the effectiveness of his tongue, and found it satisfactory.

"You're really good at that," said Tobias weakly.

"I know," said Jove, and leaned back down... this time to run his tongue up the length of Tobias's dick.

Tobias shuddered.

"Have you...?"

"I'll figure it out," said Jove, and then took the head of Tobias's cock in his mouth.

He figured it out.

He'd probably received enough head to have an idea of what worked, and Tobias gave him more than enough feedback by way of moaning like an idiot.

Jove's tongue throbbed up and down him, lips just snug enough for suction, still gentle. Almost cautious.

He lifted his head, giving Tobias's cock slow attention with his hand, and asked, "Do you want me to try and deepthroat it?"

"Nope," said Tobias firmly, partially because now was not the time for risky experiments and partially because he was sure he would come instantly. "Just regular sucking is fine—"

Jove slipped Tobias back into his mouth, and this time he sucked with greater confidence.

Devastating confidence.

By the time Jove had satisfied his curiosity, Tobias had forgotten why he'd been protesting anything.

He only remembered after Jove kissed all the way up his body back to his mouth... and that huge thing pressed down on his leg.

Oh yeah.

Tobias wrapped his fingers around that thing and imagined it inside of him.

Beyond that... imagined Jove inside of him.

Moving inside of him. Coming inside of him.

As a rule Tobias kept things wrapped up, avoided risky behavior. He didn't get a thrill out of that kind of danger.

But now, he found he had never wanted anything more in his life than Jove's cum, Jove panting on top of him, driving inside of him, burying himself with a grunt and a final shudder.

Leaving him raw, sticky. Claimed.

"Grab the lube," he said.

Jove did, and they covered all eight or nine inches of him, got him slick and shiny and ready.

Tobias ached just looking at it.

He couldn't tell if it was an ache of need or anticipation of pain.

He took a deep, shuddering breath and spread his legs open.

Jove lifted Tobias's ankles to set on his shoulders and moved up closer to him on the bed, cock coming to rest directly in place.

"Jesus fuck," breathed Tobias.

He was already breathing heavily.

So was Jove.

He moved back and forth, cock slowly rubbing, its tip bumping the base of Tobias's. His eye looked glazed over. He caressed Tobias's thighs almost unthinkingly, his face simultaneously distant and intent, and then he murmured, "*Fuck*," with rough emphasis.

He bent to kiss Tobias. Mouth hard, then soft. Giving his swollen lip a careful suck that made Tobias's eyes roll, the pop of pain perfectly punctuating his pleasure.

"Here," said Tobias, guiding the head of Jove's cock into place. "Just a little. Just the tip."

He heard the words come out of his mouth and despaired.

Then Jove pressed down, and Tobias felt his guts try to suck up into his chest.

"Ow," he said weakly.

Jove pulled away, but Tobias immediately tugged him back, determined. "It's okay," he said. "It just hurts a little. I can handle the head. I can handle it."

The head was all he could handle.

Tobias had vastly underestimated the sheer *girth* of the thing; just the head was splitting, was like a fucking rod.

But as soon as the tip finished breaching inside, and the initial swell of the head slipped in, Tobias felt his toes curl.

“Oh,” he said softly.

“Is it all right?” asked Jove, breath ragged.

“Mm hm,” was all Tobias could manage.

Jove pulled back just a little, enough to encounter resistance, enough to make Tobias whimper... and then let the head sink back inside.

Tobias’s eyes rolled.

He dug his nails into Jove’s waist, legs going taut and trembling.

“Just there,” he managed. “Just that. Back and forth. I can handle that.”

And Jove slowly retreated, the rounded head spreading Tobias open — then relaxed his hips forward, sinking it inside of him once more.

Back and forth.

The pain began to lessen, replaced by an intense, building pressure.

“Oh.” Tobias found himself whimpering again. “Oh, fuck, oh, fuck.”

Jove pulled back too far, and his cock slipped all the way out.

Tobias groaned.

“Sorry,” murmured Jove, brushing a kiss over Tobias’s mouth, taking his cock in hand and gently easing it back in.

Ache.

Pain.

Bliss.

He managed it just a little deeper.

God, it was barely more than an inch. Two inches at best.

But if Tobias took any more, that bubble of pleasure would burst, and it would be nothing but pain.

“I think that’s all I can do,” he croaked. “I’m sorry. I—”

“That’s plenty,” said Jove, sounding hoarse.

He reached down and began to stroke himself — stroke the length that remained outside, like he was jerking off *into* Tobias.

“Fuck,” was all Tobias could squeak.

He watched as if hypnotized.

He watched Jove’s abs tremble, watched his cock try to twitch under his fingers, looked up to watch him bite his lips white. Tobias could *feel* how

much he had held back, could feel the anticipation, the fierceness from the night before that Jove struggled now to keep in check.

Tobias had felt lusted after before, had been the subject of desire.

But he had never felt so specifically *wanted*. Wanted in a hungry, delayed way. Wanted, and not just wanted, but needed.

He could feel how Jove strained with need. Feel the way Jove's hands struggled to be soft.

But they *were* soft.

Tobias suddenly wanted to say something profound — something like 'thank you'. 'Thank you for making me feel safe'. And not just now, but in general.

He wanted to say more than that.

"Do it," said Tobias breathily. Meeting his gaze as it flew up. "Do it. Let me feel it."

Something about his expression broke Jove loose.

He seized Tobias's lips in his, kissed him once hard and rough, then kissed his neck, his shoulder, bit him once seemingly on random impulse.

Tobias grabbed tighter hold of him with one hand... and grabbed himself in the other.

They both stroked themselves, both panting, both watching as the first two inches of Jove's cock pulsed shallowly in and out of Tobias's body. Clearly struggling to fit. Clearly straining with the curbed desire to *fuck*.

Tobias lost it.

He meant to stop himself coming, wait until Jove was already there and let him *feel* it around his cock, but suddenly he couldn't control his hand. He couldn't keep his fingers from rushing, grabbing, stroking until he was crying out. Shaking.

Jove watched the cum spurt out between his fingers, roll down his stomach, and that was it for him, too.

He braced his fists against the bed, closed his eyes, and shuddered with the clear force it took to stop himself thrusting all the way in.

Tobias had enough presence of mind to help.

He reached down a trembling hand, locked it around Jove's cock, and jerked it.

Helping him come, feeling him throb, hearing the almost tortured groan.

And then Jove was past the whiteout point of climax, eyelids fluttering and breath shuddering out over his lips as he emptied himself inside of

Tobias, as that small hand helped caress him along.

It took them both several long minutes to unlock.

To be able to move again.

When Jove pulled away — Tobias biting his cheek against a painful whimper — he left Tobias shining with a hint of pearly white.

Tobias couldn't help but touch the spot with his fingertips, marveling at the novel sensation. Realizing he'd never let anyone do it before.

"What is it?" murmured Jove.

Tobias looked up and found Jove watching him, a fraction of concern in his forehead.

But Tobias smiled.

"That's the first time," he said. "I've never let anyone creampie me before."

Jove frowned at the word choice. "That's vulgar," he said, and added, barely audibly, "Good."

—

Another shower was inevitable — and a change of sheets — but once they had disentangled they lay there for a bit, facing one another, to have the conversation.

"Hadrian said it was the three of them," said Jove.

He said it with a neutral face, neither depressed or angry, but Tobias thought he had an idea of how he actually felt.

"Do you believe him?" he asked.

Jove, lounging on his side, head propped up on a hand, looked up from inspecting the pattern on the sheets.

"Why wouldn't I believe him?"

Tobias normally wouldn't have been *quite* this bold, but he'd just let the man come inside of him, so he felt entitled to be a little frank.

"You don't look convinced," he said.

"What does 'convinced' look like?" asked Jove.

Tobias shrugged. "Angry."

"Maybe I'm not angry," said Jove. "Maybe I'm sad I have three sons who want me dead for an early inheritance. Maybe I think I've earned it for being a bad father."

Tobias paused before asking his next question. “Were you? A bad father, I mean. Like a genuinely bad one. Not just the ‘doesn’t show up for dance recitals’ kind, but the ‘puts their kid in the hospital out of violence or neglect’ kind.”

Maybe it was the overly-casual tone that told on him.

Jove looked at him for a moment, then reached out. With uncanny intuition, he touched the long, crisp white surgical scar on Tobias’s knee, a question in his eye.

Tobias made a face.

“It’s not like I made it sound,” he said. “You’re being evasive.”

“I’ll make you a deal,” said Jove abruptly. “You tell me what happened to your leg. I’ll tell you what happened to my eye.”

That gave Tobias pause.

He typically evaded any questions about his limp, about that scar. He would either make up a bullshit story or evade it entirely. It wasn’t that the story was tragic, or that he was dramatically shaken by memory — it was just complicated.

And didn’t seem worth explaining to anyone he happened to fuck or share a chore list with.

But the eye.

Tobias had imagined that was the kind of mob boss backstory you only unlocked on their deathbed.

“Okay,” he said finally. “But my story is probably less interesting.”

Jove didn’t say anything, only gazed at him. Postcoital, the man wasn’t too different from his normal self... but he was quieter. Almost in a sad way. Tobias itched to get hands back on him, try and irritate a smile or a grimace back onto his face.

“It’s really more like two stories.” Tobias paused, trying to organize things into a coherent timeline into his head. He realized that avoiding the topic for so long had left him ill-prepared to actually tell anyone about it. “Or a couple. I don’t know. I guess first thing is, my dad was a jockey turned trainer. That’s probably not too surprising.” He gestured at himself, at his five-foot nothing, the gift that only genetics or poor nutrition could get you. “I look more like my mom overall — curly hair, freckles, that stuff — but I got his height. So...”

He paused, trying to summon the image of his father in his head, and found he didn’t have a clear one. Just pictures of pictures. It had been a long

time, he supposed. Maybe not in terms of a lifetime, but in terms of his years on the earth. He hadn't realized, but since his last birthday, he'd officially lived more of his life without a father than with one.

"My dad didn't know I existed unless there was a horse next to me," he said. "He wanted me to grow up to be just like him — first a jockey, then a trainer. Probably hoped I would be more successful than him. He always blamed his career on bad luck, bad jockeys, people who didn't like him and only sent him slow horses. Maybe he was right. I don't know."

He could have killed the whole evening saying 'I don't know's about his father.

"There's only so much you can do with a baby," he said. "You can pose them on a horse for pictures and that's just about it. I think he saw me as being pretty much just any weanling; throw them out to a pasture until they're old enough to break to ride. He probably would have made me an exercise rider as soon as I could walk, but my mom put down her foot. She'd seen him in the hospital too many times after riding accidents. I'm an only child, so she was pretty invested in keeping me alive."

His tone invited Jove to laugh, which of course he didn't.

Tobias continued. "I had a fat little pony when I was a kid — this half-blind, obese thing that wouldn't have gone above a trot if you'd hit him with a cattle prod. That kept my mom happy. My dad didn't love it, especially because I spent more time trying to teach the pony to play fetch than I did in the saddle. But that was the compromise."

He found he could picture that fat little pony better than he could his own father, and found that just as sad as it was gratifying.

"So." Tobias paused, trying to find the next point in the story. This part wasn't so clear, and his memory was particularly murky, obscured with guilt. "I finally outgrew the pony, and I had the chance to start riding proper horses. I said nah. It wasn't like I didn't *want* to, or that I didn't plan on following his footsteps and all that. I did. I just had other stuff I was more into. Catching bugs, toads. Digging big holes in the backyard for no reason. Every day, he would get up early to go to work, and occasionally on days I didn't have school he would poke his head in. Say, 'hey, do you want to come down to the track, ride some horses?' Something like that. And it wasn't like he was going to stick me on an amped up racehorse. Probably would have just been one of the outriders' ponies."

God dammit.

This was why he didn't tell this stupid story.

Touching the inside corner of his stinging eye, he marveled that he still had any kind of reaction.

Trying to avoid the tears, he rushed through the next part.

"So, plenty of opportunities, blah blah blah, I just didn't go. And then he died in an accident, just like he was probably always going to. Bunch of horses went down like dominos, he was out trying to — well, he died. Anyway. So he never hit me or anything."

He carefully wiped his eyes, thankful that Jove hadn't reached out to kiss or cuddle him or anything like that, because *then* he would have been fucked and started sobbing his eyes out.

He pushed on.

"The problem," he said firmly. "The problem was that then I thought it was my destiny, or something. Fulfill his legacy. I had to be the best jockey ever, sweep the Triple Crown, and then I had to be the best trainer ever, sweep the Triple Crown again. But my mom had moved us into town. We were living with her sister, then, I think. I don't really remember. I just remember trying to find a way back to the track. And then I did find a way."

This memory was easier, for some reason.

"Oskar is a dick, but the first guy I worked for was a *real* shitbag," he said. "My mom thought I was doing a newspaper route every morning before school, but I was actually working for this trainer my dad had known, and I was about thirteen stripping twenty-four stalls a day, cleaning tack until my hands cramped, trying to get the chance to ride. He kept promising me that ride. I kept working, kept lying to my mom, because I knew I *had* to make it up to my dad. I never got that ride. So one day, I decided I was going to prove to this guy that I was a natural. And of course I had to be a natural, because my dad was my dad, you know? So I—"

He found himself laughing.

"So I stole a horse."

Then he stopped laughing.

"Well, I didn't mean to steal it. That part was an accident. More like the horse stole me."

He fell silent for a second.

This he remembered.

That ride, he was never going to forget.

But he didn't know how to tell it.

“Races were cancelled because there was a hurricane coming in. I planned to hop on a horse and go around the empty track.”

It was hard to tell, because no words could fully embody the experience.

“The horse had different plans, though. I don’t know if it was the idiot on her back or the weather, but she got spooked and she bolted, and we ended up *off* the track. She full-on jumped the rail and was out of there. I just happened to be attached. And she ran right for the hurricane.”

His memory was cinematic. He remembered the cloud wall, the temperature change.

He remembered darkness.

Like night falling in the middle of the day as those clouds welled up, covered the sun.

The rain hitting suddenly, the wind seizing at his shirt, and him unable to tell what was gale and what was the pure, blistering speed of a racehorse running panicked from the storm.

“I fell off,” he said. “I was lucky I managed to keep ahold of the reins.”

Luck had nothing to do with it; his fingers had been clenched shut so hard, he’d barely been able to open his hands after.

He reached down and tapped the scar on his knee.

“I broke my leg,” he said. “Pretty bad. I didn’t know it then, though. All hopped up on adrenaline just like the horse.”

He laughed a meaningless laugh.

“Got back on. She found the way home.”

He closed his mouth around his last memory, the one he could picture best of all.

Riding back in the storm, the mare trotting with a hitch in her step, the wind buffeting them both. It had been so dark, and so brutal. They’d been out in the middle of nowhere; he’d had a few weak thoughts of finding shelter, but saw nothing, and didn’t dare risk getting off and losing the horse.

Then it had stopped.

He remembered best of all how the mare had stopped, too, and how for a moment they had both stood there blank-faced and confused as the warmth of the sun fell over them.

He remembered looking up into the blue eye of the storm.

His gaze suddenly dropped to find Jove gazing at him, silent, with that single blue eye.

Different shades of blue, but the intensity was the same.

The feeling of being looked upon by something grand. Grand and deadly.

Tobias smiled.

“We made it back,” he said. “I don’t remember too much of the hospital, honestly, or how the leg hurt before they got it patched up. What I remember is after. Because—” He paused. “Because *after* is how I really ended up with a limp. And it’s because of my dad.”

He knew this part was tasteless of him, was admitting to something nearly vulgar. Something he found personally repugnant about himself. But. It was how he felt.

“Everything the doctors told me *not* to do, I did it,” he said. “I didn’t rest. I didn’t let the leg heal right. That’s why I have a limp. I fucked it up on purpose.”

Jove finally spoke up for the first time. “Why?”

“Because,” said Tobias. “I knew that if I could physically get in the short stirrups, ride a thoroughbred, that that would be how I spent my life. I was going to be just like my dad. I would be a jockey because it was my destiny, or out of guilt, I don’t know. I just knew I would *have* to. And I was terrified.”

He gave Jove a half-hearted smile, acknowledging the irony, and said, “I haven’t been on a horse since. I’m still terrified.”

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jove

Jove had never seen the kid quite so serious.

In the short amount of time they'd known each other, he'd seen Red scared, seen him defensive, seen him annoying. But he didn't think he'd seen him serious.

As Red told his story, Jove couldn't help but think of the mare sitting in the stable, the one he'd sent Nerva only months ago.

He may as well have attached a letter asking *'Why don't you ride like your brothers?'*

Watching the damage progress across Red's face, watching him continually pause and bite his lip, Jove wondered what the kid wasn't saying. What he deemed unimportant, or irrelevant, or maybe thought that Jove wouldn't care to hear.

Jove restrained himself until the story seemed to come to a natural end.

At Red's final, sad smile, the half-quizzical eyebrow lift of *'what do you think of that?'* Jove couldn't hold himself back anymore.

He reached out, grabbed the kid's waist and pulled him crushingly close, cupping the back of his head to ensure the deepest possible kiss.

He kissed him slow until he felt that telltale tremor of suppressed tears, until Red went limp in his arms and let out a muffled whimper of defeat. Jove tasted salt.

He let the kid cry it out for a bit.

They weren't on any kind of schedule.

Looking over the kid's shoulder, Jove could see the gray of the sky getting darker through a sliver of window, as if Red had summoned it by talking about storms. The darkening sky reminded him of the inevitable need to cross the island, reach the opposite dock and find what Nerva had been doing in his absence.

Tomorrow.

He pulled back, pushed one of Red's curls out of the way to find him looking almost cross.

"You made me cry."

He sounded mad, too.

"I'll make it up to you," said Jove. "You want to hear the story, right?"

Red leaned back to examine his face, looking dubious. “Is it a big secret? Or does pretty much everyone know? Just realized I might have traded my tragic backstory for something I could have just Googled.”

“It’s not a big secret,” said Jove. “Pretty much everyone knows a little bit of it. But nobody has heard the story I’m going to tell you.”

That seemed to satisfy the kid. He gave his eyes a final wipe and nodded to indicate his willingness.

Jove propped his chin up on his hand, getting comfortable. He did notice his bullet hole had finally started to twinge more insistently, but it could wait. It wasn’t a long story.

“It probably won’t surprise you to hear that William Izawa was involved.”

Red’s melancholy ebbed in the face of curiosity. “Is this why you’re enemies?”

“We’re enemies because William is a prosocial psychopath who made my family his business,” said Jove. “To both our detriments.”

Red’s frown said he didn’t quite get it, but he didn’t say anything. He propped his own chin up, echoing Jove’s body language in a way that said ‘I’m listening’.

Jove found himself a little reluctant to continue. It wasn’t a story he was proud of, or one that reflected well on him.

But the kid had already seen him drunk, murderous. Jove doubted this would be the turning point of his judgment.

“When I made my debut,” said Jove, keeping things concise, “I was what you might expect. Young. Arrogant. Good at what I did. Smug about it.”

Even the concise version wasn’t fun to say.

“William and I are not far apart in age,” he said. “But he had already established himself when I appeared. At first, things were civil. William has never been terribly competitive; as long as he gets his portion, he’s satisfied. I thought I was proving myself against him. Winning.”

Making more money. Covering more territory. Measuring success like a dragon on its hoard, too distracted by the gold between its toes to consider the changing sky outside.

“I didn’t understand what kind of man he was,” said Jove.

He had assumed, back then, that Izawa was weak because he appeared to be kind. Because he was permissive, because he wasn’t bloodthirsty.

“I made him my enemy,” he said. “Measuring my power according to how much his waned. Eventually, he grew curious about me.” He paused, took a long moment before continuing on. “Nerva was ten at the time, and Dio was eight. Hadrian was three.”

Red’s eyes grew a little wider.

“Hadrian disappeared in the middle of the night. I received a letter the next morning.”

Jove examined the cold neutrality of his own voice, like the story had happened to someone else. As if he’d felt nothing at the time and felt nothing now.

“He asked for money, of course, but that wasn’t all. He also wanted an ear.”

The kid frowned. “But your eye...?”

“I’ll get to it,” said Jove, this time examining Red’s face, and feeling a flicker of amusement. The kid didn’t look a bit the horrified he should have been. He looked more like a historian trying to make sense of an old artifact.

“Back then,” continued Jove. “He was also known as Izawa the Ear-Cutter. He’s a kind man because he can afford to be, because he never needed to threaten. He didn’t have any interest in it. Anyone who crossed him significantly had their ear sliced from their head. No matter their crimes, they were allowed to live — as billboards of Izawa’s dominion.”

He glanced again at the darkening sky.

“William delivered me a choice. I could have found another means of rescuing my son. I could have summoned my forces, all my allies, and waged war. Splattered blood all up and down the coast. I probably would have succeeded; at that point I was richer, I had more influence, I had the manpower. But it would have marked me as a coward — too vain, too proud, or too afraid to allow the mutilation. However, if I had accepted his terms, allowed him to cut the ear from my head, I would have become another billboard for Izawa the Ear-Cutter. My career would have become his. Either way, I was over.”

The gray of the storm had become almost black.

He spoke more quietly.

“William didn’t need the money, of course. He didn’t even want revenge for anything in particular. He only wanted to know what kind of man I was.”

Jove looked to see Red's eyes had opened even wider.

He gave the kid a sardonic smile.

“How could my son be worth only an ear?” He echoed the words he had asked Izawa a long time ago. “What an insult. I went to William and demanded new terms — my first, final, and only offer. I pulled it out of my head right in front of him.”

He touched his eyelid almost absentmindedly, feeling the hard curve of the gold prosthetic inside.

“William was suitably impressed,” he said drily. “He refused the money, let me take my son home. Everyone assumed I lost the eye in some climactic duel with Izawa and treated me with due respect. I think my reputation only grew because of William's test. But I don't think Hadrian ever forgave me for valuing my ear over his life.”

“But you didn't,” Red burst out, finally unable to keep his thoughts to himself. He looked almost indignant. “You gave up your eye for him instead! Why didn't you tell him? Does Nerva know?”

Jove mused that this was one area where the vast gulf of age and life experience between them really made a difference; for him, the answer was obvious. It hadn't even been calculated.

“Nerva was already an anxious child,” he said. “He tried his best to emulate me, to be a little soldier of the Hanged Men himself. He was supposed to be babysitting that night. Fell asleep watching cartoons. He was ten. Do you think he wouldn't have carried that guilt with him forever? Do you think Hadrian would be happier if every time he saw his father, he saw this, and knew it had been done for him?” He pulled down his eyelid, touched the prosthetic directly, watching Red's face for either pity or disgust.

Instead, the kid was incensed.

“But they hate you,” he protested. “They want you dead.”

Jove smiled half-heartedly. “See? Despite my best efforts. Maybe you shouldn't blame your father too much, Red. All parents ruin their children. He must have tried his best.”

Red didn't back down. “I'm not ruined,” he said. “And neither are they. None of you are dead; you can still talk it out. You can fix it.”

Jove couldn't help but sigh.

“I can't tell if you're naive, an optimist, or just young,” he said.

“Maybe you're just a jaded old pessimist,” countered Red.

Jove reached for the kid again, a small smile on his lips. He had expected some kind of pity or horror at the tale. The way Red shrugged it off was both humbling and incredibly endearing.

Before he could land a kiss, Red beat him to it. Cupping Jove's face in his hands, he leaned up and pressed his lips gently to Jove's scarred eyelid. The tenderness of the gesture caught Jove off guard.

He almost didn't breathe.

Red pulled back to look him in the face. "I haven't heard Nerva's voice," he said, a light in his eyes. "I just realized. Do you have anything? A voicemail, a video? Maybe I can say for sure it wasn't him. Maybe I can say for sure it wasn't really any of them. Hadrian could be lying, right? He could be angry."

Jove couldn't bring himself to humor the kid's words, but he did reach for his phone.

"There's nothing recent," he said.

It was partly a lack of sentiment, partly a matter of practicality. He didn't speak to his sons often and they kept little record of it. It was common sense in their line of work.

It still felt somewhat shameful to acknowledge the absence of normal family memories.

Even Red had voicemails from his mother.

Jove turned back, pulling up an old video for Red to watch. As it began to play, he realized just how long ago it had really been. This was before Hadrian's last hospitalization, before Nerva had taken full control of operations. They all sounded so much younger. Or maybe it was only that they sounded happier. More light-hearted.

The video was taken at one of Hadrian's competitions during the cross country. It had been rainy, the sky gray and grass slick. Nerva was commenting on it as the vague began.

"—really safe to be galloping like an idiot in these conditions?"

"Relax." Dio's voice. The camera panned briefly to him. He was wearing a rain slicker and muddy riding gear under it; Jove vaguely remembered an incident where Dio was warming up one of Hadrian's horses for him, the thing spooking and throwing him in the mud. But in this moment, Dio was grinning. "He's got a velcro seat," Dio was saying. "He won't come off. Worst case scenario, she flips over and lands on top of him."

“Ha ha,” came Nerva’s voice, caustic, knowing his brother was baiting him specifically.

Dio grinned even wider, wickedly, then his eyes lit up. “Look.” He pointed. “Here they come.”

The camera panned back to the course, over the tape fence keeping back spectators and onto the water obstacle. An enormous wooden fence dropped the oncoming riders directly into a shallow pond, where they had to cross over a second water jump, then run up a bank to a final jump, and onto the next obstacles.

A huge bay mare came flying around the visible turn, gunning right for the first fence.

“Is he just running that thing in a snaffle?” asked Nerva, sounding horrified.

“Yes,” said Dio, sounding delighted.

The rider’s face was hard to see. He was perched high in the stirrups, hands up and holding steady on the reins as the mare tried her damndest to rip them away, his helmet and visor blocking out the rain.

“Half halt, half halt,” hissed Nerva as the pair approached the fence.

“Relax,” said Dio. “He’s got this.”

At about the last second, Hadrian gathered the mare up, setting her back on her hocks for a (relatively) balanced explosion over the fence.

He let the reins glide through his fingers as she went over, giving the mare her head as she splashed through the water. The action was seamless. He had taken them up a moment later, as she barreled at the middle jump. Shortening the reins into one hand, he gave her a tap with the crop to pop her over, then let the reins out again.

The bay mare surged through the water and up the bank. Hadrian stayed right in the middle of her motion at a perfect neutral, a calm passenger as she arced over the final jump.

Then they were gone.

Seamless.

Jove hadn’t remembered how good Hadrian was. He marveled silently at the boy’s ability to ride with such tact and empathy, considering how he acted out of the saddle.

Jove couldn’t account for it, and took no credit.

“That thing is a dragon,” said Nerva’s voice on the video. The camera panned to show him poorly dressed for the occasion, in a neat suit with a

rain slicker thrown over top, wingtips hopelessly muddy. Jove faintly recalled that Nerva had left an important meeting to come watch. Holding one hand over his glasses to keep the rain off, Nerva said, "I'm buying him the biggest bit they sell. Something with twisted wire and a long shank."

Dio laughed. "Good luck getting him to use it. I think he'd run her in just a neck rope if it was allowed—"

The video abruptly ended.

Jove looked at the frozen picture, showing the water jump at a standstill, the surface of the pond dappled with raindrops.

He couldn't remember why he had this snippet of video and nothing else. Maybe because it had been the last time all of them were in the same place at the same time, and happy about it.

Had that really been the last time he'd seen them all at once?

"He's a good rider," said Red.

Jove glanced sideways at him, trying to read the expression on his face.

He didn't want to ask.

"Was it—" he began, then stopped.

Red looked at the picture a moment longer, then looked at him, and finally Jove saw the hint of pity he'd expected earlier.

"I don't know," the kid admitted. "It's hard to say with the rain, the other people in the crowd, and he kind of sounded like he was stuffed up from the cold. Congested, I don't know. It maybe... it could have been. You don't have anything else?"

There was nothing else.

"No," said Jove. "That's it."

They both lay there in silence for a few minutes. Jove's head began to hint at throbbing. The ache always began right behind that eye socket — when he was cold, when he was tired. When his suppressed emotions were seeking an outlet and found a weak spot to push at.

"What are you going to do?" Red asked finally.

Jove was silent another moment before speaking. "Nerva is probably on the other side of the island, and Dio with him. I'll find them. And then we'll see."

He would see.

Red would be gone.

Laying there, picturing the empire crumbling before him, Jove could practically smell the blood of tomorrow.

Red had already seen too much violence at his side.
He could spare the kid his death, at least.

The storm broke overnight.

When Jove woke up, he found the snippet of window now showed a column of cheerful blue. He lay there considering it, enjoying the sense of brief calm, thinking about how to tell Red he had to leave the island without prompting a fit.

He could all too easily imagine Bialy trying to stuff the kid back in the plane, Red grabbing at the doors with his fingers like a cat resisting being scuffed into a crate.

Even now the kid was clamped on like a leech. Dead asleep, mouth open, he had arms wrapped around Jove's body and face smushed against his side in a position that could only have been comfortable to someone used to sleeping on shitty little cots in shitty little tack rooms.

Jove checked the clock and felt the first pang of inevitability.

Breakfast was served at eight, and the minute hand was speedily creeping up on seven thirty-nine.

He couldn't deny Hadrian — locked in his room for the night — breakfast, nor Izawa, no matter how suspicious the two of them both were. Once breakfast was on the table, the events of the day would be officially in motion. Whatever those events might be.

He wondered if he could get Bialy to sneak something into Red's food to knock him out. That might be kinder and easier than dragging him physically. It would certainly be quieter.

Looking down at Red, listening to his rattling half-snore, Jove tried to memorize all of it.

And then he leaned over to flick a curl of hair off the kid's cheek.

Red scrunched up his face, his eyelashes fluttered, and then suddenly he sat bolt upright.

Jove looked up and waited.

The wheels slowly turned in Red's face, expression turning perplexed as he noticed he wasn't in a barn or being screamed at by a furious Swede, eyes roving over the room.

Jove poked him in the side.

“Grab a shower,” he said. “I’ll take it next after I patch myself back up.” He indicated the bandage, which needed changing.

Red stretched his arms out. They made well-used, crackling noises overhead. “There’s room for both of us in there,” he said.

“I know,” said Jove, and leaned forward, unable to resist brushing a kiss to the small of the kid’s back, enjoying the shiver he felt under his lips. “We’re on a schedule today. Don’t distract me.”

“Oh.” The kid frowned. He had remembered. “Okay.” He hesitated, then turned and leaned down, wrapping an arm around Jove’s shoulders to kiss him. “It’ll be fine,” he said. “Probably. Maybe.”

So reassuring.

“Go,” said Jove, giving him a shove, and the kid rolled out of bed.

He had made it halfway to the bathroom when someone started pounding their first on the bedroom door. The kid jumped, grabbed a towel with uncanny timing, covering himself up right before Bialy barged in.

Jove didn’t bother to dramatically cover himself, eyes narrowing at his second in command’s expression.

“Hadrian is gone,” said Bialy grimly.

—

“He must have taken a horse and gunned it.”

They walked rapidly down the hall, side by side, Red trying to keep up with their fast pace and the heated discussion.

“I spoke to Dio’s lawyer back on the mainland,” continued Bialy. “He skipped bail. I bet he’s at the dock with Nerva; and now Hadrian has gone to join them.”

Jove’s mind turned over and over rapidly. Thinking.

“There’s only one straight shot, but Hadrian won’t take it,” he said. “It’s too open. Do you know if they kept the old riding path clear?”

“They must have,” said Bialy. “I saw Hadrian’s cross country tack sitting out clean, but no jumps in the ring. If he was running obstacles it would have to be out there.”

“We’ll have to take horses,” decided Jove. “We won’t be able to see anything through the trees if we come in from above.”

He suddenly turned, and the nearly jogging Red ran right into his chest. Jove took him by the shoulders and held him straight.

“Red,” he said, and felt an awful, bitter cold budding in his chest. “You need to stay here.”

“What are you going to do?” Red asked, searching his face.

Jove had no idea. He was sure he wouldn’t know until he was face to face with the sons he had wronged.

“I’m leaving you with Izawa,” he said, ignoring the question and letting his voice get hard — cool, authoritative, as if they hadn’t just spent the night together. “I need you out of the way.”

Red gawped. He looked shocked, then offended. “You’re leaving me with Mr. Ear-Cutter?”

“He won’t harm you,” said Jove. “I’ll get his word.”

“His *word*—” Red began incredulously, and then Jove shoved him down onto a sofa.

Bending down to look him in the eye, Jove said a definitive “*Stay here.*”

Red stared up at him. Jove registered a certain amount of hurt in his eyes, and swallowed the sharp gall of it. He tried not to think about the fact that this could very well be the last time they saw each other.

Because he knew that if his sons wanted him dead, he wouldn’t be able to stop them. He knew he wouldn’t be able to bear the struggle. Wouldn’t be able to bear their honest hatred.

He would let nature take its course.

Impulsively he leaned down, gave Red a hard kiss on the mouth. Hard and short, brief because if he’d lingered for even a moment he wouldn’t have been able to drag himself away.

Red stared up at him in silence when their lips parted.

“I’ll come back for you,” Jove lied.

And he turned and went.

Izawa wasn’t far; the man stood predictably near, admiring the painting from the night before and drinking a cup of coffee.

“I’ll make you a trade,” said Izawa before Jove could speak. Holding his mug up at the painting, he looked over and said, “Give me the painting and I’ll get your boy to safety.”

Jove felt the tiniest flicker of relief, the comfort of the familiar bargaining. Blunt but fair. Vicious but honest.

“Done,” he said. “But then I have another trade for you.”

“I’m listening,” said Izawa with his easy smile.

“If I die, keep Tobias safe for as long as you live,” said Jove. “Whether you keep him in your care personally, or keep a secret guard three blocks away from him his whole life, I don’t care. As long as he’s safe and reasonably happy.”

“And in return?”

“You can have all the sonnabend in my possession,” said Jove, “All hundred head.”

He saw he had surprised Izawa, who regarded him for a moment before nodding. That easy smile disappeared for a moment. Izawa showed no sympathy, nothing as human as that, but Jove saw the same look of respect he’d gotten all those years ago handing over his eye.

“I’ll take care of him,” said Izawa. “But try to return, if you can. You’re much better at love than I am.”

Jove said nothing more, except, “You might have to drug him,” as he turned on his heel.

He went after Bialy, heading for the front stables and the fast horses.

His eye socket ached.

He suddenly very much missed the north, his iced-over retirement, the simple horses he’d been breeding there. Frost in his beard. Heavy coats. Letting his hair grow out a little wild. He wanted to step outside into crunching leaves or fresh snow.

Instead, he stepped out into the sunlight.

Bialy’s thrown out arm kept him from walking out onto the lot.

Jove frowned sideways, and found his friend’s expression was drawn.

“Hadrian opened the gates,” he said.

“What gates...?” Jove trailed off as he realized it could only be *those* gates.

Eye following Bialy’s pointed finger, his gaze fell on the doors to the iron barn, the ones normally chained and padlocked shut,

The doors were splayed wide open.

The black interior was like the gullet of a monster.

Jove’s eye trailed along the length of the barn, to where certain doors — metal sheets held up like guillotines — fed out into runs, leading out to the huge reinforced pastures.

Each door was open, and the pasture gates as well.

Jove’s eyes dropped to the ground.

There in the dirt, he saw the crushed signs of hooves, punctuated with bloody splashes.

The trail led out toward the open land, toward the green line of jungle. Just as Jove's gaze reached the treeline, he saw a few quick-moving shapes disappearing inside.

A flash of copper.

Of gray.

"He's suicidal," said Bialy, near-awed.

"He's keeping us from following him," said Jove. His tongue felt numb. "We'll have to take the helicopter."

He turned away. "Close the doors," he said. "Arm the security system, trigger the alarms. Make sure everyone is inside."

He walked back down the hall with a calm he didn't feel, giving orders automatically. Bialy paused at a wall panel to do as he was told, and after a moment the alarm began to ring out.

The numbness kept spreading.

His mind filled with familiar crunching noises. Hungry teeth.

He didn't hear the voice right away, didn't register that Izawa was standing in front of him until Bialy gave his arm a cautious tap.

Jove's eye refocused and fell on Izawa.

A terrible premonition had already seized hold of him. Izawa's face told him what he already knew. He didn't need to hear the words.

He turned, legs moving fast, unable to feel them. They carried him all the way down to the side stable, under one of the bells ringing its warning, through the doorway he'd crossed under so many times before.

Angel's stall stood empty.

Jove stood in front of it, gazing at the vacant hay within, and felt desolation like he'd never experienced suddenly seize him by the chest.

"Sir?" Bialy had followed him. His voice sounded clearer with alarm, as if fear had chased away his cold.

"He's gone," said Jove calmly. "The kid took a horse and went after Hadrian. He's out there, now. With them."

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tobias

Sheer momentum carried Tobias through the task of mounting up.

Momentum thanks to fear — *knowing* Jove would be right on his heels and furious — and also thanks to the muscle memory of having caught and tacked up horses of all ages, sizes, and levels of cooperation for the last decade of his life.

Despite Angel's pinned ears and witchy face, she gave him less trouble than he'd anticipated. Maybe she'd caught on to the fact that the tiny munchkin who'd grabbed her from her stall was actually horse-smart. When she went to cheerfully bite him, he just as cheerfully blocked her with his elbow, saying, "No, ma'am," almost politely and chasing her hindquarters once in a circle. After that, she settled, and actually watched with pricked ears as he darted about grabbing tack and chucking it on her.

Thank god whoever rode the mare did so in an English saddle, because Tobias would have been *fucked* if he'd had to remember how the hell a western girth cinched up.

The mare's dance of rude behavior also helped. It was hard to focus on his fear while also wrangling an eighteen-hand horse, who stuck her head high up in the air as soon as he presented the bridle.

"I knew that man was a giant softy," scoffed Tobias. He tossed the lead rope around her neck, worked it up to her ears, and towed the mare's obstinate head back down into reach. "He let you get away with murder, didn't he? No wonder his kids are brats."

He kept up a steady commentary, talking loudly over his own nerves as they mounted higher.

"Bigger and meaner horses than you have tried, ma'am," he told her, as he pressed the bit into her mouth, opening her teeth with a finger against her lips when she tried to ignore him. "Well, maybe not bigger. Definitely crazier." She took the bit with a resigned chomp and he went through the motions. Pulling her forelock through the browband, fixing her mane under the crownpiece so it wouldn't pull, doing up the throatlatch.

He tightened the girth another notch and stopped to stand still for a second.

Deep breath.

In and out.

Angel echoed his breath with a big sigh, one that said, 'we may as well go for a ride'.

She practically towed him to the mounting block, like a dog eager to go on its walk.

Don't think about it. Just don't.

He clamped down on his cowardice.

Climbing to the top step, he laughed bleakly to see the mare's back still so far out of reach. He was going to have to *climb* up, like a kid trying out their parent's horse.

Looking up, he found himself looking past the saddle, up at the blue sky.

He swallowed hard.

He suddenly saw in his mind that enormous blue eye, the circle in the middle of the storm, silent. Full of the most ominous kind of peace.

The mare saved him from his own frozen fear. Bored or annoyed, she reached around to click her teeth together inches from his thigh.

Tobias cursed, blocked her with his knee, and grabbed the saddle pommel to vault himself up.

As soon as he settled into the saddle, he realized he had miscalculated a few things.

Not only were his legs far too short for the stirrups, which were set for someone much larger, but the mare herself was much wider than he'd anticipated. The result was that he wasn't so much sitting on the horse as straddling what felt like a particularly warm couch. She couldn't have been more different from a thoroughbred — which were narrow, with withers like sharkfins — and Tobias found that difference to actually be very reassuring. She felt almost impossible to fall off of.

But he had also miscalculated Angel's eagerness to go.

As soon as Tobias settled, before he so much as tapped the mare with his heels, she was on her way like it was her job.

She didn't exactly gallop off, and her trot was smooth enough to sit almost without bouncing at all, but he still saw his life flash before his eyes.

He pulled one rein to his hip, circled her to a stop, and forced himself to take a deep breath.

In. Out.

This time, the mare didn't echo him, but instead made a noise like a steam engine and pawed.

Absolutely no manners at all.

"As soon as we get back, I'm telling on you," said Tobias, and quickly, awkwardly, adjusted the stirrups from the saddle. Just short enough he could touch his toes to them. It would have to do.

It would have to do because he was out of time. If Izawa hadn't already missed him, it wouldn't be long.

He pressed his feet into the stirrups, turned the mare back around, and let the reins feed out between his fingers.

She grabbed the length and, instead of taking off at the trot again, stepped directly into the canter.

The stable courtyard flew away behind him, and in what felt like only a second, they were rolling along the long dirt path alongside the pastures.

She had incredibly smooth gaits. She hadn't hit the gas pedal, but she was so big, with such long strides, that they may as well have been galloping in Tobias's book. Still, the feeling was nothing like his panicked memories.

It was... surreal.

Somehow natural.

Grass swayed all around as they broke away from the estate, away from the paddocks and onto nothing but broad green.

He felt a moment of pain — his legs, already worn out from his night with Jove, were not happy about this new odd position, his bad leg in particular jarring against the stirrup iron — followed by a moment of indignation.

He could have been doing this for years!

He still had no desire to get anywhere near a thoroughbred's back, but sitting on a mountain like Angel didn't bother him one bit. Even at a lope, covering ground very quickly, she gave the impression of no effort. It was a feeling almost as smooth as levitation, or like riding a carousel horse instead of a living creature.

He could understand why Jove had sent the mare for his son, and the sincerity of the gesture made Tobias only more determined.

Okay, so Jove wouldn't tell his sons about the sacrifice he had made for them. Fine. He didn't have to.

Lucky for Jove, he had an impulsive young boytoy to make all kinds of decisions for him now.

Tobias was convinced he had it sorted out now. Jove's story and that video clip had given him all the information he needed.

Hadrian *couldn't* be a bad person.

Nobody who could take a horse off the track, recondition and train them, and ride them through rain and mud with *that* degree of tact, could be anything but a good person.

It wasn't just precision.

That degree of respect for the horse's mouth, the understanding of the nature of a racehorse... Hadrian had to have gotten that from his father.

Complicated people. Rough around the edges. A little murderous, maybe. Not *good* people, probably.

But Tobias was convinced the truth would mean *something*.

There only seemed to be one dirt track, which aimed directly for the dark treeline. The sight of it made him a little uneasy, but Angel headed towards it with the chill of a horse used to a certain path, and he let himself trust her. That would have to be where Hadrian went; the rest of this section of the island was flat, open. Tobias would have seen him.

He gave the mare enough leeway to choose her direction.

...but not quite enough to take it at a dead run.

As they approached the trees, Tobias snuck a little more rein from the mare. When she protested, trying to throw her head up and run through the bit, he picked up more on one side, turning her head enough that she had to slow.

He managed to break her down to a trot right as they reached the shadow of the first trees.

And as they plodded on into that shadow, an alarm suddenly began to blare from the house far behind.

The mare didn't spook, but Tobias did.

He looked back over his shoulder a second too late for a last look at the house. Angel persisted on into the trees, and after a minute the sound of the alarm had faded. The jungle was a powerful dampener.

What was that about?

A warning about Hadrian? A warning for Tobias, telling him that Jove was going to belt his ass when he got back, and not in a sexy way?

For a truly uneasy second, Tobias wondered if it was a storm siren.

He looked up, but the trees blocked out most of the sky. All he could tell was that there was sun squeaking through in sparkling rays that crossed the path in front of him.

Maybe a strong storm coming in soon?

Tobias swallowed.

For the first time, miles away from the house and the man who had sworn to protect him, sitting on a strange horse and surrounded by jungle, Tobias thought that maybe he had been a little *too* impulsive.

But hell, he was out here.

“Hadrian!” he shouted.

The path took a turn and steepened; he gave Angel her head and she slowed to pick her way down, big hooves crunching over rock and leaf matter.

“Hadrian,” he called again. “It’s Tobias. I have a message from your dad.”

It occurred to him that maybe ‘a message’ from Jove had an ominous undertone, but then, would Jove have sent *him* as an assassin?

Exactly. Tobias was the least threatening person possible, and that was why he was the perfect messenger of peace.

The path straightened out once more, and Tobias saw with a little thrill of surprise that there were cross country jumps built in.

They walked past the first — a roll top jump easily taller than Tobias.

A bit farther down the path was a short but wide table. Passing it, Tobias could almost imagine jumping that one.

Angel skirted the thing with the disdain of a horse bred to stick close to the ground.

However, when they came to a set of banks, descending down a gradual slope, Tobias couldn’t resist.

He pointed the mare at one. Little more than a step down.

She bulldozed her head to the side and went around it.

For a moment losing track of his mission, instead dialing in on getting this huge animal to do as he told her, Tobias shortened his reins and pointed her at the next one. He gave her a little boot of the calves to tell her he meant business.

The mare took him at his word that time, dropping down the bank without a single effort to keep her shoulders up.

Tobias nearly went right over her neck.

Her hind end caught up with a thump of dinner-plate sized hooves into dirt, and she stopped, polite enough to let her rider scramble back into place.

Tobias felt his face burn as he got his ass back into the saddle and toes back into the stirrups, giving the mare a shoulder pat of ‘thanks for not killing me’.

The mare switched her tail and walked on.

This time he let her make her way around the obstacles, reminding himself of his mission.

“Hadrian,” he called again. “It’s Tobias! I—”

He stopped. The mare stopped.

He frowned and looked around, swiveling in the saddle.

He could have sworn he heard something.

The mare definitely seemed like she had, too; her ears swiveled around, alert. She didn’t move.

“Hello?” Tobias called out. “It’s Tobias.”

This time he heard it for sure.

His own voice echoing back at him.

“*It’s Tobias,*” returned the echo, only to be picked up by another echo, “*Tobias...*” and a final, softer, “*Tobias.*”

He sat there looking around, fascinated. There must have been some kind of odd geological feature he couldn’t see, some weird pattern of rocks or hill that accounted for the echo.

“Helloooooo,” he shouted, and grinned as the echo started up again.

“*Helloooooo.*”

“*Helloooooo...*”

“*—ellooooo.....*”

“*—lloooooo.....*”

This time, it sounded almost like the echos came from different directions. Some to the left, some to the right, some behind. Not coming from any one specific location.

His smile faded a little.

It was strange.

He realized the mare was tense, ears still flickering but the rest of her frozen, and his smile returned. He gave her shoulder a pat.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s keep going. It’s just an echo.”

He put his leg on, and this time she went along at a jiggy little trot, tense and bouncy to ride for the first time. It jarred his head badly enough that his teeth began to ache.

Finally the jerky motion got to his bad leg. Already unhappy, now the joint went from twinging to throbbing.

He had better not fall off the mare. If he did, he wasn't sure walking was going to be an option.

That thought brought back his nerves, and he swallowed hard.

"Hadrian!" he shouted, and then jumped badly as the echo returned all around him.

The cries of "*Hadrian!*" came from all directions but in front, as if the source of the echoes had followed right behind them.

When the mare spooked and launched forward into a lope, Tobias didn't stop her.

The path was clear and wide, showing nothing but its own continuation for a long ways, lined by incredibly tall trees. It felt like an enormous hallway, and Tobias and the mare were mice racing along the floor.

The thud of her hooves came faster and louder, and Tobias tried to stay steady in the center of it. His old fears began to mount once more. When he tried to gather her up, the mare responded by trying to yank the reins away and take off.

Tobias had to pull his left hand almost all the way to his hip before he got the mare's head to twist around, her body slowing necessarily as she tried to balance herself. She came thudding down to a walk, sending a bright pain right into Tobias's knee. He gritted his teeth and his vision blurred, eyes watering.

She threw her head in protest, and kept throwing it.

"Whoa," he shouted, pain and nerves getting the best of his horse sense. As if it had been waiting for him to speak, the echoes returned.

"Whoa!"

"Whoa!"

"Whoa..."

"Whoaaa."

But this time, they all came from a single direction.

Tobias slowly turned his head to the right.

The sun filtering onto the path shone in his eyes, half-blinding him, and the brush was so thick that it was hard to see anything in the trees anyway.

But he thought he saw...

Shapes. Moving in the forest.

Some calm, disconnected part of his brain wondered what kind of big animal could live on a little island like this. What was there to eat? Unless someone was feeding them.

Another part of his brain reminded him that rich people had weird hobbies. Didn't royals overseas have pet cheetahs, tigers, things like that?

Tigers lived in forests.

It was the thought of '*Tigers!*' shouted at max decibel in Tobias's brain that made his heart leap into his throat, had him turning the mare and throwing slack into the reins, heels driving like he was making up for lost years on the track.

Angel threw herself down the path.

She had seemed fast to Tobias before. Only now did he remember her old job — carrying outriders on the track, tasked with chasing down loose racehorses, catching up to them at a dead sprint as they ran wild on the track.

He didn't even have the chance to be scared. Air punched the fear right back down his throat before he could gasp, and then all he could do was cling to the pommel and try not to lose his reins.

He wasn't aware of a side path off the main road, but Angel was, and she took it.

One second they were going straight, and then Tobias's horse was ducking off to the left. He barely went with her.

She plunged down an incline, scattering half-grown plants on a less maintained trail, one that dropped off dramatically. Tobias fell forward on her neck and felt his split lip give up the ghost yet again.

When he managed to sit up, there was a smear of his blood on the horse's white neck.

He leaned way back to avoid another fall forward. Gripping the back of the saddle, he got a look below, and his eyes widened.

Here was a barbarous version of Hadrian's water obstacle.

The water looked just as shallow, but instead of clear jumps, the huge pool hosted small boulders.

It was also directly under a waterfall.

Water flowed down flat over a cliff face, birthing heavy foam at its base, and then ran through the boulders to form a pool, where waters slowly

circled within it before finally feeding out into a stream.

A beautiful sight, to be sure.

But not one Tobias wanted to see from the back of a strange horse — particularly not a horse merrily flinging herself towards the rocks.

It was too late to grab rein and pull her up, too late to do anything but jam his feet in the stirrups, grab leather, and pray.

Angel made it to the bottom in a final slide, almost setting down on her heels as the dirt gave out and carried them down.

She stepped promptly into the water and blew air out of her nostrils.

Now that she was standing level, Tobias settled himself properly upright. Reaching down, he gave each stirrup leather a tug that did exactly nothing. There was only so much he could do; he wasn't fit for this, the saddle wasn't fit to him, and he had guaranteed years ago that his leg wouldn't be happy with weight in the stirrups.

He had only been aboard maybe twenty minutes, but his body whined like it had been in the saddle for days.

Angel started to ford the pool with continued urgency. Tobias checked her — not because he wasn't as concerned with their escape, but because he could see the moss that had grown all over the rocks, and could too easily imagine her slipping. He didn't think his seat could survive another sudden movement.

The mare ignored him, planting the whole weight of her huge head and neck on the bit and continuing to splash her way through the water.

They came to an obstacle — an especially large boulder, with others surrounding it. To get around they would have had to either duck under the waterfall itself, wade into even deeper waters in the other direction, or go over.

And, well, going over was not an option. She had made that clear at the banks.

Turning to look for a better route, Tobias caught sight of something coming down the path they'd just taken. His heart jumped in panic, and he booted the mare around to face it.

He blinked. Spray from the waterfall bounced off his face, and he didn't even notice, staring bemused at the horse picking its way down towards them.

It was just a horse.

A silver gray thing with healthy dapples on its haunches, it seemed to be choosing its steps carefully. It nosed at the dirt, tested the ground. Then it looked up.

Even across the water, Tobias could see it had blue eyes like Angel. There was something eerie about blue eyes on a gray horse.

And it was an eerie animal overall. It moved slowly through sheets of sunlight, in and out of the jungle's shadow, giving a sparkly impression like a unicorn.

But then it stopped, and it regarded them.

Not a tiger, no, but the way it looked at them made Tobias think of a big cat.

It was attentive, but not in a horselike way. Curious, but not in a horselike way. Not waiting for an excuse to spook.

It was odd.

Seeing movement above, Tobias glanced up to see a few more sticking their heads out, looking down the path the gray had chosen. He saw a bay, a chestnut. He thought he saw something spotted.

Of course Jove would have horses on the island.

The strange echo must have just been the geological phenomenon he originally thought. Now that a river was involved, it made even more sense. Water always distorted sound. He'd heard the oddest things stretched out over water, people murmuring at the beach.

Amused at his earlier fright, Tobias said, "Hello."

The gray looked back at him and its mouth opened.

"Hello," it said.

"Hello," came a voice from above.

"Hello, hello."

"Hello."

Tobias stared blankly at the gray thing, and it stared back.

There had been no movements of the throat, no sound-related breaths in or out.

Tobias's first horrified thought was that someone had jammed some kind of recorder up into the horse's throat.

Then it made a neat little jump down to level earth, and it met Tobias's eyes again, and suddenly his heart thudded back into wild, frenzied beating.

The eyes.

The eyes were too close together. Too far forward.

It sniffed the ground, flared its lip at some strange odor, and Tobias saw that the creature had teeth like a dog's, teeth that were sharp and polished white from gnawing bones.

He saw in his mind's eye the paintings Jove and others had been bidding over so aggressively.

And he realized they hadn't been bidding on *paintings*.

He remembered Jove's voice, the odd metal muzzle he'd found back in that barn with its hidden cellar.

'Have you heard of a Saturday horse? A zatertag, a samstag? A sonnabend, sometimes.'

The Saturday horse bared its teeth and lunged, just as the others finally began to pour down the path from above, in leaps and slides scattering rock and dirt down in a flood.

Angel backed up to the boulder and flattened out her neck, ears pinned like a good cowhorse facing down a rogue steer. She was bigger than the thing coming at them.

But there were half a dozen of them.

Tobias sat there frozen, and might have perished without moving a finger, might have been dragged down and devoured like dead meat, if it hadn't been for the horse and rider who came vaulting over the boulder directly beside them.

Tobias immediately recognized the red mare from the video Jove had shown him. Not a mark of white on her. Conditioned to a T, almost as tall as Angel, haunches and shoulders bulging with muscle.

He knew the rider by their skillful seat as the mare leapt the boulder, the hands on the reins following her mouth down, giving her freedom to jump and then smoothly pulling her up.

Hadrian braked the mare one-handed, and with the other hand brought up and cracked a cattle whip overhead.

The silvery gray dropped back onto its haunches. It bared its teeth, eyes rolling and then coming to focus on Hadrian and his mare. It began to circle like a wolf, fast and splashing in the water, head down, eyes bright, seeking a hole to leap through.

Hadrian cracked the whip again, this time directly in the Saturday horse's face.

Blood sprouted up on the thing's nose. It drew back again with an awful sound, what must have been a cry of pain or rage or both, but sounded

nothing like any creature Tobias had ever heard before. A crackling, rusty noise scaling up to a high peak.

It backed up, gnashing its teeth and shaking its head, tossing blood left and right.

The others loomed up to take its place.

They circled, echoing the noise of the first, crackling and shrieking, almost cackling, while their tails thrashed and water flew up between their racing legs.

Hadrian let the whip fly again, sent another backpedaling with an almost metallic-sounding squeal. But a third only took its place... and the first had begun creeping back in, looking maniacal, a near-human rage and light of revenge burning in its pale eyes.

“Come on,” shouted Hadrian. He threw his whip out in an arc, making all of the creatures dance back a few steps, and then looked back over his shoulder at Tobias. “Move your ass!”

While the things were briefly backed off, Hadrian gave his mare a boot, plunging off through a narrow gap and into the deeper water.

Tobias may have been frozen, but Angel wasn't stupid, and the mare immediately lunged after Hadrian's.

He managed to hang on somehow.

He didn't see where they were going; his vision had narrowed to a pinprick, and his world was made up now only of Angel's shoulders and the red mare's haunches up ahead.

Water churned all around, splashed on his legs, and then suddenly that silvery gray face burst out of nowhere.

Tobias saw the blood on its nose, the white of its teeth.

The rage in its blue eyes.

Angel reared to strike out with her front hooves, and Tobias finally lost the battle to stay aboard.

He slid off backwards and fell into the water.

His world went silent for a moment — he had a vague impression of the water churning, but didn't know if the force was hooves or waterfall. There was nothing to be seen through the water but foam.

He rose up out of the pool with a great gasp.

Something seized his shoulder.

Tobias tried to scream, inhaled water, and could only choke. He waited for the bite of huge teeth to sink into his flesh and rip him open.

Instead, a human hand hauled him up.

All the way up over a pair of red shoulders.

Hadrian held onto Tobias, dangling over the front of his saddle like a calf, and Tobias heard the cluck of him urging his mare.

Seconds later, darkness fell all around, and the sound of water stopped completely.

He heard the mare's hooves clacking on hard ground as she dropped down to a walk. Then a halt.

Light flooded over Tobias, and he blinked repeatedly as Hadrian carefully lowered him back to the ground — where Tobias's knees immediately buckled — then nimbly dismounted beside him.

Tobias stared through a sheet of glass at the back of the waterfall. Overhead, warm lights filled a small chamber. As Tobias's gaze traveled from the transparent wall to the marble floor, he found a cozy sofa off to one side and a stocked drink service next to it.

Hadrian's mare stood by a closed door in the glass, dripping water, and beside her Hadrian was punching something into a keypad on the wall.

Of course, thought Tobias distantly. Of course they had a secret room behind a waterfall.

"Look at that," remarked Hadrian, voice incredibly casual.

Tobias followed his pointing finger to the horselike faces forging through the stream of water.

Two of the Saturday horses came wading under the waterfall to see where their prey had gone. One was spotted and the other was the silver-gray with the bloody nose. They stood and gazed intently at the doorway.

"It's one-way glass," said Hadrian. "But they're not stupid. They're incredibly intelligent, actually. I've been trying to break one to ride for a while, but you can't turn your back to one. Not even for a second."

He laughed, and Tobias finally turned to stare at him.

"You saved me," he said blankly.

Hadrian's bright, laughing face immediately turned ugly.

"I didn't save you to save *you*," he said. "I just don't want these ones to learn the taste of human flesh."

He rounded on Tobias, bending down to focus both ice blue eyes on him — not unlike the creatures outside.

"Let me guess," said Hadrian, jabbing one finger into Tobias's chest, turning it back and forth to dig in painfully. "You wanted to get a better

look, didn't you? But my father told you no, trying to 'keep you safe'." His voice became deeply sarcastic. "And you snuck out to get an eyeful and accidentally let the damn things out. Right?"

Tobias stared at him.

Everything he'd planned on saying before had been wiped out by the sudden horror.

So instead he just said blankly, "I don't even know what those things are."

Hadrian's eyes narrowed.

He gave Tobias's chest one last sharp prod, then sat back on his heels, looking out the glass at the creatures.

"Maybe he sent them to hunt me," mused Hadrian. He was silent for a second, as if the idea might have hurt... and then burst out laughing. He turned back to Tobias. "You. What are you doing out here? *He* wouldn't have sent you after me." Hadrian's lip curled.

"He didn't," said Tobias. "I sent myself. He told me the truth about something — something you need to know. If you knew, you wouldn't be trying to kill him."

Hadrian turned unreadable again. He looked at Tobias for a long moment. When he finally spoke, it was in a soft, almost honey-sweet voice.

"First of all," said Hadrian. "Until I see a ring on that finger, you're not my stepmom, so don't stick your little jailbait nose into my family's business."

He smiled pointily. Tobias swallowed.

"Second of all," said Hadrian. "I'm not trying to kill him. If Nerva and Dio are plotting, they've left me out of it."

Tobias blinked rapidly.

"But you told him—"

"He's the one who accused me," said Hadrian, voice aggressively bright, eyes shiny. "If he thinks I'm a killer, let him believe it! You think if I'd said 'oh no Dad, I would never,' he would have believed me?"

He sounded manic, but he also had a point.

Tobias opened and then closed his mouth.

"But go ahead," said Hadrian, continuing to smile. "Tell me the truth. Or better yet — maybe I should tell you some exciting truths. How about we trade? You tell me your story, and I'll tell you why I don't believe for a second that Nerva is behind this."

Tobias frowned. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because,” said Hadrian. “If he’d wanted to destroy our father, he already had the opportunity years ago. Instead, he let himself be nearly killed.”

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jove

Bialy knew better than to say a word; he had seen Jove through innumerable deadly situations, moments of doom, and catastrophes, but the look on Jove's face now was different. Bialy's silence said it was spooking him, and he climbed into the passenger seat of the armored vehicle without so much as a breath of advice.

Jove could tell his expression was unique. It didn't feel familiar. It felt tight and numb.

Fury and fear were twin in his chest, pressing up against each other in an equal measure that created a kind of temporary stasis. He couldn't act on either. Yet.

Part of him swore that he was going to hogtie the kid and stuff him in a closet for the remainder of the chaos.

Another part was resolved to grab him so tight it left bruises, leash Red at his side and refuse to let him out of sight.

He fumed in silence.

He barely felt the wheel under his fingers.

They barreled out of the lot, leaving behind them staff peering terrified out of doors and windows, and Izawa probably sitting on the couch with a glass of scotch. Waiting to see how it all unfolded.

Jove no longer cared how it all unfolded.

He gunned it out over the road, past the tall, the *useless* pasture fences, and hated himself for his hobby.

Horses hadn't been enough. Racing hadn't been enough. He could have been gambling, could have been sponsoring fine art, could have thrown his money at charity, but no. It had to be monsters.

If they touched Red, he would slaughter them all.

They sped towards the trees.

Bialy gripped the overhead handle, white-knuckled and white-lipped, as the car bumped over rougher off road terrain. He still said nothing.

Before they could even reach the treeline and answer the question about whether the thing would fit on the trails — a shape burst from the jungle.

Jove's foot slowly descended on the brake.

Angel came streaking out of the trees.

Her saddle was twisted askew, reins dangling. She had no rider. There were bite marks on her haunches, but not deep, as if the creatures had only snapped at her upon retreat.

There was blood on the top of her neck, right by her shoulders. Right by where a rider would have sat. Where they would have bled.

Blood and no wound.

She slowed somewhat as she drew near the car, ears darting forward and back, and then she put on another burst of speed. A moment later, Jove saw why.

The things came darting out of the woods after her. At the head of the pack was the gray stud that had been Jove's favorite — the one he had bred himself, had sent to the island to grow from a leggy foal to hopefully a leggy adult.

Jove had once had fancies of riding the things, but most were too short for him, so he'd put in the time to study bloodlines. Dig up secret populations the world over. He'd found the tallest stock, had them shipped from Argentina, Poland, South Africa. His work had been bearing fruit; he'd gone from having mostly pony-sized stock to mostly horse-sized, each new generation shooting up inches.

As a two-year-old, the gray stud was on track to reach thoroughbred height.

Watching him now, Jove felt utterly detached from his success.

The gray floated, ran with an effortless spring that rivaled what any painting could reproduce. His refined head may as well have been sculpted just so. He had the deep heart girth of a horse that could run, the perfectly-balanced neck, the splendid ease of movement.

He had blood all over his muzzle.

Jove's previous resolve to slaughter them all faded on sight.

So too did the rest of his anger, his fear.

He sank back in his seat and didn't even watch them go.

Angel went over a hill and disappeared, and the creatures pursued her. As they passed the car, Jove heard what she'd been running from: a horrible cackling noise, like that of wild dogs.

They crossed over the hill and were gone.

Jove mused silently on their nature, on the gleeful tearing into flesh he'd witnessed so many times before. He knew their ways better than perhaps anyone else alive, save for a few deeply private scholars.

He knew they did not leave prey alive.

Bialy finally spoke up.

“Do you want me to drive?” he asked.

“Drive?” repeatedly Jove distantly. “Drive where?”

Bialy hesitated, then said, “You know where.” His voice was cautious. Almost gentle.

“To find them?” asked Jove, detached. He supposed Hadrian had joined his brothers in the bay on the far side of the island. If he’d taken his fast horse, it wouldn’t take him long to reach them. “Why?”

He found he no longer cared about the outcome of the day.

“If Hadrian opened the gates,” said Bialy. “He’s responsible.” He paused. “They’re responsible.”

Responsible for what, the little shit that Jove should have known better about, should have kept under lock and key to stop him taking off again?

No. Jove was responsible.

But still, at Bialy’s soft reminder, Jove did feel a cold core forming in his chest.

He’d thought he had felt ice before, thought he had felt the true depths of his anger.

It was only now, far too late, that he realized just how horribly deep his feelings could go. So deep that he became empty. He was a crevasse.

“All right,” he said calmly, and unbuckled his seatbelt. “You drive.”

—

They took the ocean path, skirting dangerous rocks along a thin needle of a road directly above the water. It was cut into the very cliffside, invisible unless you knew it was there, and unknown to anyone who wasn’t intimately familiar with the island.

Jove’s sons were probably having it watched, but at least it was a difficult point to defend from.

Bialy drove and Jove watched the water.

His mind filled up with pleasant barbs, sweet things that only added ice to the crevasse growing inside of him.

He had a small yacht sitting around somewhere with a clear bottom. Maybe one of the boys had been using it. Jove recalled taking it over coral reefs, over shark shoals. He wondered if Red would have enjoyed it. He

thought the kid probably would have been horrified; he hadn't seemed enthusiastic about the yacht Jove had taken him on previously. Jove imagined taking Red to exotic locations on such a vessel, treating him to awe-inspiring views, places most people could only dream of visiting. He imagined Red's slightly mystified, slightly disdainful expression faced with such things.

He could have had that.

He'd only known Red for days, and only during chaos. Crisis.

What would it have been like in peacetimes?

Would they have fallen into a more normal rhythm, age difference be damned? Gone to the restaurants, gone to the shows, gone and messed around secretly in private gardens? Maybe Red wouldn't have liked it. Maybe he wouldn't have been happy. Maybe he would have rather have been with someone his own age, someone who lived a life closer to his. Maybe it wouldn't have worked out.

But maybe it would have.

Jove hadn't dated since the divorce, had even scarcely slept with anyone. He'd brushed it all off as too much trouble.

It was funny to think of that excuse now. 'Too much trouble.'

Red had been wildly troublesome, but Jove found now that he'd rather have pure chaos than the kid's absence.

He scarcely noticed they had reached their destination until the car came to a halt.

His eyes dipped up over the dashboard.

There in front of them was the little bay, the private inlet of the island that served as refuge from bad weather for the few ships docked there. These weren't luxury yachts, but gray, industrial shipping vessels designed for smuggling.

Just up from the dock was a blunt cliffside, this one unnatural, a huge, smooth cutaway like the wall of a quarry.

No windows betrayed the structure inside — only a blast-proof iron door.

"No one guarding it," observed Jove.

Bialy stared at the door, expression drawn. "It could be a trap," he said.

"A trap for what?" Jove was already unbuckling his seatbelt and opening his door. "They must know I'm coming."

Before, he had thought it was oddly underhanded of Nerva to send an assassin instead of straightforwardly shooting him face-to-face. Now, he suspected the man hadn't been sent to kill him after all.

'A message.'

Perhaps this was what Nerva had wanted all along. Face-to-face. Perhaps he'd wanted Jove to dread this moment. To think on all he'd done wrong. Maybe he had wanted to demoralize his father, kill him bit by bit on the inside, before finally pulling the trigger.

Had they really hated him so much?

Bialy stopped him with a hand on the arm.

"I thought about it," he said, uncharacteristically both bold and urgent. "I think I understand it now."

"Understand?" repeated Jove, looking at his friend icily until Bialy pulled back his hand.

"They must want the codes," said Bialy.

Jove was silent for a moment. Then he felt a smile crack his face.

"Nerva already has the codes," he said. "He's had them since I retired."

"What?" Bialy's pale face went a little paler. He stared at Jove with a blankness and a disbelief that struck Jove as almost strange. "You gave him that power?"

"Why wouldn't I?" returned Jove, still feeling that smile sitting eerily on his face, almost stretching it. Almost painful.

"I trusted him," he said.

It was Bialy's turn to be silent, something conflicted on his face. Maybe not sure if he ought to offer pity.

Finally he spoke up.

"I'll go first."

Jove's smile faded, eye sliding over to fix and narrow on his friend. "That's dangerous."

Now Bialy smiled — a half-hearted kind of thing. A tired smile. "Not much safer if it's the two of us," he pointed out. "At least this way I can give you a heads up. Scope it out." Now his smile warmed, but at the same time, there was something sad in it. "Just like old times."

These past few days back on the coast, back at the races, back at his old games, Jove had felt more like himself than ever. Refreshed. Light. Young again.

Now, looking at Bialy's weary smile, he realized just how old they were.

Not old in body, but in spirit.

This life aged a person worse than too much sun. Worse than boozing, worse than coke.

Let this be the end of it.

"Just like old times," he agreed. "But be careful."

Bialy took the warning tone with a gracious nod. "I'm always careful," he said.

He leaned around a rock, scanned up and down the flat cliff wall again, and eyed the docks. Coming to a decision, he leaned back.

"I'll go in through the front," he said. "And signal you if it's safe. If you don't see me—"

"If I don't see you, I'll go in through the ocean door," said Jove.

Just like old times. Two men, two routes. How many times had they pincered the enemy like that?

Bialy nodded, and he went.

Jove watched him go.

No one sniped him from some hidden spot. Bialy moved in his characteristic silence, somehow embodying stillness even when in motion, crossing to the entrance quiet as a spider.

Jove watched him pause at the door before opening it... and slipping inside.

A few moments of silence passed. Enough for Jove to hold his breath.

BLAM.

The first shot was followed rapidly by two more.

BLAM. BLAM.

Moments turned into minutes. Long minutes.

Jove waited for the signal he knew wouldn't come.

As he waited, he let his gaze drift to the calmness of the ocean, the blue waves rolling in delicate little strokes against the land.

He thought to himself, *You could have done better.*

At so many things.

But there was nothing to do now, nothing but to assume Bialy dead — another casualty of Jove's personal failings.

He left his hiding place behind and picked his way down the rocks towards the boats gently bobbing on the water. This part of the island

showed evidence of old volcanic activity in its sharp edges, pricking his fingers and snagging his clothes on the sharp edges as he went.

When he reached the ocean edge and waded silently into it, the saltwater bit gleefully at dozens of little cuts.

The pain meant less than nothing. Jove ignored it.

He waded nearly to his shoulders, slipped under a wooden dock, and moved in the shadow of the planks.

There, under the far dock, soaked in seawater up to his beard, Jove felt with his hand along an obscured jut of rock. It took a minute to find the old button, and several more minutes to scrape away the crust that had accumulated over years of nonuse.

Finally, the button gave, and Jove ducked under the water.

The passageway was barely wide enough for him.

Thankfully, it was short.

He felt the bottom, kicked off, and swam upwards.

Jove's head broke the surface of a pool. He sucked in a breath, slicked his hair back from his face, and swam for the edge.

He doubted anyone had used this section of the island for anything but business in a long time, but the facilities were still maintained as if guests could be expected at any minute. The water was clean, the floors and walls immaculate, all an iridescent cream-pink that suggested the inside of a shell. White chairs circled the pool, and shallow steps led up to a platform full of artificial palm trees.

Beyond the trees, stairs.

Jove climbed wincingly out of the pool.

He stopped for a minute to strip and wring out his clothes. His brow furrowed when he found his taped-down bandage dangling halfway off, drenched with seawater.

He suddenly remembered something Red had said.

'I don't want to be the reason you die of septic shock.'

He half-smiled.

Turned out he could get an infection all on his own.

Ripping the bandage off altogether, Jove left it with his coat, dangling over one of those white chairs.

He went looking for his sons.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tobias

Hadrian put off his story as if he were both eager and reluctant to tell it at the same time. Treasuring the moment, or delaying it.

He led Tobias through passageways carved into rock, long and complicated enough to make Tobias wonder if the whole island was full of secret tunnels. Hadrian's mare followed in-hand, looking used to the whole thing. Lights switched on automatically as they went, and off behind them as they moved on, which just made Tobias think about the lights all going off leaving them blind. It made him antsy, and antsy made him rude.

"Can you please just spill it?" he asked. "I nearly got eaten and I feel like there's a chance I still might be. I'm not really feeling a lengthy exposition."

That, and his leg fucking hurt. He was surprised he was able to keep up with the two of them. Hadrian had his father's absurdly long legs and the mare matched him. Hadrian seemed to be keeping to a slower pace, but Tobias suspected it wasn't out of kindness as much as it was wanting Tobias on hand as a meat shield or bargaining chip.

"After our dad lost his eye," said Hadrian, finally seeming to decide he wanted to talk. "He got paranoid."

Tobias opened his mouth to bring up 'hey and about that eye,' then stopped himself. Later.

"Paranoid?" he asked instead.

"Very paranoid," said Hadrian. "I don't remember too much, I was a kid. I wasn't even old enough to start stabbing yet."

He laughed. Tobias did not.

"I heard most of this from Nerva and Dio," Hadrian continued. "I heard most things from them. My father has never been chatty with me." He made a snide face. "He had plenty of enemies then, but plenty of allies, too. William Izawa was actually closer to an ally than an enemy back then, according to Nerva. Said Dad had him over for dinner once. Spaghetti."

Tobias could picture it — and the picture was an amusing one.

"So Izawa betrays him." Hadrian went on. "And Dad suddenly can't trust anyone. Who can blame him?" His voice was flippant, didn't at all fit

the next words that came out of his mouth. “So he started planting bombs under houses.”

Tobias almost tripped. “B-bombs?”

“Bombs.” Hadrian nodded sagely. “Under people’s houses, under their headquarters, under the strip clubs and casinos they owned. Enemies, allies. Anywhere he could sneak one in. Bialy Bezruc, the guy you’ve met, was actually the main person doing the installation. Sneaky fucker. He coasts under the radar; nobody noticed him.”

After seeing how Bialy’s mild manner had turned to murder, Tobias could believe it.

What he couldn’t quite believe was the rest of the story.

“Why would Jove do that?” he asked.

“Insurance,” said Hadrian. “It was smart. I would have made the move if I’d been him.” He grinned, knowing his approval qualified as a kind of condemnation. “See, with the ability to blow anyone to pieces, he had security. He didn’t even have to go for a big HQ. If anyone made a move against him, he could have blown up a few clubs, maybe a house, and dropped the, ‘Oh by the way, I can do the same to any of you, anywhere.’ That would have cooled shit down in a hurry.”

“Did he—” Tobias faltered before he could get the question out.

“Did he ever use it?” Hadrian flashed him a look, then sneered. “Of course not. The plot kept him busy while his kids grew up without him, and by the time he had finished planting the web, he’d worked through his crazy, I guess. Or maybe he felt safe after that. Or maybe, everyone just lucked out, and after his showdown with Izawa nobody wanted any smoke.”

Tobias was silent for a moment, trying to reconcile the man he barely knew with the one Hadrian had known all his life. He had to admit that he had no idea what Jove was capable of. He’d seen the man as casually and effectively brutal, but somehow this felt different. It was different.

“Thinking you could do better with a different sugar daddy?” mocked Hadrian.

“What does that have to do with Nerva?” asked Tobias.

Hadrian paused. Stopping in the middle of a cross section between hallways, he looked down each one, then turned back towards Tobias.

“Odd that there’s no one around,” he said, with a wide smile that said ‘odd’ meant ‘ominous’. Then he continued on walking without elaborating.

“Nerva,” he said, launching back into his story. “Got access to the big red button when Daddy retired. Well, buttons. He got access to the codes, letting him use the network if he felt the need. Shook him up a little. He didn’t even know the network *existed*. None of us did.”

“He didn’t tell you,” murmured Tobias.

“No,” said Hadrian. “I only know about them because of what happened next.”

Tobias found he didn’t really want to know. He felt like he was learning too much, and it was dangerous knowledge.

But it was also too late to stop listening.

“*Somebody*,” said Hadrian. “Found out. It could have been another sneaky fucker, like Izawa. It could have been a hacker dug some shit up. Maybe Nerva even let something slip. I don’t know, still don’t. But what happened is that the somebody who found out, wanted the codes. They wanted control of the network. Who wouldn’t want the ability to blow up the competition?”

They passed another empty juncture of hallways with no one to be seen, not in either direction.

“They managed to capture Nerva,” said Hadrian. His voice became very bland considering his words. “Got inside of his personal security, paid someone off, and stuffed him in the back of a van. They tortured him for a week and a half to try and get the codes.”

His words echoed off the walls as they continued down another passage.

“He didn’t spill,” said Hadrian. “He got loose. Killed them. Got away. He came to me—” Suddenly, Hadrian laughed. “I think he came to me because he knew I was *definitely* too batshit to be able to coordinate something like that. Only one he could trust.” He laughed again, and shook his head. “He picked me up from my class, covered in dried blood, total thousand yard stare, and then he crashed at my place until he could put his brain back together.”

He paused and scratched his chin. “After a few days he seemed back to normal, but then, my gauge for ‘normal’ isn’t the best.” He shrugged. “He cleaned himself up and went back to work. Purged most of his staff. It was ugly, but it was quiet. And then—” Hadrian laughed once again, as if this were the best part of all. “He returned the favor of secrecy, and never told our dad.”

Tobias stopped to gape.

Hadrian turned around, raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“Why not?” demanded Tobias.

“You know why?” Hadrian sneered. “Because dear Dad had just retired, and Nerva didn’t want to drag him back into the hellhole *he’d* just inherited.” Hadrian rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “Who wants to be in his position? Nobody. But Nerva’s the oldest, the most responsible, and of course neither Dio or I were ever going to fit the role. Dio’s let too many low-level bodyguards climb on top of him to ever be respected, and, you know.” He showed all his teeth in a crocodilian smile. “I’m me.”

Turning away, Hadrian continued back down the hall.

It took Tobias a moment to follow.

His head spun with all the new information, all the new baggage, and he found he didn’t know what the hell to think or feel anymore.

On a personal level, he trusted Jove absolutely.

...but then, he also continued to find Izawa pleasant and personable, so maybe he wasn’t a great fucking judge of character.

And then again, as he recalled the horse-like creatures that had attempted to hunt him down like wolves, Tobias landed on the simple fact that everything happening around him was absurd.

Suddenly realizing that Hadrian and his mare were getting farther away, Tobias hastily limped after them.

“So,” said Hadrian casually once Tobias had caught up. “What’s your big story? The something I need to know? The reason dear old Dad doesn’t deserve to die?”

Tobias opened his mouth.

It occurred to him then that maybe, this was Jove’s business. This was Jove’s family. Jove’s sacrifice, his secret, his missing eye. His story to tell.

Except... fuck that.

“Your dad gave up his eye for you,” he said. “When he made that deal with Izawa. It was a deal. Not a duel.”

Hadrian stared at him, sneer fading into something unreadable.

“He told me the whole story,” said Tobias. He had no way of knowing if Hadrian believed him, and heaped on facts in hopes it would help his case. “Izawa held you for ransom, right? When you were a kid. He wanted an ear, but an ear would have made him Izawa’s bitch, or something?” He heard his own voice get exasperated. “I don’t know how all these weird mobster politics work.”

“‘Bitch’ is about the right word,” said Hadrian, still without giving away anything in his face or tone. “Say the rest.”

“He told Izawa,” said Tobias, trying to recollect exactly how Jove had phrased it. It had seemed impressive at the time. “He told him... he asked him, ‘How could my son be worth only an ear?’”

That sounded right.

He looked up at Hadrian, saw a funny look on his face, and realized after a second it was something like a smile.

“Let’s go, stepmom,” said Hadrian, abruptly scooping Tobias up and dumping him in the saddle. Tobias groaned in protest. *Not again.* “We’ll get to the bottom of this as a family.”

So, so great.

For the thousandth time in the past couple of days, Tobias wondered how the fuck he had ended up in this position.

Hadrian vaulted up behind him, grabbed the reins, and clucked to his mare.

They took off down the hallway.

—

Eventually — after a harrowing descent down some stairs — they turned onto a familiar-looking thoroughfare. The sudden change in footing made Tobias blink, as the sound of the mare’s hooves went from clattering on tile to thumping on dirt. Looking down, he saw that it *was* dirt. Turning his head back and forth, he was about to ask, before Hadrian spoke up in a braggy voice.

“They built this wide enough to fit tanks,” he said. “When they used to smuggle stuff like that through here. Munitions. Bits and pieces of war machine. Your new sugar daddy tell you about those?”

“As long as it’s not human trafficking, I can deal,” said Tobias, earning himself a laugh of approval, which was a terrible thing to hear from Hadrian.

“Anymore it’s just collectibles,” said Hadrian. “War memorabilia. Historical artifacts, mummies. Do mummies count as human trafficking?”

Tobias didn’t answer.

They plodded on.

“This is the port Dad brings the sonnabend through,” Hadrian went on, a cheerful tour guide now. “You met them already, so you know there are worse things to run into down here than old bombs.”

“Sonnabend?” repeated Tobias. “I thought they were...” He tried to recall all the words Jove had used. “Saturday horses, right?”

“Nobody knows those things exist except the rich fucks of the world,” said Hadrian. “And every rich fuck has a favorite name for them. Most western names are related to Saturday because they used to be used in war, then in blood sports, none of which were appropriate Sunday activities.” He laughed.

Blood sports.

He probably didn’t want to know, but...

“Blood sports?”

“Animal fighting,” said Hadrian with relish. “You know — bull baiting, bear baiting, dog fighting. Stick two animals in a pen and watch the carnage.”

Yeah, Tobias shouldn’t have asked.

“They fight them?” he asked, feeling queasy. Maybe he should have specified that he wasn’t *just* opposed to human trafficking.

“Not anymore.” Hadrian snorted. “Well, I’m sure there are still some secret pits out there, somewhere in the world, but they’re too rare now. Too valuable. Ask my dad about it, I’m sure he’d love to tell you the whole dull history. I’ll just tell you what’s important.”

“...which is?”

“Don’t run,” said Hadrian.

Of course it would be some shit like that. ‘*Don’t run.*’ As if his brain was going to be in control of his legs if he ever saw one of those things again.

“They’re not too unlike pet tigers.” Hadrian spoke with an authority that suggested he’d had one of those, and Tobias wouldn’t have been surprised if he *had*. “Even when they’re tame, those instincts still kick in. You can raise a tiger, keep it its whole life, but as soon as you trip and fall over in front of it, BAM. It’s gonna jump you.”

“So... don’t fall over in front of them?”

“Don’t act like *prey*,” emphasized Hadrian. “They’re social animals, and they’re curious, and these ones are well fed. You work on the track.

You know horses, right? Treat them just like any other bloodthirsty-acting twat.”

Tobias suspected that Hadrian had been doing a lot more attempted domestication than his father would have approved of, but he didn't say that.

“Right,” he said instead. “Problem is, I don't have a lunge whip.”

Hadrian burst out laughing.

Seeing how much of Jove's appearance this son had inherited, Tobias couldn't help but wonder if they shared any other traits. Was it possible Jove had been this maniacal in his youth?

They exited the long dark passageway into an enormous warehouse — enormous as in Tobias couldn't see the ceiling no matter how much he craned his neck.

At the doorway, iron stairs with high railings ran off to the left and right, and up ahead were towers of boxes, shipping containers, rack systems stretching up out of sight.

It was a maze.

“Used to play down here when I was a kid.” Hadrian's voice was full of nostalgia.

“Where are we going?” asked Tobias, almost dreading the answer.

“We're going to find my brothers,” said Hadrian. “And if they really want my father dead, you can tell them your story. Maybe that will change their minds.”

Tobias almost turned around to see if Hadrian was being sarcastic, then felt the mare freeze under them.

“Fuck,” breathed Hadrian.

Tobias listened... and heard it.

A soft clattering noise, almost mechanical.

But not mechanical at all.

“Someone followed your example,” said Hadrian. “Now *we're* in the pit.”

“There are more of them down here?” Tobias's heart jumped into his throat.

“Sure are.” Hadrian somehow sounded entertained, as if this was a funny twist. “A fresh shipment. Just in from... I wanna say Colombia?”

“We just have to bluff them, right?” asked Tobias hopefully.

“Normally,” agreed Hadrian. “However, these suckers are fresh from the rainforest, and I haven’t exactly had time to teach them tricks yet.” He huffed a breath, and suddenly Tobias felt himself being lifted up out of the saddle, deposited unceremoniously back on the ground.

Tobias grabbed the nearby railing to get weight off his sore leg, and hissed, “What are you doing?”

“Sonnabend tip number two,” said Hadrian, holding up two fingers. “They can’t climb stairs. At least, I haven’t seen them figure it out yet.”

He grinned at Tobias’s expression of disbelief.

“I’ve got a fast pony.” Hadrian patted the mare’s red neck. For the first time, Tobias noticed the scars half-hidden under her mane. He wondered how many times she had helped wrangle the creatures. “You hide up there, I’ll circle back once I’ve tricked the damn things back into their stalls. Dad would kill me if I lost his shiny new jailbait.”

Tobias opened his mouth to say something rude, then blinked.

“Hadrian,” he hissed, as the pair turned to go.

Hadrian turned back with a smile.

“Yes, Mom?”

Tobias had endured beatings, bullets, and a metric fuckton of general bullshit these past few days, but he thought it was probably going to be Hadrian calling him ‘Mom’ that finally sent him running.

He almost asked Hadrian how old *he* was as a gotcha, then remembered he absolutely did not want to know.

Instead he said, “I didn’t let them out.”

Hadrian stared at him for a second. There was a thought ticking behind his eyes, but he didn’t share it. Instead, he just said, “Up the stairs, jailbait,” and urged his mare on.

The two quickly disappeared into the dark.

Left half-lame and alone, Tobias had no choice but to hold tightly to the rail and limp his way up, cursing Jove, all his progeny, and his own *idiot* libido that had decided a one-eyed mobster going through a midlife crisis was exactly what he needed in his life.

He wasn’t exactly prepared for the ‘ring on the finger’ commitment Hadrian had been rubbing in his face, but if Jove dumped him the second this was over... Ohhhhh, Tobias was going to be *pissed*.

He hobbled his way up and up.

The stacks slowly descended below him, falling into enough shadow that he couldn't see the floor anymore. Finally he saw the ceiling — riddled with industrial-sized fans and air ducts, and dizzyingly long. It gave him both a hopeless and an ominous feeling, wondering again about the scale of operations down here. Even if things turned out some definition of 'fine', how was anyone going to find him?

He reached the top of the stairs.

A long walkway stretched out along the wall, disappearing into further darkness, but this time it wasn't his only option.

There was a door to his left.

He pressed on the handle without much hope, and then his heart leapt as it actually moved. He pushed the door open, letting it swing all the way and revealing the room inside.

It wasn't a huge room. Computers lined all the walls but one, where a screen made up of many monitors filled up the whole wall, up to the ceiling. A man was bent over the control panels doing some kind of work.

Even with the man's back to him, Tobias recognized the coat, the red hair.

"Bialy?" he blurted out.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jove

Jove walked dripping wet through the luxury suites, leaving a track of damp bootprints behind him.

He didn't miss the lack of staff or the general silence. Everything was clean, left without so much as a speck of dust, ready for Hadrian or Dio to barge in with their loud friends and turn the place upside-down.

It gave off the impression of a place emptied suddenly, with little warning and considerable danger.

It had barely been twenty-four hours since the attempt on his life.

Enough time for Nerva to give warning, to hide away this staff and get his accomplices moved in. Enough time to leave things pristine.

He stopped to listen, and heard an odd burbling sound.

A familiar sound.

Nostalgia pricked him. He turned off the straight halfway, passing through a set of temperature control doors and emerging into dappled light.

The ceiling overhead was painted blue and obscured by the leaves of trees, creating an illusion of being outdoors. The illusion was emphasized by foliage thick enough to mostly hide the walls, walls which had detailed murals painted upon them, further simulating the outside.

This wasn't jungle, but a scenscape closer resembling a Chinese garden, the murals depicting a white wall. A stream crossed the length of the room, passing under a bridge nearby, and turning to dwindle off in another direction.

Jove stepped up onto the bridge and leaned on its edge to look down at the water.

Koi fish.

The ones missing from the house's atrium swam here with a multitude of others, darting among lily pads and gentle green lotus.

He thought this garden had a touch of his eldest about it.

Nerva had spent a few years in China, studying abroad at Jove's insistence. After everything the boys had endured, Jove had thought a change of scenery could help.

At least it had gotten them away from him.

His mistakes.

Jove stood there for a minute just remembering.

Nerva had sent plenty of pictures, like anyone sharing the excitement of such a trip... but now Jove wondered if those pictures, if those messages hadn't come more like field reports.

He remembered them all: Nerva hiking the Great Wall from Jiankou to Shixiaguan-Badaling. Nerva at the start of the Mongol Derby, watching ambitious riders get thrown from their semi-feral horses. Nerva visiting palace and temple complexes, their innumerable gardens — gardens echoed by this chamber.

Standing there ruminating on it, Jove thought that Nerva would have liked Red.

Red would have liked him, too, if they'd gotten the chance to get to know each other.

Jove thought they had a similar disdain for the lifestyle.

He heard a rustle in the brush and didn't look up, assuming it was an artificial breeze, or some kind of kept bird.

Then it came again — loud enough that he knew it was no bird.

He lifted his head to watch one of his creatures appear from behind a sheath of bamboo across the water.

He remembered buying this one; a mare, a dainty slip of a thing with a refined profile he hadn't been able to resist. Pale palomino, gold tipped with a white muzzle and three white feet, she browsed at the water's edge. Her tail flicked. Her ears pricked forward, expression light and curious.

Only hours ago, he would have been charmed by the sight of the barbaric thing.

Now, all he could think of was how Red had lost his life at the end of a muzzle like that.

Before, Jove had managed to banish all thought of the deaths he'd witnessed, the times he'd thrown men to the hungry creatures, knowing that they deserved it. Knowing that the sonnabend were more valuable than any living person. They may as well have had gold for blood, silver for those blue eyes, precious gems for organs.

Now, all he saw was meaningless animal, flesh and blood no more important than that of a dog's.

He stepped forward on the bridge.

The filly's head shot up, and her eyes settled on Jove.

Her jaw gnashed once, eagerly.

She struck the water once with a forefoot before jumping clean over it, evading the next cluster of bamboo, coming at him in a rush.

He calmly pulled out his gun, raised and sighted it.

He saw nothing but her teeth. Thought of nothing but what that *death* must feel like.

And he didn't pull the trigger.

Then he didn't even see the filly anymore.

He saw Red's face. Saw the way the kid rolled his eyes, saw the way his face advertised his fuck-ups clean as day, betraying any chance of a lie.

He didn't hear the splashing hooves — he heard Red's laughter, heard his moans, heard the soft sounds he made when he was sleeping.

Things Jove was never going to see, never going to hear, never going to have again.

He lowered his gun.

The filly was midleap when something gutted her momentum; a rope sang out, neatly collaring her by the throat, and snapped her off her feet.

Jove's eye flew past her to settle on the one holding the rope — Hadrian, teeth gritted in a conjoined smile and grimace, hands on the end of the lariat, the line itself braced under his boot.

As the mare scrambled to her feet, Hadrian moved nimbly, looping the rope twice around the bridge railing and then leaping away. She came after him, ears pinned and teeth bared, but he was too quick. He raced around the bridge, letting her chase him a few circuits until suddenly, all the slack came out of the rope again.

The filly thrashed, but she'd trapped herself just like a dog running circles around a tree.

Panting lightly, Hadrian stopped to bend and catch his breath.

When he looked up, he grinned at his father as if awaiting congratulations.

Jove moved so quickly, he didn't think.

He found himself closing the distance, his fist tightening in Hadrian's shirt, dragging his son close enough to bite into pieces.

"Do you have any idea," he growled, "what you've lost me?"

Hadrian cocked an eyebrow. "What?" he asked. "You mean that little lamb-headed thing, with the doe eyes? Is that the only reason you're pissed?"

Jove wanted to shake him violently, but that seemed just as fruitless as shooting the creature would have been.

“Did you mean to do it?” he asked instead, voice deadly soft. “Did you hope to kill him, seeing he made me happy?”

“You know,” said Hadrian, infinitely casual. “It is refreshing to see that you *are* capable of love. I had wondered about that.”

Jove flung him into the stream.

Hadrian didn’t even try to catch himself. He landed with an enormous splash, but nearly drowned out the sound with his own laughter. Sitting up in the water, he pushed his wet hair back.

“As if I have to put in an effort to make you unhappy,” he said, then pulled a face, spitting out a bit of pondscum. “If I was really motivated I would just — go to law school, or something.” He laughed. “Don’t worry, Dad. He tried his best to feed himself to them, but I pulled his dumb ass right out from under their jaws. You’re welcome.”

Still sitting in the stream, Hadrian affected a long bow.

Jove stared at his son.

Something like hope fluttered in his chest, and he immediately crushed it.

“I don’t believe you,” he said.

“That’s fair,” said Hadrian. “I wouldn’t believe me either. So, how about this... a little lamb-headed, doe-eyed birdy told me a story. A story about your eye.” He reached up to tap his eyelid.

Jove’s heart throbbed once, so intensely it hurt more than his bullet wound.

“The little birdy told me that... you gave up that eye,” continued Hadrian. Growing quieter. His smile faded a little, turning bittersweet and small, as his gaze grew more intent on his father. “That you traded it for your son’s life.”

Jove didn’t say a word. He couldn’t breathe.

“Does that ring a bell?” asked Hadrian softly. “Dad?”

Jove stayed silent. For a moment he just stood there, and then he stepped forward — reaching down, he offered Hadrian his hand and helped him up out of the stream.

Hadrian filled him in as they grappled with the mare, working together to keep her strung out between them, unable to attack either with each one keeping equal tension on the rope.

Although she was small, no more than twelve hands at her age, she was made strong with indignation. She thrashed like a bronc and gnashed her teeth like a rabid dog.

By the time they finally got her tied properly to a tree, Jove had heard the whole story of Hadrian and Red's escape from the first pack only to run into more. Hadrian claimed that he'd managed to trap most of the herd back in storage, and that the filly was one of only a few small ones left running around. He said he hadn't let out the first *or* the second wave — and for once, Jove believed him.

Jove tried to make sense of events, but his mind was too full of one thrumming, recurring thought.

He needed to find the kid. He needed to know, to see, to *feel* up close that Red was safe.

Before, he had been numb.

Now, he was afraid.

If Red was alive, he could still be killed.

Jove had to find him.

"Where's Bialy?" Hadrian finally asked, with an air of complaint suggesting that Jove's right-hand man should be doing this sweaty work, not him.

Jove didn't immediately respond.

Finally he said a short, "He's dead."

"Dead?" repeated Hadrian, looking surprised for the first time. "Who killed him?"

"Whoever your brothers have hired to keep watch," said Jove, anger flaring again.

Jove watched Hadrian's face. It revealed little, only speculation. Jove was fairly confident at this point that Hadrian hadn't been the one responsible for loosing the sonnabend, for making an attempt on his life, for playing a role in this conspiracy — but whatever Hadrian did know, or did think, he didn't seem to feel the need to share with his father.

And maybe he was simply in the dark.

Hadrian being Hadrian, it would have made sense if they simply left him out of things.

“Shall we go dig up your boytoy?” suggested Hadrian.

Jove ignored his word choice. “No,” he said.

As much as he wanted nothing more than to find Red, grab and crush him in a kiss, to violently shake him for running off, Jove knew it wasn't safe. Not while he knew so little. Not while he knew nothing.

He didn't even know where Nerva and Dio might have secreted themselves.

“Let's go find your brothers,” he said, then frowned. “Where did you learn to lasso?”

Hadrian grinned.

“That's what happens when you let me pick a school based on its rodeo program,” he said.

—

They went to count heads and sort animals.

Fortunately, the closed nature of the back warehouse meant there were only so many places they could go, allowing father and son to systematically work through the rest of the units.

The animals were also sufficiently spooked enough by their new surroundings, and used enough to flocking together, that it was possible to keep a safe distance from above and herd them about.

They saw no one.

There wasn't just a lack of staff, but a lack of people altogether, as if the sonnabend had devoured them all whole without leaving a smear of blood behind.

Jove had fed too many sonnabend to think such a thing was possible.

They managed to corral the creatures in a large pen, one that had originally housed a few dozen Matsusaka wagyu cows, made up of metal panels sturdy enough to keep large animals in.

...most large animals.

Jove didn't have much choice; when any new creature arrived, they were unloaded one at a time and placed immediately into stalls or small individual pens, in order to be assessed and controlled on an individual level. It was safest.

And it meant that there wasn't a system in place for when the things got loose. It just... didn't happen.

Had never happened.

Not until today, when it had happened twice.

Jove thought that there was some very forced poetry happening; someone who knew his love for the breed very much wanted him to die at their teeth.

As Hadrian went around checking the joints of the panels, making sure there were no weak spots, Jove looked in at the sonnabend.

The zatertags.

The Saturday horses.

There really was no appropriate name for them — nothing that encompassed their contradictory nature, that expressed both beauty and grim horror.

One specimen in particular caught his eye, winning back Jove's admiration despite his reservations.

Sleek. Dark, dappled gold. Well-fleshed. Unusually black-eyed.

Those black eyes gazed back at him from the shadows of the pen, one animal standing stationary as the others milled restless around it.

As Jove looked on, he heard the low whistle of a herd stallion. The others slowed their anxious circling and, after a few minutes, came to a stop. The black-eyed stallion whistled again — a soft, high noise. Haunting. This time, the others echoed him. A chorus of whistles in the same key. Quiet. All of the group coming to a standstill.

Jove wished he'd been able to introduce Red to the creatures properly.

He would have loved to have seen the kid's face, allowed to meet them without fear. Through a fence. Maybe a foal. Jove could imagine the kid's face turning from disbelief, to skepticism, to delight as soon as he found them just as softly furred as a horse. Just as charming in their expression. Just as dazzling in their movement, in their speed.

Jove's chest ached horribly.

Was this how it was going to be from now on? He wondered. Always this gaping feeling, always this dark place that throbbed empty, demanding to be filled with one particular person's presence?

The need to go to Red was almost intolerable... and yet Jove had to wait.

"I count nineteen," said Hadrian, returning around the other side of the pen.

“Minus the one tied in the garden room, that’s everything on the manifest,” said Jove.

Hadrian shook his head. “There are at least two more,” he said. “At least, two stalls are barred up. I smelled blood.”

Jove paused. He looked towards the dark aisle, the rows of metal stalls like prison cells lining each side.

Silently he turned and followed his instincts.

His instincts whispered ‘*dread*’.

Most of the stall doors were swung open, their contents obvious, their space empty. Some dirty shavings. Some scattered straw. Occasionally a forgotten clump of bone or bristle.

At the end of the aisle were the two closed doors Hadrian had spoken of.

Side by side, they were smaller stalls, designed for younger animals. They weren’t just shut, but had their grilles closed as well, slats shut to hide whatever was inside.

And they stank of blood.

Jove tried the latch. There was no padlock on it, and the deadbolt slid back easily. Well-greased.

He gave the door a gentle push and it swung open.

He stood there in silence, blood beginning to buzz, a rage slowly spiraling in the back of his head.

Nerva lay there.

Jove’s eldest was bound hand and foot, gagged and blindfolded, and drenched head to toe in blood — not his. Jove’s eyes immediately sought holes or telling dark stains in Nerva’s clothes — the same he had worn on the boat — and saw no sign of injury.

Only signs of capture, and of having buckets of blood poured on top of him.

Nerva didn’t stir.

But Jove could see the rise and fall of his chest. The flutter of a pulse in his throat.

So it wasn’t him, said a calm part of Jove’s brain.

A calm part that was gradually dissolving.

“Nerva?”

Jove hadn’t paid any mind to Hadrian coming down the hall, had almost forgotten him until he looked under Jove’s arm, saw his brother, and cried

his name in a horrible voice.

Hadrian flung himself to his knees beside his brother and immediately began tearing at his bonds. Producing a knife from nowhere, he cut through the wire around Nerva's wrists and ankles. His hands were visibly shaking.

Jove had seen him maniacal, vicious, bloodthirsty — but never fearful.

Hadrian yanked down Nerva's gag, pulled off his blindfold, and touched his face. "Nerva," he said. "Nerva?"

Nerva's eyes fluttered open.

His first word was, "Fine," said in a coarse, disoriented voice.

"Where's Dio?" asked Hadrian.

Jove already knew. He turned on his heel to go open the second closed door, sliding the deadbolt aside and pushing it open to find his final son bound in an identical manner. Down to the coating of blood.

As he bent down, both his knees and his bullet wound protested in a way that suggested he didn't have long to be on his feet.

He ignored them.

He cut Dio's bonds, pulled off the gag and blindfold, and found his son conscious but with eyes glazed over. Dio mumbled something, but Jove shushed him and continued checking him over.

No wounds. Just blood.

The logic of it occurred to Jove and settled like a fine dust.

Bait.

If they had managed to escape while the creatures were loose...

Rage made Jove tranquil.

He looked up to see Hadrian with his brother slumped over his shoulder, a look approaching animal frenzy on his face, cheek twitching with the visible desire to maim. Nerva hung on him blinking, still clearly disoriented.

Drugged.

As Jove helped Dio sit up, he swayed, too. Just as out of it.

Jove didn't need to ask. He didn't want to know. He already knew.

He let the words come out of his mouth anyway.

"Who did this?"

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tobias

Tobias sat and watched Bialy working the controls, an uneasy feeling in his stomach.

Bialy's eyebrows were knit together, lips creased in a deep frown as he searched the system for... something.

When Tobias had first asked, he got only a clipped response:

"I'm trying to find who's responsible."

Tobias didn't ask anything more.

The main screen in front of Bialy showed what looked to Tobias like some Matrix shit. Something mainframe-y. Something data-y. Above that were the feeds from security cameras, displaying dozens of shots of storage rooms, hallways, a dock with a few ships in it. The feeds were grainy and changed rapidly.

When Tobias spotted movement in one and leaned forward, Bialy sharply reprimanded him.

"Turn around," he said. "There's sensitive information on here."

It struck Tobias as funny and a little odd that Bialy was worried about hiding information from him *now*, when he'd already witnessed and been privy to both family secrets as well as professional ones — but then, there were apparently a fuckton of bombs in the equation now, and Tobias didn't especially want to be responsible for those secrets as well.

So he faced the wall.

But, as usual, he found it impossible to just sit in silence. He fidgeted with strange nerves.

"So... who do you think is responsible?"

He'd already told Bialy about Hadrian, about the rescue and search for his brothers, hoping for Bialy's insight as someone who knew the family and its members far better than him.

Bialy had clearly doubted Nerva's involvement from the beginning, but for some reason, it still surprised Tobias when Bialy responded immediately, saying, "Izawa, of course."

Tobias snuck a look at the man and was taken aback by the expression on his face.

Teeth-gritting irritation.

Something about Bialy's search wasn't bearing fruit. That, or he didn't want Tobias in the room.

However, as soon as Tobias got up, volunteering a timid, "I can wait outside," Bialy's demeanor changed immediately. His arm shot out as Tobias tried to pass, hand closing in an iron grip around his wrist.

When Tobias stared at him, Bialy gave an incredibly flat smile.

"It's dangerous out there," he said, and let go with a shove, pushing Tobias back towards his chair.

Tobias's uneasiness intensified.

He sat... and remembered what Bialy had said about Jove.

'He's counting on me to keep you safe.'

Now, sitting there useless, feeling smaller and weaker than ever before in his life, Tobias couldn't help but wonder if *Jove* was safe.

The man wasn't made of iron. He'd been shot just the day before... and Tobias probably hadn't helped his recovery by being a horny little fuck. More than that, he was vulnerable here — vulnerable because his family was involved, his sons either trying to kill him or potentially in danger, and because...

Tobias couldn't help but wonder if *he* made Jove more vulnerable.

Couldn't help but wonder if there was more than the usual reason for Bialy wanting him to stay close.

Suddenly Bialy cursed. Tobias jumped and looked over, but Bialy seemed to have forgotten him entirely; the man glowered at the screen and muttered, "Locked out," in a vile tone. There was a cold, contained rage in his voice that was almost akin to Jove's.

Looking up at the other monitors, Bialy let out a rough laugh.

"Huh," he said. "They all made it."

Following his gaze, Tobias saw figures moving on the screen — and his heart leapt. A buzzy warmth filled his whole chest.

The video wasn't super clear, but he only knew one person that size and shape.

Jove was accompanied by three more figures. One Tobias assumed must have been Hadrian, which made the other two... Nerva and Dio?

"You were right," he said.

Relief made Tobias's already shaky legs even weaker, and he had to take a steadying breath, holding onto the sides of the chair. Relief faded into

something stomach-fluttering, an involuntary smile. His fear for Jove switched over into joy at seeing him in one piece.

He could imagine so vividly how it would feel, rushing and thumping right into Jove's chest. Wrapping his arms around him. Hanging on. Being truly obnoxious about it. Then demanding what the fuck he was doing with those freakish horses. Then kissing him hard on the mouth.

And then...

Tobias's smile faded.

Bialy stood. When Tobias looked up, Bialy looked at him with flat eyes and a flatter smile, and said, "Let's go meet them."

Tobias's instincts pinged.

He swallowed hard.

"One last thing," said Bialy, and turned back to the dashboard. His fingers skimmed over the levers, the keys, and finally hovered over a series of buttons. Eyeing the monitors up above, he found what he was looking for, and pressed one button.

"That'll do," he said calmly.

—

Bialy helped Tobias along on his bad leg — a nice gesture spoiled by the fact that Tobias could feel Bialy's gun tucked into its belt, bumping against his side the whole time.

"Don't we have to worry about...?" Tobias's voice trailed off before finishing his question. There was nothing about Bialy that suggested worry.

"About the hungry things?" Bialy chuckled.

He pulled out his gun, tapped it once on the side of Tobias's head, then dropped his hand back down. Leaving the gun dangling.

"We'll be fine," he said.

Tobias felt very cold in his gut.

They descended the stairs. When they reached the bottom, Tobias let out a breath. "I can probably walk by myself," he said, trying to ease out of Bialy's grasp.

Bialy ignored him. Instead of letting go, he tightened his grip on Tobias's arm.

"Izawa is a fool," he said, making casual conversation as they limped on in the near-dark. Shipping containers loomed on either side, giving the

impression that they were walking through some shadowy canyon. “Thinking he could turn father against son.” His tone was odd. He didn’t seem to be talking to Tobias as much as himself... and not happily. “Despite all their differences, there must be something of nature in it. Do you know much about wild horses, Tobias?”

The question came suddenly. Tobias blinked, glancing up and trying to read Bialy’s face. It was in shadow, too.

“Not really,” he said truthfully. “Just domestic ones.”

“I’m admittedly not a horse person,” said Bialy. “But I’ve seen a lot, working with Jove. We once spent a period of time in Mongolia. The horses there all belong to people, but they live wild until the time comes for them to be rounded up and broke to ride. In feral populations, there are always fights.”

They kept going, and Bialy kept talking. Their uneven footsteps echoed strangely in the eccentric shapes of the warehouse.

“They fight over the same things people do,” said Bialy. “Territory, mating rights. I found two things particularly interesting about them. Firstly — the brutality of the fights. For prey animals, they can be vicious animals. But secondly, oddly — I don’t think I saw a single fight end in an animal’s death. They did just enough violence to make a point.”

He paused.

“Like I said, I’m not a horse person, but I did respect that about them. I used to think that was appropriate behavior. Do no more harm than was absolutely necessary.”

Tobias suddenly, vividly pictured the man dying on the ground in the bathroom back on the yacht. His thrashing feet. The sound of the knife.

“Do you know how to play chess?” Bialy asked abruptly.

Tobias’s legs gave out, pain and fear lancing through them both in an icy shock.

‘The king and the rook.’

Bialy didn’t wait for his answer.

“The king is the least powerful piece on the board,” he said. “He can move only one space at a time, and relies on the maneuvering and protection of every other piece on the board. Even pawns serve more of a purpose.”

Tobias said nothing. He was sure Bialy must have been able to feel the increasingly fast beat of his heart.

“Even you will come to serve a purpose,” said Bialy. “Though I wasn’t sure at first what role you would play on the board. Nobody was supposed to get out of that barn alive.”

Tobias felt his fear slowly transforming — as it was wont to do — into resignation.

“Those cough drops must have helped,” he said, deeply bitter. “Your cold sounds like it’s gone.”

Bialy’s chuckle was low and rich.

“Must have been seasonal,” he said, and dropped the final semblance of hoarseness.

How had Tobias described that voice to Jove?

‘People who park wherever they want, don’t check prices on things. Someone who went to school somewhere. Buys horses, doesn’t ride them. Nice watch. That type.’

At least, Tobias thought with a final mental shrug, at least he had remembered the voice correctly.

“Fuck you,” he said decisively.

“Is that all you have to say?” asked Bialy, that deep chuckle resonating one more time against Tobias’s side. “I was sure you’d be so much chattier. Did you finally get tired of running your mouth?”

“You know he’s going to kill you, right?” Fatality loomed, but Tobias decided he didn’t care. Fuck it. He’d come so close to death so many times now. How was this different from helping to load a panicked, eighteen-hand filly into the starting gate? How was it different from facing the leering, alligator-snap of one of the sonnabend? Like... end it or don’t. He was over it.

“Oh, Toby.” Bialy’s normal voice turned out to be deeply condescending, tempting Tobias to stomp on his foot out of gut distaste. “Why do you think you’re still here? Do you think you’re big enough to make a useful body shield? The man is deep, doomed in love with you. He won’t act with your life on the line.”

Tobias ground his teeth against the words, the flutter in his stomach — his fatal resignation weakening before the word ‘love’.

“Don’t call me Toby.”

“All right.” One more chuckle. “Let’s go on then, Mr. Nimh.”

They hit a wall. Tobias looked up, eyes climbing as far as the darkness would allow. All gray. All ugly. What a shitty place to die, he thought.

“Last stop,” said Bialy. “Push the button, Mr. Nimh. If you don’t mind.”

Tobias reached out and tapped a button, and a set of doors slid open. Bialy marched him through and out onto a platform. Down below was more of the same — warehouse connected to warehouse, how the hell much contraband could one island hold? — but here the space was close to empty, and close to well-lit.

One half of the space was as pitch black as a cave mouth. The other half, their half, was comfortably bright.

The middle of the room made up a strange gradient, a twilight space. A question mark. Something about it was dreamlike... transitory.

It was out of that twilight that Hadrian reappeared, just like he had promised Tobias he would.

He was not alone.

Tobias didn’t recognize the man slumped over Hadrian’s shoulder, but assumed it must have been Dio. He had the look — dark hair, blue eyes. Clothes crispy with dried blood.

Spitting image of his father.

Nerva was in the same condition, looking either beaten half-catatonic or sedated. Hair a mess, glasses nowhere to be seen. Nothing like the frosty Clark Kent Tobias had met on the yacht. He hung over his father’s shoulder.

And God, Jove looked like shit, too.

Tobias wondered how the hell the four of them had passed the last few hours. Had someone dunked Dio and Nerva in a vat of blood, like a TV villain dipping a spy in acid? At least he knew the reason Jove had a big splotch of red on his shirt — though exactly why he was missing some clothes, well, that was a mystery.

Before either party could enter into a dramatic monologue, Tobias blurted out, “I found your rat.”

He heard Bialy’s mouth close with an angry click of teeth.

Jove’s expression didn’t change at all, and neither did two of his sons’. Possibly because they were drugged.

Hadrian laughed.

When Jove spoke, it wasn’t to Tobias, which seemed rude. Shouldn’t he have been shouting some kind of last minute love confession?

“Didn’t get the codes, did you?” he asked Bialy. Voice mild.

“Unfortunately not,” said Bialy. “Apparently it’s not my day. None of you managed to kill each other, either.” He clicked his tongue. “I didn’t

think today would be simple, but two points of failure? Almost a wipe.”

“I’m curious,” said Jove. “Did you think I would end up killing my sons over some failed rebellion, or did you think they would end up killing me if sufficiently baited?”

“Ideally,” said Bialy. “You would have killed them, and then in your grief put a bullet in your brain. That would have made my life incomparably easier.”

“I’m surprised,” said Jove. “You’ve always demonstrated good judgment. I relied upon your instincts for decades because they were so often correct. How is it that your judgment has failed here, so significantly?”

Bialy’s tone changed.

“I didn’t misjudge you. I *mistook* you for someone else.”

It was an ugly tone.

“I thought I was still working with the Jove of decades ago,” said Bialy. “Softened from retirement, but fundamentally the same. I was wrong. You’re a different man, now. A weaker man.”

“Weaker?” repeated Jove. His lips twisted. It wasn’t a smile. It was terrifying.

Tobias felt cool metal touch his temple, and saw that terrifying look melt right off Jove’s face.

“I’ve known you for so long,” said Bialy. “But I’ve never seen you in love.” He paused, and asked, “Is it frightening?”

Tobias couldn’t see Bialy’s expression, only Jove’s — and it was horrible.

Tobias had never seen such a clear promise of death on someone’s face before.

“What do you want?” asked Jove.

“Just a little patience,” said Bialy calmly. “Perhaps another minute. I pressed the button to loose the creatures before leaving the control room, so if they’re following the smell of that pig’s blood on your boys, they shouldn’t be far.”

Silence.

Jove stared up at the platform for a minute, then whipped his head around to stare into the darkness.

“Again?” Hadrian groaned in overstated aggravation. “I’m getting real tired of wrangling those things. Fuck it. They’re free range now.”

Bialy said nothing. Tobias could feel him waiting — could feel a tremor in him. Excitement? Apprehension? Both?

Then they heard it.

A low whistle.

The sound snuck out of the dark before any actual animal — one clear, assertive whistle followed by a number of echoing whistles.

Then the eyeshine appeared.

Little pale gold dots, floating in pairs in the blackness.

There came the sound of hooves clicking on tile.

Jove looked back up at them — no. At Tobias.

Tobias realized he was taking his last look. Treasuring it.

There was no place to go. Even on a fast horse, Hadrian had only been able to evade them because he knew the twisted underground and where to hide. Now there was nowhere to hide. And they had both Nerva and Dio, barely conscious, coated in dry blood.

Tobias realized something with an electric jolt in his gut.

Dry blood.

Even the red patch on Jove's shirt was the maroon-brown of blood that had stopped.

He remembered the silver gray from the waterfall, the way the creature had seemed distracted by the stink of blood on its own muzzle.

The first of them slid out of the dark. Then a second.

These were taller than the ones Tobias had seen in the jungle, and they had a different shape — shorter-backed. Thicker necks. A heavier front end balanced out by powerful hind legs. They reminded Tobias of what he had seen painted back on the yacht... something more like a Barb horse, built like a bullfighting mount from Spain with a shorter, slighter head.

It was easy to see them as beautiful. Easy not to be frightened until they had emerged fully from the shadows, until their nostrils flared and their lips parted, teeth gleaming white.

They seemed cautious at first, as if suspicious of the light.

But they were growing bolder.

Tobias could definitely feel Bialy's heart pounding now, and in that moment finally found what it was to actually *despise* a person, despise them for the fear underlying their ambition.

Coward.

Jove didn't turn his head. He showed no fear even as the things crept out of the dark.

Hadrian didn't fear, either. He cast the things a look like a shrug, an '*I may as well die this way.*'

The nearest of the Saturday horses was only feet away from them, nostrils flaring after the smell of blood, when Tobias felt it.

Calm.

Something crystal clear occurred to him.

He hadn't realized, these past few years, that he was living his life without love, without intimacy, without really caring about himself or really any other person. He'd grown so used to a solitary existence, finding friendship on four legs, that he hadn't realized there was something missing.

He didn't know if what he felt was love — didn't know what romantic love *felt* like — but he knew now absolutely what it meant to prioritize a life over your own, to feel such softness for someone that giving up your own life was more than easy.

He felt no fear at all.

He bit down hard on his lower lip and spat blood over the side of the platform.

Instantly, every creatures' head whipped around, and they gulped breath eagerly.

"You—" Bialy exclaimed, and furiously jammed his gun against Tobias's forehead.

Tobias laughed.

"What?" he asked. "You better not shoot me. All that blood... it'll get all over you."

Bialy dragged him back, slapped at the control panel on the door to open it again. There was a polite sounding beep from the panel, requesting a code. Bialy cursed wildly and began punching in numbers.

The motion only attracted the creatures' attention even more.

They passed right by Hadrian, Dio, Nerva, and their father.

Tobias saw the anguish on Jove's face, and for a moment he felt regret. Sympathy.

He thought, *it would have been nice, if things had turned out differently.* And then the creatures flooded up the stairs.

Rushing bay, chestnut, black, mane, hooves, teeth. Garbled noises. A cackling, whimpering, eager dog-starving sound.

Bialy threw Tobias towards them.

Tobias tried to catch himself on the rail, but his leg gave out, and down he went.

And he was under the hooves.

Each second became like an hour — he saw and memorized every white fetlock, every chipped hoof. The whole of the rush of animal fury and speed that passed over him.

Bialy, that idiot, thought Tobias distantly.

‘Not a horse person.’ Well, you didn’t have to be a horse person to know not to run screaming from predators.

Falling facedown might have saved Tobias; his bloody mouth ended up pressed into the floor, hidden by concrete.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the doors fly open, and human feet run through — followed by dozens of hooves.

Then the screaming *really* started.

Each animal raced eagerly through the door, following the sound of death.

Tobias realized his heart was pounding. He only registered the terror in it when the hooves had disappeared, when the doors stood empty and open, and it occurred to him that hey. Doors worked both ways and they could come right back out.

Adrenaline launched him to his feet to shut them.

He froze.

One of the sonnabend remained. It was just taking the final step up onto the platform, trailing behind the others in a leisurely contrast to their mad rush.

Tobias realized he *knew* this one.

The painting.

The hundred and fifty million painting of the golden monster that wasn’t actually a painting.

It was the very creature he’d helped Jove to win.

Now, it looked at Tobias with a surprisingly readable expression — the mild curiosity of a strange horse, neither friendly nor standoffish. Not yet. Waiting for a reason to act.

Tobias's instincts, his muscle memory, the automation of a lifetime spent with horses, kicked in before his brain could.

Just as if the thing were a horse, Tobias reached out and gently pinched the curl of one nostril.

He gave it a wiggle.

The creature flared its lip, bobbed its head to free its nose, and gave a deep and dragonish snort.

Tobias imitated the snort, the blowing rattle of air, the same way he teased horses dancing anxiously at the end of a lead rope as if to say 'See how silly you sound? Now calm down' and often they did.

The animal blew hot air once more, swished its tail, and passed Tobias by.

As soon as the thing walked through the doorway, Tobias slammed his hand down on the emergency close button.

Whoosh.

He hit the ground before the doors had finished closing.

All the air went out of his lungs, all the strength from his body.

Suddenly he could feel all the pain and terror of the day.

It went through him in a single flash — Tobias shuddered once, and then laughed.

"Haha," he said. "Oh, Jesus. What the fuck."

He looked up as Jove mounted the stairs, wearing a face like a man pulled still-living from the grave. Tobias said in a weary voice, "I want waffles."

He didn't even get the chance to specify that he wanted them with bananas — bananas and chocolate chips — before Jove was crushing him tight, was kissing him blood and all, giant hands trembling on him and gathering up his legs, cradling him close like some infinitely precious, absolute mess.

It was nice.

It was really nice.

"I'm sorry," he said, struggling to talk around Jove's insistence on kissing him desperately. "Galloping off was stupid, I lost your horse and then I managed to get held *hostage*—"

"Shut up," said Jove hoarsely, and kissed him about twenty more times.

Hadrian, standing at the bottom of the steps having helped sit his brothers down, looked up at the closed doors and scratched his chin.

“Huh,” he said. “I guess they can climb stairs after all.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Jove

Jove had adhered completely to the doctor's orders. Down to the hour.

At some point during the odyssey of that day Red had cracked a fibula, which meant a minimum six weeks of what the kid bitterly referred to as 'stall rest'.

For someone used to spending twelve hours a day on his feet, being relegated to a couch or the bed turned Red into an even bigger brat than Jove could have thought possible. He snuck off whenever left unattended, visiting and befriending every horse in Jove's barn. The kid claimed innocence, but the chorus of nickers whenever Jove walked him through the building gave him away. He had a resolute disinterest in anything on TV and was blisteringly rude to anyone Jove left to babysit.

Jove had filled the gap left by Bialy with two not quite new faces, the men he still thought of as Glasses and Hickey even after learning their names. Pinto and Kaleb didn't blink at any risky legwork Jove set them to, but when it came to supervising the kid, they immediately turned to each other and rock-paper-scissored for dear life.

Red was particularly cruel to Jove.

The doctor who treated him had given Jove a *very* specific lecture about what activities were permissible during the recovery period, and Red was absolutely furious with him for following those orders.

The doctor had left plenty of reasonable things on the table, but the kid took the refusal of full-on penetrative sex as a personal insult.

After insisting to Jove that he'd been fucked with worse injuries, only to come up against an uncompromising brick wall, Red went on the offensive.

Jove couldn't spend ten minutes around the kid without a hand snuck into his pocket or an ass-grind against his crotch.

If it hadn't been for the process of restructuring the Hanged Men keeping him busy, Jove probably couldn't have held out.

Fortunately there was plenty of work to do. Traitors to be purged. Money to move around. Sons to be managed. Jove was cautiously reestablishing relationships with his sons, and each had come out of the betrayal differently. Hadrian was increasingly enthusiastic... and suspiciously cooperative. Dio had surprised him by diving back into the

work, all but taking Nerva's place, while Nerva... well, Nerva had taken Hadrian's place in the hospital, checked himself out after a week, and disappeared after claiming there were rats still within the organization.

Jove couldn't blame him for being paranoid.

He was watching his own back as well. After finishing the bulk of the work on the coast, he retreated back up north.

He took the kid with him.

Red was temporarily distracted by the new place. Delighted by the arrival of snow and charmed by the simpler living of Jove's cabins — at least, simple compared to the excess of the island manor — he'd taken a few days off being a rabid cocktease. He even seemed to forget the final hour of the doctor's stall rest mandate.

Jove did not forget.

That morning he stirred with the hunger of a man starved.

Jove sat up in bed to find the kid already awake.

Red had wrapped one of the quilts around himself and cozied up to the cold window, gazing out with his face glowing. Feeling the bed move, he glanced over at Jove.

"Look," he said, pointing out the window. "More snow." He turned back to the window and remarked, "It's really coming down. I know you probably have a tank to clear roads with, but it might be fun to play at being snowed-in—"

His words were cut off with a gasp and a shudder, as Jove's face sank into the curve of his throat.

"Mm," said Red, letting out a soft groan and tilting his head up, giving Jove room to suck. There was mild, playful reproof in his voice. "I thought it was my job to tease."

"I'm not teasing," said Jove flatly.

He buried his teeth in the back of Red's shoulder like a leopard taking a gazelle.

The kid melted with a whimper, unresisting as Jove dragged him down, pressed him belly-flat on the bed and pulled down the boxers he slept in.

The kid let out another gasp when Jove's cock dug in between his thighs.

Just like the first night they'd touched each other, Jove thrust back and forth between his legs. Short, hard thrusts. Thumping Red's whole body

emphatically underneath him. Even without penetration, it was rough. Giving him an idea of what he was in for.

Red whimpered again as Jove's much larger body slammed against his back, his thighs, his ass.

"What about the doctor's orders?" he asked, tone just as hopeful as it was apprehensive.

Jove unlatched his teeth from Red's shoulder just long enough to say softly in his ear, "Do you think I haven't been watching the calendar?"

"Oh," said the kid weakly, only to yelp as Jove bit down again, teeth capturing the nape of his neck.

The 'doctor's orders' had probably given Red the wrong impression of Jove. So too had the oral, the careful fingering of the past several weeks. He could be courteous, he could be generous. More than generous.

And he had been.

That was over now.

He'd put the lube handily in reach the night before, awaiting this morning, and his hand found it now without looking.

Red took the first of Jove's fingers with another yelp, and words seemed to fail him as those fingers skipped right over their usual teasing, driving on instead with unmistakable purpose. He said something along the lines of "Hnngh," and grabbed the sheets. His high whine as Jove's force increased suggested deep need as much as it did suffering.

Jove stopped to let him pant.

"If you don't tell me to stop, I won't," he said, and made himself brutally clear with another thump of his fingers, forcing out another whimper. "You told me you wanted this. Did you mean it?"

He withdrew his fingers, took his cock in hand and brought it to bear right in place, the head pressing just enough to threaten.

"Yes," said Red, with a ragged shudder. Jove looked down at the fresh prints of his teeth, saw the skin under them trembling.

Good.

Jove lowered his head, pressed his lips to the back of Red's ear and murmured there.

"I want you to always remember this," he said. "I don't want to have to make this point again."

"What point?" Red managed to ask weakly.

"I love you," said Jove. "And you belong to me."

“Oh,” breathed Red. “That point. I think I already knew that one—”

He didn’t get to finish, all his words morphing into a single cry as Jove helped himself in, guiding his cock with his hand just as he thrust, sliding, penetrating, coming to rest deep.

Deep... but not all the way.

Jove waited, let the kid shake and let out little agonized noises, little ecstatic noises and say “Fuck, oh fuck,” over and over again.

Then Jove gave him the last two inches.

Red said one last strangled “*Fuck*,” and then ran out of intelligible noises as Jove fucked him.

Hard. Panting. Rough and hot, too hot under the heavy quilt, but they didn’t stop. Stopping would have been impossible. The triumphant lock of their bodies came with a finality and a momentum neither of them had any control over. Red was so slight under him, so soft, and Jove buried himself in all that silk, brutalized it with teeth and bruising hands and a hard, driving, continuous fucking from behind.

Red became a mindless, moaning, vibrating mess. He first grabbed the sheets, clawed them half off the mattress, then grabbed at the pillows, the quilt. Finally, in an act of mercy, Jove let go of the kid’s waist to reach around him, and Red immediately seized his wrists. He gripped so tight that the nerves in Jove’s hands sang.

His body tried to rise off the bed, and Jove put him back down with sheer bulk, forcing him belly-flat again with nowhere to go. Nothing to do but let Jove have him.

Fill him, fuck him, mark him.

Jove buried his face in the back of Red’s neck, eye closed, inhaled the sex-sweat smell of him, listened to the moans pulse raggedly out of his mouth.

The restlessness of several decades dissolved in the face of this savage peace.

The peace of having the thing he wanted, the thing he loved, lying underneath him. Taking and loving him and moaning from the pain, the bliss of it.

Red’s voice suddenly changed.

He went from fuck-sobbing to trying to speak, words falling out of his mouth in bits and pieces.

“Jove.” He managed to get the name out. “I, I. I’m.”

Jove knew what he meant, and shifted his weight up a fraction, rebalancing only to throw himself in deep again. Slamming his full length into Red, pounding harder, giving it faster.

Even in the face of certain death, Jove hadn't ever witnessed the kid fall apart like he suddenly did when he came. Collapsing, going rigid, collapsing again. Body rolling. Making an excruciating noise — something that might have been a scream if he'd had enough air.

Jove made Red endure him all the way through the orgasm. Spread Red's legs with his knees, sank and slammed insistently deeper.

He didn't stop until he finally got that scream.

Only then did he grab the kid's chin, twist his head around, and kiss his mouth hard. Stop still inside him. One, two more deep thrusts. Then finishing with a full body shudder and a dizzying ecstasy that would have taken him off his feet if he hadn't already been prone.

They both kissed senselessly for a long time.

Outside, the snow kept falling, filling the world with a soft and dampening white.

—

Jove's lips carried the half curl of a self-satisfied smile as he watched Red limp valiantly through the drifts. Already short, Red practically had to wade through the snow, his freckled face getting more and more irate as the stuff fell into and accumulated in his boots.

But still, he refused to so much as glance at Jove for help.

He'd been pouty ever since he saw the deep, purpling bruises sprouting on his shoulders.

He would remember those, Jove thought.

And was satisfied.

They made their way up to the barn, where the roofs were nearly indistinguishable from the winter skeletons of the broadleaf trees, everything completely overtaken by snow. None of the horses were in their runs. As Jove and Red approached, a few stuck their heads out of their stalls and blew steam into the air, but didn't budge out into the cold.

A truck and trailer waited up by the road.

As they grew near, the sound of arguing voices grew clearer, until they rounded a corner to find Glasses and Hickey — no, Pinto and Kaleb —

bickering over who had gotten the wheels stuck in the snow.

When the two of them saw Jove, they snapped to attention and took on reserved expressions.

“Sorry, sir,” said Pinto. His glasses were steamed up from arguing. He kept talking as if he hadn’t even noticed, as if his vision was perfectly clear. “We’ll have this dug out ASAP.”

“It’s no problem,” said Jove. He noticed both of them twitched a little, probably unnerved by his mild tone and the polite words. Amusement rippled through him. He glanced at Red, who was ignoring all of them and seemed to have even forgotten about the snow, eyeballing the trailer greedily. “These are the new arrivals?”

“New arrivals, old arrivals,” came Hadrian’s voice as he hopped out of the hub of the truck. Thrusting his hands into the pockets of an enormous quilted coat, he grinned at them. The terrifying expression was somewhat lessened by the winter hat, which featured reindeer and had a sparkly gold puffball at the top of it. Like the star on a Christmas tree. “Hello, Dad. Hello, future stepmom.”

Red gave him an ugly look.

“Hadrian,” said Jove in warning.

Hadrian rolled his eyes and announced, “I’ve brought your presents. Sorry they aren’t wrapped.”

He spun his hand, and Pinto and Kaleb jumped to it, opening up the back of the trailer and letting down the ramp. Hadrian promptly climbed up, disappearing for a moment. There came the sound of snorting, hooves stomping, and Hadrian swearing. A moment later he called out, “Where do you want this bitch?”

Red’s eyes lit up at the words, and a smile broke out over his face when Hadrian emerged leading Angel.

“I thought those things ate her,” he said, looking up at Jove with surprise.

“She’s fast,” said Jove simply, not adding that upon returning to the island stables he’d found the sonnabend huddling by the gates with big, dinnerplate hoof-sized bruises on their sides.

The mare took a look around, blew out steam, and began to march down the ramp, dragging an unprepared Hadrian.

“Take this,” demanded Hadrian, passing the lead rope to Kaleb, who took it automatically but stared blankly at the mare as if he’d never seen a

horse before. Angel immediately began investigating his pockets for treats.

Hadrian went back up the ramp. Jove looked to Red, anticipating his reaction — and found the kid having apparently teleported to Angel’s side, reintroducing himself to the mare with a beaming smile.

Jove felt his own lips echo that smile.

“What about this one?” asked Hadrian.

He stood at the top of the ramp holding a second horse — this one much smaller.

Red-sized.

Jove had spent the past month hunting for just the right animal. Something in the area of fourteen hands, something good-minded, something with the sense of a cowpony but better movement. Something that would float.

A little Welsh Cob, a little Connemara, the pony gelding would have been handsome if he hadn’t been overwhelmingly shaggy with a winter coat. Liver chestnut in color, he was an almost chocolate-y black at the moment, with his flaxen mane standing up in an absurd blond puff.

Someone — Hadrian — had fastened an enormous green ribbon to his halter.

Now it was Jove’s turn to give his son a dark look.

Glancing at Red, Jove found him still preoccupied with Angel, and gave a loud cough.

Red finally noticed the other new arrival.

“Aw,” he said. “Cute. Who’s that for?”

Before Jove could sigh, Hadrian scoffed, and said, “Who do you think? Do you see any other five foot nothings around here?”

Jove’s expression went dark, but then Red wheeled on him, hazel eyes huge.

Then those eyes narrowed.

“You got me a pony,” he said, sounding like he was leveling an accusation.

“You don’t have to ride him,” said Jove, who had anticipated a certain amount of pushback. He didn’t imagine the kid was eager to hop on another horse right away after what he’d experienced. “But if you decide you want to try again—”

“A pony,” said Red again, with offended disbelief in his voice. “All that money, and you couldn’t have sprung for an Andalusian? Or a champion

retired off the track? I want a *fast* horse, something fire-breathing, maybe a big wild mustang—”

Jove grabbed the kid by the collar, calmly bent and scooped up a handful of snow, and shoved it into his face.

“Do you have the other two?” he asked Hadrian.

“Yeah,” said his son, carefully fixing a strand of the pony’s ridiculous mane. “But I imagine we should offload them directly into a pen? One with a tall fence.” He grinned toothily.

Red wiped snow out of his face, sputtering, and asked, “Did you bring those...?”

His expression was bright, tone eager.

“You’re not riding one,” said Jove, silently castigating himself for having abhorrent taste in romantic partners.

Red didn’t argue, but Jove didn’t trust the thinky look on his face for a second.

He would have delivered an actual warning if there hadn’t been a familiar, muffled buzz from Red’s pocket. The kid immediately pulled out his phone and waded a few feet off into the snow to answer it.

“Hi, Mom,” Jove heard him saying. “Yeah, yeah. I know. I had a busy morning. Yep, snowed here too. Roads look bad. We might—” Red paused, listening. “Uh huh. Yeah. Okay.”

Pinto and Kaleb exchanged glances, took hold of the horses, and made themselves scarce, heading off down towards the barn. Hadrian went back up into the trailer, presumably to check on its other cargo.

Red kept walking, slowly circling back around to Jove.

“Mm hm,” he was saying. “No, no allergies, I don’t think. Just make what you always make, Mom.”

He gave Jove a somewhat pained look.

“Yep, I know,” he said. “Yeah. Yeah, I love you too. Yes, I’ll call you before we leave. Please don’t try and scoop the sidewalk. Mom. No, seriously. Get that guy next door to do it again, he has a freaking snowblower. Yeah... yeah, I know. Okay. Yeah. Love you. Bye.”

He hung up. Jove waited.

“Well,” said Red. “You’re still invited to Christmas. And by invited, I mean it’s compulsory. She told me to consider it a ‘shotgun Christmas’.”

Jove eyed him. “Have you told her how old I am yet?”

“I have not,” said the kid. “I’m hoping your big, creepy gold eye distracts her from that. Just so you know in advance, the turkey is going to be dry as hell. She watched a docu series about salmonella years ago and since then she’s nuked everything she cooks. If you say anything, I’ll kill you in your sleep.”

“Noted,” said Jove, steeling his face and forcing it to remain serious.

“The pie is great,” said Red. “I recommend having as many servings as you can pack in your face. She’ll like you more.”

Without another word, the kid bent to scoop out some of the snow that had accumulated in his boots, then called, “Hadrian! Let me help with them,” and ran up the trailer ramp.

Jove listened to the sound of their voices, starting to bicker. It sounded like it might be a while.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his allocated once-per-season cigarette. He lit it, then stood a moment in reflection. Recalling the last smoke, the cigarette of fall, he recalled also the weary, gray cold of that morning. The grim drizzle and the man he had killed.

Today was much colder, but it was brighter. The snow was fresh and still soft. Soon it would settle, it would harden into more punishing drifts, but in this moment the powder was as light as he felt in his chest.

Jove took a single drag off the cigarette, for memory’s sake, and then flicked it away into the snow.

He smiled.

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About the Author

Daniel May lives in Nebraska with his cats, horses, and partner.

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