



Virtuous

LAURA LASCARSO

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DESCRIPTION

The heart is not commanded.

Giovanni is not sleeping, and he refuses to eat, as if trying to follow his beloved Master to the grave. Silvio is similarly lost as to how to care for his broken-hearted boy, and always there is the haunting sense that his brother is watching, reminding him in subtle ways that he is not adequately providing for his precious *schiaivo*.

But Silvio is determined to be strong, to be the Dominant Giovanni needs and the man he desires in this season of grieving. Together they will forge a new path with virtues unique to their own budding dynamic. But even with the discipline, rules, and structure Silvio provides, there is something more Giovanni craves...

Pain.

When Giovanni goes to dangerous lengths to reach his Master, all of Silvio's hard work threatens to unravel. Silvio must figure out a way to soothe his boy, or else Giovanni will succeed in his risky endeavor and be lost to him forever.

The third installment of the GIOVANNI trilogy, VIRTUOUS is an introspective MM romance about grief and healing, love and loss. Trigger warnings for addiction, self-harm, and mentions of past trauma and attempted suicide. This book is meant for entertainment purposes only, not as a guide to safe, sane, and consensual BDSM practices.

The bedsheet next to me is cold, absent is my lover.

“Giovanni?” I murmur, throat roughened by sleep. Squinting in the dark, I roll over and sweep the room to find him kneeling on the rug in front of our family portrait. Naked, bathed only in moonlight, he stares up at his beloved Master. The glow falling on his golden hair is the same that illuminates the oil painting. He must have angled the easel for the light to shine on my brother’s face, his features sharp but not yet gaunt from illness. Stately and severe, Valentin surveys the bedroom that used to belong to him, taking in the condition of his villa and his boy.

Not just his boy, his *schiaivo*.

“I didn’t mean to wake you, Sir,” Giovanni says, still gazing at the portrait as if hypnotized. The artist was masterful in capturing our moods. Heavy strokes, somber too. A nude Giovanni rests his head in Valentin’s lap while my brother pets his hair. The look on the boy’s face is blissful, content, an expression I’ve not seen since my brother passed away months ago. Valentin’s eyes are guarded but knowing. He alone holds the keys to the locked doors of Giovanni’s heart. I stand behind them both as an afterthought, a late addition to their intimacy. Perhaps even an intruder. I feel that way now, disrupting this late-night communion. I never know when to tighten the reins or when to loosen them. Perhaps I should let go completely.

“Have you slept?” I ask him.

“No, not really.”

I don't like it when he wanders. I prefer him tucked in right beside me where I can hold him close and know that he's safe.

“Come to bed, Giovanni.”

“A few more minutes, Sir? Please?” His voice is thick—he's been crying. Should I go to him or stay back? Demand his obedience or give him space to grieve? What is best for him? What can my heart endure?

Valentin would know what to do.

“Giovanni,” I say, firm this time. Reluctantly, he tears his eyes away from his Master, stands in a soft wash of white, and makes his way over to the bed. He's too thin, a mere shadow of himself. He's been losing weight ever since Valentin stopped eating solid foods, as if mirroring his Master's decline. The prominence of his bones is a glaring reminder of my lesser care. Valentin has left me everything—his fortune, his villa, his *schiaivo*. But what Giovanni and I have is fragile.

I hold the covers open for him to slip inside, and he presses his cold body forcefully against mine as if knowing how tenuous the thread is that connects us. I wrap my arms around him to offer him my warmth, at least.

“It's okay to miss him,” I say to acknowledge the loss, both his and mine.

He nods and lowers his head so that I can't see his face.

“Please do not hide from me.” I tap his chin, and he lifts his gaze, showing me his sorrow and his pain, a deep longing for what once was. It is a morbid, selfish thought that comes to me then. *I hope he grieves for me the same one day.*

“I miss him too, Gio. It's not the same, but I do miss him.”

He blinks, wetness gathering like droplets of ink on his long lashes. “Thank you for understanding. And for being here, for not leaving me alone...”

He buries his face in my chest, and I inhale deeply the scent of his hair. He chokes out a broken sob, and I grip him

tighter with a kind of wild desperation while my brother stares down at me from his noble throne. I imagine him grimacing and shaking his head slightly, a slip in his stoic expression as if trying not to let his disapproval show.

You are failing him, my brother says.

He is right.

GIOVANNI IS NOT EATING. HE MOVES HIS FORK AROUND THE plate to make it look like he's participating in the meal without putting any of the food into his mouth. To be polite. To go unnoticed. It's aggravating and it worries me. He is fading before my very eyes, becoming more ghostly and gaunt with each passing day. Following his Master to the grave, even though I'm sure that is the last thing Valentin would want. I wish I could physically drag Giovanni back to the living, slap him until his cheeks are pink and he's woken from this grievous stupor.

But you're not supposed to do that to depressed people. I've tried to be understanding, to be patient, but it's a struggle, and it's not working. If there were an endpoint in sight, perhaps I could hold on, but I cannot stand by while he slowly starves himself to death.

While I watch Giovanni from across the table, Ma and Anthony carry on a conversation about some local feud between two brothers who own the same deli and can't agree on where to purchase their meat.

"They may have to open a second store just to settle it," Anthony says. "Or buy the other one out."

"*Che brutto*," Ma says. *That's ugly*. "It shouldn't be like this. They are acting like children."

"I think they should let the customers decide," Anthony says and takes a big bite of Ma's baked ziti. "I'd be up for taste-testing."

I got Ma an apartment in town so she can be closer to her church friends and social activities, but she stays here with

Giovanni when I must go to Napoli for work. I've been doing as much as I can remotely to limit my time away. I'd like to bring Gio with me, but he's reluctant to leave the property. Valentin is buried here, and Giovanni visits his gravesite every day. He rarely goes into town, not even for church, and he hasn't played a gig since before my brother needed intensive care. Even around here, there is no music to be heard. Giovanni says he doesn't feel like playing, but there is the unspoken part of it, *not without my Master*.

To combat his self-imposed isolation, I've revived our Fortuna family dinners. They were a tradition in our household when we were growing up. No matter how busy my father was, or myself when I got older, Sunday night was for family. Even after I'd come out as gay to my mother at 23 years old, she expected me to be there for Sunday dinner. To me, it meant nothing had changed. Family was family. And we both need family right now.

"Why aren't you eating?" I ask Giovanni from across the table. It comes out louder than I expected. Conversation dies.

"I'm not feeling well, Sir." His tone is polite, but the way he looks at me, jaw-set and eyes narrowed, feels like a challenge. He is daring me to assert myself.

"Ma spent a lot of time cooking for us this afternoon," I say, thinking I might be able to guilt him into eating.

"Silvio," she says, not wanting to be caught up in our battle of wills.

"It's very good, Evelina." Giovanni gives my mother the kind of smile he rarely gives to me anymore. "I'm sorry I'm unable to eat right now. Maybe later."

Ma nods and asks if his stomach is giving him trouble, then gives him a list of home remedies that might help, herbal tea and ginger ale among them. Giovanni listens attentively but doesn't eat anymore. Instead, he lays down his fork and pushes his plate away. That small act feels like a quiet rebellion, only he is so very civil.

“May I be excused, Sir?” he says when my mother is finished fussing over him.

My eyes rove over his slight frame. The knobs in his shoulder are apparent even through the fabric his shirt, and the tendons in his neck are raised in sharp relief. The hollowed-out look in his eyes scares me. He is dying. I’m watching it happen.

“We’ll discuss this later,” I say. He nods, eyes catching on my frown, before taking his plate with him to the kitchen where he surely scrapes his meal into the trash. Ma and Anthony make conversation to ease the awkward silence, but as Giovanni re-enters the room, I say to him, “*Vieni qui.*” *Come here.*

He pivots and approaches me. Obedient, or so it would seem. He’s close enough that I’m able to reach out and grab him. His wrist is too slender—just holding his hand makes me feel as though I might break his bones. Laying my palm flat against the small of his back I ask quietly, “Do you need to go into your box tonight?”

I’ve caught him cutting himself a few times since Valentin’s death, which always makes me feel so helpless. Valentin used to punish him for it, but we’re not in a place where I could administer any kind of punishment and, even if we were, I wouldn’t know what to do. I was never the disciplinarian in this relationship.

He shakes his head. “No, Sir.”

“Are you going to bed now?” He spends a lot of time in our bedroom prostrating himself before that portrait.

“After my nighttime rituals, if that pleases you.”

“Eating your dinner would please me.”

He sighs, aggrieved by my request, then glances away as if it’s out of his control. He won’t tell me *no* outright; he just won’t do what I say. I think this is worse.

“We’ll talk about this in the morning,” I say, something Valentin always suggested when Giovanni was in a mood. “Goodnight, princess.” He leans down so that I may brush my

lips against his forehead. Other than cuddling in bed and touching for comfort, we haven't been sexually intimate since long before Valentin passed. I know he needs it—I need it too—but he's not in the right headspace. I can't make love to him when he's like this, sick with grief and only just surviving. Besides that, I want him to crave my touch, not simply tolerate it for my sake.

As soon as he leaves, Ma starts in on me. “He needs to eat more, Silvio. The poor boy is skin and bones. He practically rattles when he walks.”

“I know, Ma.” I grip my fork and stab at the pasta, chewing and swallowing without tasting it.

“Are there things he likes best? Ricotta pie, tiramisu? He used to love my panna cotta.” She lists a few more desserts, and I shake my head because it's not a matter of taste.

“He's been starving himself since Valentin got sick. Near the end.” To punish himself or because he's sad, because he doesn't want to go on without his Master. I look to Anthony, who saw a lot more of their daily interactions than I did. “Do you know how I can get him to eat?”

“He likes his routines,” Anthony says with a shrug, like he doesn't want to offend me. “The Boss was real strict with him.” He crosses himself and motions heavenward.

I nod and rub my eyes. The goddamned schedule that ruled every minute of their lives. I am not a schedule-type person. I prefer to act according to how I feel on any given day. If the weather is good, I go sailing. If not, I tinker. I don't crave routine, and I rarely plan ahead. I'm trying to adapt to Giovanni's needs, but I'm obviously not doing enough.

“How did Valentin get him to eat?” I ask, because if I could solve just this one thing, maybe the rest would follow.

“Boss wouldn't let him leave the table. Or he wouldn't eat until Gio did. Or he'd take away his... privileges.” Anthony nods toward my mother because we both know the *privilege* was sucking my brother's cock. That won't work as a deterrent either because there are no privileges to take away.

But perhaps there should be.

“I don’t know what to do,” I admit and run my hands through my hair. Maybe I should talk to his therapist, but she doesn’t speak Italian, so I’d need Giovanni to interpret, and I don’t necessarily trust him not to bend the truth, especially if she says something he doesn’t like.

“You gotta get tough with him,” Anthony says, raising one fist in a gesture of strength. “Show him who calls the shots around here. Boss always made sure Gio knew who was in charge. When he got bratty or mouthy, Boss put him in his place.”

Valentin’s treatment had always seemed callous for such a gentle soul, at times bordering on cruel. But it’s becoming more apparent that he knew far better than I what Giovanni needed.

Needs.

Dinner is subdued after that. I ask Anthony to escort my mother home, and I assume he will visit his lover and stay the night in town afterward. Giovanni and I will be alone in the morning. I’ll speak with him then.

I check on him in the bedroom, asleep in his Master’s bed, pale as a ghost and swallowed up by the pillows and blankets. Feeling his eyes upon me, I glance at the portrait and hear the echo of my brother’s voice, the first time he left Giovanni in my care.

“The important things for Giovanni to have are structure, stability, and rules. This is what I need you to provide for him in my absence, Silvio...”

“I’m trying,” I say, frustrated by my own impotence. “You certainly didn’t make it easy for me.”

He is silent, watchful. His shrewd eyes and stern mouth convey his disappointment.

I cannot relax under this scrutiny. In an effort to cleanse this bitterness from my soul, I head down to the beach, ruminating on how I might help to heal my grieving boy. I’m still angry at my brother for what he did—setting me up to fall

in love with Giovanni, then giving me just enough of his precious *schiavo* to make me want more. He kept me on a tight leash and refused to tell Giovanni the truth about his illness so that when Gio found out, he blamed me too, even though I'd been urging Valentin all along to be honest.

And now I'm left with a heartbroken young man whose whole world revolved around my brother, who couldn't take a piss without Valentin's permission, who looks at me with so much sadness and sometimes scorn because I am not his beloved Master. Valentin shaped him to be the perfect submissive—for himself but not for me. The *schiavo* is lost without his Master, pining for something I cannot give him.

I gaze out at the moonlit sea and listen to the waves, searching for answers in their quiet murmurings. I am not my brother, but for Giovanni, I must try.

We are at breakfast, engaged in a silent standoff. Giovanni will not eat the food he himself prepared. His poached eggs sit like two soggy eyeballs on his plate, staring at nothing. His toast is untouched.

“Are you going to eat that?” I ask.

“No, Sir,” he says with an edge of defiance in his voice, and I’ve already decided that I will not let it go this time. I will be firm.

“Come over here, Giovanni. And bring your plate with you.”

He makes his way over to me in his elegant, haughty stride, sets his plate down next to mine, then stands with one hip jutted and arms crossed, a bratty air. He was sometimes this way with Valentin, so I don’t take it too personally.

“Sit right here, princess.” I slide my hands along my thighs, and he softens to the name, then perches gingerly on my lap. I started calling him that because of his long hair and soft features, but it stuck around because he was also pampered like a princess by my brother. Valentin gave him whatever he wanted and, until recently, I’d thought that was their arrangement. But now I know Giovanni comes from money, which explains some of his entitled behaviors. I thought he was faking his snobby airs, but no. Someone was spoiling him long before Valentin.

But I like knowing Giovanni doesn’t have to settle, that he will demand excellence because it’s what he’s accustomed to.

It is daunting, yes, but in this aspect at least, I'm up for the challenge. And his heart—when I'm able to get past his defenses—his heart is the most beautiful I've ever seen. That is perhaps the most painful thing about his grief, that he is hiding his heart from me.

“Tell me why you won't eat your food,” I say.

“I'm not hungry,” he says, which may be true since his stomach has probably shrunk to the size of a walnut.

“Tell me, Giovanni, how did your Master get you to eat?”

This at least gets his attention. His eyes sweep mine cautiously as if it's a trick. “*Dimmi.*” I urge with a soft nudge to the ribs. *Tell me.* “I want to know.”

“Master weighed me every week. He set athletic goals for me. And if I dropped below a certain weight, he had my nutritionist reconfigure my diet.”

“And when you were sharing a meal together, sitting across from each other at the table as you and I are now, and you weren't hungry. What did he do then?”

“He'd say, ‘*Mangia, Giovanni,*’” he says in my brother's manner of speaking, sounding wistful and forlorn.

“And why doesn't this work for me?”

Giovanni licks his lips and stares at me with cold calculation. “Because you are not Master.”

Finalmente. It's a relief to hear him say it. He watches for my reaction while I contemplate my next move, deciding on a different tack.

“Your body is a temple, no?” I ask, and he nods, lips parting ever so slightly. “For your Master to worship and defile?” He nods again, blinking rapidly. “And what about me, Giovanni? What about the passions of your Sir?”

He moistens his lips and says, “Sir has not made any physical demands of his boy. If there is no temple to worship, then the body ceases to exist.”

Could it have been this easy all along? If I had taken him to bed the day after my brother's death, or even before, would he have submitted to me? Probably, but it wouldn't have been right. He told me before Valentin's passing that he could only serve one man. So, I backed off, hoping Giovanni would come around, that he would seek me for intimacy and sexual release, or even the sort of easy companionship we used to share. If that's truly what he wanted—what he wants—he only needed to tell me.

But Giovanni does not ask for such things.

“Tell me, Giovanni, do you wish to be used by your Sir?”

He nods slowly, enthralling me with his yearning gaze. I circle his waist with one arm and rest my hand against his stomach, under his shirt, allowing me the skin-to-skin contact that I crave. His body stills, curious. Perhaps even... aroused.

“Do you know why your Sir wants you to eat?” I ask quietly.

“To be healthy?”

“To be healthy and strong. *Forte*. Because when I squeeze you, I want your flesh to plump between my fingers. I want your ass bouncing like a ball when I fuck you. And my rope...” I get a little lost in imagining my beautiful boy restrained by my rope. “I want to string you up like a suckling pig and make you beg me to take you, and I must be able to do that without breaking your bones. What do you say to that, princess?”

Breathlessly, he whispers, “Sir's reasons are very compelling.”

I reach for one of the cold eggs. It nearly slips through my fingers, but I cradle it carefully between my digits and offer it to him.

“*Mangia, Giovanni.*”

He licks his lips delicately and opens his mouth to draw it inside, staring at me the whole time. I let him chew and swallow, then gather up the other. I feed him his toast too, one nibble at a time, and then I make him eat my bacon and the

rest of my croissant. It's more than he's eaten in months, and I stop there so he won't get a stomachache.

"*Bravo*," I tell him, wiping his mouth with one of Valentin's fancy linen napkins. "That's a good boy. Now, for dessert. On your knees, *ragazzo*."

His eyes dilate like an exotic bird as he slips gracefully to the floor. I stand and dig under the waistband of my pajama pants to pull out my cock, drawing down the elastic to hook it under my balls. I stroke myself until my dick swells to a magnificent proportion. The heat in my groin flares outward. Pulsing. Ready. My foreskin crawls back behind the dark-hued ridge, the head of it shiny and wet. My crown bulges, my slit drips, and all the while Giovanni stares, entranced.

"What do you think of my cock?" I ask, still standing.

"You have a beautiful dick, Sir." His hooded eyes track the movements of my hand as I slowly jerk myself.

"Am I worthy of your worship?"

He glances up, perhaps to see if my feelings are hurt. They are, but only a little.

"Yes, Sir. You are worthy."

"Have you missed having this beautiful beast inside your mouth?" With my thumb, I swirl my slick around the crown to further tempt him. He nods, looking hungry. "What have you missed, Giovanni?"

"Choking on your dick, Sir."

"And?"

"Drowning in your cum." His breath hitches, and he says in a rush of passion, "I've missed being used by you whenever you desire. I've missed being put on my hands and knees as it pleases you. I've missed your kissy noises too."

I make the kissy noise now and he looks a little light-headed. Valentin wasn't the only one who trained him.

"May I?" he asks, licking his petal pink lips, so eager to take it. "Please, Sir?"

“May you what, princess?” I like it when he talks dirty. And I want him to get used to asking for things. Valentin may have been a mind reader, but I am not.

“May I suck your cock, Sir? May I take it so deep in my throat that I gag on it? Will you please punish me with your every bruising thrust?”

“You beg so beautifully, sweetheart. Should I fill that pretty mouth of yours now?”

“Yes, Sir. Green.”

I smile. “Green is my favorite color.”

I sit down and grab the back of his head to drag him closer to me, so that he’s a little off-balance. I rub his face in my groin, smearing my scent all over him and leaving trails of slick all over his delicate features. With his eyes closed and his mouth open, he roots blindly, trying to make contact.

“I’ve missed this,” I say as I pull him back by his hair and stroke myself just out of reach. “I think it’s time we add this back into our schedule, yes?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“*Prendimi in bocca,*” I say as I stretch his pretty pink lips wide open with my swollen prick and sink into his warm, silken mouth. “Take it all, princess. I know you can. *Assaporami.*” *Savor me.*

His palate and tongue work me down slowly, sucking me deep into his silken throat with a desperate edge. It’s a thirst I thought he’d forgotten, but the sweet yearning resurfaces to my immense satisfaction. I let him lead for a few moments—I’m still a little stunned this ploy has worked—but soon enough the desire to take control comes rushing back to me. Like a tree tapping water from its roots, power flows through me, flooding my limbs until I am recharged. I grab hold of his head with both hands.

“*Guardami,*” I command. *Look at me.* Green eyes blink up at me, but his mind is already gone. “I’m going to use you until it hurts, then use you some more.”

He nods, as much as he can with his mouth full.

“Tap my leg if you feel faint.” He nods again, and with his soft hair threaded through my fingers, I punch my hips forward. He gags and I pull back, then thrust a little deeper, reminding him to whom he belongs—this mouth, these lips, this supple throat, and wicked tongue. No longer his Master’s spoiled rotten boy, he belongs to me now.

“You are mine, Giovanni,” I say, and I hope Valentin is listening. “You may miss him, you may mourn him, but you will not join him in death.”

He weeps a little while he sucks me, but he doesn’t tap my leg or pull away. I don’t like seeing him in pain, but I need him to accept this truth. He cannot have us both. He must choose to live with me or die with his Master, and I will not let him go without a fight.

He sucks me with vigor, the column of his throat shifting under my hand where I hold him, his hair like cornsilk threaded through my fingers. My arousal gathers like a summer storm, building toward something violent and alarming. Giovanni’s teeth graze my shaft, and I thrust my hips forward, ass clenching, and shoot down his throat with a thunderous roar.

“*Ingoia tutto*,” I command. *Swallow it all*. “Every last drop.” He chokes a little in his haste, and this is something I learned from Valentin too, to hold him there. I collect his tears with my thumbs and cradle his face tenderly in my hands. Even as my cock softens and the sensation of his soft suckling is almost too much, I remain.

“*Bravo*,” I soothe as I pet him. “Thank you for that pleasure. You are still very good at this, princess. Your Master taught you well.” I give credit to Valentin for training him so thoroughly. Giovanni is the best I’ve ever had, and I’ve had a lot.

I pull him off me and he smiles, a little bashfully, and says, “That was pretty explosive, Sir.”

“I had a lot to give.” I draw my thumb along his swollen lower lip, and he opens his mouth wider, allowing the tip of his tongue to graze my skin, an invitation for more. “You are still hungry?”

“Famished,” he says, voice hoarse.

“Later, pretty baby. For now, *mettilo via.*” *Put it away.* He tucks my dick back into my pants, then lays his cheek against my softened groin like it’s a pillow.

“Thank you, Sir, for making use of your boy.”

“You’re welcome, sweetheart. From now on, we’ll do this every morning. You eat your breakfast and then for dessert, you suck my cock. And when I say *mangia*, you *mangia*. *Accordo?*”

“Deal,” he says.

“And when I’m not here, you take a photograph of your meal before and after you’ve eaten. No cheating. If you need to meet with a nutritionist, I’ll find you one who’s Italian.” No more Americans. Outside of his therapist, the people who serve him will know my language, and they will answer to me.

“I have my meal plan from before, but I would like to meet with someone who knows the local cuisine.”

“I’ll make some calls.”

“They’ll need to create one for you too,” he says, eyeing me intently. He must want to put me on some bland, old man diet like he did my brother.

“But I am a young man, Giovanni.”

“And an exercise regimen,” he says and pokes my stomach.

“Are you calling me fat?” I drag him onto my lap and tickle him while he squirms and protests, until I’ve wrestled my arms around him and caught his slender fingers in my hands.

“I’m not calling you fat, Sir, but you do like to indulge.”

“Yes, and?” I lick his fingers one at a time, as if they were my mother’s delicious biscotti dipped in Nutella.

“I’m going to take care of you,” he says ardently and lays his hand flat against my chest. “Not only your sexual cravings but your heart too. I want it beating strong for me. I’m not going to lose you like I did my Master.”

My eyes sting and my heart aches for him. “*Povero piccolo,*” I say. *My poor little one.* How can I argue with that?

We compromise. Giovanni eats according to his new meal plan, and I try my best to follow mine as well. Luckily, grilled chicken and fish is still on the menu. Nutella is not, but the nutritionist makes an exception for me. I'm allowed a spoonful each evening after dinner as a treat. And I insist that we both have a cheat day to allow for a little more flexibility. Giovanni's rigidity can sometimes send him spiraling.

Giovanni supplies my mother and Anthony with meal plans as well, since they are also part of the family. My mother thanks him while giving me the eye. Anthony doesn't know what half the foods are, so Giovanni patiently explains it to him and offers to help with food preparation for our Sunday dinners to ensure everyone is meeting their nutritional goals.

"At least he's eating," Ma says to me privately after a family dinner of grilled salmon and roasted vegetables over brown rice. "But what about you, my son? No pasta? No cheese?" She shakes her head grimly and pats my tummy. "My poor boy."

"I am allowed some cheese and pasta," I inform her. "Just not as my main staple."

"But this is the food of our people," she says, gesturing with both hands.

I smile at her dramatics and lay a hand on her arm. "This is Giovanni's way of telling us he cares. Go with it, Ma."

To help Giovanni with his routines, I join him for yoga on the mornings I'm on the island. Giovanni instructs me on the various poses, and though I'm not nearly as flexible or limber as he is, I am improving. Mostly, I like to watch him twist and bend while thinking of the many ways I will restrain him with my rope. I fantasize about fucking him too, but I am resolved to wait for him to make his arousal known. My passions will not wane, and patience is a virtue of both the Dominant and submissive.

As part of our new exercise regimen, we go running three days a week along an island route that ends at my dock. I like to check on both the house and my boat regularly. The main house is largely untouched, still decorated with all of Valentin's things, so it's nice to be surrounded by my own possessions from time to time. I'm looking forward to getting back on the water soon. The chill of winter is beginning to thaw, and I'm hoping Giovanni will be up for some adventure.

One afternoon during our cool-down, while we're drinking water in the boathouse kitchen, a picture of my brother and me captures Giovanni's attention. It's from when I was a teenager and Valentin a man in the prime of his life. Both of us are smiling, standing on this very same beach, looking windswept and carefree. I say to Gio, "That was taken before Valentin purchased the property and built his villa. We were here on vacation, just the two of us, because I was getting into trouble at home. We fell in love with the island, certain that it was enchanted. Valentin asked me, if I could have anything in the world, what would it be? And I told him, a sailboat. He made me keep after my dream until one day, it came true."

Giovanni smiles, cradling the framed picture in both hands to study it more closely. "He had a way of making the impossible seem possible."

"Do you want to talk about him?" I ask because he sometimes needs prompting.

"What is your very first memory of Master?"

I have to think about that, because Valentin had always just... been there. Even when he moved to America, he was

still more involved in my life than our father who was distant and somewhat cold, spending most of his time at the pharmacy or else buried underneath the mountain of paperwork that went along with running a small business.

“I remember sitting on his shoulders while strolling through town,” I tell him. “How big he made me feel.”

“He made me feel that way too,” Gio says. “He always spoke to me as an equal, even when I was little. Even when I misbehaved.”

His phrasing makes me wonder just how old he was when they first started their relationship. Valentin was always frustratingly brief on the details of Giovanni’s past.

“What is your first memory of him?” I ask.

He draws one fingertip lovingly along my brother’s face. “I used to jump into his arms at our swimming pool. And later, when I was a bit older, he would watch me practice my dives. I remember him in his bathing suit with a drink in one hand and a cigar in the other, saying, ‘That’s a seven, Mattie, maybe a seven and a half. Point your toes next time.’”

“Mattie?”

Giovanni looks up in alarm. Valentin had called him that name a few times toward the end, and I’d written it off as a sign of his advancing illness, but the memory Gio describes makes it sound like he *was* a little boy when they met.

“How old were you when you met him?” I ask.

“I was seven.”

Seven years old? How is that possible? Valentin told me he’d picked him up off a park bench in Central Park and rehabilitated him, that he’d had to tell the mob I’d sent him from Milano because of some scrape he’d gotten into with a rival family. Now I wonder if any of that was even true.

“So, who’s Mattie?” I ask again.

“Poor, poor Matthew,” he says hauntingly and sets the frame back on the shelf. “Matthew had to die so that Giovanni could be born.”

I know that his Italian is near-fluent by now, so if it's not a language barrier, then the only other explanation is someone is lying to me.

"Come with me." I circle my arm around his waist and lead him to the sofa in the living room. "Sit with me, Giovanni, and tell me the story of how you met my brother. The truth, this time."

"I've never lied to you, Sir," he protests, looking wounded, and while that may be true, he also never corrected my brother's untruths.

"I'm not accusing you, princess. I only want to hear your side of things. Now, tell me about it."

"First, you must know that resurrection as a motif is fairly common throughout many religions," Giovanni says in his scholarly way, "Osiris and Tammuz of ancient Egypt, Adonis, Attis, and Dionysus of the Greco-Roman era and our very own Jesus on the cross. The phoenix dies every 500 years in a show of fiery flames only for its successor to rise from the ashes."

Eyes the color of sea glass stare back at me as if I could possibly decode his meaning from this explanation alone. Perhaps my brother could have, but I cannot.

"Valentin told me he found you on a park bench." I smooth my hand over the top of his. "That you were near death."

"Not near death. *Dead*. Matthew died that night. Cold and alone. He'd been dumped there by his so-called friends to be collected like garbage. Master saved me. He rechristened me Giovanni Ricci, and that is who I am now, Master's *schiaivo* and Sir's boy."

The pathways in Giovanni's mind are winding indeed.

"And who was it who died on that bench, princess?"

His eyes are downcast, staring at his slender hand enveloped by my own. "Matthew Aponte III."

Aponte, as in the Aponte family business? The crime syndicate my brother devoted his life to running and eventually dismantled because there was no living heir?

Matthew II was murdered, so this must be the grandson. That explains Giovanni's pedigree and his wealth, as well as the reason why Valentin had to hide his identity. Their bond began when Giovanni was just a child. No wonder Giovanni's devotion to my brother is so absolute.

"Valentin never told me," I say, an important bit of information he should have shared.

"Why would he?" Giovanni asks as if I don't have the right to know.

"You lied to me, Giovanni. You both did."

"You cannot hold the slave responsible for the actions of his Master," Giovanni says huffily, and though my first instinct is to argue back, to *make* him understand, that is not the way with Giovanni. He is difficult and proud. Like a distrustful horse, he must be led to water with gentle words and praise.

"I don't want there to be secrets between us, princess. How can I care for you and protect you if I don't know who you are?"

"I am Giovanni. That's all you need to know. Matthew was stolen, held captive by his mother, raped, then raped again by the people he thought he could trust. Matthew is dead!"

He starts to sway, the start of an episode I fear, and we are nowhere near his box, not that I would put him in it unless I absolutely had to. I pull him into my arms and move with him, gently back and forth, as if it were the ocean rocking us to sleep. I smooth the hair from his face and kiss his temple. "Breathe, my sweet baby boy." I take a deep inhale and release it in an exaggerated way. Eventually, his breathing returns to normal, and his eyes become focused again. "How's that?" I ask.

"Better, Sir, thank you."

I give him a few more minutes to recover, then press on with the conversation. "I don't want to hurt you or force you to confront painful memories from your past, but I need to know some things. You are here in my homeland, surrounded by my people, my culture. You know my language better than me.

My mother loves you as her own son, you've sailed on my boat and seen the pictures of my family all around us." I point to the various ones framed on my shelves and mounted on the walls. "What is the biggest fish I ever caught?"

"A bluefin tuna."

"And how big was it?"

"One hundred, fifty centimeters."

"It was 155 centimeters," I correct. "My appeal to you, princess, is that I do not hide myself from you, and I don't want you to hide yourself from me. You have to let me in, and you must be honest with me. That is the only way this will work."

"And what if I'm not?" he asks, pulling away to stare up at me with a quiet resolve.

"What do you mean?"

"If I lie to you, what will you do? Will you force me to leave?"

"Never," I assure him.

"Will you beat me?"

"I wouldn't do that either."

"Then what will you do, Sir? How will you enforce your rules? And what happens when I disobey?"

This is not just his curiosity; this is Giovanni testing my dominance and the boundaries I've set.

"You are asking to be disciplined?"

He nods, his expression grave. "More than just disciplined, Sir, I need to be punished."

A FEW DAYS LATER, I ASK GIOVANNI TO TAKE ME FOR A RIDE in the pretty red convertible my brother bought him for his last birthday. Since Valentin's death, it's been sitting in the garage, gathering dust. After showing him how to jump-start the dead battery, check the oil, and put more air in the tires, I settle in

beside him in the passenger seat with the top down. I now know that these gifts were my brother's way of expressing his love to his beloved boy and not an attempt to buy his affection. But I am a jealous, possessive man, never having had to share my belongings or my lovers, and at the time, when I could not have afforded such extravagant gifts, it felt like a slap in the face.

But here we are, enjoying a breezy afternoon in the most beautiful place in the world, my boy and me. Giovanni's hair is down, golden waves undulating in the breeze, and he is smiling.

It's only after the second turn he takes way too fast, that it is apparent Giovanni cannot drive. Then he blows right past a stop sign without even slowing down.

"Giovanni, you must stop when you see that sign. Do they not have stop signs in America?" I know that they do because I have seen them, but perhaps he doesn't realize it's the same here.

"Master said I only have to stop if there are people around or cars."

"No, you must stop fully, every time, whether there are others or not. That is the law. It's to prevent you from being hurt or hurting others in an accident. And, *caro*, you must stay in your lane."

"What lane?"

I gesture to it. How can he not know this? "The right side is your lane. You cannot drive in the middle of the road."

"But there's no one else coming."

"Giovanni."

It is a harrowing journey to say the least, and we arrive back at the villa half an hour later unharmed through my prayers to the *Madonna* alone.

"Where did you learn how to drive?" I ask when the car is parked safely back in the garage. Perhaps they have different rules in America.

“Master taught me, here on the island.”

“I can’t believe the Office of Motor Vehicles issued you a license. Did you take the written exam and finish the lessons?”

“What lessons?”

“Master let you drive without a license?”

“No, he bribed someone at the office to give me one.”

I demand to see this license and Giovanni produces it. It is authentic-looking, and I suppose if it was issued by the OMV then it *is* authentic, which brings into question all his other paperwork. Was it all procured through bribes? Is he even a real citizen? What sort of obstacles will we face if we choose to travel with his documents?

“Sir, are you mad at me?” Giovanni asks, noting my frustration.

“Yes, I am upset, at you and Valentin both. This is not the way to accomplish things. What if you’d gotten into an accident? What if someone realizes your paperwork is false?”

“Master told me that my documents are good, and he only let me drive on the island, not on the mainland.”

“What if you needed to one day, or wanted to?”

“But I don’t.” I snort at his mulishness and Giovanni says, “You should punish me.”

“Punish you for what, *caro*?”

“For the sins of my Master.”

He is taking responsibility, in a way. Or he wishes to test my authority. The punishment is clearly something he desires, so perhaps it is time.

“What would your Master do to punish you for something like this?” I ask. I’ve seen some of Valentin’s methods—effective but distressing.

“Well, because I admitted my transgression promptly, he’d probably make me write sentences or stand in the corner or

gag me and give me some menial chore to accomplish as a way to reflect on my misbehavior.”

None of those sound terribly appealing to me, except perhaps the last one.

“Come with me. I have an idea.”

GIOVANNI SITS ON THE FIBERGLASS DECKING OF MY BOAT surrounded by a massive tangle of nylon rope. I try to keep my gear organized, but I am only one man. Now, he is meticulously untangling the knots, bit by bit, while I quiz him on the traffic rules and regulations that I recently made him study.

“Who has right-of-way at an intersection?” I ask, going through an online practice test.

“The person to the right.”

“When are you allowed to make a right-hand turn at a red light?”

“In this country, never.”

“Very good. And how often are you permitted to check your phone while driving?”

“Sir,” he admonishes, giving me a sly look. “That’s a trick question. I’m only allowed to use my phone if it’s hands-free.”

“That’s right, princess. We will practice driving again in a few days when my nerves have recovered. How about a bike ride into town this afternoon?”

His eyes go wide, a look of dread on his face.

“What is it now?” I ask.

“Sir is going to be very disappointed in his boy,” he says woefully.

“*Dimmi, Giovanni.*”

“I don’t know how to ride a bike.”

Christ, what do they even teach children in America?

“Thank you for being honest with me, Gio. I want you to tell me when you don’t know how to do something. Sir will never be mad at you for that. Would you like to learn how to ride a bike?”

“Yes, I would,” he nods.

“*Bene*. I’m very proud of you for wanting to learn something new, and I will gladly teach you. What other new things would you like to try? We’ll make a list.”

He smiles shyly and glances down to where his nimble fingers are nested in my rope. “Well, I’ve never flown a kite before or learned to throw a baseball or started a campfire. In fact, I’ve never been camping...”

I nod for him to continue while taking notes on my phone. I am gratified by all that I can offer him. This is a good place to start.

I have been waiting for this day, longing for it too.

We are napping together in Valentin's bedroom—*my* bedroom now—when Gio, half-asleep and fully hard, starts rubbing himself against me in an amorous way. He must be caught up in a lusty dream, and my only hope is that I am featured somewhere in it. I turn toward him so that he may use my thigh as a pole to rut against. He murmurs and groans, his face flushed scarlet, and hisses through his pretty pink lips, “Silvio.”

“Yes, Giovanni?” I am ready, *more* than ready, to answer his call. His eyes flutter open, forehead dewy with sweat, locks of golden hair stuck to his cheek despite the coolness of the room.

“Sir, may I?” he pants.

“You may,” I whisper roughly. His gaze darts to the painting where his beloved Master stands sentinel. Giovanni winces and shuts his eyes before continuing to mount my leg with a frenzied fervor.

“Need more,” he says in a desperate pitch. Swiftly, I am on top of him, guiding his hand between his legs, underneath the elastic band of his underwear, encouraging him to grab hold of himself. “Master wouldn't...” He shakes his head, spying my brother's grim expression, caught in an internal conflict of Valentin's making. I would burn that damned portrait if I didn't know it would cause Giovanni such distress.

“Master wouldn’t like it,” I say. He nods, tearing at his lower lip with his teeth and pleading with his eyes, begging me to take over. I yank his underwear down his smooth thighs and toss it aside. Grabbing hold of his cock, I command, “Color?”

“Green.”

I reach for the weird little statue on the night table. A half-goat creature with a huge prick as the spout of the instrument, a souvenir from that kinky museum they visited. I pour a generous amount of oil into my hand and grab hold of him again, but I don’t stroke him. “Hang onto my neck, Giovanni, and fuck yourself with my fist. Look at me while you do it.”

He shivers and scoots closer, legs spread lewdly to bracket me on either side. His arms clasp around my neck as he propels himself upward, eyes locked heatedly on my own. The velvet of his cock is so slick and so warm, pistoning across my callused palm. He is irresistible when he lets go and allows his raw desire to consume him. I lean in for a kiss, and he takes my tongue eagerly, sucking me inside his hot mouth as if he’s been starved of it. We kiss with the ardor of long-lost lovers who are at last reunited. His is the sweetest nectar I’ve ever tasted, a cup from which my thirst is temporarily slaked but never quenched.

“That’s it, princess,” I urge, still with his dick rooted firmly in my hand, “You are so sexy like this, chasing your pleasure. Your pretty, pink cock fits so nicely in my big, manly fist. Come for me, Giovanni, come for your Sir.”

He roars with a sudden passion and releases into my hand, smooth prick spouting like a fountain, speckling my fingers with a white, pearly foam. He gasps, sweaty and disheveled with a spark of sexual vigor alight in his eyes, one that I’ve not seen in a very long time. I press my soiled fingers to my lips and savor the taste of him while he watches me closely.

“Have some.” I offer my hand for his careful attention. We each lick and suck the cum from my fingers, like that first ice cream cone we shared so long ago. Then I kiss his mouth slowly, purposefully, to remind him of the pleasure I can offer

him. With his lips swollen from my kisses and just as a hint of a smile unfurling, his eyes dart again to the painting. He looks worried. Even more concerning, he looks ashamed.

“Master would want you to experience sexual release, Gio,” I remind him. His pleasure was paramount to Valentin. I often admired the many ways my brother could make his *schiaivo* unravel.

“I know that, Sir.”

“But you still feel guilty?”

He stares down at his lap, his sweet phallus curled slightly over two hairless testicles. He still waxes his body hair, says he enjoys the ritual of it, and I’ve encouraged him to do as he pleases. Besides that, it will be better for my ropework if his skin is bare.

“*Dimmi*, Giovanni.” I am always begging him to tell me what’s on his mind.

“That was my first time since... since Master went away.”

He avoids the words *died* or *death* and treats Valentin’s passing as an extended vacation or a long business trip, something impermanent from which he will return. Giovanni has not faced the finality of it, not truly.

“Do you think your Master would want you to remain celibate?” I gently tuck his hair behind his pierced ear so that I might see his whole face.

“No, Sir.”

“Would he want me to touch you, to take pleasure from your body?”

“He would want that, Sir.”

“You suck me every morning and that doesn’t cause you such turmoil.”

“Master would want me to show my appreciation for your hospitality.”

It stings that he would think of me as simply a proprietor of this house and not the keeper of his heart. “You are much

more than my guest, Giovanni. You are my lover and my submissive.”

I lay his hand against my chest, the organ that throbs for him even more so than my cock. Sex with Giovanni is amazing, but I want also the intimacy and trust. I know that I must earn it, that I cannot have what he and his Master shared, but I do want to carve out something that is our own. I am reminded of the saying, *Al cuore non si comanda. The heart is not commanded.* Valentin could command Giovanni, but I must persuade him.

“I suppose it is harder for me to take pleasure than it is to give it,” he says. “It feels selfish and... *wrong.*”

“It goes both ways, giving and receiving. I am gratified when you come. Giving you pleasure is my sweetest delight.”

“But Master’s not here to... to give me permission.”

“Is it not enough that I give you permission?”

“That helps, Sir, but it would better if you demanded it.”

He wants me to have power over this too. Of course, he does. Valentin had complete authority over when his *schiaivo* came, *if* he came. Should I also assume that level of control?

“Listen carefully, Giovanni. When your passions ignite and your loins burn with a deep desire for release, then you must tell your Sir. In graphic detail,” I add because he has a command of language like no other. “You must tell me that your physical need to come is overwhelming you, and Sir will take care of it.”

“You’ll tell me what to do?” Giovanni asks hopefully.

“Every step of the way. Remember how you used to pleasure yourself for Valentin and me in the sauna?”

He nods, eyes blazing.

“You will perform for me too, according to my wishes. That means you may not touch yourself when I’m not around. And you are only permitted to seek release with my permission, according to my own desire.”

“That sounds good, Sir. Thank you for clearing that up. You’ll have to think of a proper way to punish me if I mess up.”

“How about no kissy noises for a week?”

He looks taken aback, then says, “Tough but fair. Though with your libido, I could probably convince you to give in after a day or two.”

I grin at his cheekiness. “Challenge accepted, princess.”

We settle into each other’s arms. My fingers find his soft skin to graze, as they so often do. Giovanni asks me in an idle way, “Do you think Master is watching us?”

I glance over to where my brother’s imperious gaze lands on the both of us, babes in his bedroom, his temple of worship, and answer him honestly.

“Yes, Giovanni, I do.”

“I WANT US TO GO TO CHURCH TODAY.”

It’s after breakfast on Sunday a few days later, and Giovanni is down on his knees, having just worshipped my phallus, still licking the cum from his lips like a cat at a saucer of milk.

“Church?” he says with a furrowed brow, not altogether pleased.

“It’s been a long time. The ladies are all asking about you. And I’m sure you have some things to confess?” I press my thumb against his wet mouth, and his lips give way easily to my intrusion. “Have you been sinning with your Sir, Giovanni? Have you been worshipping false gods from down there on your knees?”

He nods, eyes blown wide with lust. I timed this request for when he was most amenable to suggestion, and I’m happy to see my efforts are paying off.

“I have, Sir.”

“Then we will go, and you can make your confessions to God.”

Later, standing in the threshold of our closet, Giovanni says, “Will you dress me, Sir? It’s been a long time since I’ve been to town, and it would make me feel better if I didn’t have to worry about what to wear.”

“It would be my pleasure.”

I join him in the master closet where Valentin’s suits all hang in tidy rows, untouched by anyone but Giovanni because that’s what he requested. I keep the clothes I need in a chest of drawers. My one nice suit hangs in the closet of the guest bedroom. That room is also where I moved Gio’s box with his permission. I found it unsettling to sleep next to it at night.

I sometimes find Giovanni lingering in the recesses of their shared closet, surrounding himself with his Master’s suits. Now, he trails one hand lovingly over Valentin’s dress shirts as I survey his side of the wardrobe. I select a pair of navy pants with a slate blue shirt. Instead of a tie, I choose a length of green silk to wrap around his neck. I pull it taut between my hands, enjoying the feel of such an extravagant fabric. Valentin used to make him wear scarves like these often, to cover up the marks from being bitten and choked. I was always fearful that Valentin might take the breath play too far. He never did though, and Giovanni seemed to enjoy it. Does he miss that too?

With an artful flair, I knot the green silk around his slender throat. Giovanni places one hand against it, probably reminiscing about his gold collar, which he keeps in a satin-lined box and still looks at from time to time. One day, when we’re both ready for the commitment, I will offer him a new collar—my own—and I will insist that he never take it off.

While helping him undress, I notice the erection tenting his very tight underwear. The tiny triangle of fabric can hardly contain his bulge.

“Giovanni,” I say in a teasing voice while nudging the head of his prick, where his slick has darkened the material, “is there something you’d like to tell your Sir?”

“I would but I already have so much to confess,” he says with an impish smile.

“What is one more sin on top of so many?”

“Sir, you are impossible.”

“Tell me what you want, pretty baby,” I coax. He says nothing but stares intently at my mouth. “Do you want a blowjob, sweetheart. *Un pompino?*” I ask and he nods slowly. “Say it, princess. Tell your Sir what you are craving.”

“Will you take me in your mouth, Sir?” He blinks at me so earnestly. “Please?”

A *please* from Giovanni is the ultimate entreaty. I toss his clothes onto the bed and go down on my knees in the carpeted floor, yanking his underwear to his thighs and taking him deep into my throat with one long swallow. He is so tasty: his skin sweet and his tip salty with the tantalizing bouquet of male arousal, smooth and hairless wherever my lips and tongue make contact. Whimpering, he grabs hold of my shoulder with one hand while the other reaches out to Valentin’s dress shirts. I suck him as a hummingbird does a flower, licking the crown and fellating his shaft as if it were a delicious nectar-filled straw, until Giovanni is shivering and keening and spilling his release down my throat. He’s drawn Valentin’s shirt sleeve to his face and buried his nose in it, perhaps trying to smell what remains of my brother.

“Sir... *Silvio*,” Giovanni gasps, going up on his toes as I coax the last droplets of cum from his wet prick. I rise to embrace him, then back him up against my brother’s very fine suits and kiss him passionately, to remind him that it was I who made him come. I ravish him until his lips are cherry red and he’s in a state of disarray.

“What do you say, princess?” I ask when I finally pull away.

“Thank you, Sir.”

“It was my pleasure. Now let’s hurry or we’ll be late for your confession.”

THE WOMEN OF THE CHURCH MEAN WELL AS THEY FUSS AND fret over Giovanni. He stays glued to my side, shy after so many months of absence. They comment on how thin he's become, though it's better than it was, and they promise to load us up with hearty casseroles and cakes, none of which are on our meal plans, though we do not tell them. To refuse food is the ultimate insult. They invite us to play cards, which I graciously decline, telling the ladies we have a prior engagement. One of the women asks Giovanni if he's still considering the priesthood, which is news to me.

"I'm still trying to make my amends with God after He took my beloved uncle away from me," Giovanni says sorrowfully. The women all cluck and commiserate, and I wonder if the rumor that he and Valentin were blood relations may have done us a disservice. At least the "family tie" was on Valentin's mother's side, so hopefully if they ever catch onto our affair, it will be seen as scandalous but not incestuous.

"And, Silvio, when are you going to settle down, *bello mio*?" one of the women asks. "I have a beautiful granddaughter, Giorgia, who is coming to visit in a couple of weeks. I'd love to introduce you."

"I can tell you already, ma'am, that I am not good enough for your precious granddaughter. Besides, I am married already to the sea and devoted to my beloved sailboat, *Evelina*."

Ma says to the women, "It's true, my lovelies. I never saw a man more committed to sailing than my dear Silvio. He's a wonderful son and an excellent sailor, but he would make a terrible husband, I am sure."

They shake their heads and tsk at Ma's words, and I shoot her a grateful smile. She knows I'm gay and that Giovanni is my lover, that Valentin and Gio were lovers as well. She may have even seen our dungeon, though if she did, she's never mentioned it to me. My mother has come a long way in accepting my sexuality and my lifestyle, and she loves Gio

like a son. These lies are cumbersome, but in a small provincial town such as this, they are somewhat necessary.

“You didn’t tell me you were considering the priesthood,” I say to Giovanni as we make our way home on foot. His hand dangles close to mine, and I resist the urge to hold it.

“They wouldn’t leave me alone about their daughters, granddaughters, nieces, and cousins, twice-removed,” he grumbles.

I chuckle. “Do you think I could pull it off as well?”

He glances over and shakes his head, a sparkle of mischief in his eyes. “Definitely not.”

“Am I not pious enough?” I press my palms together in a gesture of worship.

“Sir, no offense, but you are like sex on a stick.”

“Sex on a stick? This must be an American saying. Give me an example.”

He plucks at my shirt, which is only half buttoned due to the heat. “This started out fully buttoned, but now, as if by magic, you’re practically undressed.”

I smile. “You can hardly blame me for the humidity of the island.”

“And this,” Giovanni says, running his hand lightly through my hair. “A full head of thick, luscious hair, your fine muscular ass, not to mention your monster cock that is clearly outlined by your obscenely tight pants.”

“My pants are not tight, they are fitted. This is the style of my people.”

He rolls his eyes. “Sir, you are dead sexy. You know that you are. But if you were a priest, I would attend church faithfully every single Sunday, and I’m sure the tithes would skyrocket.”

I walk a little taller. “I can see the priesthood suiting you,” I tell him.

“Really? How so?” He looks shocked, my pretty baby.

“All the time you spend on your knees,” I say with a wink.

He shoves me merrily and I grab hold of his hand to give it a quick squeeze. “You know if I had my way, we wouldn’t have to hide our affection.”

He shrugs. “I don’t care what other people think. I never have. The only person whose opinion matters to me is yours.”

Mine and your Master’s, that troublesome voice reminds me.

“I am charmed, Giovanni.”

His smile is prettier than the sun peeking through the clouds.

“*S*ilvio, you need to come home. Giovanni is... not well.”

I’ve just finished a meeting with my finance team and am checking my voicemails when I hear this harried message from my mother. I try her phone, but she doesn’t answer, so I call Giovanni. Again nothing. Finally, I call Anthony.

“He’s having a hard time, Boss,” he says soberly.

“Is he hurting himself?”

“Not yet.”

In the background, I hear Giovanni shrieking and wailing, bleating for his Master like a little lost lamb.

“Do what you can for him,” I tell Anthony. “Put him in the box if you must, but do not leave him alone and watch out for sharp objects. I’m heading home now.”

I cancel my meetings for the rest of the afternoon and reschedule the walk-through of my bottling plant for next week. We have a health and safety inspection coming up, and I want to make sure we are more than prepared to pass it. However, these concerns fade from my mind as I grip the cold metal railing of the ferry back to Ischia and mentally will the boat to move faster. That settles it. I will use some of my inheritance to purchase a speedboat. The ferry and my sailboat are too slow. This wait is torture.

I blow into the house two hours later. Ma is in the kitchen, fretting over a pot on the stove and gesturing toward the

master bedroom. There, Anthony sits on the edge of my bed, keeping watch.

“He’s in there.” Anthony motions to the closet. The door is open to reveal Giovanni huddled in a corner, sobbing in a pile of Valentin’s rumpled suits.

“What happened?” I ask Anthony, knowing I’ll get a more accurate report from him than I will from Gio.

“He woke up this morning agitated. You know how he sometimes gets, wouldn’t eat his breakfast, didn’t want to swim laps, started climbing the walls around noontime. I called your mother, thinking she might be able to help. She has a way with him, you know?”

“Yes, she does. Then what?”

“She tried to get him to play a game of *Scopa*, but he couldn’t sit still, wouldn’t pay attention. Then he came in here, started wailing. You know the rest.”

“Do you have any idea what might have started it?”

“No, but he keeps saying he’s lost Master. Maybe the reality is finally kicking in?”

“Maybe.”

Giovanni spent weeks after Valentin’s death in a listless fog, not eating or sleeping, cutting himself when no one was watching, then guiltily showing me the gashes in his arms as he would have with Valentin. This seems different from that depression, more volatile, more acute.

“Anything else?” I ask and Anthony shakes his head. “Can you keep Ma company for a little while, maybe eat some of what she’s preparing for us, then take her home? Tell her I’ll call her later when everything’s calmed down.”

“You got it, Boss.”

He exits the bedroom, shutting the door quietly behind him. I toss my jacket onto the bed and remove my tie, then decide to take off my dress shirt and slacks too, since I want to be able to hold my boy without the encumbrance of fussy

clothing. I squat at the entrance of the closet, more or less at his level. "Hello, princess."

His eyes are so swollen from crying that they are just two puffy slits, and his cheeks are stained with tears. My poor baby. He blinks and searches my face as if looking for someone, Valentin perhaps, and then his sobs begin anew. I crawl over and gingerly pull him into my arms so that my legs are astride his and I'm cradling him from behind.

"Shhh, shhh, shhh, my beautiful baby." We rock together on the floor and I hum him a little lullaby while petting his tangled hair, until his cries eventually subside. "Tell your Sir what has upset you so."

"I can't find him. I can't find Master." His utterance breaks on a wail, one that I feel in my bones. His pain is so fresh, as if Valentin's passing was just yesterday. I feel guilty that I don't have the same profound grief over the loss of my brother, but his suffering was so great at the end. Part of me was relieved when he passed.

"Where did you go looking for him?" I ask.

"I used to be able to smell him in here." Giovanni raises the dress shirt wrinkled in his fists and inhales deeply. "But he's gone now. He's gone, and I don't know where to find him."

He starts crying again, softer this time but still broken.

"What can I do for you, princess? How can I make this better?"

"Just hold me. Don't leave me alone, Silvio. Please?"

"I won't. We'll stay right here until you're ready to come out."

I glance at my brother's portrait, at a loss. How can you bring a man back from the dead?

EVENTUALLY, I PERSUADE GIOVANNI TO COME AND HAVE A shower. There I gently wipe the tear stains from his face and wash the sweat from his body. I shampoo and detangle his

hair, then use a hair dryer and comb to style it. I started doing this for him when his grief made him unable to care for himself. Now as then, it is soothing to us both.

In the kitchen, I feed him canned soup, some American brand that Valentin kept stocked in the pantry for him. We cuddle on the couch with the television playing in the background while he dozes. Eventually, I take him to bed where he clings to me still, and in the morning, after our other rituals, I ask him to tell me more about what happened.

“I had an episode,” he says in a very straightforward way. He stares at me as if waiting for me to argue, but I only nod for him to continue. “According to Rebekah, it’s to be expected. She told me there are many stages of grief, and even if it seems as though I’ve processed one stage and felt all my feelings, I may still have moments where I feel worse.”

Some part of Giovanni is still in denial. That is my non-expert opinion. As gently as I can, I ask, “Do you believe your Master will come back to you, Giovanni?”

“He promised me,” he says stubbornly. “Master said no matter where he goes, he’ll always come back to me.”

Is this what occurs during their late-night communions? Does Giovanni converse, or believe he is conversing, with my dead brother? More important, should I encourage this delusion or deny it? I don’t know the answer, so for now, I do neither.

“You said you couldn’t smell him on his clothes?” I ask and he shakes his head sadly. “What about your letters? Can you find him there?”

He hugs himself tightly, dimpling the flesh of his upper arms. “Those are only memories. I need to know he’s here with me. I need his hands on me, his arms around me holding me so tight. I need him to silence the voices.”

Pain. That’s what he needs, the adrenaline rush and the release.

“How about I tie you up, princess? You think that might help?”

He nods, looking hopeful. “It might.”

EVEN IN VALENTIN’S ABSENCE, GIOVANNI HAS MAINTAINED the playroom. The leather whips and floggers are freshly oiled, the furniture is dusted, and my ropes are neatly looped and hung on my section of the wall. The chore is done lovingly, an expression of Giovanni’s devotion to his Master’s teachings and to our lifestyle. My eyes trail over the various implements, remembering some of our more adventurous exploits. It saddens me to be here without Valentin. Of all the places in his home, this was where he truly came alive.

Giovanni, already nude, kneels on a gym mat in the posture of *display* and slyly watches me survey the space. I try not to be intimidated by the many whips and canes mounted on the walls, most of which have been sanctified with Giovanni’s own sweat and blood. High impact was his and Valentin’s preferred type of play, and it became so intense at times that I had to step away. I understand the thrill of it and the release, but it’s not something I crave, nor is it something I can administer. Even the abrasions left on his skin by my rope are sometimes distressing to me.

We’ve had the discussion about limits and boundaries earlier this morning, a refresher of sorts. Giovanni’s are largely unchanged, as are mine. In the places where Valentin stood, there is now a noticeable gap, and it serves as a reminder of all I cannot give him.

“My beautiful boy,” I say, by way of greeting as I lay my hand atop his head.

“Sir,” he responds, leaning into the touch like an affectionate pet.

“Go select your rope.”

He stands and walks over to the wall where there are several to choose from. The red silk is for intricate ties and looks lovely against Gio’s skin, a stunning contrast for when I want to photograph him. The natural jute is rougher with less give, for when he wants to feel the friction and the burn. The

thick black silk was our first rope, and it became a close companion of mine during my brother's final weeks, when I'd practice my old standards on a mannequin just to keep my mind from spiraling. There is also a white cotton rope that reminds me of a bridal gown when Giovanni wears it, and a few others I've yet to use. Over the years Valentin helped me discover and explore many hidden facets of my identity, including most recently, my love of bondage and rope kink. I am grateful to him for that—*gratitude*. His lessons are forever present in my mind.

Giovanni peruses his options, and it is the thick, black rope he selects from the wall and presents to me with a humble bow. It's as if he knows we must begin where we last left off, by working through our shared grief.

“Something simple but secure,” I tell him. “A diamond chest harness, tight so that you feel comforted and safe. Kneel, sweetheart.”

He gracefully lowers himself to the mat and opens his arms, bending them at his elbows to touch his own shoulders. This is a tie we've done many times before, so he knows what to expect. I double up the rope and wrap it around his chest so that it lies just underneath his pectorals, snug without pinching his skin. Using a slipknot in the back, I loop the rope over one shoulder and hook it under the rope in the front, creating a harness with an open knot at the center of his sternum. Once the structure is there, I wrap it again across the top of his chest on either side, securing the rope so that it creates a diamond-shaped gap between his pierced nipples. Careful to avoid his jewelry, I continue to weave, circling and knotting his torso until his chest is a web of diamonds and his back a series of knots.

The pleasure is both sensual and psychological, the feel of the rope in my hands, using my favorite medium to restrain a beautiful body in an artful way. With Giovanni especially, I have a deep desire to secure him in one place and command him to stay, lest he slip away from me like one of his mythical nymphs.

“Rest now.” I gently guide him downward until his forehead is pressed against the mat with his arms loose at his sides, like Child’s Pose in yoga. When he’s relaxed and breathing evenly, I cup the back of his neck and whisper, “How’s that?”

“Perfect, Sir. Thank you.”

“This rope is an extension of my dominance,” I say, admiring the way the black silk ornaments his body. I glide my coarse hands over his glistening skin. “These fibers are my hands caressing you and holding you tight. Breathe deep now. Can you feel me, Giovanni?”

He shivers in his bindings and whispers, “Yes, Sir, I can.”

“Do you know how much I care for you, as my submissive and my lover?”

“Yes, Sir. I am grateful for your mastery of rope and your dominance. I need...” His voice hitches. “I need these reminders even more now since Master went away.”

Went away.

“I am happy to serve you, princess.”

He rests there, peacefully, caught in my silken web, as I stroke along his back. I am not so arrogant as to believe this alone will satisfy him, but it is something.

“I’D LIKE TO MAKE SOME RENOVATIONS TO THE DUNGEON,” I say to Giovanni a couple of days later. I am massaging his limbs on the playroom bed, an elevated vinyl mat covered in a tightly fitted sheet. Our rope session earlier today was long and strenuous, requiring Giovanni to kneel with his spine straight and his hands clasped at the small of his back for an extended period of time. Now, I have the pleasure of rubbing out his muscles with a lightly scented oil made by my very own company while he reclines on the bed, sipping on a bottle of fruit juice through a bendy straw.

“I’m listening,” Giovanni says, staring at me intently while I rub his calf, then his ankle, working my way down to his

very ticklish foot.

“I’d like to install anchors in the ceiling and floors so that I can add some permanent rigging.”

“Rigging?” A slow smile spreads across his face. “Sir wishes to snare me like a rabbit and dangle me from one foot?”

I chuckle at his teasing. “You would look very beautiful, suspended by my rope, like a bird in flight. Does that interest you, princess?”

He draws one hand down the center of his navel, stopping just short of his groin and says, “I would like to be wrapped in one of your silken cocoons. Do you think I might emerge as something new?”

“You are already as beautiful as a butterfly, *caro*. But I may need to move some things around. I won’t get rid of any of your Master’s belongings. I know they are precious to you.”

He nods, looking relieved. “I appreciate that, Sir.”

A few days later, we are in the dungeon again. Giovanni has taken to repairing my old nets as something to occupy his time, a meditative sort of discipline. He sits in the center of the mats with a large cast net blanketing his lap while I take measurements for the hardware I will need to purchase for my renovation.

“Do you know the Biblical parable of Drawing in the Net?” Gio asks as his fingers pluck at the nylon with the same dexterity with which he plays his instruments. He’s still not returned to his music, but I am hopeful he will eventually.

“No, princess, I am not the best at remembering things. My mind is more like a sieve than a sponge.”

“I find that hard to believe, Sir. You remember the many intricate knots required to rig your sails and your subs.”

“Muscle memory,” I say and flex one arm for his viewing pleasure.

He shakes his head primly at my flirtations. “In any case, the Bible compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a dragnet that is

cast into the sea. It gathers fish of every kind and draws them onto the shore. The good are gathered into containers and the bad are cast away; so will it be at the end of times. The angels will come forth and separate the righteous from the wicked, and the latter will be cast into a furnace of fire to a great weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

He delivers the story in his sweet, lilting voice as though it were a child’s nursery tale and not a herald of eternal damnation. I recall him speaking of his beloved Dante and the many circles of Hell, and of his desire to be whipped by horned devils for all of eternity.

“What prompts you to ruminate on such dreadful tales?” I ask.

He laughs and shakes his head. “I have simply become preoccupied with your nets, Sir. That is all. No need to worry over the state of your soul, if you are feeling guilty about something.” He glances up and smiles coyly.

“I worry over *your* soul, Giovanni. You are the wicked one here, tempting your Sir to commit all manner of carnal sins.” He laughs at this too, but I know how he struggles with his own demons, who are more real to him than most. “Do you believe you will go to Heaven, princess?”

He frowns and blinks, then says to me with complete certainty, “No, Sir, I will not go to Heaven. I will go to Master.”

WHEN HE THINKS I AM NOT PAYING ATTENTION, I CATCH Giovanni caressing Valentin’s instruments—his bullwhip, the leather strop, and an implement called a devil’s tongue, in particular. Those were Gio’s favorites, the ones he’d beg Valentin to use on him as a reward for good behavior and sometimes, as Gio once told me, to satisfy his demons.

“Do they still get loud?” I ask him on one such occasion. “The voices?”

“Yes,” Giovanni admits.

“What do you do?”

“I remind myself of all the work Master has done to stabilize me, the work you continue to do, and that if I give into their wicked temptations, then I am desecrating my Master’s love and devotion. Sometimes though...” He rubs his fingers over his inner arm where there are freshly raised scars from recent cuts. “Sometimes, I can’t help it.”

I come over to where he stands and lift the strop from its hook. I take the leather belt between my hands and caress its fine texture, drawing the implement through the valley of my palm, then snapping it with a loud thwack. Giovanni flinches, and his eyes widen with desire.

“You know I cannot give you this, not in the way you want it,” I say with regret. He nods and glances away as if I’ve caught him misbehaving. I guide his chin back to me. “But I know someone who can.”

He makes a little noise at the back of his throat, strangled and needful.

“Would you like me to arrange it?” I ask.

“I don’t know, Sir. That is an interesting proposition to consider. I suppose I’d have to think about it.”

I nod. “Take your time.”

WE ARE IN THE PLAYROOM AGAIN, AND I’VE JUST ANCHORED several heavy-duty pad eyes and bolts to the exposed wooden beam running along the ceiling. When we held demonstrations here last spring, I brought in a couple of A-frame bondage racks that resembled playground swings, but their uses are limited. This permanent rigging will allow me to raise Giovanni to any height I desire, and with the flight blocks I plan to install, the ride will be much smoother for him too. I’ve blended my knowledge of suspension bondage with sailing to customize my own rigging so that lifting and lowering Giovanni will be as easy as trimming the sails on my boat.

“Do you know the story of Hephaestus’s net,” Giovanni asks while watching me work. He is fulfilling the role of apprentice, handing me tools and various hardware when I ask for them, keeping me hydrated and entertained. He’s excellent at taking orders and as I’ve told him before, he is my sexiest first mate.

“I do not know this story, but I’d love for you to tell me.”

He sits cross-legged on the mats and spreads both hands as though narrating a tale by the fire. “Hephaestus was the Greek god of blacksmiths and metalworkers. He was born lame, and was cast from Mount Olympus in disgust by his very own mother, which is probably where his first stirrings of misogyny began...”

While I work, Giovanni tells me the story of a brutish blacksmithing god who was very grumpy but also very useful. He forged Achilles’s armor and Hermes’s winged helmet and sandals, as well as Eros’s bow and arrows, which, as I know from previous stories, have the power to strike love or repulsion into the heart of the receiver. Surely, I have been struck by Eros’s arrow of love for this beautiful and peculiar boy.

“And so, Hephaestus was given the most enchanting of brides to marry, Aphrodite, goddess of love and passion. It was probably a poor match from the start, as Hephaestus spent so much of his time in the forge while Aphrodite frolicked among the oversexed nymphs of the forest. In any case, it wasn’t long before Aphrodite began having an affair with Ares, the god of war.”

I smile to myself while Giovanni spins his tale. The boy is always in his head, contemplating the grudges and passions of gods. He speaks of them as though they are real people that he interacts with day to day, his preferred version of friendship, I suppose.

“To confirm his suspicions, Hephaestus wove a golden net to trap the lovers and when he did, he brought them, still naked and entangled in each other’s arms, directly to the gods

for judgment. Hephaestus expected retribution for their obvious adultery, but what he got instead was mockery.”

Giovanni pauses there.

“This is the end?” I ask, glancing up from my work to find him watching me. He nods, so I ask, “What became of Hephaestus and Aphrodite?”

“They were divorced,” he says shortly, “or the god equivalent.”

“Probably for the best,” I say.

His brow wrinkles, and he tilts his head like a dove, still staring at me intently. I have the sense that there was some deeper meaning to this story, so I say, “Pretty baby, I am a simple man. Your Sir’s passions are food, sex, sailing, and taking care of my beautiful baby boy. When I hear this story, my first thought is how horny the gods were, always fucking one another, fucking animals, fucking their sisters and their brothers, mothers, cousins... and also how gorgeous you’d look in a net made of gold, and then I wonder where I can purchase such a rope and what material it might be made of. So, if there is a lesson to your story, you will have to explain it to me. Go slowly.” I drop down to the floor and mimic his posture, the perfect pupil.

“Sir,” he says with a troubled look. “I don’t want to make a mockery of our love.”

“How would you do that, sweetheart?”

“This sadist friend of yours. If he whips me and I like it, I don’t want you to feel threatened or as though you’ve been made a fool. I don’t want to be like Aphrodite caught in Hephaestus’s golden net.”

He is a tender-hearted boy, always thinking of my feelings.

“You think I am a very jealous man?” I ask.

He lowers his lashes and gives me a demur little pout. “I think you are a very *passionate* man.”

“I am Italian, yes.”

He smiles. “I wouldn’t want you to think less of me or believe I wanted anyone else.”

“But what if the sadist is very handsome?” I ask.

He shakes his head, says with certainty, “There is no man more handsome than you.”

“What if he has a nicely shaped cock?”

He shoves me lightly in the chest. “I wouldn’t know because I won’t be seeing it. He can keep his nicely shaped cock in his pants where it belongs.”

I nod in understanding. “This isn’t going to be sexual, princess. At least, there will be no sex between you and the sadist. Strictly business.”

“He won’t touch me,” Giovanni says.

“Only with his implement if that is what you wish. And all of it will be negotiated ahead of time. Boundaries, limits, green, yellow, red.”

“I only want you to touch me. You and—” He interrupts himself before he can finish, eyes flashing guiltily.

“Only me,” I confirm.

We go back to working, Giovanni hums some foreign tune, and I wonder, how do I tell him that the man I most envy, is the one man I will never best?

Our trip to Napoli will be partly for work, partly for pleasure. Giovanni is happy to accompany me on my sailboat as my handsome first mate, and on our journey to the mainland, we stop by the smaller island of Procida where I take him to a secluded beach that is only accessible by boat. There we lie on the soft sand trading saltwater kisses and sloppy blowjobs until we are both wrung out from pleasure and the afternoon heat.

“Did you know that dolphins have huge cocks?” Giovanni says to me, shortly after swallowing the spend of my own lavish member. He glances over, shielding his eyes from the sun. He is all bronzed skin, a ripe berry mouth, and golden hair curling from the damp, a mermaid with long legs instead of a tail and a succulent cock to play with. And he likes to sail! How could I be so lucky?

“How big are we talking?” I ask.

“At least the size of a man’s forearm.”

“Impressive.”

“And they’re mostly hard all the time.”

“Just like me,” I tease.

“You’re not supposed to swim too close to them or they may try to mount you, and you’ll most likely drown.”

One might think Giovanni’s musings are absurd, and sometimes they are purely for the listener’s enjoyment, but

more often, he's trying to make a point. "Are you fantasizing about being fucked by a fish, Giovanni?"

"Mammal, Sir, but it has got me thinking... it's been a while since you've fucked me on your boat." He says this with a knowing little smirk and a flirtatious nudge of his foot.

"Has it?" I play dumb even though I've been looking forward to this day for months. "Have you missed the incomparable pleasure of having your sweet cheeks pounded by my monster cock?"

Laughing, he sits up and plucks a handful of cold figs from the cooler. "I have," he admits as his eyes slowly rake over my naked, hirsute body. My cock is already rising like a mainsail at his attention. I roll onto my side and prop myself up with one elbow to watch him slowly lick between two figs as if they were a pair of weighty testicles.

"You are too tempting, princess." I steal one of his figs and pop it in my mouth, so sweet and delicious. I gesture to him, "You are like one of those oversexed nymphs from your mythical tales, tempting married men to cheat on their wives and creating all sorts of drama in the gods' playground."

"So, you *are* listening," he says, delighted.

"I always listen. I can't always remember. I am like that big-dicked god. What was his name?"

"Priapus," he says.

"Yes, Priapus, the most blessed of them all." I reach down to stroke myself. "My dick is very interested to see how this story ends."

"I'm a little nervous," he says, staring at my cock as though transfixed. "It's been a while."

"Have you been doing your exercises?"

"Every single day." He licks his lips in an exaggerated way. They are still puffy from my kisses and the labor of fellating my cock.

"*Dimmi*, what is the biggest object you've ever had inside you?"

“It’s not your dick,” he says with a laugh.

“What then?”

“Probably Master’s fist.” Giovanni glances to my own hands, which are massive. Valentin’s fingers were long and elegant, like a pianist. Mine are thick and calloused like a stonemason.

“Did you like it?”

“Yes, but I’m not sure about these paws.” He draws one of my hands into his lap, forming it into a fist.

“Do you want me to fist you?” I have no experience fisting subs, but I’d learn, for him.

“No, I mostly did it for Master, because that was one of his kinks. He was too humble to ask me the first time, so I had to beg him until he gave in. It was... intense.” He glances up at me. “You can ask for things too, Sir, or take them. You are not as humble as Master.”

“*Arrogante*,” I remark, something he has accused me of being before.

“Yes, but I like it,” he says and kisses the top of my fist.

“I am better with my cock anyway.” I drag my knuckles along his smooth inner thigh, then squeeze his tender flesh. He opens his legs wider while his prick swells, pointing in my direction and wet at the tip.

“You are fantastic with your cock,” he praises, “like an artist or a swordsman.”

“*Grazie*, baby boy. So, would you like for me to make love to you on my boat? Would that satisfy your perverted craving for dolphin dick?”

Giovanni, eyes closed, licks his lips and nods.

“I want to hear you say it, princess. Tell your Sir what you want.”

Emerald eyes flash open, and he says with the command of a prince to a lowly soldier, “Fuck me on your boat, Silvio.”

“Gladly.”

GIOVANNI IS A VISION, SPLAYED OUT ON MY CAPTAIN’S BED with his golden hair fanned across the pillow and his piercings winking in the late afternoon sun. We took another swim, had a little snack, then returned to my boat, both of us eager for what was promised.

“Open yourself for me,” I command as I drizzle oil liberally across his skin.

Giovanni cups his smooth cock and balls in one hand, tugging his pebbled sac up and away, while the other hand goes searching for his hole, fingers sliding through the oily slick until they reach his pretty little star.

“That’s it.” I grab hold of my dick to give it a warning squeeze. I don’t want to come as soon as I’m inside him and with the way my manhood is already throbbing, I might.

“Like this, Sir?” he asks innocently while dipping a single, slender digit inside his tight, hairless pucker.

“Just like that, princess. Does it feel good?”

“Mmmm,” he murmurs, hips undulating to fuck one finger before slipping a second inside. I watch as he finger-fucks himself, getting off on the sexy show, then I bury my face between his sweet cheeks so I can lick around his digits, tasting oil and skin and the very essence of my lover. I add my own finger to his, mesmerized by the slide of flesh against flesh as we coax his shy little bud to bloom.

“Sir,” he says, sweaty and breathless already. He pinches one nipple between two fingers, until it flushes a bright, ruby red. It’s something he never would have done without explicit permission from Valentin. I marvel at his ability to adapt.

“Fingers are not enough, princess. You’re going to have to take this too before you can have my magnificent cock inside you.”

I pluck the dildo off the bed and coat it in lubricant. His eyes dart from that to my own member, fully engorged and

dripping with fluid. “Fuck,” he murmurs, realizing the challenge ahead of him. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“It will be strenuous. It will be unforgettable. Hold yourself open now. I want to watch you take it.”

He draws his legs back with both hands, presenting his spit-slick hole to me, already throbbing and red. I circle his pulsing sex with the blunt end of the toy. His star expands and contracts like the mouth of a sucker fish as I ease the silicon knob inside. His muscle cinches around the intrusion, tight as a knot, and tries to force it out. Giovanni throws back his head and pants, long hair sweeping along his shoulders and back. “Fuck me,” he growls as I steadily breach his body. True to form, he takes it all, tight channel stretching wide to swallow the toy hungrily.

“You are still very flexible down here.” I sweep one oiled finger around his taut rim where it grips the base of the dildo. “Does it burn, pretty baby?”

“A little.”

“Looks like it. A big toy for such a tiny place.”

“Your cock is even bigger,” he says, perhaps to flatter me. “I hope I can manage it.”

He’s playing games with me. I know he will take it. His pride won’t allow him not to.

“I hope so too. Get on your hands and knees now, so you can see what your Sir has done to you.”

He rolls onto his stomach and raises himself up, sticks his beautiful, round rump high in the air like an offering with that thick, flesh-colored dildo jammed deep inside. It looks obscene, too common for such a holy place, and for a moment, I am jealous of the toy. The mirror at the head of my bed allows us both to see him in this debauched state, hair wild and eyes hooded with lust. His fingers grip the sheet tightly and he bites savagely on his lower lip while I tease the toy in and out, frustrating him with every stroke. He groans and pushes back on it, demanding more friction.

“Are you eager to be fucked by a thick Italian stud?” I ask, drawing my hand along the curve of his flank.

“So eager, Sir. I’m practically drooling.”

That is certainly true in the case of his erect member.

“Remember, Giovanni, if you come now, you won’t be getting your Sir’s monster cock.”

“Sir is too cruel to his boy.”

“Cruel?” I laugh as I gather his hair in one hand and kiss his shoulder, then travel down the center of his spine, one vertebra at a time.

“Silvio, may I suck you?” he asks. His appetite for dick is insatiable.

“You may.”

He turns and bows down to take me deep in his throat. I hold his hair at the nape as he bobs on my dick, encouraging me to curse and make the filthiest noises. I pump my hips upward. The mirror offers me a closeup of his plugged hole, ass cheeks tensing while he works my girthy member down his throat. He’s so good at his job that I must interrupt him and squeeze my balls tightly to stave off an orgasm.

“*Bravissimo*. Now take out the toy and hop on Sir’s dick.”

Gracefully he rises to his knees and slowly works the dildo out with both hands. It releases with a wet pop, and he tosses it aside. I arrange him so that he can straddle my lap, my cock, thick and eager, wedged against his inner thigh. I fist my erection for him to mount. “Ready?”

“Yes, Sir.” He lowers himself gingerly until his rim just barely kisses the tip of my wet crown. I pull back the remainder of my foreskin like unsheathing a dagger. His hole has been softened and stretched enough that it shouldn’t hurt much. He uses his strong thighs to tease the head as he slowly descends. The grip of his body is exquisite. My hand is a poor substitute for this immaculate heat.

“Yes, Giovanni,” I say while bracing him up. “Go slowly now. Patience, sweetheart. You don’t want to tear.”

“I want it all,” he says with a focused determination in his eyes.

“You’ll get it.” I slide one hand up his spine to grip the back of his neck, propping him up like a doll. “There you go, pretty baby. Sit right here on Sir’s lap like a good little boy and let me kiss those sweet candy lips.”

Lust consumes me as I devour his mouth, his body slotting onto mine like a perfect sleeve of flesh. I love the taste of him. I love being inside of him, making him mine in a carnal way. Heat blossoms and expands as we begin to move, following the primal instincts of our ancestors, thrusting and grinding to create that magical friction, chasing the incomparable pleasure which has sparked wars, razed kingdoms, and brought the most powerful of men to their knees.

“*Che bello,*” I murmur and bury my face in his hair. “*Sei magnifico, principessa.*”

“Silvio.” He sings my name like an angel as we gain momentum, until he is riding my dick so hard and so fast that his teeth rattle. “Silvio, please, Sir, may I come?”

“*Vieni, Giovanni,*” I say on a harsh pant. He clings to me, his slender limbs grasping me everywhere. His channel grips me too, as I pound into him like a drum. A surge of adrenaline powers through me as I hammer out the last few strokes. My loins ache with the oncoming release, a yearning as painful as it is sweet. My body seizes, my heartbeat so loud in my ears that I can hardly hear Giovanni’s cries of ecstasy. My muscles burn as I roar my passions and release inside him. Pure bliss. Gradually, our fervent thrusts subside to a gentle rocking, and we hold each other, skin slick with sweat, oil, and cum. I kiss him with an endless desire and taste the sea on his lips.

Breathless and spent, he collapses in my arms, and I lay him down gently, my sweet, tender boy, then carefully collect the remnants of his orgasm with my tongue.

“Sssssir,” he slurs, playing idly with my hair as I tend to him.

“Mmmm?” I ask, circling his navel with my nose.

“That was transformational. Cataclysmic. Volcanic. I’ve erupted into a hot molten mess. You have metamorphosized me.”

“Let me see this mess.” I lift his legs so that I may gaze upon his ripe split peach. I suck on my fingers and ease two of them inside, the rim still soft and glazed by my seed.

“Sir,” he protests, arching back beautifully the moment my fingertips graze his sensitive prostate. “What are you doing to your boy?”

“I know you can,” I say as I coax him to turgidity with my other hand. We used to share him, Valentin and me. In the sauna when Giovanni was warm and loose, Valentin would make him ride him until he came, then pass him over to me. We traded him back and forth like a sex toy until Giovanni’s legs were as wobbly as a fawn and his ass was so tender, he could hardly sit. Then Valentin would take him back to their bedroom, tuck him into bed, and feed him dinner by hand like a little prince. Sometimes I’d lie with Giovanni and hold him until he fell asleep. Rarely was I allowed to stay the night, though. That was where Valentin drew the line.

But now... now I can have him whenever I want. I make the rules.

“Sir is relentless,” Gio says, but his hips roll to chase the movement. Cum pools in the gully of my fingers and I push it back inside.

“Sir is hungry for your little moans and groans of pleasure. They are the sweetest melody to my ears. And I wish to be inside you a little while longer.”

We are both that way, not wanting to uncouple after our lovemaking, but be tangled up for as long as possible. If I had a golden net, I would wrap us both in it.

“Sir wishes to ruin me,” he says, pink tongue skimming along the surface of his plush mouth.

“Do you like it, princess? Does it hurt in just the right way?”

“Yes, Sir. Don’t have mercy on me. My body is yours to command. You are the captain of this vessel. Take from me what you will.”

I smile at what is truly an indulgence. “I want an encore.”

When he comes for a second time, red-faced and screaming my name, I am more powerful than a god.

“*W*hat do you think of my empire, Giovanni?”

I’ve taken him on a private tour of my bottling plant, which is a short walk from the harbor where shipments of oil arrive weekly from Greece in large stainless-steel drums. He’s now perusing the gift shop, specifically the section reserved for cosmetics. A few years ago, Valentin suggested we purchase the property next door and build out the warehouse to include a storefront with a gift shop and café, in addition to offering tours to the public. It’s been a boon to our sales and has helped marketing efforts tenfold. Word of mouth is something you cannot buy.

“I never realized olive oil has so many uses,” Gio says, spraying his inner arm with a tester bottle of scented moisturizer.

“Of course,” I respond enthusiastically, as this is my area of expertise. “Good for your hair, good for your skin, keeps you looking youthful, lowers blood pressure, prevents cancer... the list goes on and on.”

“No wonder you practically bathe in it,” he teases.

“You know what else it’s good for?” I say, then poke my finger through a circle made by my other hand.

“Sir,” he says, laughing, and swats at my arm.

“Is it not true?”

“Yes, but we’re in your place of business, surrounded by your employees.” He glances around to the few people

observing us with interest while pretending not to.

“If only they knew the many ways we’ve experimented with these products.” I wave at the display. “Get whatever you like. They give me a discount here.”

Giovanni takes his time shopping, carefully selecting items to place in his little basket, while I lean against the checkout counter and chat with whomever of my employees happens by. We are a tight-knit group—we typically only hire on a recommendation from existing staff—and jobs at my plant pay well. Valentin told me early on to invest in people, not things, and his advice has benefited the business greatly.

“Shall we give your guest the family discount?” Allegra asks. My marketing manager is a savvy and impeccably dressed woman in her early forties who gives tours of the facility and has been with the company for years. I’ve never seen her without heels and full makeup. She sometimes chides me for my very casual business style.

“Yes, please. You can charge it to my account.”

“Very well. And how is your mother liking Ischia?” She knows that I moved her out there some months ago to help with Valentin’s care.

“She’s very involved with the church, has a flock of women with her wherever she goes.”

“Which church?”

“All three. She likes to stay busy.”

“And is the young man the reason you’ve been spending so much time on the island?” she asks with a telling smirk.

I smile at her wily ways. I introduced Giovanni to my workers as my friend and roommate, but those who know me well, as Allegra does, can surely divine the true nature of our relationship.

“Yes, he is, and I inherited my brother’s property, which is a lot to maintain.”

It’s not lost on me that in some respects, I inherited Giovanni as well.

“He’s a very handsome young man,” she says with something like approval. “A gentle spirit.”

“He is both of those things. I care for him deeply.”

It’s freeing to admit my affection to someone outside my close, personal friends. I do not fear the judgment of my staff or even strangers for that matter, but if there are stirrings of homophobia, and there sometimes are, I’d rather not have to deal with it in my place of business.

Giovanni joins us then and asks a few questions about the products. Allegra gives her advice, then rings him up herself, even though we have a cashier for that. Gio and I then proceed into the café where we’ll be having lunch.

“Fortuna Brothers Olive Oil,” he says in his thoughtful way, one finger tracing over the gold foil label, which shows two men in profile with their backs to each other, modeled after my brother and myself. “How lucky am I to have known both so intimately?” he says.

“I tried to convince Valentin to use our cocks as the logo, but he said it was too lewd. I think we both know it’s because mine’s bigger.”

Giovanni’s laugh is an unexpected eruption. Sometimes I catch him by surprise and am treated with his unbridled joy. A few months ago, I thought I’d never hear this sound again. My heart swells.

“He is with us,” Giovanni says with a soft smile. I lay my hand atop his.

“He’s making sure I take good care of you, princess.”

“You do, Sir. You really do.”

LATER THAT EVENING I KNOT A SILK SCARF AROUND GIO’S neck, an expensive Gucci one that was a gift from his Master. Giovanni wanted to wear something special for this “date” with Leandro. I suspect it’s because it has the feel of a collar, a weight and significance Giovanni surely misses. He knows I

will offer mine gladly once his period of grieving has passed. We are getting there, slowly but surely.

He looks so handsome with his golden hair brushed back and styled by my own hand, wearing a designer dress shirt and pleated slacks that hug his ass beautifully. The clothing probably cost Valentin a small fortune. I was raised in a comfortable lifestyle and have a significant inheritance thanks to my brother, but I suspect Giovanni's wealth is greater still. Not only that, but he embodies the manners of the affluent so effortlessly that at times it feels like I am the one serving him, not that I'm complaining.

"Are you nervous?" I ask

"I am a little apprehensive, Sir," he says and ducks his head in that shy way of his.

I first met Leandro in Milano where I spent several months learning ropework from my mentor and dear friend Santino. Leandro was in the BDSM community where I started as an interloper and soon became like family. He moved back to Napoli to help care for his ailing parents. His father has dementia, and his mother recently suffered a stroke. He and a sister share the responsibility of caring for them. We've kept in touch and often meet for dinner when I'm in town for work. He knows about the unique bond between the three of us, that Giovanni and I are both still grieving the loss of my brother, and that I'm looking for someone to help fill the void Valentin left behind. Now, I add another bit of information for Gio's benefit, "Your Master saw Leandro's talent with a whip during our bacchanalia, and he approved."

Giovanni's eyes widen at the mention of our demonstration day, which was akin to one of Dante's circles of Hell, though all of it consensual. "I appreciate your telling me that, Sir. I do remember his skill as well. Very promising. But... what if he doesn't like me?"

This is one of Giovanni's main concerns whenever I suggest he make friends or meet new people. "What's not to like? You are very charming, princess."

“When I want to be. Do you remember the day we first met?”

How could I forget? Giovanni was stubborn and sulky. A rare beauty with a sharp tongue, I was attracted to him immediately. He gave me the best blowjob of my life, then spit my ejaculate in my face, earning the nickname, *camel*. He was distant in those first few days, watching and waiting for me to reveal myself one way or another. I readily admit that I seduced him. My goal at first was to best my older brother and prove to him that Giovanni was only after his money. But the boy confounded me at every turn. When Valentin left, he was so distraught, and I realized their bond went much deeper than provider and pampered prince. Gio was soft and so sweet with me, so earnest. I didn't plan on becoming so attached. Then, like a flower whose beauty slowly reveals itself, I fell in love with every facet of Giovanni, chief among them, his fighting spirit.

“You were bratty,” I admit, “but also very pretty.”

“I was awful. I'm surprised you didn't hold my head underwater.”

I shake my head at his exaggeration. “That was your Master's kink. Besides, don't you want to be charming for your Sir?”

“It's not something I consciously turn on or off. It's just...” He frowns, then nods with renewed determination. “I'll do my best.”

“That's all I ask. And after dinner, you and I will take a stroll by the university.” The Federico II University is within walking distance of my apartment and has one of the best Classical and Antiquities departments in Europe. I'm hoping I can pique his interest in enrolling.

“Why would we do that, Sir?” he asks, immediately suspicious.

“Because it is a beautiful Napoletano landmark, Giovanni, and I want you to see it.”

I get no further argument on that front. Instead, he pivots to, “Do you think you might do the talking for me with Leandro? Master always...” He trails off, glancing away.

“Go on. Tell me about your Master.”

“Master knew my limits already and negotiated our scenes. I get embarrassed, especially around strangers.”

“Let us hold off on that conversation for now. Tonight, we are simply having dinner and getting to know each other. How does that sound?”

“Good, Sir.” He’s quiet, but only for a moment. “Silvio?” he asks, tugging at my shirt sleeve and staring up at me as if something is wrong.

“Yes, my beautiful boy?”

“Do I look okay?”

“*Magnifico.*” I kiss my fingers to illustrate my point, then lean down to smooch his soft cheek. Giovanni smiles, slaying me with yet another of Eros’s arrows to the heart.

We stroll to the restaurant from my apartment, winding down a couple of cobblestone side streets to the quiet café. Leandro joins us soon after we’ve been seated, and we both rise to greet him. He’s a tall man, broad-shouldered with a commanding, quiet air, like my brother though closer to my age than his.

“Giovanni, so nice to see you again,” Leandro says and pats his back. Giovanni nods shyly and dips his head, and I give Leandro a hearty hug before we all take our seats. We order wine for the two of us and a flavored San Pellegrino for Gio. Leandro and I have a few glasses while we catch up on the goings-on of our mutual friends. Leandro admits that he hasn’t been out much since moving back home. He shares with us some of his trials in being a caretaker too, including an argument with his father just that afternoon about the proper method for reheating a loaf of bread.

Giovanni, who has been watching our conversation like a soccer match, pipes up to add, “Master would often want to argue with me over small things. And he didn’t want me to

give in right away. If I did, he would get frustrated and think I was only placating him. I had to put up a fight and let him convince me that he was right.” Gio smiles fondly at the memory, and I touch his hand.

“*Amor senza baruffa, fa la muffa,*” I say, an Italian expression. *Love without a quarrel, it makes mold.*

“The Fortuna men do love a good argument,” Giovanni says warmly.

“Perhaps it is a display of dominance,” Leandro muses. “An attempt to put me in my place?”

“Like two lions in the jungle.” Giovanni says. “If your father is having to give up control in so many other aspects of his life, he may be clinging to his habits as a way of asserting himself. I imagine it is difficult for great men to feel their power waning, to have to cede their authority to a younger, more virile man.” He glances at me meaningfully, perhaps to intimate that Valentin and I have shared a similar struggle.

Leandro smiles softly at Giovanni. “You are wise beyond your years.”

Gio grins and lowers his head in deference. It seems to me a promising start.

We speak of other things, the beautiful spring weather and my mother’s health. Giovanni offers little in the way of personal information, but he remains engaged throughout. After Leandro leaves, and we are alone again, I ask, “What did you think of Leandro?”

“He has kind eyes.”

“Would you like to be whipped by such a kind man?”

Giovanni laughs, before turning earnest again. “I would like to give it a try.”

“MY BROTHER WAS A SADIST,” I TELL LEANDRO OVER DRINKS the next night. This is something he knows already but it bears repeating. We’re on the small balcony of my apartment, which overlooks the marketplace, known for its many artisanal shops

and restaurants. Leandro's agreed to meet with us again, and it feels a bit like courtship, only the bride is my own beloved.

I knew of my brother's kink long before he came to live on the island but had never really witnessed him in his element before Giovanni. I was continually surprised by the depths of his desire to inflict pain and Giovanni's desire to receive it. To Leandro, I say, "That was a significant part of their Master/slave dynamic. Giovanni craves the sort of pain I cannot provide him. We are looking for someone we trust to offer him an outlet. A sadomasochistic scene without touching."

"No touching?" Leandro inclines his head in an inquisitive manner.

"Nothing sexual."

"What are you looking for in this scene?" Leandro asks Giovanni who is seated at my side. My hand rests just above his knee, and despite the relative warmth of the evening, he is trembling.

"Release," Giovanni says with a small shudder.

Leandro considers it. "What types of implements have you used in the past?"

Giovanni begins to list them, and it is exhaustive. In their four years together, there was very little he and my brother didn't try. Giovanni concludes with, "But I only do bondage with my Sir." We exchange a smile at this.

Leandro nods. "I have experience with several of the implements you listed. I rent a studio not too far from here, a very discreet place where I conduct scenes. Perhaps you both can come by tomorrow afternoon? We can go over the finer details then?"

I look to Giovanni, for the decision hinges on his answer. With his body tense and eyes sharp, he nods.

LEANDRO'S STUDIO IS A SUBFLOOR APARTMENT IN THE SPANISH Neighborhood, a historic district of Napoli where the streets

are lined with clothing shops and food stalls selling fried pizza, our regional specialty. There are also several flower vendors whose lush bouquets attract Giovanni's attention, something to remember for later.

Today, I've outfitted him in something simple and light for the weather. In his shorts and t-shirt, he looks like any other student on their way to class or perhaps an American tourist taking in the many sights and sounds of a city so rich in culture and history. I fixed his hair too and smoothed a lightly scented balm over his lips. Giovanni teased me that he's going to start calling me Daddy. I wouldn't mind.

"You look very handsome," I compliment because he seems nervous, and I never tire of telling him.

"Thank you, Sir. I hope to represent you well in front of your fellow Dominant."

"Just be yourself, Gio."

"If only it were that easy," he says with a worrisome twist of his lips.

"I know it is not your preference to be assertive, but I'd like you to be direct with Leandro about what you want and what you need. He's a friend, and he wants to help."

"I'll do my best, Sir."

I buzz the door and Leandro greets us wearing loose pants and a shirt with an open collar. He is barefoot, casual. He invites us inside and we descend the short staircase to where there is a small table in what appears to be a reception area. He offers us drinks, then sits with us to discuss rules, limits, and safewords. Giovanni asked that I provide his written list, so I offer it to Leandro who reads it over carefully.

"And what is your role during our scene, Silvio?" he asks.

"I am Gio's Dominant, but I will defer to you. I'd like to be present throughout, as an observer and a support."

"And what do you want, Giovanni?" Leandro asks, his voice taking on a more authoritative tone than before.

"I want to... um." He swallows, glancing between us.

“You may call me Leandro,” he says, understanding Gio’s reluctance to address anyone other than me as Sir.

“Thank you, Leandro. I would like to... escape my body? When Master and I scened together, he took me to a place of not thinking, not being, a place that was quiet and calm.”

“Subspace,” Leandro says.

“It’s not just subspace. When Master hurt me, it was more... obliterating? I’m not sure if that’s the right word. I’m still learning the language.”

“You speak very well for a non-native.”

“Thank you. It was important to Master that I become proficient.” Giovanni catches my eye, and I wonder if he made the effort for me, specifically. Does he miss speaking in his mother tongue?

We go into the dungeon next, a small but tidy room with wood paneling, warmer and more inviting than if it had been left as bare concrete. It smells of leather and lemons, perhaps from the oil used to treat the implements. Leandro invites Giovanni to acquaint himself with the instruments and Gio steps up to an entire wall of whips and harnesses hung like tack in a stable.

“You may touch them,” Leandro says at Giovanni’s obvious hesitation.

He runs his elegant fingers over the leather with reverence. Some he takes off their hooks and holds in his hands. Leandro watches for a few minutes, then strolls over to share various anecdotes about where he acquired the tool or how it is used, even though the latter, Giovanni is likely familiar with already. Giovanni is timid, but I recognize the quiet yearning in his eyes.

“Would you like to choose your implement?” Leandro asks and Gio’s big eyes search mine. I nod my approval, and he turns back to the wall of options.

“This one, Leandro.” He removes what looks like a long belt with a wooden handle, split down the middle so that it has not one but two lashing tongues.

“That’s a tawse,” Leandro says. “A Scottish instrument designed as a corporeal punishment for errant schoolboys. It can be very painful when used aptly.”

“Master used to beat me with something similar as a reward for good behavior.”

“Then you must have been *very* good,” Leandro says and Gio smiles bashfully. He hands the implement to Leandro, who runs one hand lovingly over the leather, similar to how Valentin would handle his own instruments.

“Bare skin?” Leandro asks.

“Yes, Leandro.”

“Pull down your pants and underwear, all the way to your ankles and brace yourself against that bench over there. Silvio, if you’d care to have a seat?” Leandro points to a leather divan, and it’s only then that I realize I’ve been hovering. I try to appear relaxed even while every nerve in my body hums with tension.

Giovanni drops his shorts and underwear to his ankles, rucks up his t-shirt, then leans against a spanking bench and holds onto both grips. Seeing his ass bared like that, it’s a natural reaction for me to get hard. I don’t try to fight it.

“Spread your legs wider, sub,” Leandro says. Giovanni steps out of his clothing to widen his stance. If it were Valentin, he would rub a hand over Gio’s buttocks and thighs to settle him, but that might be interpreted as a sexual touch. Giovanni’s shoulders heave with every shuddering breath, back rippling with tension. I’d like to remind him to relax, but I don’t want to disrupt their scene.

“First, I’m going to warm you up with some light slaps. Color?”

“Green, Leandro.”

“Color, Silvio?” Leandro asks.

“Green,” I say with a little less confidence.

“*Cominciamo.*” *Let’s begin.*

The first few times the belt makes contact are just light taps, almost teasing, meant to acquaint Giovanni with the implement and loosen him up.

“Very good, Giovanni. We’ll do three rounds of ten. Each set will be more painful than the last. Remember, you have your safewords if you’d like to stop or slow down.”

“Yes, Leandro.”

The first flick of the belt is accompanied with the sharp slap of leather hitting skin. Giovanni flinches, then juts out his ass almost stubbornly. Leandro delivers another, and another, each one with a sharp, biting thwap. The tawse leaves a forked pattern with the edges darker than the rest as Gio’s skin transforms from a sun-kissed gold to a bright, blushing pink.

“Ten more,” Leandro says. “Harder this time. Color?”

“Green,” Giovanni bites out.

The spanking starts anew, and I notice the rigidity in Gio’s arms where he grips the bench, the way his eyes are squinted shut, jerking after each blow. I try to remember if this was his reaction to Valentin’s whippings. They’d always seemed like poetry in motion, giving and taking from each other in perfect synchronicity.

During the next round, with his bottom now striped in an angry scarlet hue, Giovanni lets out a few labored groans. Are these pleasurable noises or is he uncomfortable?

“Color, sub?” Leandro asks, surely noting his response.

“Green,” he says through gritted teeth, but I’m not sure I believe him. I quickly admonish myself for not trusting him to know better. His ass cheeks are swollen and mottled in what will surely bloom into nasty bruises. But he has a high threshold for pain. Valentin told me more than once, so perhaps this is irritating to him because it’s not enough? Halfway through the third round, Giovanni lurches forward, slowly shaking his head while letting out a quiet sob. I raise a hand to halt Leandro’s blows, but he’s already stopped, waiting for Giovanni’s next cue.

“Green,” Gio rasps, having noticed the interruption.

“Are you sure, sub?” Leandro asks. “We can rest here and come back to it later.”

“Green,” Giovanni hisses.

Leandro, trusting him to know, lands a few more blows, softer this time, which seems to irritate Gio even more. “I said green,” he snarls.

“Red,” Leandro answers calmly and takes a step back.

I resist the impulse to rescue him. Valentin taught me to wait and see how things play out, don’t always rush in to comfort him, but give him the opportunity to express himself first. Giovanni whirls on Leandro and cries out in an accusing tone, “Why did you stop?”

“I was uncomfortable, sub,” Leandro says matter-of-factly. “I don’t know you well enough to read your body language or interpret your nonverbal cues.”

Gio lets out a roar of frustration and turns on me, says in what I lovingly call his “demon voice,” “Why did you make me do this? Master will not like it.”

Once I’ve recovered from my surprise, I ask him, “Is your Master here with us right now?”

“He is *always* here,” Giovanni insists then turns his fury on Leandro, “You are *not* my Master.”

“You’re correct, sub,” Leandro says with the utmost calm, tawse still in hand. “The beating was delivered by my hand, not your Master’s. I don’t have the same feelings for you as your Master did, nor do we share the same bond.”

There is something else I interpret from what Leandro doesn’t say: *I cannot be your Master.*

Giovanni’s glare turns to bewilderment and then a sad nod. He keens as if something inside him is breaking and drags his lower lip through his teeth, getting that primal panic about him that I recognize from past episodes.

“I’m going to give you both a few minutes.” Leandro sets aside the tawse and exits the room quietly.

Instead of approaching, I say to Giovanni, “Get dressed and come sit with your Sir.”

Despite being a bundle of nerves, I maintain my composure because he needs me to be unflappable in these moments of crisis. Giovanni, with his shoulders hunched and head hanging, tugs on his underwear and shorts, then makes his way over with a sullen slouch. When he’s close enough, I pull him right into my lap and arrange him so that it won’t irritate his tender ass too much. I’m expecting a fight, an argument at least, but it seems the wind has been knocked out of him.

“I’m sorry,” he moans, crying softly, sniffing a little into my shirt. I rock him for a spell, until he’s gotten most of it out.

“I’m sorry too. Perhaps you are not ready for this sort of thing yet?”

“I should be punished for my disrespect. I’ve embarrassed you in front of Leandro.”

“I’m not embarrassed. Leandro will understand, and you can apologize to him when you’re ready. There’s no deadline on these sorts of things.”

“I feel so stupid. Master would be so disappointed in me.”

“Because I allowed another Dominant to scene with you?”

“No. Maybe? I don’t know.”

“It was my idea, Giovanni. My attempt to take care of you in a way I thought would benefit us both. You agreed to it, yes, but it was with my encouragement.”

“I am not demonstrating my virtues.”

Whose virtues, I want to ask, because they are certainly not mine, but that is a discussion for another time. “I think Master would understand how difficult it might be for you to scene with someone new. And I think he would be happy you are trying to get your needs met. I don’t think he would be angry or disappointed in you. On the contrary, I think he would be very proud.”

Giovanni looks at me as if to see if I'm telling the truth. I kiss his nose, which he scrunches up adorably.

"You are too soft with me, Sir."

"Probably, but you are my weakness. It hurts my heart to see you in pain, which is how we ended up here in the first place, yes?"

He nods and burrows into my chest, then says very softly, "I wanted it to be Master, Silvio. I wanted it so bad."

I will not be the one to tell him his Master is gone forever. That is something he'll have to accept when he's ready.

AFTER LEAVING LEANDRO'S, I TAKE GIOVANNI ON A BRIEF tour of the university and walk him through their beautiful, hallowed library. When I ask him if he could ever see himself in a place such as this, he looks at me very intently and says, "Maybe."

One must give thanks for small victories.

Now he is penning a letter of apology to Leandro on the fancy stationery he buys in town from his former employer. His face is thoughtful, pensive. I'm reluctant to call it a punishment because it is simply the right thing to do, but Giovanni needs the closure of being granted forgiveness. Tomorrow, before we return home, we will deliver it to Leandro ourselves.

I let myself out to the balcony so that I may have some privacy to call him myself. We parted on good terms, but I feel another conversation is warranted. When Leandro answers, I open with, "I wanted to call and apologize again for this afternoon. I didn't know he would react that way."

"How could you have known? It was an experiment for us all. And it wasn't a failure. You both learned something important, didn't you?"

I try to piece together what lessons may have come from such a demonstration. That I shouldn't push him? That I should have consulted my brother's ghost?

“I suppose we did,” I say, a little ashamed that I cannot anticipate Giovanni’s needs the way Valentin could.

“My advice is to be as patient with yourself as you are with him, Silvio. You’ve suffered a loss too. The death of your brother not only created a void in your life but also altered the dynamic that you and Gio shared. Perhaps when the grief isn’t so fresh, we could try again.”

Leandro’s offer is far more generous than I might have imagined. “Thank you for your grace, dear friend. Please don’t hesitate to call on me if there’s any way I can help you.”

“I treasure our dinners, Silvio. They mean more to me than you know. And I’m enjoying getting to know your boy. He is every bit as enchanting as you’ve said.”

We end the call and I sit on the balcony a while longer, watching the bustle of the piazza below, listening to the laughter and lively shouts drifting up from the courtyard like the fragrances of savory food.

“Is Leandro upset with me?” Giovanni asks. Silent as a cat, he stands in the open doorway as if waiting for my explicit permission to join me outside. I hold out my hand and draw him in closer, kissing the top of his knuckles.

“No, princess. He was very understanding. He knows you’re grieving. He said we couldn’t have known how you might respond. Did you know?”

“No. At first, I was nervous, I wanted to do well. Then I got excited, thinking it might help, but then I became bitter. The voices were mad that it wasn’t Master hurting us. They felt tricked and... betrayed. Master made a lot of promises, and I know he meant to keep them, but... I was angry.”

“Who were you angry at, sweetheart?” I ask as I pull him into my lap and stroke along his spine.

“I was mad at Master for leaving me, for forcing me to allow a stranger to do this to me, something we had always cherished. I... I’m mad at him, Sir.” He grunts with displeasure, fists balled in his lap. I slowly unfurl one of them and hold it in my own.

“You can be mad at someone and still love them very deeply.”

“I guess so,” he says, looking glum.

“I used to have a motorbike, one that I adored, but I was reckless with it, drove after I’d been drinking, went too fast, that sort of thing. One day, I got into an accident. I was okay, but I was hurt pretty badly. Valentin flew in from America to yell at me in my hospital bed. When I got out, the first thing he did was douse my bike in gasoline and make me strike the match. And as we watched my beloved bike burn, he made me swear to get my act together. That was when we took a trip to Ischia, and he asked me about my dreams. Valentin told me he would come back and beat my ass if I didn’t straighten myself out, and I believed him.”

Giovanni smiles. “Master could be very persuasive.”

“And scary,” I add with a hearty laugh. We’re quiet, each of us remembering the man who molded us into the men we are today. “But he’s not here, sweet boy, not in the way we both want him to be. It’s just the two of us now, and we must figure out a way to go on without him. I love you, Giovanni. My feelings for you are as wild and boundless as the sea, and I’m committed to being your Dominant, but I need you to teach me how to rule you. Not in the way of your Master, but in a manner that is all my own. What do you say to that? Will you help me, princess?”

He nods solemnly and says with the utmost sincerity, “I will help you, Sir.”

A few days later when we are back at the villa, Giovanni brings me a letter, one written by Valentin toward the end of his life and given to Gio after the reading of my brother's will. This letter and the painting are all that Giovanni wanted of my brother's estate. Now, he points to my brother's shaky cursive and says, "Normally his penmanship was very neat, but you can see here the tremor of his hand. It must have been hard for him to write this. He saved it for me, so that I might have some comfort after he..." He glances up at me with his big, sad eyes. "After he went away."

The letter is written in English, so Giovanni translates it for me. *"...and all that I ask of you, Giovanni, is that you demonstrate the virtues I taught you in a way that honors me, and if you do choose Silvio as your Dominant, then love him with your whole heart and devote yourself to him as you would your Master. Until we meet again, my beloved golden boy..."*

Giovanni snuffles and wipes at his eyes. He's already crawled into my lap for this reading, so it's easy to comfort him as we are. He's very much like a little boy sometimes, needing cuddles and affection and to be told that he is good.

"Thank you for sharing that with me, Gio. Your Master loved you very much. He told me many, many times how precious you were to him."

He nods and folds the paper, careful not to smudge the ink with his tears. "I thought you might like to know why this is hard for me, Sir, to shift my allegiance. I love you and I want

to submit to you. It's just that, I don't know how to be your submissive. Because I'm so used to serving Master."

We are each clinging to what we know. For myself, trying to mimic my brother's way of dominating Gio will only set us both up to fail. If we are to truly move on, we must leave the past behind and forge something new.

"Tell me your virtues," I say, even though they are engraved in my psyche already.

"Humility, patience, subservience, and gratitude," he recites.

"But these are your *Master's* virtues for you, are they not?"

"Yes?"

"These are not *my* virtues, Giovanni. This is clearly the problem. How can you serve me as my submissive if you are following your Master's rules?"

He juts out his lower lip, thinking on this revelation, and I recall the passages he'd shown me about the many types of love the Greeks have for each other. That was how he was finally able to express his feelings toward me, by writing his thoughts down in a letter, with annotations, my little scholar.

At last, his dewy-eyed gaze lifts to meet mine. "How might I be virtuous for my Sir?"

"Don't worry, beautiful baby, Sir has some ideas."

WE'RE IN THE PLAYROOM NOW, AND I AM BINDING ONE OF Gio's lovely pink heels in an ankle tie that resembles the crisscrossing straps of a Roman sandal, an observation he made with a quiet sort of awe. We have come to this scene to discuss the virtues I have in mind—three in all. Giovanni has had time to reflect and will share his virtues for me as well. He was hesitant at first to make such a determination, but I insisted.

"I would like my submissive to be adventurous," I tell him, admiring the golden glow of skin that peeks between the gaps in my rope.

“Adventurous,” Giovanni repeats as if sounding out the word. “What does that mean to you, Sir?”

“Well, you are already first mate on my magnificent *Evelina*, and I now wish to suspend you with my rope.” I nod to the rigging above us. “This requires an adventurous spirit and a willingness to try new things, which I believe you have already.”

Giovanni wiggles his toes. “Would Sir like to experiment with his boy sexually?”

“Oh yes. I would like to try many, many new things with you, but this virtue is not only for the bedroom, Giovanni, it is for life.”

“Sir would like his submissive to take more risks?” he asks, tentative this time, probably recalling all the times I’ve encouraged him to make friends and pursue his passions.

“With my help, princess. Like when we’re in a scene. I’ll never leave you bound and alone but stay with you the entire time to monitor your comfort and make sure you’re enjoying the experience. And I wouldn’t ask you to take risks without my being there to support you.”

“But what if I fail?”

“Failure is a fact of life and how we learn. Your Master taught me that. Besides, your willingness to try new things is more important to me than whether or not you succeed.”

I tell him a story of my maiden voyage on my first sailboat, how I couldn’t catch the wind and ran out of fuel and had to be towed back to the marina by the Corps of the Port Captaincies, which was terribly embarrassing. “But I didn’t give up after that first attempt and look at me now.”

“A seasoned sailor,” he says with a smile. “I can be adventurous for you, Sir, as long as there is a safe harbor for me to return to.”

“I promise to always provide you that. Now, up on your feet.” He rises to stand with his legs shoulder-width apart, arms akimbo so that I may bind his slim hips and torso. My rope winds around his smooth thighs and taut stomach like a

chastity belt, framing his groin and the plump fruits dangling there. “Give me a kiss, pretty baby.” I pause tying him up to brush his softly parted lips with my own.

“Mmmm...” he murmurs, wrapping his arms around my neck and pulling me in for more because my kisses are a delicious treat. “What else would you ask of your boy, Sir?”

“You know that I love your mouth, princess, for so many reasons. Your Master didn’t like backtalk from his *schivo*, and that was fine for him because he was a very strict man, but your Sir likes a little sass.”

“You want a brat?” he asks, nudging my foot with one toe.

“I want a boy who will challenge me, one who’s not afraid to tell me when I’m wrong. I want to earn my right to dominate you, not simply inherit it. And I like a good argument. It keeps things lively and fresh. What did you once call this treasured Italian pastime?”

“A national sport?”

“Yes. You are mouthy, and I like it. I want you to express yourself with me, all facets of your personality so that I may know you, not as your Master knew you, but as you are now.”

He nods and sucks in his lower lip. “There is a reason I don’t talk about my past, Sir.”

“*Dimmi.*”

“I didn’t like who I was, who they turned me into. Matthew was broken beyond repair. I wouldn’t have wanted you to know me then.”

“And now?” I ask, fiddling with the knots just to keep my hands occupied.

“It’s still a struggle. I’m still an addict. You talk about taking risks. The reason I’m so scared is because... I don’t trust myself a lot of the time, even with the smallest decisions. I like routines because they’re something I can rely on, tasks I can accomplish and feel good about myself without any risk of temptation. As my world expands, you must remain vigilant. I am my own worst enemy.”

I appreciate this glimpse he's given me. He so rarely talks about his addiction or his past. "Thank you for trusting me with your fears, Giovanni. I will love your imperfections, too. That brings me to my third and final virtue, but first, are you ready to fly?"

"Yes, Sir."

I guide him downward so that he's lying flat on his back with his knees bent. His untethered arms lie gently across his chest as though sleeping peacefully. The position is like being cradled by the swing, and I've rigged three more harnesses to support his legs and his head when I suspend him. I hook a carabiner through the loop on his chest and fasten it securely. Then I gather up the rope, and with the aid of a pulley, slowly begin to lift him.

"How's this?" I ask when he's hovering half a meter above the mats.

"Good, Sir," he says with a nervous laugh and reaches out both hands as if to balance himself.

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes, Sir, absolutely."

I float him upward until he's as high as my waist and tie off the rope to a cleat mounted to the concrete floor. I inspect my work closely, checking the knots that bear his weight and the tension in the rope. I fit his head in the dangling rope harness that resembles a woven plant holder and hook his legs behind the knee through similar supports. "Comfortable?"

"Extremely." He stretches his limbs and settles into his bindings like a cat reposing in a patch of sun. "Did you know, Sir, that Japanese ropework began in feudal times as a way to torture prisoners of war and force their confessions?"

"I may have heard that somewhere. Have you been doing research on Sir's kink, Giovanni?"

"Yes. It began during the months you were studying in Milano. I wanted to understand why you had to go away."

"You missed me, sweetheart?"

“Tremendously. You know that.”

“What else did you learn? Enlighten me.”

“The technique was later used to display the accused publicly, differing ties according to their crimes, and it only evolved into an erotic art in the late 19th century. *Kinbaku*, as they call it in Japan, means ‘the beauty of tight binding.’”

“You look very beautiful bound in my rope. Any pain or numbness?”

“No, Sir.”

“Can you feel this?” I ask and tickle the bottom of his foot.

He yanks it back with a snort of laughter and warns, “Sir, don’t make me safeword.”

I draw one hand along his thigh and inspect the sway of his body, making sure the ties are secure without cutting off his circulation, that they will hold fast for our next athletic pursuit. I guide his hands to the rope that suspends him from the ceiling and curl his fingers around the strong fibers for him to grip, then run my hands along the webbing of his torso, hips, and groin, lingering where his skin is exposed, my very own masterpiece. I want to show him off to my friends in Milano. Many have not met my beloved boy, only heard stories.

“There is something else I learned,” Gio says in a dreamy sort of way.

“*Dimmi tutto, piccolo mio.*” *Tell me everything, my little baby.*

“There’s a Japanese woodblock print called *Dream of a Fisherman’s Wife* that depicts the ecstasy of a woman being ravaged by two octopi whose tentacles intertwine and titillate her body in rope-like fashion. It is said that this piece of art is an iconic reference to rope erotica.”

“You are fantasizing about being fucked by a fish again,” I say in a playful way.

“A cephalopod, Sir, and I blame you for my marine fantasies. You are like a Triton, who are the sons of Poseidon, lusty gods of the sea.”

“Do they have fish tails and cocks as big as dolphins?” I ask and he nods. “Then I’m flattered.”

His own pretty member is stiff with arousal, nudging against the soft part of his belly and leaving behind a sticky trail of fluid. With his legs bound and spread, his sweet cheeks are mine for the taking. I draw one finger along the cleft of his buttocks, brushing lightly over his puckered hole. He shivers with pleasure and moans sweetly.

“You promised to tell me your last virtue,” he says.

“Simple. I want you to be open with me.” I stand at the place where we will soon be joined, the thin fabric of my pants the only barrier between us as I grab hold of his thighs and slide him against my ripe manhood.

“How much more open can I be, Sir?”

“Not just here,” I press two fingers to his opening, “but here too,” I tap his temple with my other hand. “And here.” I touch his left pectoral to signify his heart.

“You are asking a lot,” he says.

I grab a bottle of oil and coat all five of my fingers, then slowly ease one inside him. Giovanni arches, squeezing my digit with his rectal muscles, the ones he exercises every day to keep strong just for me. My rope ripples and glistens where it holds him. “Beautiful,” I say to him as he levers himself backward to fuck himself on one finger. “This is my poetry, Giovanni. Your beautiful body ensnared by my rope.”

“Sir,” he whimpers, his temple damp with exertion as I add a second finger.

“Yes, Giovanni?”

“More, please?”

“How much more?”

“Everything. Give me all you’ve got.”

“Soon, sweetheart.”

By the third finger, he is panting and restless, writhing, eel-like, in my bindings. I admire the glimpse of pink from his

interior walls and the tight clutch of his channel. “So strong. And so sexy.”

“Please, Sir,” he begs. “I’m ready now.”

I strip off my pants and kick them aside. Giovanni lifts his head to watch me coat my cock in oil. He’s suspended at an angle, so that I may hold him in my arms while we make love. I grab my dick in one hand and my boy in the other, then slowly feed it to him while he grasps the rope above us with both hands.

“Gio,” I say as I gather him up in my arms. I kiss his temple and whisper his name into his golden waves of hair.

“Silvio,” he pants.

“*Apriti*,” I coax. “*Apriti a me.*” *Open yourself to me.*

In a feat of acrobatics, he slots into place, then leans back into his cradle and swivels his hips, seeking his pleasure by grinding on my dick. I allow this torment to continue while admiring the ebb and flow of his supple body, then I grip his thighs in both hands and pump my hips once.

“Fuck,” he says, eyes rolling back on a guttural groan.

“Play with your nipples,” I command, and he grabs onto both and twists savagely. I take over then, centering my gaze on his bouncing cock that slaps against his navel with every thrust. His balls are drawn up tight as figs and riper still.

“You’re so deep inside me. This feeling is…” he trails off on a whine. “Make me yours.” He continues to beg as the pounding of our flesh echoes all around. My cock throbs, ready to erupt as my vision narrows to the two flashing gold pieces in Giovanni’s nipples. His moans of ecstasy fill the room along with my own harsh grunts as our bodies collide.

“*Toccami*,” he says. *Touch me.*

“Come for me hands-free, Giovanni. Imagine Sir’s tentacles wrapped around you, holding you so tightly, wringing the pleasure from your beautiful body.”

His fingernails scrape along my shoulders, a sharp biting pain, as I thrust in deep and blow lightly across his nipples.

Gio wails, then spurts, going boneless in my arms. I use him still, until my orgasm thunders through me like a herd of galloping beasts and I release inside him. Aftershocks of pleasure roll through me, tingling all the way to my toes. We are a sticky mess, but I continue to hold him while he sighs contentedly.

“How was that?” I ask once we’ve finally parted and I’m slowly lowering him to the mats. He resembles a human sacrifice, helplessly laid open and offered up to the gods, only it is I who ravaged him.

“Fucking fantastic,” he says with the sort of listlessness he exhibits after sex.

I set to work untying him, then clean the semen from his stomach and grab a bottle of lightly scented oil to massage his muscles. Giovanni lies there sated, private in his pleasure and staring dopily back at me. Hums of contentment resonate from him as I rub him down. Eventually his awareness returns, and he says, “Can you tell me how you’d like for me to be more open, Sir? I want to better understand this virtue.”

“You are secretive, princess. Mysterious. You confound me even when you’re not trying. Your Sir needs small words and clear explanations. You must tell me what you want and how you feel. You must volunteer this information and give it freely whenever asked, not be like a stubborn, silent clam holding everything inside.”

“That will be... hard for me. My childhood was... not stable. I had to hide things from my mother to survive. And some of my behaviors, even with all of Master’s instruction, they’re not very flattering.”

He is referring to his self-harm and fits of temper.

“Admit your mistakes promptly. That was one of your Master’s rules, yes?”

“Yes.”

“We will keep that one. You can tell me anything, princess, including what the voices say to you. I don’t expect you to trust me with everything right away. I need to earn your

confidence. But you must try to be open with me. Now tell me, what virtues do you have for your Sir?”

Giovanni drags one of my hands onto his chest and lays it atop his ribcage. “I need your strength. You may give me a long leash, but you have to yank me back when I go too far. I will test you, and I need to know there are lines I cannot cross. I need you to enforce those boundaries, firmly.”

This sounds a lot like punishment, of which I am wary, but I will figure out a way to accommodate him.

“Okay, what else?”

“There are times when I’m not mentally well or stable. I need you to be steady, a rock I can rely on to ground me when the voices get loud. An anchor when I’m being tossed around in a storm of bad thoughts.”

“Rock. Anchor. Steady. I can do that.”

“And I need you to pursue me, especially if I try to run away. To flee is my first reaction to fear and stress, but it gets me into trouble.”

That is certainly true. I think of Paolo, the weaselly cook in town who tried to get Giovanni high off heroin when he first learned of Valentin’s diagnosis. Whenever I see him on the streets, he looks the other way, as he should.

“Lucky for you, I love chasing after beautiful things,” I tell him.

“And I need to know that I’m wanted and desired.”

“Endlessly, *caro*. Obsessively,” I add and kiss his pretty mouth.

“I reserve the right to add more later when I’m not still buzzing from the afterglow of sex.”

“*Certo*. Very wise of you.”

Still holding onto my hand, he asks, “Is it only because of Master, that you chose me?”

“I chose you in spite of your Master, Gio. You know I don’t like to share. That was very hard for me, sending you

back to him. Even now, I feel as though I'm standing in his shadow, trying to be who you need me to be. He left very big shoes to fill."

"I wouldn't want you to be any different, Sir. With you I feel safe and cherished. You make me laugh and you cuddle me when I'm sad. I love my Master, but I fell in love with you, something that's never happened to me before. I'm still a little bewildered by it. And I've seen my competition. You've never seen me in a jealous rage, but I can promise you, it's not pretty."

I suspect he is the "slashing tires and setting things on fire" sort of jilted lover, which is not a theory I wish to test.

"So, I guess what I'm saying is, I'd like to know that you're committed to taking me on, demons and all," he says. "My only rule is that you don't leave me for someone else. I don't think I could recover from something like that. I'd rather die."

I wish he were being dramatic, but I don't think so.

"I'll try my best not to hurt you, Gio, I promise. And if you or I are feeling jealous, we'll express it to each other rather than jump to conclusions. That would be best, yes?" He nods. My next words come easily because they are from my heart. "You are very special to me, because with you I have the confidence to share the parts of myself I've never shown to anyone else. You allow me the freedom to be who I am, and you accept what I give you so beautifully." I tap his chin. "And you look good on my boat."

He smiles, then says with a haughty sniff, "I thought it was my ass."

"Your ass is a sweet bonus." He laughs at that, and I continue, "To review, I will be strong. I will be steady. I will pursue you to the ends of the earth, and my desire for you will be like an invisible rope bound inextricably around your heart."

"Yes, Sir, I like that," he says with tenderness. "Thank you for allowing me to stay here with you and for taking care of

me. I couldn't do this without you. I wouldn't want to."

"We're doing this together. Healing from our loss and creating something new."

"Something that is just ours," he says with a cautious smile.

"Esattamente." Exactly.

I am taking my pretty baby to Milano for a holiday. Santino has been asking for a visit, and it's time for my boy to meet my friends and mingle with people outside our immediate family. Perhaps he will make a friend of his own? I also convinced Leandro to join us for the long weekend, and we meet him at the train station in Napoli, each of us with a small travel suitcase, though mine is mostly filled with my rope.

Now, Giovanni and Leandro are engaged in an animated conversation about the nature of pain while I sit across from them, admiring my young lover.

“Plato advocated that pain and pleasure went hand-in-hand and were emotional in nature,” Giovanni says, placing both hands against his chest. “He believed pain emanated from the heart. In fact, none of the early philosophers connected sensation to the brain at all. That discovery didn't happen until...”

I try to pay attention, but the warmth of the sunshine streaming in through the window has made me listless. And I am distracted by Giovanni's collar bone and the flutter of his throat as he speaks. I like to press my fingers against the pulse point on his neck and feel his heart beating—his temple, his groin, everywhere on his body where the skin seems like such a thin barrier to the life throbbing within. Is it *arrogante* to believe that his heart beats for me?

My thoughts drift to later this evening when we will dine as a group at Santino's. I've brought a special rope to weave a decorative tunic for Gio. Made of gold silk, this will hopefully be a delightful surprise, a demonstration of my love as well as an obvious claim to all those present. The rope I've selected is smooth as butter, meant to glide sensually across his skin. And later, after the party is over, I will lay him down on my bedsheets and make love to him like the treasure he is.

"What do you think, Sir?" Gio asks, bright-eyed and expectant. He is generous to try to draw me into their scholarly discussion.

I moisten my lips and touch two fingers to my mouth, tasting the salt on my skin. "I'm afraid I wasn't listening, princess. My thoughts were of a more carnal nature."

He blinks, then swallows. I note the jog in his throat. He turns briefly to the scenery outside our window, gathering himself, then back to Leandro, not missing a beat in their conversation. I smile wickedly and continue to stare at his neck. Tonight, he will wear my rope as a collar.

SANTINO'S BUILDING IS IN THE NAVIGLI DISTRICT OF MILANO, overlooking a wide canal spotted here and there with people taking gondola tours of the city. The bustling waterfront is lined with several cafés, shops, and nightclubs, and there's a market every Saturday with vendors selling everything from fresh fruits and vegetables to antiques and second-hand bikes—I bought one myself during my stay with Santino a little more than a year ago. There are also some quaint bookshops I plan to explore with Gio while we're here.

Behind the walled entrance to Santino's property is a large outdoor courtyard where he sometimes hosts parties and gatherings. At the courtyard's center is a large, working fountain, and it's here that Santino welcomes us into his home with warm greetings.

Gazing up at the statue of three women who appear to be conspiring, Giovanni says, "The three muses?"

“That’s right,” Santino says. “My family had it commissioned by a sculptor many, many years ago to pay homage to the arts.”

“Some scholars claim there are actually nine muses,” Gio says.

“That would have been a much more costly fountain,” Santino teases.

Gio smiles and Santino goes on to tell us the history of the building, largely for Gio’s benefit. “The *navigli* are a system of interconnected canals in and around Milano, dating back to the Middle Ages that have been used for everything from irrigation to commerce to defense. When my family arrived here, most of the canals had fallen into disuse and were paved over, but not this one. They saw the potential of having a waterfront property and bought the building as a salon for artists, taking great pains to restore it. For many years, it was an art gallery with several studios. Now, I use it as a sort of academy for rigging and bondage.”

It’s a rite of passage for riggers to study under Santino, and he often hosts experts in other areas of kink who give lessons and demonstrations as well.

“Do you own the entire building?” Gio asks.

“Yes, and I rent out rooms to friends in the lifestyle who wish to stay for a while or have a private space to conduct scenes.”

“I guess being the owner means you don’t have to deal with so many noise complaints from all the screaming subs,” Gio says with a smirk.

“That is certainly one of the benefits,” Santino says, eyes twinkling with amusement. He nods to Leandro. “Leandro here can certainly get them to wail and moan.”

Leandro only inclines his head, smiling modestly.

The apartment’s exterior is painted a bright, buttery yellow, but the inside is more subdued with white stucco walls, wood flooring, and exposed beams running along the ceiling—ideal for mounting equipment. Santino shows us a

few of the communal studio spaces as well as a library, which has one of the most comprehensive collections of bondage instruction and erotica I've ever seen. Santino ends the tour in the lounge, where there are several cozy couches and coffee tables, as well as a polished piano, which draws Gio's attention immediately.

"I seem to recall that you play," Santino says to Gio.

"I've never played a Fazioli before," he replies, and I assume he means the type of piano.

"I grant you permission to play whenever your heart desires. I'm sure you'll want to investigate the library more thoroughly as well. I'd like to discuss some weekend logistics with Leandro. Silvio, I assume you'll be taking the same rooms as before?"

"Yes, Santino. Thank you again for having us."

"My pleasure. Leandro, if you'd care to follow me?"

The two of them head off toward the kitchen and Giovanni's fingers dance across the ivory keys so that it makes a glittering sort of sound.

"You should play something," I suggest.

"I haven't played since..."

Since before Valentin died.

"It *has* been a while. You know, Master wasn't the only one who enjoyed your music."

He stares up at me in a curious way. "I thought your tastes leaned more toward the contemporary, Sir."

"Music is music, princess. I also have ears." I tug at one lobe, and he smirks.

"Maybe later. I'd like to see your rooms now, Sir, where you spent those months we were apart in your quest to be the Dominant you are today."

I offer him my arm. "Right this way, princess."

AFTER GIOVANNI INSPECTS OUR SUITE OF ROOMS, WHICH includes a small sitting area, a bedroom, and an attached bath, we take a stroll along the canal. We stop at one of the many cafés for lunch, then visit a few bookstores, including one that sells used books where Giovanni finds his prize, an academic text from the 1970s about a Greek philosopher named Hypatia. After purchasing it for him, Gio shows me the reprints of the original letters written to her in Greek by one of her pupils and says he can't wait to complete his own translations.

“And who was this woman?” I ask.

“Hypatia advocated for the philosophical state of *apatheia*, the complete liberation from emotions and affections. You might recognize it today as *apathy*, though its Greek root has a more neutral connotation. It means eliminating the tendency to react emotionally or egotistically to external events and things that cannot be controlled.”

“But we must live with passion,” I argue. “That is what makes life interesting.”

“Yes, well, I see you more in the camp of the Hedonists than that of the Stoics,” he says smartly.

“Perhaps so. But what is a life without passion? Without pleasure?”

“A Stoic might argue that pleasure in and of itself does not lead to lasting happiness, only temporary gratification, and that moderation and self-discipline are the keys to a long, fulfilling life.”

“Wine, sex, good food, good company,” I nudge his ribs, “These are the things that make life worth living, no?”

“They are, Sir, but what about service and charity?”

“Service to your Sir? Of course.”

He smiles and shakes his head. “Perhaps you are not one who is driven to excess. When I get a little taste of something pleasurable, I want it all, right away. I can hardly control myself and I don't know when to stop. When I was on drugs...” He pauses there and considers his next words.

“Getting high was really all I cared about. I once stole one of my grandfather’s watches and sold it to buy drugs.”

“What did he do?”

“He put me in rehab. That was the first time. And one time with Master...” He lapses into silence again, so I prompt him to continue. “I got mad at him and ran away, sold myself to a drug dealer in exchange for some heroin and hid out in an abandoned apartment. My plan was to shoot up till I overdosed.”

This disturbs me, both his confession and the fact that Valentin never told me. I know that Giovanni has struggled, but I was never given much detail.

“What changed your mind?” I ask.

“Master found me. Our doctor gave me Naloxone. I survived.”

In the weighty silence that follows, I consider the alternative, which is very bleak. “If your Master hadn’t found you, I might never have known you or fallen in love with my beautiful baby. *Che tristezza.*” *How sad.* I squeeze his hand for reassurance.

“I can be very impulsive sometimes. And destructive. Anyway, that’s why I seek the wisdom of great thinkers, to help temper my appetites and keep my demons on a leash.”

While I imagine Giovanni’s demons as snapping, slaving dogs with choke collars, he goes on to tell me more about Hypatia’s teachings and the philosophy of Stoicism, and I am reminded again of his profound intellect. “You should consider getting a degree in this. You’re practically an expert already.”

He says nothing, only hums, and then quietly, “Maybe.”

NOW, WE ARE BACK AT SANTINO’S APARTMENT. GIOVANNI stands at attention, chin raised, in our bedroom wearing only a clingy, flesh-colored dance thong as I dress him in only my rope. I’ve told him he cannot look until I’m finished, and he’s

been very patient, as always, allowing me the grace to perfect my technique.

“The rope is so soft,” he says. “Is it made of silk?”

“Yes, custom-made. Purely decorative and not for suspension. I wanted something comfortable you could wear for several hours.”

“It feels heavenly.”

I rise from where I’ve been kneeling, having tied off the final knot on his ankle. I check the twin rope around his neck and the knot that lies like a pendant against the hollow of his throat. From there, it’s a series of loops that slant around his abdomen and hug the masculine V of his waist. They continue down one leg, all the way to his ankle, which makes it look like a sort of fancy cocktail dress.

I turn him around so he can see himself in the mirror.

“Oh,” he gasps and covers his mouth with both hands. “Silvio, it’s so... intricate.” He twists from side to side so he can take in every angle, including the back where the rope plunges in a V to the base of his spine.

“I left you a little tail here so I can tug on it from time to time.” I grasp it in one hand and give a little yank.

“I hope that you’ll treat it like a leash and not let me out of your sight. I feel like Cinderella in her beautiful ball gown.” He stretches his arms above his head and then lays one hand against the collar. “I like this very much.”

“Does it remind you of your collar?”

“A little.”

“Valentin was right. Gold suits you.”

“I love it,” he says, swiveling his hips back and forth. “I want to wear it forever. I’ll probably cry when you take it off.”

“No tears tonight, princess. Now, pose for me so I can get a picture.”

He stands in front of the window where the light is better and places both hands behind his back, assuming a quietly

submissive posture, so elegant and handsome. I snap some pictures from that angle as well as a few of him sitting in the chair with one knee bent, showing off the ropework on his leg, and more of him on the bed where he positions himself on hands and knees like it's an intimate boudoir shoot. With his ass on display and hair falling in his eyes, he glances back at me over one shoulder, tugging on his lower lip with his teeth.

“You're too sexy, Giovanni,” I growl, suddenly lightheaded due to all the blood rushing to my dick.

“Who? Me?” he says innocently.

He rolls around in the bedding, striking increasingly provocative poses, trying to seduce me into ravaging him right then and there. I'm not looking at the camera anymore, just shooting blindly, too captivated by him to pay much attention to anything else.

“We could stay the night in,” he suggests. He draws his fingers along the silken threads in a highly suggestive manner, then pushes down on the elastic of his thong to give me a glimpse of his freshly waxed groin. His erection strains against the tight fabric, leaving behind a wet spot that I can practically taste. “I'll do whatever you tell me, Sir. I'll be your very best boy.”

I have no doubt that he would, but that is *not* what's on the agenda. I mentally shake myself from this heady stupor. “No, Giovanni. We're going to dinner. I'm going to introduce you to my friends as my beloved boy, and you're going to enjoy the company of interesting people.”

“Will I be kneeling beside you at dinner or...” He rises from where he's been writhing against the pillows to kneel at the edge of the mattress with his legs spread wide enough that I could see his genitals if it weren't for the form-fitting thong. His eyes are downcast, dark lashes fanning across his cheeks. This is how Valentin liked him—silent, obedient, and eager to serve.

“You'll be sitting by my side. I want you to make charming conversation, remember?” He frowns, looking uneasy. “Risks, Giovanni. I'll be there to help you, and if you

need a break, just tell me. We'll go outside or retire to our rooms. The important thing is that you try." I take a step nearer to him and pet his golden hair, then draw my finger along his jaw and trace his pouty lower lip with my thumb. He draws my digit into his mouth and cradles it on his tongue, softly sucking. "You are a pretty little seducer," I say in appreciation of his effort, then remove my thumb from his mouth. "But you're not going to convince me to cancel our plans."

"I'm not sure what I might have to offer your friends in the way of conversation, Sir. My mouth's best use is for sucking your cock."

I tut at his reticence. "You and Leandro practically conducted a lecture on pain and suffering on the train ride over."

His lips purse in consternation. "We happen to have that in common. What will we do after dinner?"

"There will likely be drinks, a more intimate sort of conversation in the lounge, music perhaps. Some may wish to indulge in more sensual pursuits."

"Sir, have you invited me to an orgy?" he asks, widening his eyes for effect.

I shrug. "You know the crowd. One thing sometimes leads to another."

Giovanni leans toward my groin and nuzzles my hard cock through the fabric of my trousers, then lays his cheek against my bulge and looks up at me slyly. "If I behave well during dinner, may I have a reward?"

"A reward?" I ask as my fingers card through his flaxen hair. "What sort of reward would you like, sweetheart?"

"I want to suck you off in front of your friends. I want to swallow your load and have everyone know that I am the only submissive permitted to savor your seed."

My impulse is to give him an enthusiastic *yes* and maybe a pre-dinner blowjob to take the edge off, but I recall Valentin's lesson on patience, how delayed gratification is sometimes the best motivator of all.

“That can be arranged, but only if you are very, *very* good.”

“I’ll be good for you, Sir. I promise.”

GIOVANNI IS SEATED AT MY SIDE, THIS DAZZLING BEAUTY WHO is the light of my life. It astonishes me still that such a thoughtful, intelligent young man belongs to me. Between courses I can’t help but let my hands wander. I caress his bare back, my fingertips drifting over the smooth planes of his shoulders and down the spinal cord that bends and twists so beautifully in my rope. And when we’re making love.

He is pretending not to be affected by these sensual touches as he makes conversation with a submissive across the table, a non-binary individual named Andrea, who is a student at a nearby institute for design. The sub has complimented Giovanni’s “dress” and asked to take a picture later, as inspiration for their own work. I’m flattered and charmed by the praise. Their mistress, a woman named Patrizia, notices Giovanni’s accent and asks him where he’s from.

“New York City,” he says.

“And what brought you to Italia?”

“I came here with my Master, who is Sir’s older brother. You may have met him last spring at our home in Ischia?”

Patrizia nods and I briefly recall that treasured time, right before Valentin’s health declined so dramatically and Giovanni took up the mantle of his care while I retreated into managing my brother’s affairs and practicing my ropework.

“I was so sorry to hear of his passing,” Patrizia says. “That disease is a truly harrowing one.”

I resist the urge to speak for him, even as my thumb continues to rub his nape in slow circles.

“We do not like to dwell on that time,” he says stiffly. “We find it too distressing to contemplate.”

“Of course. I’m sorry I brought it up. I only wish to offer my condolences.” She glances in my direction, and I give a

slight nod.

“Tell us more about your studies, Andrea,” I say to reroute the conversation. “Studying design in one of the world’s fashion capitals must be very exciting for you.”

We pick up the thread of their former conversation. Eventually, the tension in Giovanni’s shoulders releases and my hand wraps around his neck, squeezing lightly.

“*Molto bene, piccolo mio,*” I whisper in his ear. “You are Sir’s very good boy.”

AFTER DINNER WE ADJOURN TO THE LOUNGE, WHERE SANTINO serves after-dinner drinks. My cheeks are warm from laughter and good company, my belly full and happy as I sip the bittersweet liqueur. At Santino’s urging, Giovanni has taken up a place beside him at the fancy piano, and the two are taking turns playing softly while a few people observe nearby. Leandro is at my side, flirting with a handsome young man visiting from Barcelona. Others are trading gossip or perhaps making more amorous advances. Patrizia is fondling Andrea on one of the couches, rubbing the point of one nipple where it pokes through the light fabric of their blouse. Another couple is kissing decadently with their hands parting the folds in their clothing.

“Your boy is very talented on the piano,” Leandro says when his young man goes to fetch them another drink. “A musician *and* a philosopher?”

“A lover of languages too,” I say with pride.

“Does he play professionally?”

“He plays on the island, at a couple restaurants and at church. Sometimes he’ll bring out his cello and play for the tourists passing by, though he hasn’t picked up his instruments since my brother passed. This is the first I’ve heard him play since then.”

“A sign that he is healing?”

“I hope so. It hasn’t been easy for him. They were very close.”

“And how are you handling it, Silvio?”

“What do you mean?”

“It must be hard for you too. Having to be so strong for him. Your brother was like a father to you, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, he was. I haven’t really given myself time to grieve. I’ve been too focused on taking care of Giovanni.”

“He is a beautiful distraction.”

I ponder Leandro’s remark. It hadn’t occurred to me that I might be using Giovanni as a way to distract from my own grief. It isn’t something I’ve done on purpose. Maybe I’m still waiting for the finality to hit me.

“My brother was always the strong one, the sensible one. The one with rules and routine. I feel sometimes as if I’m role-playing at trying to be him,” I admit.

“We all model ourselves after the people in our lives who are important to us,” Leandro says. “It’ll take time for you both to know who you are without him. But the boy clearly adores you and you him. It’s heartening to see.”

As if knowing we’re talking about him, Giovanni’s head pops up from the piano and he smiles warmly at me. Santino notices the exchange and releases him to my care. I wave him over, and rather than sit in my lap or at my side, he grabs a pillow from the couch and kneels very prettily at my feet.

“Sir,” he says demurely.

“Hello, my beautiful baby. Would you like to say hello to our friend?”

“Leandro,” he says with a slight incline of his head.

“Giovanni, have I told you yet how beautiful you look dressed in your Sir’s rope?”

“You have not, but it humbles me to hear it,” Giovanni responds with a dip of his head. He then turns his attention to me. “Sir, have I been good?” His wandering eyes trail over my

shoulders and chest, down to the arrow of my groin. I spread my legs wider and tug lightly at my crotch to rearrange my burgeoning arousal. These pants are tight. I suppose I am a bit of a show-off.

“You have been very, *very* good, princess.”

“Have I made polite conversation and demonstrated good social graces?”

“You have.”

“Have I modeled my virtues to your standard?”

“In every way.”

“Then, may I have my reward?”

I glance over at Leandro who only grins and gestures for us to continue. The other guests seem only mildly interested in what is transpiring between us. “You may, Giovanni. You’ve earned it.”

I spread my arms across the back of the couch as an invitation for him to take care of me. Giovanni leans in to unbutton and unzip my pants, peeling back the folds of my slacks like unwrapping a present. He tugs down on the waistband of my underwear so that he may free my stiff cock and bulging balls. With his lips and tongue, he worships my manhood until my dick is rock-hard and my slit oozing. It’s a little obscene, to be dressed in such nice clothing and surrounded by similar finery with my dick hanging out, being pleased so openly. I’m a little shy too, with so many eyes upon us. I focus on Gio’s lovely face instead—green eyes, pink cheeks, red mouth. He gives me little kitten-licks, darting around my tumid head, lapping up my slick like it’s honey, and teasing me with his clever tongue.

“You are cruel to torment your Sir in front of all these people,” I say in a voice rough with lust.

“You said you wanted a challenge,” he says with a smirk, right before opening his mouth wide and swallowing me whole. Conversation and the tinkling of glasses fades away as he takes my shaft down his velvet throat and proceeds to extract the seed from my loins. I tilt my head back and growl,

pumping my hips slightly to deepen the sensation. I close my eyes and see angels everywhere, only they all look like Giovanni—mouths open, lips wet, bodies positioned in obscene ways with golden halos and matching jewelry. Naked and inviting, they beg me to commit every manner of carnal sin.

These are not the musings of a pious man, and my only consolation is that my mother will never have to know. My eyes blink open to find a vision better than any fantasy. My boy with tears in his eyes, staring back at me in adoration, focused singularly on the task of delivering me to ecstasy. On a breathless gasp, I spill, with one hand fisted deep in his hair and the other gripping the rope, though I cannot recall moving my hands. At my side, Leandro murmurs “bravo” to the pair of us. When Giovanni finally pulls away, his smile is smug, lips glazed by my cum.

“Thank you, Sir, for allowing me this pleasure.”

“*Prego*, Giovanni.”

“Are you hungry?”

“No, Sir.”

“Thirsty?”

“No, Sir.”

“Do you need to use the bathroom?”

“All my bodily needs have been met, but thank you for asking, Sir.”

We’re in Santino’s studio where a few of us have gathered to practice our ropework under his supervision. I’d like to test out some more complicated lifts with Gio, and it’s best to do so with a more experienced rigger to supervise. When I first met him, Gio didn’t even like having his hand held, and because of his past trauma, bondage was out of the question. Now, he trusts me to restrain him in all sorts of creative ways, though I’m still careful to avoid binding his wrists.

Today I’m using a strong hemp rope, softer than jute and better for suspension than silk. Even still, the ties will likely leave mild abrasions and perhaps even bruises, the ghost of my pattern on his skin.

“I’m going to suspend you a little longer than we have before. You’ll have to tell me if you’d like to come down. No explanation needed.”

“Yes, Sir. Green.”

I weave a complex web of knots around his chest and pelvis, including anchor points at his sternum and waist so that when lifted, it will appear as if he's being raptured. This position will test the limits of his flexibility and endurance. I remind him of this too.

"I've been looking forward to this scene since you showed me pictures," he says.

"If you're uncomfortable or the pressure in your head becomes too much..."

"I will tell you, Sir. I promise."

I finish with the ties and affix a blindfold over his eyes so that he is better able to focus solely on the sensations of his body, then attach carabiners to the two support knots. Santino inspects my work and gives me the go-ahead to lift him. I do so slowly, checking in a few times. When I finally tie him off to the anchor, my breath catches at the beautiful sight before me. Giovanni is... a work of art. His lower ribs are at the height of the arc with his limbs hanging loose, spine curved beautifully, head tilted backward so that it's only a little higher than his ankles. The blindfold prevents me from seeing his eyes, but his face appears relaxed as his chest steadily rises and falls. The rope cuts into his flesh, but only a little. I pinch his toes on both feet. "Feel this?"

"I feel you everywhere, Sir. Your rope is like a net holding me while Mother Ocean rocks me to sleep."

He begins to drift, letting himself go, physically and mentally. I stay close so that I may monitor him while others observe my work. I point out various knots and ties and answer their questions as we are all learning from each other. Giovanni is mostly silent throughout, residing in that subliminal space he craves, where his demons are quiet and all is peaceful.

When the demonstration is over, and I've lowered and untied him, I remove the blindfold and begin rubbing out his muscles. He lies boneless on the mat, happy to be worshipped and appreciated in this way. "How was it?" I ask.

“Perfect,” he says with a blissful sigh. “I saw Master.”

I’m tempted to leave it there, as something private between him and my brother, but I’m curious to know, “How did he look?”

“He looked good. Healthy. Radiant.”

“Did he say anything to you?”

“No, he was too far away, but I could feel him all around me. It was so golden and warm.” His hugs himself in a tight embrace, likely wishing those arms belonged to my brother. His smile fades and his brow furrows. “Do you believe me, Sir? That I saw him?”

I have sensed my brother’s presence countless times since his passing. Valentin is the gruff angel on my shoulder, telling me to be better. The shrewd businessman, whom I try to emulate with my own employees. He is the unparalleled Dominant who observes me even now, and his is the voice in the back of my mind reminding me to be careful with his precious treasure.

“Yes, Gio. I believe you.”

THAT EVENING SANTINO HOSTS A PARTY IN THE COURTYARD with a deejay to play music and caterers and bartenders to serve food and drink. Giovanni stands by the fountain, adorned in a gold thong and a matching rope tied in a pretty bow around his neck. And my name written all over his skin.

Before the party, I found a gold Sharpie and drew it everywhere—*Silvio*—along his throat, across his pierced nipples, his collarbone and ribcage, up and down both legs and across his back. I signed my name on both ass cheeks and circled his hole for the “O.” Then I fucked him. Bent over a desk with his legs spread like a whore, it was vulgar and raw. I don’t know what came over me. Maybe it was seeing my name on his skin. Or maybe it had something to do with our scene that afternoon. All I know is I needed to mark him inside and out. Gio insisted I not clean him afterward, said he wanted to wear me to the party.

Now he is talking to Andrea, the same sub as the night before, who wears a long emerald silk robe, tied with a sash in such a way so that one of their breasts is exposed. Many couples are dancing under the stars, eating, drinking, and partaking in more erotic pursuits. I observe the controlled chaos with a glass of wine, but my eye is inevitably drawn back to my cryptic lover.

“You’re brooding,” Santino says. Leandro is with him, and they join me where I stand apart from the crowd. I don’t bother trying to hide the source of my fascination.

“I am contemplating,” I tell them. “My thoughts are sometimes very deep.”

They chuckle, and Santino says, “I thought your scene today went very well.”

“Yes, it did. Gio was perfect, as always.”

“Your ropework has really advanced,” he says, and it is not only to flatter me.

“I did a lot of practicing while my brother was ill. It was a comforting distraction.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“So, why the long face?” Leandro asks.

“The first thing Gio said to me when we concluded our scene was that he saw my brother, while suspended.”

“Mmmm,” Leandro says.

“Subspace isn’t supposed to cause hallucinations,” Santino says.

“I don’t think it was that. More like a deep meditation, or an intense daydream. Giovanni lives in his head. His imagination is profound.”

If he was only imagining it.

“How did that make you feel?” Leandro asks.

I shake my head, ashamed by my insecurities but unable to rein them in. “Like I am in competition with my brother still,

and I hate feeling this way, especially because some part of me knows I will never win.”

The men are silent, sipping their wine. Leandro says, “When he was alive, did you feel this way toward your brother?”

“Sometimes, yes. Not that he fostered any resentment. He was just older and wiser. He always had everything under control, or made it seem that way. I looked up to him, wanted to be him, and with Giovanni...”

It’s ridiculous of me to try and compete with my deceased brother, I know that, but this pattern was established years ago. He was a father figure and a mentor to me, but he was also my big brother, the person with whom I compared my achievements, and he outpaced me in every way.

Leandro gestures with one hand as if to say, *go on*.

“With Gio, it felt like my brother was teasing me. I could have him, but only according to Valentin’s rules, and there were many. It made it difficult for us to form a bond, and at times, it even felt cruel. My brother and I had some differences of opinion, but Valentin was... Valentin. Then with his sickness, Gio devoted himself fully to his care. We are finding our way, but I keep hitting these walls that prevent me from... taking ownership.”

“I did notice the artwork,” Leandro says. “Was that a reminder to him or was that for you?”

“Both. Gio likes to be marked, though he would probably prefer if they were bruises or lashes from a whip.”

“You’re comparing yourself with him again,” Leandro says.

“I know.” I drag one hand through my hair, frustrated.

“I don’t believe an ultimatum would serve either of you,” Santino says.

“I wouldn’t do that to him. And I know he needs to feel this connection with Valentin, however maddening it is to me. His mental health is my first priority. Sometimes it’s just...”

“Painful?” Leandro prompts.

“Yes. But if I tell him, I’m afraid he’ll hide his feelings from me, and that would be worse.”

“How did you deal with this when Valentin was alive?” Santino asks.

“I tried to live in the moment and be grateful for what I was given.” That was Valentin’s advice to me, the condescending prick.

“But that’s no longer enough to satisfy you?”

“It’s not enough to satisfy either of us. He wants more from me, and I want to give it to him, but I don’t have Valentin’s confidence or his knowledge. It’s as if I am grasping for him in the dark. And I can’t afford to mess this up.” It’s not an exaggeration to say that I am in a tug-of-war with Giovanni’s demons. I must remain ever vigilant of his mental health and continue to prove that a life with me is preferable to joining his Master in death.

“These things take time,” Santino says. “And patience.”

“I am not a naturally patient person,” I admit.

“But you are trying,” Leandro adds. “And he knows that.”

Santino gestures to where Giovanni stands, an absolute vision, and says, “This isn’t a long-term solution by any means, but perhaps you should go claim your sub. There’s nothing like a good public fucking to solidify one’s sense of ownership.”

This is one area at least where I excel. I take a deep breath and straighten my shoulders, then stroll over to where Giovanni stands. Their conversation quiets upon my arrival and Andrea dips their head in deference. “I enjoyed chatting with you, Giovanni. Please excuse me now while I go find my Mistress.”

Once Andrea has departed, I say to Giovanni, “I didn’t mean to chase them off.”

“It’s fine. I was wondering when you were going to make your way back over here.”

“You could have summoned me with the crook of your little finger.”

“A boy doesn’t make such demands,” he answers demurely.

“Are you so shy?” I set my glass on the wide ledge of the fountain so that I may wrap my arms around him.

“I told you that I like to be pursued.”

“Maybe I wanted to give you the opportunity to miss me,” I say, kissing his temple and his cheek.

“I miss you being inside me.”

“Ah, but am I not still inside you?” I run my hand up his smooth thigh and along his crack, feeling the dampness there. I tug on the thin scrap of material wedged between his ass cheeks. “You were still open and dripping when I dressed you for this evening. And here, you are still soaked with my cum.”

He licks his lips to further entice me. “I have an addiction, Sir. And it always takes me a while to tighten up after I’ve taken your cock. Sometimes, I like to touch myself after when my hole is still tender and raw.”

“You are tempting me to do bad things to you, Giovanni.”

“Yes, I know.”

He maneuvers himself out of my arms and splashes me with water from the fountain. I make a grab for him, and he dances away, so light on his feet. It soon becomes a game, with Giovanni edging his way around the circular structure, then moving in the opposite direction so that I must chase him back and forth.

“You’re going to be very sorry when I catch you,” I threaten with a grin.

“Oh yeah? What will you do to me, *Sir*?” he taunts.

I know what I *want* to do. “Keep tormenting me, and you’ll soon find out.”

He does, laughing and splashing, vexing and exciting me, a real-life nymph. Finally, I kick off my shoes and deposit my

wallet and phone on the edge of the fountain, then climb into the water to cross over. He giggles and shouts, protesting playfully as I drag him into the fountain with me. Wiggling in my firm grip, he kicks up a fuss until we're both soaked.

"Now we're both wet," he says, breathless and panting where I've pinned him between myself and the base of the sculpture. The muses' bare feet are displayed at eye-level.

"Was that your goal all along?" I ask.

"No, but it serves you right."

"Reach into my pocket and tell me what you find, princess."

He digs in deep and brings out small vial. "Olive oil-based lube? Shocking," he says sarcastically. I let go of his arms to grab both his bare thighs and yank them upward so that his long legs straddle my waist.

"It's one of our best sellers," I say.

"Probably because you're the one buying it all."

I nibble at his ear, then say to him, "Reach between your legs and tell me if you're still gaping."

He pushes aside the flimsy thong to probe between his cheeks. "Yes, Sir, still wet and wide open."

"You going to take my cock again?"

"I want to."

"I thought you were sore from earlier."

"That makes it better."

"What about all these people watching?"

"You can have me whenever you want, however you want. That is your right as my Dominant. I will bend over and show them the cum dripping from my hole if that's your desire."

"Whatever Sir wants, Sir gets," I tell him with satisfaction.

And without any further discussion, I'm spreading his cheeks and pushing inside him. Giovanni's head is thrown back in his effort to accommodate me. His rim is still soft,

supple, and well-lubricated, his body warm and pliant in my arms. He would never leave my bed if I demanded it. He'd live out his days on his hands and knees if that were my command. It's too much power for one man to hold, a realization that is both terrifying and thrilling. When I slow my invasion of his insides, he says snottily, "Fuck me like you mean it, Sir," and though I know I shouldn't let him provoke me, the desire to consume him is strong. But instead of quickening my pace, I halt it, frustrating him further.

"Did Valentin ever wash your mouth out with soap?" I ask.

"No, he fit me with a ring gag and fucked my face."

I recall that day on the beach, when Valentin dressed Gio in a dog leash and harness, fucked his throat brutally to teach me a lesson, then told me he was dying of a terminal illness. My brother was a bit dramatic.

"I don't think my cock would fit inside that gag," I tell him.

Gio smirks. "Probably not."

"Perhaps I will make you shower me with praise instead. Punishment for you and a reward for me."

"Your head is quite enlarged already, Sir."

"Just like my dick. And how's your tender little hole faring, Giovanni?"

"You tell me."

"Perfection."

That is the end of our conversation. We fuck in Santino's courtyard like animals, grinding our bodies against each other in the fountain Gio admired only the day before, while some of my closest friends and acquaintances look on, strangers too. We are both lost in each other, tossed about in a storm of passion. Giovanni bites his lower lip, trying to stifle his cries as his fingernails dig into my back.

"Don't hold back. I want to hear your sounds of pleasure."

He unleashes a torrent of moans. “Fuck... oh yes... Sir... please... Silvio.” He sings for me like a songbird trilling to its mate. The back of his head is cradled by my palm so that he doesn’t bang his head against the stone, the other is wrapped around his waist. When my arms tire and my lungs burn from exertion, I drag him backward with me to the ledge of the sculpture and tell him to ride me until we both come. His endurance is remarkable, bouncing ecstatically on my dick while furiously stroking himself to get off. He is wild, uninhibited, and he is *all mine*.

I grab his hips and fuck into him with a sort of mad fever he inspires, and when Gio comes with a delirious howl, I am not far behind. The muses above us bear witness, hiding their expressions behind delicately folded hands. Streaks of Gio’s cum smear his gold marker, and my clothes are similarly dusted by a golden shimmer.

“You will finish out the night with your seed staining your skin and my own dripping down your thigh,” I command, tugging on his hair as I growl into his ear. “As a reminder of all the ways in which I’ve claimed you.”

“My body is yours, Sir, to pleasure and defile as you see fit. This boy’s only wish is to serve.”

He has given over his body to my command, but what about his heart?

On our return to the island after a wonderful trip to Milano, I institute a new rule. One day a week, Giovanni must pick our activity. *Subday* he calls it in English. Today he's teaching me how to make focaccia from one of Ma's recipes, and since I'm the one who dresses him every morning, he's wearing a skimpy muslin apron and nothing else—my slutty little housewife. I spend more time fondling him than mixing the dough, and while we wait for it to rise, I crowd him from behind, pressing him against the countertop and kissing along the juncture of his neck and shoulder while groping underneath the apron. I'm thinking about bending him over and breeding him when I get a call from my office in Napoli.

"Ignore it," I say, more to myself than to him and make a grab for the oil.

"Might be important," Gio says, elbows on the counter, ass in the air.

"Nothing is more important than you, baby boy."

I've got my trousers undone and two thick fingers inside him when they call again. "*Cazzo*," I mutter. They seldom contact me on my off-hours and never twice in a row. "Stay right there," I order and watch to make sure he doesn't move. He remains perfectly still, eyes tracking my movement as I pull up my pants and wash my hands in the sink. I rearrange his apron so that his entire ass is bare, giving me something sweet to look at while I make the call.

“This is Silvio,” I say in a tone that I hope conveys to them to make it quick. The call is in regard to a recent shipment of olive oil from one of our mills in Greece, and it is not good.

“It’s too acidic,” says Daniela, my quality control manager. “We can’t label it ‘extra virgin’ and we may not be able to label it ‘virgin’ either.”

“What if we dilute it with a better batch?”

“I’m worried it will taint whatever it touches.”

“*Merde*. This is the second time they’ve done this in the past six months.” Daniela knows this already. Everyone at the plant does. “I’ll call Vasilis, see if he’ll exchange it.”

“He wasn’t very accommodating last time.”

“No, he wasn’t.”

I end the call soon after. Giovanni is still bent over but with his chin resting in his hand, a bored look on his face, my petulant little prince. I slide one hand along his flank, regretting this interruption. “I have to make a few more calls.”

He yawns and stretches like a cat. “I gathered.”

“You know I’d rather be inside you right now.”

He glances down at my tented pants, my erection still holding out hope for release. “I can warm your cock while you make your calls.”

My dick nods at the offer, but I shake my head with sorrow. “I don’t think that would help my ability to negotiate.”

“Well,” he shrugs and straightens his apron. “This boy is ready when you are. Until then, I will bake.”

My good mood quickly sours when dealing with the supplier. After explaining the issue three times to three different people, I finally get Vasilis on the phone. We never had problems until this man, the owner’s son, took over the family business. The last time this happened, we argued about it, and I ended up taking the hit, absorbing the loss as the cost of them getting their house in order. Not again.

It's not long before I'm in a heated argument with the man, who is cursing both my honor and my reputation, calling us fools and implying something more nefarious on my end.

“Vasilis, do you really think I would go through the trouble of bottling your oil, replacing the tank with something inferior, then paying to have it shipped back to you? All to prove a point?”

“The Italians do it all the time, greedy bastards, but I know the difference. Your soil is polluted and barren. It gives the oil a bitter taste.”

“Now you are insulting my homeland?” I am astounded by the man's gall.

“You insult me when you call my oil sour.”

“I didn't say *sour*, I said *acidic*, and you are being dense on purpose.”

It doesn't improve from there, and I end the call with no resolution. I shouldn't be surprised he's taking this so personally, as olive harvesting and refinement is more than just their livelihood, it's their culture, a tradition that's been passed down for generations in the Kalamata region of Greece. Most of the families have trademarked their own blends of olive oil, and some of the groves have trees that are a thousand years old. There is sometimes sabotage that occurs to particularly prized trees, resulting in blood feuds between neighbors. It's a dicey situation.

More concerning to me than the man's pride is that I don't like being so reliant on one supplier, and this one in particular, who is young and hot-headed and too arrogant to admit his product is flawed. When I discuss the matter with my team via an impromptu conference call, we all come to the same conclusion. I must go to Greece and negotiate with Vasilis in person, and if we can't reach an agreement, I'll need to find another supplier.

I take a break from phone calls to sit at the counter and rub my temple. The dough has risen for the second time, and Giovanni is now using his oiled fingertips to dimple the

surface so that it creates the bubbly effect. I watch him in a kind of trance while my mind works through various scenarios.

“Sir?” Gio says. He’s washed up and is now at my side, gently removing my hand from where it’s tangled in my hair. He sets aside my phone too, which I’ve been holding in a death grip, and maneuvers my head backward to rest against his chest. “Close your eyes and think of the ocean.”

He massages my head, starting with slow circles at my temples, then gently drawing his fingertips up through my hair.

“That feels good, baby,” I murmur.

“Can’t have you getting a migraine,” he says, noticing the signs even before I do. “Stress can lead to high blood pressure, you know.”

“Thank God I no longer eat delicious, fatty meats or fried food.” I open one eye to catch his smile.

“Things at work not going well?” he asks.

I sigh because I hate doing this to him, especially with such little notice. “I need to go on a business trip, princess. I’d like to take you with me, but this will not be for pleasure. I’ll be in contentious meetings and possibly touring facilities and having to be tough with suppliers. There may be some unsavory characters.” Not all the families operate like mafia, but some do.

“That’s... disappointing. How long will you be gone?”

“A week, at the most.” He presses his lips tightly together, trying to be brave. The longest I’ve left him since Valentin passed has been three days and even that was a struggle. “We’ll video chat every day, and you’ll have your schedule to follow. Ma and Anthony will be here to keep you company. You think you can book an extra appointment with Rebekah?”

He nods. “I can try. When will you be leaving?”

This issue needs to be resolved as soon as possible, unfortunately. “I’d like to head out tomorrow morning, after I’ve spoken with my lawyer.”

“I’ll help you pack then,” he says with the resignation of a military spouse sending their beloved off to war.

“Come here, baby.”

He circles around me, and I pull him onto my lap. I kiss his cute little nose, his forehead, and his pouty lips, softly, tenderly.

“How’s your head?” He brushes away the hair at my temple.

“Much better, thank you. Talk to me now, sweetheart. Tell me how you’re feeling.”

“I’m sad about you leaving. A week feels like a very long time, and I want to tell you I’ll be fine, but I never really know.”

“You’ll do your best for me?”

“I will.”

“That’s all that I ask. I’ll finish up with business this afternoon. And tonight, I’ll take you apart slowly, every piece of you until you’re crying and cursing and begging me for more. How does that sound?”

He nods and hugs me, buries his face in my neck. “You’ll come back to me, though, won’t you?”

“Always, Giovanni. Just seven days, I promise.”

WE REVIEW HIS SCHEDULE THE NEXT MORNING. I’VE BROUGHT him breakfast in bed because his ass is still sore from being used the night before and besides that, I want to spoil him. I’ve made some additions to his schedule to include music time in the evenings and a stroll through town with Anthony in the afternoons.

“But we take our walks on Sundays after church,” he says.

“I want you to get out more, see new people, perhaps even... make a friend?”

“Are the demands of this boy becoming too great for his Sir to manage?” he says with an indignant sniff.

“Giovanni,” I admonish. “You are my pretty baby and my beautiful boy. I love you too much for words. And I love spending time with you. This is so you have someone closer to your age to share your very deep thoughts with and spread the gospel of my sexual prowess.”

“I thought you were my uncle,” he says grumpily.

“Your uncle’s half-brother and not a blood relation,” I remind. He chews on his lower lip, and I tug gently to free it from the ravages of his teeth. “You will try, princess? Try for your Sir?”

“Fine,” he huffs.

He rides with Anthony and me to the ferry, and I hug him tightly on the docks. “I’m going to miss you,” I whisper into his hair. I want so badly to kiss his broody mouth, but there are too many people around.

“I’ll miss you too, Sir.”

“Be a good boy while I’m gone. And when I get back, Sir will have a very special surprise for you.”

“Your dick in my mouth, while always welcome, is seldom a surprise.”

I make the kissy noise to make him smile, then kiss the top of his head and squeeze his hand one more time. I watch him as the ferry slowly chugs away from the dock. His eyes sparkle in the distance, wet with tears.

MY BUSINESS TRIP IS NOT SMOOTH OR EASY. THE ORNERY supplier isn’t any more reasonable in person, doesn’t believe the sample we brought him is truly his own, nor is he happy about my desire to terminate the contract when he proves unwilling to bend. He threatens me with everything from a lawsuit to bodily harm, and I threaten him with a detailed report of his inferior product to the Ministry of Rural

Development and another to fellow distributors if he continues to vex me.

He tells me in Greek to go shit on my mother, and I consider that to be the end of it.

The next few days are a whirlwind of touring olive groves and mills, observing their refinement process, sampling their product, and deciding on a couple other suppliers to contract with for a probationary period. I am convinced by the end of the trip that we need to source the oil locally and tell my team as much. As soon as we return home, we'll begin scouting Italian suppliers.

Every night I chat with Giovanni by video, and we each share what happened in our day, but despite my best efforts, I feel him withdrawing. When I tell him my trip will be extended by three days, he stops answering my calls. Thankfully, I still have Anthony, who gives me a full report and has agreed to watch over Giovanni 24/7 to make sure he's safe until I return.

It is Anthony, not Giovanni, whom I speak with while I wait to board the ferry that will transport me back to the island. Two more hours and I'll be home. Giovanni has turned off his phone, Anthony informs me, which is why I am also unable to geo-locate him.

"Where is he?" I ask.

"You're not gonna like it, Boss."

"Probably not, but tell me anyway."

"He's at the bar, drinking with some new friends."

Friends? Friends is good, but... "He's not supposed to be drinking."

"Yeah, I told him. He got snippy with me and told me to fuck off. Actually, he told me to take it in the ass from a runaway donkey. Pretty sure it means the same thing."

Giovanni enjoys using colloquial insults, and poor Anthony is too often the recipient. I'm exhausted by this trip,

but I will summon the strength needed to deal with my wayward boy. “Did you tell him I was on my way home?”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

Anthony hesitates. “Let’s just say, I think he’s gonna have some words for you too.”

I grin at the thought of it. Valentin didn’t allow for much backtalk, but I see it as another way for Gio to express himself. And I do enjoy a good argument.

“Stay with him and do not let him out of your sight. I’ll be home soon.”

“You got it, Boss.”

I climb to the boat’s upper deck and find a spot in the sunshine, pop in my earbuds and listen to a woman speaking cheerfully in English. Gio doesn’t know yet that I’m trying to become fluent in his language. If we return to America, even for a visit, I’ll need to know what the hell is going on. And just as it’s important to be able to express myself in my mother tongue, I want that for him too. This is part of my surprise for him. The other is a collar.

I lay my head against the bench and doze for a bit, then wake to the ferryman announcing our arrival. I gather my things and disembark. Ma is there to greet me and offers to give me a ride into town. I ask her if she’s seen much of Giovanni.

“We had a lovely time on Sunday. He took me to church, and we played cards with the ladies afterward. He was so sweet, even offered to get me a few things from the market. We had dinner at my apartment with Anthony, and they left together.”

“Anthony was there too?”

“He’s been like a shadow, hasn’t left his side.”

A hefty bonus for Anthony is in order. And some time off. I’m glad that Gio was in such good spirits and so well-behaved for Ma, but Sunday was almost a week ago. I drive Ma home

and leave the car there, then walk over to the bar where Anthony said they'd be. He stands to greet me, practically saluting like a soldier. Possibly, he's just relieved that I'm back.

"Good to see you again, Boss. You get done what you needed?"

"Yes, I did, thank you." My eyes rove the dim room in search of my lover. I spot him at a table in the corner, surrounded by a half-dozen other youths. His eyes pass over mine briefly before laughing at something one of his companions says. It's a savage dismissal, meant to wound me, and it does.

"What am I dealing with here?" I ask Anthony because I need all the help I can get.

"He was pretty good the first few days, did everything on the list, but when you told him you'd need a few extra days, he got down, stopped sticking to the schedule, started going out more and talking back. Of course, with them he's Prince Charming." He motions again to the table, probably feeling hurt that Giovanni has snubbed him as well.

"He doesn't mean it, Anthony. You know that right? He considers you family, which is why he's taking it out on you."

"Yeah, I know. I just thought we'd made some progress since Mr. Fortuna passed on."

"You *have* made progress. The fact that he even allows you to watch over him is because he trusts you. We both know that he could get away from you if he really tried."

"He did let me know whenever he was going somewhere and waited for me to get ready. And he asked Ma to make my favorite meal last Sunday."

Anthony calls my mother Ma too. She loves it.

"I appreciate you doing this for us. I know it's not easy."

Anthony shrugs. "He's got his issues, but overall, he's a good kid."

"Any cutting or drugs?"

“Not that I know of, but...” he nods again at the table, and my gaze lands on the figure to Gio’s left, Paolo, who is eye-fucking my boy like he’s the catch of the day. I let the waves of fury pass over me and quietly surrender to it. Giovanni’s eyes track mine, noting my displeasure. His head tilts, waiting for me to make my next move.

What would Valentin do?

He’d say something sharp to Gio, take him into his dungeon, and strap him to that examining table with his feet in the stirrups, then milk him until he was a sniveling, bawling mess. He might make him eat his dinner on the floor like a dog, too. And after they’d sorted out their differences and were on good terms again, Valentin would whip the snot out of him until Gio begged for mercy.

None of that appeals to me.

I stand there for a few minutes with Anthony, waiting to see if Giovanni will join us, but he doesn’t. Of course not. He wants to be pursued, to be compelled. Once I’ve gotten control of my temper, I stride over to the table. Gio is spoiling for a fight, but I have learned it is better to be strategic. Everyone quiets at my approach. My large, looming presence casts a shadow over their good times.

“Giovanni,” I say evenly because I want to give him the opportunity to be good. “I’m back.”

“So you are,” he says like a prince to a pauper and takes a sip of whatever he’s drinking. “Meet any interesting people while you were away?”

“Not many. I’ll tell you all about it over dinner. I’m here to take you home.”

He pivots to his friends and motions to me with an elegant turn of his wrist. “You all know my Uncle Silvio.”

“I’m not your uncle,” I remind him curtly.

“Close enough.”

“So many uncles,” Paolo chimes in with a smug little smirk. The liquor must have made him bold. I shoot him a

look that I hope shrivels his balls, and he is suddenly fascinated by the contents of his glass.

“You want to make this hard?” I ask Giovanni.

“You know I don’t like to make things easy.”

I am tempted, so very tempted, to scoop him up into my arms and extract the bitterness from his bones like squeezing the pit from an olive, but instead of doing that, I say to him, “You were very patient to wait for me in my absence, so I will do the same. Whenever you’re ready.” I stand there unmoving, extinguishing their fun, lively vibe. I make it awkward.

“Don’t you want me to introduce you to my *friends*?” he asks then goes around the table, rattling off names that don’t register because I have tunnel vision for him alone. “And you know Paolo already,” he says, goading me to react.

“I have not forgotten Paolo,” I say darkly. Paolo’s eyes flick up very briefly to meet mine.

Gio sighs, swallows back the last of his drink, and stands, pulls out his wallet and drops a couple hundred euro on the table. “I gotta go. Next round’s on me.” He blows kisses to the group, and I expect him to join me where I stand, but he strides right past me and saunters out of the bar.

“Paolo,” I say gruffly, and the man’s head snaps up. “A word, please?”

I step away from the table and Paolo follows, hanging his head. “Paolo, do you know the extent of my feelings for Giovanni?”

“Uh, no, I guess not.”

I nod. “I didn’t think so. I could fill a book with my feelings for that young man, but to be brief, I would die for Giovanni. More important, Paolo, I would *kill* for him. Do you understand?”

“Ye-yes, sir.”

“I seem to recall us being in a similar situation before, where I told you what would happen to you if you so much as look at him, and here you are buying him drinks, making

conversation, entertaining illicit thoughts about him in your head.”

“I’m not... I’m not that way.”

“You must not have understood me the first time, Paolo, or you forgot. So, tell me, what are your feelings for Giovanni?”

“He’s fine, I guess.”

“Do you find him attractive?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I’m not in love with him or anything.”

“Do you want to fuck him?”

“No, sir. Definitely not.”

“Your mouth says one thing, but your eyes say different. *Dimmi*, Paolo, do you have similar feelings for Giovanni as I do? Would you also die for him?”

He shakes his head. “No, sir, I would not like to... die for him.”

“Nor should you have to, right? I mean, that’s insane.”

Paolo nods, then shakes his head, looking a lot more sober than he did ten minutes ago.

“You see, Paolo, Gio makes me crazy in the head.” I knock my temple to illustrate my point. “There is *nothing* I wouldn’t do for him, and I hope you’ll reflect on this conversation and learn from it. I don’t have a lot of patience for men who can’t be taught.”

“I understand now, Silvio, sir. Perfectly, I swear.”

I slap his back so hard he stumbles, then turn on my heel. Now for the hard part.

“YOU TOLD ME TO MAKE FRIENDS,” GIOVANNI SAYS SNOTTILY. We are back at the villa, in the kitchen where I have poured him a glass of water and told him to drink.

“I didn’t tell you to go drinking with Paolo.”

“How else am I supposed to make friends?”

“Sixty-two thousand people on this island and you have to be friends with the one person I told you explicitly to avoid?”

“Who else would want to be friends with me?”

“You can do better than drug dealers, Giovanni. And you did it to hurt me.”

His eyes flash with guilt, but he'd rather die than admit it. “Not everything's about you, *Silvio*.” He spits my name like a curse.

“*Che palle*, Giovanni,” I say in frustration. *What balls*. Giovanni responds with the rude hand gesture that goes along with the phrase and stalks off toward the guest bedroom where he climbs the platform and goes directly into his box, slamming the door behind him. This is his sacred space where I'm not allowed to enter, but he also doesn't like being left alone, so I stand inside the room so that he may continue to glower at me from inside his see-through container.

“I'd like to talk to you about this,” I say, gentler this time.

“What's that?” he says just to fuck with me. “Sorry, can't hear you.”

I walk right up the transparent pane and say to him, “I'd like to talk to you about this, Giovanni, when we've both calmed down and you're ready.”

“There's nothing to talk about.” He glares at me with such bald hostility. “You *left*.”

There is no reasoning with him when he's feeling this way. I'll only make it worse. I back away from his box and ask Anthony, who's been hovering since our argument began, to bring in a table and chairs and start preparing dinner. I'm not leaving this room until Giovanni comes out. He is stubborn, but so am I. I put in my ear buds and resume my English lessons while Giovanni broods, pretending to read a book without turning the pages.

An hour or so later when the food is ready and Anthony has served me at a small table covered in white linen and set

with two places, Giovanni says. “Are you planning to starve me?”

“You’re welcome to join me.” I motion to his seat across from mine. “I’ve been looking forward to having dinner with you all week.”

“Ten days,” he corrects savagely and turns his back on me once more. My absence has put him in a tailspin. I hold myself responsible for breaking my promise and upsetting his delicate balance, but if I give in to his tantrum, he will not respect me, and that would be far worse.

I finish my meal in silence, having set my English lessons aside, with only the scrape of silverware against my plate to keep me company as I cut into my chicken Marsala. Anthony has become a pretty decent cook thanks to Ma’s instruction, and I compliment him on the tenderness of the meat.

“I pounded the shit out of it,” he says with a grin. Giovanni watches our exchange, becoming more infuriated at what he probably views as two-against-one. I know he wants to say something nasty, and I almost think it will work as a lure to get him out of his box, but he only scowls at Anthony before glaring at me again.

“What’s for dessert?” I ask, knowing the answer already because Ma told me.

“Panna cotta,” Anthony says.

“Ma made it?”

“Yeah, for Gio.”

“How thoughtful.”

The dish is Gio’s favorite, and knowing Ma, she probably promised it to him last Sunday, and he’s been looking forward to it all week. Anthony goes to get it, and I say to Giovanni, “Are you going to eat your panna cotta, or should I give it to Anthony?”

“Stick a boat up your ass, oars out,” he says.

“Did you save the nautical insult just for me?” His scowl tells me that he did. “You’re going to have to leave your box

sometime,” I remind him. “Would you rather it be with a hollow ache in your belly or with a delicious bowl of panna cotta made especially for you?”

This has him thinking. Anthony sets two decorative glasses before me, both topped with a raspberry sauce, whipped cream, and chocolate shavings. I dip into my dessert and make all the moans and groans warranted when devouring such a treat. Giovanni opens his door and clomps down like a moody horse.

“Welcome back,” I tell him when he finally reaches me. “On your knees.”

He drops petulantly to the floor and says to Anthony, “No wonder Master brought you here. With the way you snitch, you wouldn’t have made it to your next birthday in America.” He makes the motion of slicing his throat, adorably threatening because we all know he’d never act on it. I figure Anthony will just ignore him, but his eyes bulge and he looks to me for reassurance.

“You’re scaring Anthony,” I tell Gio.

“Yes, I know.”

“Is that how you show your appreciation for Anthony’s care?” I nudge him with my foot. He crosses his arms, and even though it’s bad form, I do admire the spirit of my headstrong, petulant brat.

“Snitches get stitches, that’s if they survive.”

I turn to Anthony. “Are you really afraid of him?”

“You gotta admit, Boss, he’s a little unpredictable.”

“I shot a man once,” Gio says in an offhand way while inspecting his fingernails.

“Excuse me?”

“He stabbed Rico and shot Master, so I got the gun out of Master’s safe and shot the rat bastard in the face.” He turns to Anthony. “Rico never snitched, and we got along fine.”

“Is this true?” I ask Anthony who looks paler than before.

“That’s what some of the guys said. About the shooting, I mean.”

“Valentin told me *he* was the one who shot the man,” I say to Giovanni.

“That’s the story he told everyone. He was protecting me. That’s why he brought me here. They wanted to kill Valentin Fortuna’s boy whore.”

This is a hell of a lot to process on four hours of sleep, and I’m getting distracted from the problem at hand, which is likely Gio’s goal. I say to him, “Do you know what Anthony’s job is here at the Fortuna villa?”

“To take care of your property,” he says, practically rolling his eyes.

“And what are you, Giovanni, if not my property?”

His eyes sharpen because I have surprised him. He thaws a little. Dropping his hands onto his lap, he lowers his gaze and straightens his spine. I take it a step further and nudge apart his knees, the proper posture of a submissive. Or a slave.

“Do you understand, Giovanni? That you are my property?”

“Yes, Sir,” he says quietly.

“And while I’m away, I expect my property to be taken care of. That is Anthony’s job, to guard my most precious possession. And you need to thank him for his service.”

Green eyes flash up at me, not quite glaring but close. There is a storm brewing as he wrestles with this command. He doesn’t look at Anthony but turns his head a fraction and bites out, “Thank you for taking care of Sir’s property, *Anthony*.”

“Uh, no problem.”

“Thank you, Anthony. You may leave for the night. Go ahead and take off the next few days. Giovanni will be occupied.” I wave him away, and he practically bolts out of the room. Meanwhile, Gio and I have been staring each other down, a snake charmer to its cobra, my beautiful, sulky boy.

“Apri la bocca,” I command. *Open your mouth.*

He does so immediately, I can't help but notice. “You are very good at following this instruction at least.” I place a spoonful of panna cotta on his tongue. Giovanni whimpers, so expressive in his pleasure, whether it's food or fucking. To watch him is an indulgence, though I wish this were truly a reward and not merely a tool of persuasion. I feed him a few more bites to soften him up, then say, “Sir was gone longer than expected. That was asking a lot of you, on top of an already stressful situation. I broke my promise, and I'm sorry.” He says nothing, but he is listening, always. “Now, your Sir is back, and we are going to talk about what happened in my absence.”

He licks his lips, stares up at me with a dulcet expression, and says in a sweetly honeyed voice, “This boy is interested to see how his Sir will enforce this demand.”

“*M*y understanding of the situation,” I say to Giovanni as I tie a single overhand knot around his waist, “is that I upset you when I didn’t come back on the day I promised. You lashed out by breaking my rules. Now, you need to be punished for that, and I need to work on regaining your trust. Tell me, Gio, what rules of mine did you break?”

“I drank,” he says with a fat pouty lip.

“Mmmm hmmm, what else?”

“I didn’t answer when you called.”

“Yes, and?”

“I turned off my phone so you wouldn’t be able to track me.”

“That’s right. There’s one more.” He glances away, refusing to answer. “I’ll give you a hint. His name begins with a P.”

“I told you I couldn’t be trusted to make friends.”

“What rule did you break, Giovanni?” I ask, sterner this time, and tug on the rope.

“I hung out with Paolo, who is bad news and I know it.”

“Very good. Are there any more transgressions you need to confess to your Sir?”

“I didn’t follow my schedule. But I don’t see how being tied to you like an umbilical cord is going to help with any of that,” he says, still sulking.

“I want to be close to you, and you want to be close to me too. You will need things, and I will give them to you. You will realize that I can be trusted and that I am a provider. Eventually, you will forgive me.”

“You seem pretty confident about that,” he says, arms crossed.

“Well, if this doesn’t work, I still have my charms.” I smile, dimples and all.

“This is hardly a punishment,” he says, baiting me still.

“You might not think so now but having to ask my permission to do every little thing, even to use the restroom, may become cumbersome.”

“Even if I have to pee?” he asks, crinkling his brow.

“Even if you have to pee. You will tell me, and I will escort you there, pull down your underpants, take out your cock and hold it for you while you go.”

“That is... a lot.”

“I’m going to do *everything* for you, Giovanni. Dress you, feed you, bathe you, tell you what to do and when to do it. I will correct you when I need to, and I will praise you. This is obviously what you need, for your Sir to take control. To make *all* of your decisions for you. And I am optimistic that at some point during the next few days, we can talk about what happened.”

This is what I have discovered about Giovanni. He would rather be whipped, beaten, and caged than talk about his feelings. To make himself emotionally vulnerable is the ultimate punishment. He studies me, likely working out his next move while I finish tying us together. We are joined at the hip with only two meters of slack between us. “Color?” I ask.

“Green,” he says cautiously.

“Excellent.”

“You look exhausted,” he says, probably noticing the prominent bags under my eyes that appear when I’m not well-rested.

“You look beautiful, as always. My first thought upon seeing you in that bar was how lovely you are because I sometimes forget.”

He says nothing, only stares at me as if the compliment, too, is a trick.

“It’s music time,” I say, referring to his schedule. “The piano, I think.”

I place my palm against the small of his back and guide him into the lounge where the piano awaits. I take up the seat on the glossy wooden bench beside him and pull out a sheet of music he probably knows by heart.

“I haven’t played this in months,” he grumbles like a hormonal teenager.

“That’s why we practice.”

“I’m going to sound awful.”

“It’s only the two of us here.”

He huffs and bangs out the first few notes, trying to sabotage my plan, but I only smile back at him. “This is stupid,” he gripes, but his playing steadily improves until his fingers are gliding over the ivory keys with their usual grace, and his mind has drifted into that faraway place where his music takes him.

“*Bravo*, Giovanni. That was very good. Now, we will get ready for bed. Then, you can read me a bedtime story, and I will likely fall asleep because I am exhausted.”

“And the rope stays on?” he asks.

“The rope stays on.”

“For how long?”

“As long as it takes.”

GIOVANNI DOESN'T BELIEVE I WILL TAKE CARE OF HIS EVERY need, so early the next morning, I prove it to him by leading him to the bathroom where I cradle his soft prick in my hand and instruct him to go. It's a very intimate experience, to hold him like this and not for the purpose of sexual pleasure.

"I've never done this before," he says, trying to relax long enough for his urine to flow.

"Your Master never did this for you?"

"Only after sounding or if I was injured, and I was usually too out of it to care."

I cup his balls with my other hand and hold them securely in my palm. "Does this feel good?"

"Yeah, feels... safe. Like a cock cage, but softer."

"I like it too."

I hum a little tune in his ear, and he finally releases in a steady stream. I give him a little shake and pull up his underwear, tucking him away gently, then take my turn with the toilet. We wash our hands, and then return to the bedroom for yoga. Our mats are right beside each other in front of the balcony window that overlooks the water, and our routine is the same every morning. Gio hardly needs to instruct me anymore, which makes it a quiet, meditative ritual that eases us into our day. The rope is a little awkward to navigate at first, but soon enough, we find our way.

We make breakfast together with me instructing him on what to do, and then I feed him his meal while he kneels on his pillow in the dining room. He stares up at me, calmly waiting for his next bite, opening his mouth, chewing, and swallowing like a devoted pet. I nurse him with sips of water and gently wipe his mouth.

"I'm surprised you don't chew it up for me too," he says when we are finished.

"That can be arranged if you'd prefer it. Would you?"

"I..." He blinks. "I don't know."

After breakfast, I give him his herbal tincture and wait with him in the bathroom while he eliminates his waste. I attach the nozzle to the fancy contraption Valentin installed on the back of the toilet and slowly fill his rectal cavity with a saline solution that won't irritate his bowels. Giovanni used to do this every morning as part of his daily preparations for Valentin, but I am not so fussy. I usually leave it up to him as far as frequency and timing, but today I am taking charge of this too.

Giovanni's knees tremble when he releases, and I rub his back.

"That's very good," I praise. "How do you feel?"

"Empty."

"Too empty?"

"A little."

"How about I plug you? You think it will make you feel better?"

He nods and together we retrieve his favorite plug from the bedroom, a gift from his Master. Giovanni lies back on our unmade bed and holds himself open while I lubricate the gold-plated plug and slowly insert it inside him. I nudge it gently into place, giving his prostate a little extra attention. I appreciate the way he lies there so obediently, watching me closely, calmly waiting for my next move, the exact opposite of yesterday when I arrived home.

"Do you want the cage too?" I ask.

"I thought you didn't like it."

"I wouldn't like it for myself, but it looks very pretty on you, and if it gives you comfort, then I think we should use it."

He nods. "I would like that, Sir."

I oil up his cock and balls, gently massaging without offering much friction, then slide the cage over his privates and lock it, pocketing the key. Seeing him lying naked in bed adorned in all his gold trifles, wary but trusting, I am reminded what a special gift my brother has given me, the boy he

cherished above any possession, far more than all his wealth and power. He gave me this treasure, his beloved *tesoro*.

And then I can't help but cuddle him for a little while, kissing and touching him all over. I need to reconnect in a physical way after our time spent apart, and I like to tease him too, so I pinch his nipples and tug on his jewelry, then nibble and bite his little nubs until they are puffy and swollen. I retrieve the nipple clamps from the bedside table, and his eyes flare at the sight of one of his favorite toys. I attach both clamps, then tug on the gold chain that connects them. Giovanni moans while his prick tries to swell. I pull him into my arms and suck on his smooth skin, leaving red love bites all over his neck and chest, along his inner thighs too. He grinds against me, but the cage keeps him chaste.

"I like this," I say, fingering the gold bars of the cage. It's a revelation because when Valentin made him wear it, I thought it was cruel.

"What about it pleases you, Sir?"

"That I can control when you come. I can arouse you to a state such as this, and you would willingly forgo your own orgasm to please me." I tug on the nipple chain again and he emits a kittenish little growl. "And I like to play with you like a toy."

"I want you to treat me as your plaything. I make an excellent cockwarmer too."

"I don't think so," I say, wise to his ways. "That is a privilege you must earn by showing me what a good boy you are."

He pouts a little but nods in acceptance. "You could mark me then. I would like to be defiled by you, and the pleasure would be purely psychological."

"Roll over," I say, adjusting the rope as he tumbles onto his stomach and presents his ass, lifting it high in the air as an offering, showing me what a good boy he is. I kneel behind him, massaging one ass cheek while the other hand strokes my cock.

“You may use me, Sir, whatever will ease your frustration.”

“You’re not going to fuck your way out of this one, Gio, but I might like to do this with you sometime in front of my friends. Cage and restrain you, frustrate you for a while with toys and then breed you. Leave a nice, big load inside you without allowing you to come. Your balls would ache afterward. I might have to gag you, too, because of your smart mouth. What do you think?” The fantasy blooms in my mind, broad strokes painted in vivid colors.

“This boy revels in his Sir’s displays of sexual conquest. Remember Master’s circle jerk in the sauna when I was baptized by the seed of so many virile Dominants?”

“I remember,” I say, getting a little dizzy at the thought of it. The smell of semen was so thick I could taste it on my tongue and Giovanni at its center, eyelashes painted in cum like an erotic work of art. There was jealousy too—not all the men were of my tribe. But with my own friends, men I know and trust, I can see the appeal.

“Would you like that? Being put on hands and knees, bringing me off with your mouth or your hole while surrounded by a bunch of hard, randy cocks?” I ask.

“I am safe with my Sir, and my skin is a canvas for whatever desecrations you may desire.”

As it turns out, I desire many things to desecrate his skin—my rope, my cum, my looping scrawl spelling out my name and other cruder things. I smooth one hand over my canvas and cup his ass cheek, making it jiggle and bounce, my pretty plaything.

“Would you let me pierce your slit?” I ask. “Gold to match your nipples?”

“Yes, Sir, happily.”

I’ll have it done here by a friend, so I can fuck him afterward. But first, I’ll collar him. I have it ready, nestled in a jeweler’s box in my bedside table. I picked it up in Napoli on my way back from Greece. I’m only waiting for the right

moment. My collar around his slender throat is what I envision as I bring myself off with a steady thwapping of my hand over my cock, my other hand full of Gio's ass cheek. With a shiver and a gasp, I orgasm, my dick throbbing in my palm as I stripe his beautiful back with cum. Some of it gets on the rope, also satisfying.

"Lie here until it's soaked in." I use the last of my fluid to paint his skin.

"Yes, Sir."

"What do you say, Giovanni?"

"Thank you, Sir, for using me as your fuck toy."

I smile at the heady sensation. "You're very welcome."

LATER IN THE DAY, WE VISIT THE SAUNA. I FOLD A TOWEL AND lay it on the floor so that he may kneel at my feet, as he's been doing all day and will continue until his punishment has concluded. I'm not so strict with protocol, but it's better for his mental health to be reminded of his place. I've removed the nipple clamps, but the rest of the implements remain. Caged, plugged, and with the scent of my semen on his skin, he seems at ease.

"You are being very good," I praise as I stroke his silky hair. His cheek lies pressed against my inner thigh, gently nuzzling my cock with his nose. The beast is slumbering with one eye open.

"Thank you, Sir. You certainly have a way with me."

"What way is that?"

"Well, Master was stern and without compromise. He ruled me, body, mind, and soul, and if I misbehaved, the consequences were very unpleasant. But you are more subtle. I *want* to be good for you because I care about your feelings. I *want* to please you."

"Is that so?"

“Yes, and I think you should reward me by letting me suck your cock.” He bats his eyes hopefully, and I shake my head.

“Nice try, sweetheart.”

He grumbles, only a little, and I go back to petting his head. “So, you killed a man?” I say, deciding to take advantage of his mellow mood and the confessional atmosphere.

He nods, peering up at me from underneath his long lashes. “Are you mad?”

“That is one of those details you probably should have told me before.”

“It doesn’t reflect very well on my character.”

“Neither does omitting important information.”

“I didn’t feel as if it was my story to tell.”

“Then how about you tell me now?”

He sits back on his heels and recounts for me the night he killed a mobster and saved my brother’s life, a debt I didn’t know I owed him.

“I would do it again, if anyone threatened your life, Sir.”

“Hopefully, you won’t have to, Gio. I’m afraid I cannot offer you such excitement.”

“I’m glad you’re not a mobster. I worried all the time about Master. If he’d been dead, I would have turned that gun on myself.”

I palm the top of his head. “And splatter these beautiful brains everywhere? What a waste.”

“I’m glad you think so,” he says softly. “My mind is a battlefield most of the time.”

“Do you want to talk about it? Tell your Sir what happened while I was away?”

He sighs, sounding sorrowful and a bit forlorn. “They told me you weren’t coming back.”

“The voices?”

He nods and gazes up at me with big, sad eyes. “They said my demands were too great and you needed an escape, that you were probably off fucking some pretty Grecian boy and forgetting all about me.”

“Hmmm, what does this pretty Grecian boy look like?”

He pinches the inside of my thigh and I laugh.

“Did it offend you, princess, the horrible things these voices were saying about your Sir?”

This idea seems to confound him. “I didn’t really think about it like that.”

“You didn’t think to defend my honor?”

“I guess not. It wasn’t really about you.”

“Wasn’t it? These terrible accusations, slandering my good name? What would you do if another person had said those things to you about me?”

“I would have...” His sharp brow softens he nods in understanding. “I’m sorry, Sir. I should have defended you better, or at least tried.”

“What were you feeling then, when the voices were taunting you?”

“I was mad. At you. Because you... you *promised*.” There’s a hitch in his voice. “So, I went to the bar and had a drink. The alcohol helps to dull the voices. Paolo invited me out that night to a club and I went with him and his friends. Yesterday too. I knew you were coming home, and I timed it so that you’d find me there with him. I did it to hurt you.” He stares down at his lap, avoiding my gaze.

“This is because I hurt you?” I tilt his chin so that he’ll have to look at me. He nods, lower lip protruding. “It was not my intention to hurt you, pretty baby.”

“I know, but I didn’t care. It was just the voices and me. And *you left*. You left me with *them*. And when I saw you at the bar, looking so handsome with your hair blown about from the ferry ride over, shirt practically undone, all tanned and

gorgeous, I wanted to run to you, but I wanted to hurt you more.”

I’m glad he feels safe enough to admit it. “You are very stubborn and proud. I blame the men who spoiled you before me.”

“You spoil me too, Sir.”

“I am part of the problem.”

“But what does it say about me, that hurting you was more important to me than... than loving you?”

“It says that you were feeling abandoned by your Sir. You wanted me to prove myself. To pursue you.”

“I’m a mean and spiteful person. That’s who I am at my core. I’m not really a good boy at all.”

He folds his arms like wings and buries his head in my lap. I offer him this quiet place to retreat. And while he manages his inner turmoil, I stroke his hair.

“You *are* a good boy, Giovanni, one who sometimes acts out and misbehaves. Your Sir is at fault too. I left you, even knowing how hard it would be for you to endure.”

“Master would be so disappointed in me.”

“I don’t think so, because look at you now, kneeling here before me, confessing and repenting to your Sir. Valentin never expected you to be perfect. He only expected you to try your very best.”

He lifts his head to say, “I still think you should throw me overboard.”

I smile at this ongoing joke between the three of us. Whenever Gio would act like a brat, Valentin would say to me, “Are you going to do it, or am I?”

“Never, princess. You can be bad, spiteful, hurtful, terribly rude and nasty, and your Sir will not abandon you.”

“That includes dying, you know?”

“I’m going to live forever, thanks to my heart-healthy diet.”

“Did you follow it while you were away?”

His eyes search mine and I smooth the pad of my thumb against his soft lips. “I did my very best, I swear.”

“I missed being tied up. I missed the weight of your cock in my mouth and the taste of your semen coating my tongue. I missed your laughter and your smile. Your smell started to fade from our bedsheets. That’s when I really started to lose it.”

I can imagine him trying so hard to be strong and failing, then feeling even worse for it.

“I will tie you up soon. And I will stuff my cock down your throat faster than I probably should because I have terrible willpower.”

He smiles and lays his head back down, exhausted by the weight of his emotions. His fingers clutch at my thighs, dimpling the flesh. “It scared me how much I needed Master, and it scares me how much I need you.”

“This is why I suggested you make some friends, Gio, but I think you are right that you are very bad at picking them.”

“Like attracts like.”

“You are *not* like Paolo.”

“I am, Sir. You didn’t know me when I was abusing drugs, but I can promise you, I am just like him.”

“Did you fuck him?” I ask and he pulls back, stricken.

“No, of course not.”

“Then we are even, because I also didn’t fuck any pretty Grecian boys, though there was the strongly worded suggestion by an irate Grecian man that I go shit on my mother.”

Gio frowns. “Your mother is a saint. Did you find a new supplier?” He stopped answering my calls before I could tell him the good news.

“Yes, and we are going to look for more in Italia, later in the year during fall when it’s harvest time. You will come with me. We’ll tour Calabria, that’s the toe of the boot, and you will learn about the process of extracting oil from the olive. There will be a test.”

He nods but his eyes are still sad.

“What’s the matter? You don’t want to go with me?”

“No, I really do. I just remembered that you said you were going to give me a very special surprise if I was good, and I’m sad because now I won’t get it.”

“Ah,” I say, excited for this. I sit up straighter and clear my throat. In my very choppy, heavily accented English, I say, “Hello, beautiful baby, my name is Silvio Fortuna. I like your blond hair and your ass is very bouncy. Would you like to offer me sexual pleasure?”

Giovanni blinks, then cracks a wide smile. “Yes, Sir, I would.”

“I LIKE THIS,” GIO SAYS TO ME THE NEXT AFTERNOON. WE have spent the past two days together, inseparable, and I have just made love to him in our bed. My boy is well used, lying contentedly in my arms and being terribly sweet with his cuddles. From his throne on the wall, Valentin watches our tender reunion, his expression inscrutable.

“What’s that? Being stuffed with the essence of a hot Italian stud?”

He kisses my cheek shyly and tugs on the rope. “I like being tethered to you.”

It’s a big confession for him to make, to speak from the heart. Physical intimacy he offers readily, but heartfelt words are not as forthcoming.

“Me too. I think we should do this whenever I return home from the mainland. It will be like one of those leashes for toddlers, to help me keep an eye on you.”

“It will definitely make it harder for me to get away.”

“And much easier for me to catch you. You know you can come with me when I go to Napoli for work.” I’ve told him this many times before, but he’s always resisted.

“I wouldn’t know what to do with myself, Sir. I wouldn’t want to get in your way, and all my routines are here.”

“We could develop new routines, and if you went to school, you’d have plenty to do in the daytime.”

“Sir.”

I hold up both hands. “Just an idea.”

He sits up in bed and stares out the window to where the sun is just starting to set, highlighting the gold in his hair and bathing his bare skin in fiery orange hues. “I mean, what would I even study?” he asks.

“Anything you want.”

“But for what purpose?”

“For the pursuit of knowledge, to meet new and interesting people, to let your ideas be heard, to enrich your mind.” I tap his temple.

He frowns a little and says, “I don’t want to fail, like I did before. I don’t want to embarrass myself or embarrass you.”

“That is your pride talking, Giovanni, and perhaps also your fear. It is preventing you from taking the risk. I understand that you are anxious about trying new things, but so what if you fail? If your Master were here, he’d just bribe your professors into giving you high marks.”

“Sir,” he admonishes with a smirk and glances over at my brother. “Do you know that he paid Mr. Maggio to hire me at the stationery shop?” I shake my head because of course he did. Gio says, “He probably had to pay him extra every time I made a fool of myself in front of the customers.” He sighs and his pretty brow furrows. “What if the professors are mean to me?”

“Then I will have strong words for them.” I drop one fist into my palm.

“You can’t do that. I’d have to take care of it myself.”

“But I could go with you, to provide a menacing presence.”

“What if the other students think I’m strange? What if they make fun of me?”

“I imagine there will be others just like you, those who are passionate about the same topics. Besides, you shouldn’t let what other people think prevent you from pursuing your dreams.”

“There are just so many things...” His eyes glaze over in panic, and I squeeze his hip.

“Giovanni, do not worry about the things that have not yet happened. Just let yourself imagine it. Picture your Sir dressing you in the morning for school, packing your lunch for you, dropping you off to spend time in that beautiful library, reading very thick books with tiny print, sharing your thoughts and ideas with others who can match your intellect.”

“Sir, you are very smart.”

“I know a lot about olives and sailing, but not as much about your slutty gods or your music or all those languages you speak.”

He lies down again with his head against my chest, fingertips dancing across my pecs, tickling the hair and subtly arousing me. “I appreciate your confidence in me. I promise I will think about it.”

“Ah, that reminds me, there is something else I have for you.” I sit up in bed and reach over to the night table drawer. “If I could have, I would have given this to you before I left. It is your reminder that I am always with you, always watching over you, and you are always mine. It is also your reminder of my rules, and that I care whether you follow them. But even if you break them, I will always be here to correct you.”

I pass the slender box over to him and he draws his fingers along the edges.

“Is this what I think it is?” he asks with the hint of a smile.

“Something for my beautiful baby. I hope you will like it.”

He removes the lid and stares for a moment at the collar nestled inside, a delicately woven, black silk choker with a gold ring at its center. “It’s made from the fibers of our very first rope,” I tell him.

“That’s... really special.”

“A special collar for my special boy. I know you are attached to your Master’s collar, but I wanted something more delicate, something for you to wear all the time, not only for special occasions.”

“I love it,” he says with a smile, the light dancing in his eyes. “Will you put it on me, Sir?”

He hands me his collar and holds the hair off his neck. I carefully fasten it around his throat, pressing at its center. He climbs out of bed to admire himself in the mirror, fingertips brushing over the silk.

“Show it to your Master,” I say.

He pivots toward the portrait, reaching out to touch Valentin’s hand. “He approves,” Giovanni says, and I find myself breathing a sigh of relief. “I’ll never take it off, I promise,” he says with quiet reverence, then rejoins me in bed.

“That’s good because you know what will happen if you do?”

“No, what?”

“Your head will fall off.”

He laughs, one of those unexpected eruptions that always takes me by surprise.

“Thank you for this gift, Sir, and everything it entails. I promise to be adventurous, mouthy, and open with you. And I’ll do my very best to follow your rules.”

“I promise to pursue my beautiful baby to the ends of the earth and ravish you with the strength of ten thousand gods.”

Nestled in my arms again, fingering his new collar he says, “I love you, Silvio.”

“I love you too, Giovanni.”

I persuade Giovanni to come with me to Napoli one weekday afternoon under the guise of drinks and an early dinner with Leandro, a meal which passes pleasantly enough under the mild temperatures of late spring. I am hopeful that with time and exposure, Giovanni might consider Leandro a friend and perhaps even agree to scene with him again. It seems promising that they are now discussing the pros and cons of natural canes versus synthetics.

“Master was a purist in many ways,” Giovanni says. “And many of his toys he’d had for decades, so he became quite attached. He once broke his rattan cane on my ass, it was older than me, and though he tried to hide it, I could tell he was very upset about it. It took him months to find a new one. That’s why it’s important that I keep your ropes in good condition, Sir,” he says to me because I am sometimes lax about it. “The implement is really an extension of the Dominant, and when you don’t have your favorite toys, I imagine it feels like losing a limb.”

“I appreciate your dedication, Giovanni,” I say and chuck his chin.

“If I had a regular sub and didn’t have to worry so much about disinfectant, I might lean toward the more natural materials,” Leandro muses, “but I have found a Lexan cane to be quite versatile.”

Leandro goes on to detail a few of the scenes he’s conducted and the remarks his subs made afterward.

Giovanni's attention is rapt.

"Perhaps you and Leandro would like to try it out sometime?" I ask Giovanni, and he nods, eyes skirting toward Leandro.

"It would be my pleasure," Leandro says with a playful wink in my direction.

Soon after our meal is finished, Leandro must return home to complete his parents' nighttime routine, and I tell Giovanni that we are going to a seminar at the university.

"I know what you're doing," he says drolly as we make our way over to the campus.

"And what's that?" I ask innocently.

"You're trying to entice me to enroll here."

"Entice you? I simply seek to stimulate your mind. I figure the sex afterward will be inspired." I kiss my two fingers. "See, I am very selfish."

"Whatever you say, Sir."

I touch his arm briefly as we enter into the university's courtyard where the seminar is already underway. We arrive at the small gathering of students and a few older scholars who may or may not be professors. Two youths are in the middle of the huddle, discussing imperialism during the Roman Empire, whether the lands they conquered benefited or were disadvantaged by Roman rule.

"It is hard to justify the benefits of a well-made amphora to people who've had their farms razed, their sons slaughtered, and their daughters raped by Roman soldiers," Giovanni mutters softly at my side, brow furrowed in consternation.

"You should take a turn in the ring." I gesture toward the group. It seems to be an evolving sort of discussion, where one student retires from the center so that another may take their place. The discussion then transitions from imperialism to forced labor.

"We would not have the Egyptian pyramids or our own Colosseum today were it not for forced labor," says one

owlsh-looking youth. “Therefore, does that make it just?”

“The ends do not justify the means,” Giovanni says huffily at my side, and the first speaker’s sparring partner steps back to allow him to enter.

He glances up at me with a panicked expression and I tell him, “Be adventurous. Take a risk.”

He straightens his shoulders and steps into the center of the circle. The first speaker lists out the achievements of mankind thanks to slave labor, concluding with, “And though the method of production may not be virtuous in and of itself, surely the outcome balances out the offense?”

“Is oppression ever just?” Gio asks. “There were mass graves at most building sites due to people dropping dead from exertion. The Great Wall of China has the longest chain of unmarked graves, those who were given the dignity of a burial. Others were ground up to make mortar to build the wall. In Rome, so many laborers committed suicide rather than be forced into the sewers to work on the aqueducts that emperors began crucifying their dead bodies to deter others from doing the same. And what about sexual slavery? Is it ever just to use slave bodies to sate the lusts of another?”

“Some of it was mutual,” the other speaker says.

“Do slaves even have the power to refuse sex with their masters?” Giovanni questions. “Unlikely. If they cannot refuse, then they cannot give consent. And if the motivations for sexual slavery are based on the carnal desires of the flesh, how is that ever virtuous or moral?”

“If the children of those unions are granted a higher status in society, then surely the harm is mitigated,” says the other young man.

“More often they were born into slavery themselves, which reinforces the cycle of oppression. So, I ask again, is oppression just?”

The seminar continues. Giovanni steps back to allow room for another, poised and calm but electrified from the argument and churning with ideas. He is beautiful and brilliant, my little

scholar. He listens closely as the conversation continues to evolve, composing arguments in his head and occasionally whispering them to me.

In the end, as things are wrapping up and we are preparing to leave, Gio's sparring partner from before approaches us. The owlish looking man, wearing glasses and a smart blazer, smiles warmly at Giovanni.

"Hello there, my name is Efisio Esposito, Efi for short. I'm the president of the Socratic Society. I haven't seen you here before."

"That's because I haven't been here before," Gio says stiffly.

"Are you a Classicist?"

"Not in any formal way."

"What's your area of study?"

"I don't have one. I'm not a student here."

There is a prolonged silence, during which time Giovanni stares down his nose at the young man. I am reminded of when I first made Gio's acquaintance in the courtyard of the villa. He had just emerged from the pool, looking sleek and gorgeous, and appraised me in a similar manner, like I was a mere commoner unworthy of his attention.

"Tell him your name," I say to Gio and give him a nudge.

"Giovanni Ricci," he says with the slightest nod.

"Nice to meet you, Giovanni," Efi says brightly. "We hold seminars here twice a month if you'd like to come again. We're always looking for new and challenging perspectives. I can give you our Instagram handle or add you to our group chat?"

Efi holds up his phone as an invitation. Giovanni seldom carries his own when we're together, and it is not with him now. He waves one hand dismissively at the young man and says to me, "Sir, will you answer on my behalf?"

“Giovanni would love to join your group chat,” I tell the earnest young man and relay Gio’s phone number to him. Giovanni scowls at me.

“I’m a foreigner who lacks tact and social graces,” Gio says bluntly. “If you have to block me, I won’t be offended.”

“Well, we wouldn’t be Socratics if we weren’t open to new and radical ideas. It was nice meeting you, Giovanni. I really enjoyed our exchange and as an aside, I agreed with your points.”

Gio only nods, looking vaguely mystified by the interaction. After Efi has moved on, I say to him, “Your first impression can be a bit prickly.”

“I never know what people want from me, and most of them are lying anyway.”

How could he believe that of such an adorably earnest young fellow? “That is a terribly pessimistic view, Gio. Why do you think this way?”

“My friends back in New York always wanted something, to fuck or to have me blow them or get them high, to get them into an exclusive club or restaurant. They didn’t want my company. They weren’t interested in my thoughts and ideas. But they pretended they were, and then they betrayed me, and that’s why I don’t have friends.” He crosses his arms, resolute in his opinion.

“Surely you must have had *some* friends who didn’t hurt you?”

“My only friends were the people Master paid to spend time with me, like Rico and Anthony. Even you, Sir, you are not my friend.”

He is so cold sometimes, and I curse the monsters who hurt him so cruelly. I have the urge to hold him tightly, if only to smooth his jagged edges. I lay my hand on his shoulder instead. “I am not your friend, but I am your Dominant and your lover. I am the man who takes care of you, and I am very interested in your thoughts and feelings.”

His posture, which has been rigid since our arrival, finally relaxes.

“I’m sorry, Sir, I know that you are, and I am grateful for your care. I just get a little defensive with strangers. It’s like I want to hurt them before they can hurt me.”

“Understandable, but Efi seemed like he was interested in you because of your thoughts, not your body or your money, so I’d like you to give these people a chance. Try to be friendly on the group chat. Will you do this for your Sir?”

“I won’t block him right away,” Gio says, his only concession.

“That is a very good start.”

IT’S A COUPLE DAYS LATER AS I’M TAKING A BREAK FROM work that I find Gio out by the pool, but instead of taking his afternoon swim or even soaking up the sun, he is hunched over his phone under shade of the *loggia*, furiously typing with both thumbs.

“Sir, I cannot take it anymore,” he laments to me without looking up from the screen. “They are comparing Parmenides’s theory of unity with Heraclitis’s theory of becoming, and they are getting it *all wrong*. I mean, how can one thing exist timeless, uniform, and unchanging? The very idea is ludicrous because we are always evolving. With every decision we make and every mistake, our lives are altered, and we become something else. You can never step twice into the same river!”

I straddle the lawn chair behind him and rub his bare back, then kiss his shoulders, inhaling the sun-sweet scent of his skin while he argues with his peers, relaying their responses to me in heated fragments. This goes on for quite a while, much to my amusement, until I must return to my home office for a conference call. Later that night at dinner when I ask him about it, Giovanni discounts it as an aberration.

“It’s only because they were discussing my favorite philosopher. They had clearly not studied his original Greek

texts, only the Italian translations. They were misinformed.”

“It seemed to me you were having fun,” I say, wanting him to acknowledge it.

“Fun? Hardly. I was irate.”

“You were participating.”

“No, Sir, I was *correcting* them.”

“Ah,” I concede. “My mistake.”

Over the next few days, Giovanni continues to *correct* his philosopher friends, to the point that he requests the time be added to his daily schedule. “Or else, I’ll get obsessive about it,” he explains, “and no one wants that.” Sometimes, after a particularly distressing turn, he’ll hand me his phone and tell me to keep it until the morning before he says something he’ll regret. Inevitably though, he returns to the Socratics’ group chat, and it’s the first time I’ve ever seen him truly engage with his peers.

I congratulate myself on this new achievement.

IT’S A FEW DAYS LATER, AS I’M TYING HIM UP IN THE DUNGEON that Giovanni says, “They want to see pictures.”

“Pictures?” I ask for there is no preamble with him. “Who wants to see pictures? Of what?”

“The Socratics. They want to see pictures of your ropework. Of this.” He sweeps one arm over his partially bound form like a magician.

“Ah.” I draw my hand along the twisted, knotted rope that holds him. “They want to see you all tied up?”

“Yes. I told them a little about our lifestyle. They had a lot of questions and a lot of misconceptions. It’d be easier just to show them.”

I nod, thinking perhaps part of him also wants to show off. “All right, princess, whatever you want.”

Later that evening we sit on the couch together with him in my lap, and he goes through our vast portfolio of images that are stored on my phone, carefully curating what he believes to be only the best. From about a two hundred images, he chooses three to share. The first is from our session in Santino's studio in Milano, the one that I call The Rapture. Another is from our own dungeon, a full frontal shot of Giovanni kneeling—bound, blindfolded, and gagged by my rope. He is wearing special flesh-colored underwear with a slit in the back for fucking. Soon after this shot was taken, I bent him over on the mats and took him from behind. I get hard just thinking about it.

The third photo is from a few weeks ago, where I suspended him with loops of rope that begin at his ankles and trail up his bound legs and torso like a rib cage, knotted along his spine like a fish's vertebrae, all the way to the top of his head. Suspended with his arms spread wide, it looks as though he's executing a perfect swan dive.

"Your lines in this one are stunning." I trace along his body, from the perfect arch of his feet to his raised chin.

"It's crazy to me but I actually care what they think." He admits this as if he's alarmed, even dismayed by the thought.

"That's normal. You like these people, and you want them to like you too."

"What if they think it's weird what we do?"

"That is not your problem. They asked to see pictures, so they must be curious. I think you look beautiful like this. My cock thinks so, too." I press his hand against my erection.

"I'll send them the pictures, then give you my phone, and if they say something nasty about it, don't tell me, just delete the chat, okay?"

I nod, though I doubt they would say anything to warrant deleting them, especially if it is their own curiosity about the subject matter that spurred this on. He pushes send and presses the phone into my hand. "May I pleasure you, Sir?" he asks, and I gesture for him to proceed. He goes down to the floor,

nestled right between my thighs, opens my pants, and consumes my cock, likely wanting the distraction from his anxieties.

While he sucks me off—pleasantly distracting, to say the least—I relay their responses to him. None of them are nasty, most of them are impressed.

“‘Beautiful.’ ‘Amazing.’ ‘That looks uncomfortable.’ And some emojis that look surprised. This is a good one. ‘Where can I find a sexy Dom who’s good with his hands?’ Pretty soon, there will be a line at the front door, no?”

Gio pops off my dick to snarl, “Who the fuck said that?”

“Maria Say Less.” I chuckle at how Giovanni has her listed in his phone.

“Her arguments lack textual evidence and she’s a shameless flirt. But other than that, she’s okay.”

I smile at his description of her. “Giovanni, is it possible you have made some friends?”

He rolls his eyes and resumes his task. I suppose that is his answer.

Spring gives way to summer. On Saturdays, if the weather is nice, we go sailing. On Sundays, we attend church and family dinner with Giovanni choosing our activity in between. And during the afternoons when I'm at home and after I've finished work for the day, I tie up Giovanni in the dungeon. He's been craving it more lately, wants the rope to be tighter and the suspension to last longer. As always, he wishes to test the limits of his physical strength and mental fortitude. And I want to help him.

And then, one afternoon while he's suspended and I'm monitoring him, I notice he's not responding.

"Giovanni," I say sharply and pinch his upper arm. "Giovanni?" I shout and slap his face lightly, but still nothing. Trying not to panic, I lower him to the ground and pull out the rope-cutting shears I keep with me and swiftly cut through his bindings—neck, shoulders, and chest. He's breathing—thank God—and I can feel his pulse, but he's still not conscious. Cradled in my lap, I shake him gently, then grab the sports bottle I keep nearby and splash its contents on his face, trying to shock him into consciousness. I'm about to call for emergency services when he finally comes around.

"What happened?" he asks dully while I squeeze him all over, terrified that I may have done some lasting damage to his body or his mind.

"You were unconscious."

"I must have fainted."

“Did you eat?”

“Some. Maybe it was the heat? Don’t worry, Sir, I’m fine. It won’t happen again.”

I’m more careful after that, making sure that he has eaten and is well hydrated, keeping the temperature of the room a little cooler. I test his alertness at the start of our rope sessions. And I take him to the doctor in Napoli to have bloodwork done. Everything comes back normal.

“Sir, you are overreacting,” he tells me when I inform him that I’m about to lower him during our next suspension scene. I can’t let him go too deep into this meditative state, not until I know he can handle it without fainting.

“I cannot risk hurting you, Gio. Your safety is the most important thing to me.”

The next time this happens, he growls at me, “Not yet, Sir. Give me fifteen more minutes.”

“I’m sorry, Gio. No.”

This quarrel between us occurs twice more, where I end the suspension before he wants to be lowered. Rather than being relaxed and content, as he usually is after a bondage session, he’s moody and irritable. I can see his vexation building, and I worry I might be doing him more harm than good.

“Something is wrong,” I say to him one evening after I’ve untied him. I feel the tension in his neck and shoulders as I massage him from behind.

“I’m fine.”

“*Dimmi*, Gio. You cannot keep hiding this from me. I only want to help you.”

His head whips around to face me and he says sharply, “Then stop trying to keep me from Master.”

His admission is a gut punch, and I realize what’s been going on. He no longer communes in the middle of the night with that damnable portrait. He’s managed to find his Master elsewhere.

“You are visiting Valentin during our scenes? That is why you want to be suspended for longer, to have the rope tighter?”

He doesn't answer, but he pulls away from my touch, hunched forward and curled into himself. I've been angry at him before, and I have felt hurt and dismissed, but never quite like this. I am too furious for words.

“I'm going outside.” I tell him as I stand. “You may join me if you'd like.”

I tear out of the house and into the yard where I spot an old axe propped up against the toolshed and grab hold of it. There's a fallen tree on the side of the house that I lay into with the dull blade, chopping away at it like a madman. I may shed a few tears too. I funnel all my rage into this petty destruction and don't notice that I have an audience until my muscles are sore and my breath is spent.

“Are you mad at me?” Giovanni asks, gripping himself tightly. This is what he says to me whenever he's feeling guilty.

“You lied to me, Giovanni. I'm your Dominant, and you put me in a dangerous situation. How can I care for you if you're not honest with me? What if something had happened to you? What if you'd been injured? What if you'd died? I could never live with myself if that happened.”

“I... I didn't think about it like that.”

“Then what were you thinking?”

“I didn't want you to feel jealous or think I was crazy.”

My jealousy is a mere trifle when compared with the damage that could have been done to him, and his mental health is another matter altogether.

“You hid this from me. You've broken my trust. Your life is much more precious to me than any kink. And keeping you safe is my first priority. *Always*. The fact that you believe I'd intentionally keep you from your Master hurts me too. You lied to me because you didn't want me to stop. You used me, Giovanni.”

Tears brim in his eyes—mine too—and even though I’m angry, he must know that even in my frustration, I will not abandon him. I draw him into my arms, and he clutches at me fiercely.

“You’re right. About all of it. I’m so sorry, Silvio.”

“Me too, princess. Me too.”

AFTER A FEW HOURS OF REFLECTION AND A COUPLE OF STIFF drinks, I decide to make Giovanni write sentences, *I will not lie to my Sir or endanger myself knowingly while in a scene*, 500 times. I also restrict him from using his phone for a week. He loses the privilege of sucking my cock and isn’t allowed an orgasm for the same length of time. Suspension is off the table until I know for certain he can be trusted. All of this he accepts with a dignified solemnity. The next day, when he presents me with his written sentences, I want to give back all of his privileges right away, but I know that I cannot.

“I hate having to be so firm with you, princess,” I tell him as I stroke along his cheek. We’re in my office during one of my breaks from work, and I’ve pulled him into my lap for a cuddle and a kiss.

“I was bad, and I need to be punished. You’re doing what any good Dom would do by holding me accountable to my actions.”

“Did you talk to Rebekah about it?” The one exception to the no-phone rule is for his therapy appointment, which was this morning.

“I did. She told me what I did was wrong, in her own clinical, nonjudgmental way.”

“And do you understand why?”

“I was undermining your ability to take care of me. And I lied.”

I nod. “And you scared me, sweetheart. It’s not that you were visiting your Master, it’s that you were risking your

health and safety to do it, while making me an accomplice. I don't want you to ever put me in that position again."

"I won't, Sir, I promise. I'm really, *really* sorry."

"I forgive you."

He clasps one of my hands in his, rubbing his fingertips along my hairy knuckles. "We also talked about you."

"What about me?" I ask, sitting up straighter.

"Rebekah asked me if you might have some unresolved anger toward Master." Giovanni peers up at me. "So, do you?"

"I might," I say guardedly.

"She says that I should be patient with you and give you time to grieve, but I think you should work it out with Master."

Giovanni is a smart man, far more intelligent than me in many ways. I take his advice seriously. "What do you say to him, when you see him?"

His gaze flickers to mine, cautious. "That I love him. That I miss him. He tells me that he misses me too, that he's proud of me, that he hopes I'm doing well. He tells me that he's sorry for leaving me."

Are these my brother's true sentiments or simply the things Giovanni tells himself to feel better? "Do you ever talk about me?" I ask.

"He asks about you. He says he cannot reach you, that you have shut him out."

Giovanni's expression is neutral, purposefully so. Is he manipulating me, or is this his truth?

"But everyone processes grief differently," he goes on to say. "You may believe I'm in denial when I say that I talk to Master, but I believe I am closer to acceptance. Anyway, I think you should visit him. He misses you."

Giovanni climbs off my lap and kisses my cheek before leaving my office, giving me something to ponder long after he's gone.

I HAVE A STANDING DINNER APPOINTMENT WITH LEANDRO during the weeks when I am in Napoli for work, at a café that is midway between our residences and within walking distance. The wine list is good, and the bread is fresh.

I'm strolling through the bustling streets, lost in my own thoughts, when I notice a voicemail from my administrative assistant at the plant. Her message is peculiar. An Efsio Esposito is trying to reach me, she says. He wishes to discuss an important matter about Giovanni. She includes his number in case I'd like to call him back. I add Efsio to my contacts and call him directly.

"This is Silvio Fortuna," I say briskly to the young man who answers.

"Ah, yes. Thank you for calling me back, *Signor* Fortuna. I'm not sure how to go about saying this, so I'll just get to my point directly."

"I'm listening," I say.

"I think it's selfish and small-minded that you won't allow Giovanni to enroll in school. He's a brilliant young man who would be a welcome addition to our department and preventing him from achieving academic success goes against every tenet of the Socratic Society. It's a terribly archaic way of thinking."

It takes me a moment to process his accusation. Once I've caught onto what I believe is going on, I venture to say, "May I ask, what did Giovanni tell you?"

"He said that you prefer he not leave the island or even the villa. We've begged him to come back to all manner of Socratic events, and he's had to decline every single one. And now he won't even return my texts. Why, you have him trapped there like a princess in a tower, friendless and all alone. There is a name for what you are doing to him, *Signore*. It's called abuse."

"Is this because I like to tie him up?" I ask, wondering if Efi might also be making some assumptions about our

lifestyle.

“No, not that, unless you are tying him up to prevent him from leaving.”

I’m not sure if he is asking me this question, but I answer directly, “No, I am not.”

“Then you are surely taking advantage of his gracious and giving nature. It’s a tragedy when I think of him isolated like that, unable to express his brilliant ideas and philosophies, and I would have called you sooner, but I worried you might try to take away his phone.”

“I would not do that, Efi. Not in retaliation for you expressing your feelings to me.” I don’t bother explaining that Giovanni is currently restricted from using his phone or why. That’s Gio’s business to share if he so chooses.

“And while I have you, I think you should at least allow him to attend another seminar. There are several Socratics who’d like to meet him in person. He’s something of a mystery to us all.”

I come to the swift realization that there is no way for me to clear up this miscommunication without compromising Giovanni’s privacy, and it is not my job to correct Giovanni’s mistruths, so I say to Efi, “How about we have dinner tomorrow night? You, me, and Giovanni? Perhaps we can sort out this misunderstanding.”

“That would be fine, *Signore*, but I must warn you, I will be very frank.”

I smile at the young man’s asperity. “I welcome your candor.”

“Then, I look forward to hearing from you soon.”

I end the call with a deep sigh. I know why Gio did it, or I can at least assume it’s because it’s easier to blame me than admit to his new friends that he’s scared. Still, that doesn’t excuse his dishonesty, and this is not the virtue I wish for him to model with his peers.

The conversation with Efi weighs on my mind as I greet Leandro a few minutes later. We sit outside on the small piazza and share our burdens. Leandro tells me about a fall his father took last week, one that landed him in the hospital for a few days and now requires physical therapy. I ask him if there are funds enough to hire a live-in nurse, and Leandro admits that it might be time. I give him the contact information for the service we brought in toward the end of Valentin's life. Giovanni handled most of Valentin's feeding and bathing, while the nurses monitored his vitals and administered medication. They also gave Gio a break when needed.

"I was not a very good caretaker in the end," I admit to Leandro, something I still feel remorse over. "When my brother was bedridden and could no longer speak, I would sit with him, but never for very long. It pained me to see what the disease did to him, but it shouldn't have been about me. I should have been stronger. Gio was very committed. He endured."

Leandro says with a gentle nod, "I sympathize with you, Silvio. Sometimes I feel as though my father is no longer there, that it's a stranger inhabiting his body, and it scares me. Then he'll come back so suddenly for a few minutes or a couple of hours, and I feel guilty for doubting that he was there all along."

"Disease does funny things to the mind and body." I am thinking now of Giovanni when he's trapped in one of his episodes and impossible to reach. "There was an incident recently," I say and explain to Leandro the bondage session that went wrong, along with Giovanni's admission.

"He's using suspension bondage as a way to connect with his deceased Master?" Leandro asks.

"Yes, and the crazy thing is, I believe it's working. I have felt my brother's presence, haunting me. Gio says I need to meet with him and make my peace."

"Haunting is an interesting choice in words," Leandro says. "It implies that the presence is unwelcome."

“I was not very good at sharing Giovanni, and to be honest, neither was Valentin. It feels as though he is unwilling to let go, that he doesn’t trust me to take care of his boy.”

“Do you trust yourself, Silvio?” Leandro asks.

Do I? Sometimes, but not always. At times the path before me looks so clear and I know just how to handle Giovanni and myself. Other times, I am still groping blindly. “I don’t know,” I say at last. “I’m still relatively new to the lifestyle, still growing as a Dominant and adapting to Giovanni’s needs.”

“It was an unconventional relationship the three of you shared. Do you think Giovanni may be right? Do you have some resentment toward Valentin?”

“Perhaps. The way in which Gio found out was not ideal, and once he knew Valentin’s prognosis, Giovanni devoted himself to his care almost exclusively. Some part of me was jealous of that too, and I’m ashamed to have these feelings.” I bury my head in my hands. Leandro lays a comforting hand on my shoulder.

“It’s a lot to process. Perhaps allowing yourself to feel these emotions, however ugly they may be, is a start.”

I nod and swipe at my eyes. I prefer to cry in private, if at all. “Thank you for listening. There is more.” At this Leandro’s eyebrows quirk. I relay to him my most recent conversation with Efi, as well as the current restrictions already in place. “I need to punish him for his dishonesty, but I’m all out of ideas.”

“What have you done in the past?”

I explain to him my rope solution and the heartfelt conversation that resulted. “Giovanni hates being emotionally vulnerable or revealing anything he perceives as a weakness. He lies to get what he wants, or he lies to get out of a difficult conversation. His first instinct is to run, something he’s admitted to me. I must find a way to help him face his fears and choose honesty, even if it’s uncomfortable, even if it hurts.”

Leandro nods, sympathetic as always. “I may have a solution.”

I ARRIVE HOME LATER THAT NIGHT TO FIND GIOVANNI PLAYING his cello while Anthony snores away on the couch. The song is melancholy, one that he used to play for his Master. Gio is crying quietly, not having noticed my arrival. I watch him for a few moments, feeling like an intruder in my own home.

“Sir, I thought you were coming home tomorrow,” he says when he sees me. He hurriedly wipes his eyes and sets aside his bow.

“I missed you. Anthony doesn’t seem like very good company.” I gesture to him and Gio smiles.

“We had a big dinner. I told him he could go to bed, but he insisted on staying to hear me play.”

“He is very loyal to you.”

“Yes, he is. I’m very fortunate. Let me take your things.” He stands and sets aside the instrument so that he may greet me with a kiss. He takes my jacket from where I’ve slung it over my arm and sets my leather bag next to the recliner where I sometimes work. “May I fix you a drink?” he asks while I undo the top few buttons of my shirt.

“Yes, please. An Amaro Lucano.” I hand him the key to the liquor cabinet, which is kept locked in my absence. “I’ll be out on the *loggia*. Come find me when you’re done. There is something we need to discuss.”

“Uh oh,” he says darkly but continues to the bar. I gently wake Anthony and tell him I’m home, that he can go sleep in the bedroom we keep for him when he stays the night or return to his apartment in town. Then I go outside to the courtyard and collapse onto one of the chairs.

“Sir,” Gio says and offers me the drink with a small bow. Once I’ve taken it from him, he folds a towel on the cobblestone so that he may kneel at my side. I sip at the

bittersweet liqueur, enjoying the earthy root flavor and the subtle notes of citrus.

“Guess who I talked to today?” I ask.

“Master?” he says with a hopeful note.

“No, Giovanni. I spoke with Efsio Esposito, president of the Socratic Society. He left a message with my assistant, so I called him back this evening on my way to dinner with Leandro.”

“Oh,” he says as his gaze drops to his lap.

“Oh is right. Is there anything you’d care to share with your Sir?”

I expect him to dodge and evade my question, as he sometimes does when caught in a lie, but he lifts his chin and says in a forthright way, “They were pressuring me to enroll this fall, and while the idea is tempting, it’s too soon.”

“So, you told them I wouldn’t allow it?”

“They wouldn’t have understood, Sir. Their lives are... normal. They go on dates and weekend trips to Amalfi and Capri. They gossip with friends and don’t fall apart over little things. They don’t have a fucking glass box they must go into when they are feeling suicidal.”

His shoulders slump in defeat, his expression one of overwhelming sadness.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of,” I remind him.

“I am well aware of my weaknesses and limitations, and I didn’t want my new *friends* to know what a basket case I am, especially over a text in a fucking group chat.”

It is all very understandable, but I still don’t appreciate being framed as the bad guy.

“You could have called Efi and told him your reasons. We could have visited the mainland if you’d have preferred explaining it to him in person.”

He blinks at me. “Did you tell him the truth?”

“No. That is not my responsibility.”

He sighs, looking remorseful. “I’m sorry, Sir, for lying to Efi and for not admitting my transgression promptly. I have not been demonstrating my virtues lately.”

“It’s okay, Gio. Sir has a solution in mind to help you make it right. It involves dinner with Efi tomorrow night.”

He lays a hand on my lap, looking panicked. “Will you come with me?”

“Of course, I will. I’m here to support you, remember?”

He nods, flashing me a cautious smile. “Thank you for your patience, Sir, and your guidance. This boy would be lost without you.”

“I want to help you, Giovanni, in whatever way I can, but I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s going on. Understand?”

“Yes, Sir, I’ll try to be better.”

“Leandro gave me this to help remind you of your virtues,” I say to Giovanni the next morning. I lay the implement on our bed, an elastic chastity belt that fits like a jock strap with a clear plastic cage for his cock. Lighter than his gold-plated one, it is without any locking devices. The point of this one is trust. “This should be comfortable enough for you to wear for the remainder of your restriction.”

“He gave this to you, for me?” Gio asks as his fingertip traces the curved plastic.

“It’s for us to keep. You’ll be wearing this under your clothing tonight during our dinner date with Efi, so that your Sir’s virtues are ever present in your mind and to remind you that even when you are out with others, you still belong to me. You are my submissive, Giovanni, every hour of every day, and you are bound to obey my rules.”

“I need these reminders,” he says earnestly.

“Tonight, I want you to have an honest, open conversation with Efi. I’m leaving it up to you how much you share about your past, but I expect you to do everything in your power to resolve this misunderstanding. If you demonstrate your virtues and follow your Sir’s rules, then after dinner, we’ll be going to Leandro’s studio where you may get a reward.”

“A reward?” A spark of interest alights in his eyes. “You’d allow that?”

“I would, with your consent.”

“Green, Sir.”

“And after you’ve gotten your reward, I may decide to use you while Leandro watches. How would you feel about that?”

Giovanni nods. “I enjoy your demonstrations of dominance, and I would like to be claimed in this way.”

I lay my hand atop his head. “I’m glad to hear it, but if you change your mind, you only have to let me know. Now, let’s get you ready for your date.”

DINNER WITH EFI IS AT BISTRO CALLED THE CAVE, SO NAMED because it’s built within an actual limestone under-dwelling. The floor, ceiling, and walls are all rock, the interior dimly lit with a wet, mineral smell. The restaurant is known for their regional wines and delicious oven-baked pizza, both of which I plan to indulge in, meal plan be damned. The three of us are sharing a booth, Efi on one side, Giovanni and myself on the other. After some pleasantries about the weather, Efi and I select a bottle of wine to share, and I order that along with a Coke for Giovanni, since we are both cheating today. I typically order his food and drink, as his Master did before me, but this is another life skill I should probably help him develop so that he may feel comfortable executing it in my absence.

After the server leaves with our order, Efi asks Giovanni if he doesn’t like the taste of wine.

“No, it’s fine,” Gio says, wringing his cloth napkin between both hands, staring at it intently rather than looking at our guest. My fingers scale the ladder of his spine while he gathers the courage to speak. “I’m actually not allowed to drink. I’m an addict. That’s part of why I have so many rules.”

“Rules?” Efi asks, leaning closer and adjusting his glasses.

“Rules for my behavior, ones that I impose on myself and others that my Sir, Silvio, enforces for me.” He squirms a little in his seat, and I wonder if the belt is doing its job in acting as a reminder.

“Is this also part of your lifestyle?” Efi asks studiously, and I appreciate his forthright curiosity.

“Yes, and it’s why I’m not enrolled in school.”

“Because your Sir won’t allow it?” Efi asks, eyes flickering toward me in annoyance.

“No, it’s not that. I was in school before, in America, and I failed out of all my classes. I was doing a lot of drugs.” He shakes his head, probably not wishing to dwell on it. “That was a very dark and violent time for me, and I’ve grown a lot since then, but I’m still a very anxious person, especially when trying new things. Silvio helps me with that.” Giovanni smiles softly at me, and I return it. “He’s the one who brought me to the Socratics’ seminar. I didn’t want to go. You must remember how rude I was to you?”

“I wouldn’t say rude. More like, standoffish.”

A flutter of a smile graces Giovanni’s lips. “Anyway, Sir has been encouraging me to enroll at the university for months, really, since we met, and I used him as an excuse so that I wouldn’t have to explain the real reason, which is that... I’m scared.”

Giovanni continues to stare at his napkin, and I’m proud of him for sharing this truth. Efi offers his hand and Giovanni glances at me, silently asking my permission. I nod subtly and Gio places his hand into Efi’s outstretched one.

“I’m really glad you told me, Giovanni. I understand completely. I’m sorry if you felt pressured into anything. Sometimes I get carried away.”

“I was flattered. And your arguments were very good. I’m sorry that I lied.”

They exchange timid smiles and my heart blooms at what is surely the start of a beautiful friendship.

“THAT WASN’T AS BAD AS I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE,” Giovanni says as we stroll in the direction of Leandro’s studio.

“Friendships are like any other relationship. You screw up, you admit to your mistakes, and you apologize. Usually, you will be forgiven.”

“I didn’t think it would be that easy. It was never like that with my mother, and even with my grandfather, I never wanted to disappoint him, so I usually hid my misbehavior. He was gone a lot during the week, so it wasn’t hard to do.”

“I don’t want you to hide anything from me,” I remind him. “Whatever it is that troubles you, I promise I can handle it. I want us to work together to solve your problems. That is my role as your Dominant.” We arrive at Leandro’s doorstep, and I say to him, “Are you ready for this?”

“I think so.”

Leandro greets us with a smile, offers us coffee and tea, and after we’ve both declined, Giovanni excuses himself to use the restroom to prepare while we proceed into Leandro’s dungeon, both of us relaxing on the leather divan.

“What’s his temperament today?” Leandro asks.

“He’s in good spirits, and he’s looking forward to this.”

“And you?”

“I am feeling optimistic.”

We go over some possibilities for a scene and Giovanni joins us a little while later, still fully clothed. He walks to the center of the room to stand before us, awaiting his next instruction.

“Remove your clothes, sub,” I command, and Giovanni follows my order until he is naked, save for the belt, which serves as an enticing adornment with his soft cock safe and secure inside the clear implement. “The belt stays on,” I remind him.

“Yes, Sir.” he says, head bowed but with his shoulders pulled back.

“We tried the tawse before,” Leandro muses, “but I’m in the mood for a paddling today. How about you, sub?”

“Yes, Leandro. A paddling would be much appreciated.”

“Excellent. Then go to the wall and select your implement.”

Without any hesitation, Gio pivots toward the wall, looks over a half dozen paddles of varying textures and materials, and finally selects one in a dark walnut stain. One side of it is lacquered and smooth as glass while the other side is studded with painful looking metal spikes.

“The vampire paddle,” Leandro says. “Have you ever had one of these used on you before?”

“No, Leandro.”

“This one has quite a bite.”

“I’m counting on it.”

“You’re going to bleed with this one.” Leandro glances at me briefly. “Is that what you want, sub, to bleed for your Sir?”

“Yes, Leandro.”

Giovanni’s gaze shifts toward the paddling bench, where he was positioned the last time our scene went wrong. Noticing his hesitation, I say, “How about you come over here, princess, and lie across my lap?”

He nods. “Yes, Sir, I think that would be better.”

I spread my legs a little wider to make room for him. I prefer him here in my arms where I might comfort him while enduring this pain, however welcome it may be, for my own peace of mind and his too. Giovanni hands the paddle to Leandro and arranges himself across my lap with his cheek pressed against the leather, ass framed by the jock’s elastic and raised high enough to act as a target. His genitals are protected by the hard plastic. I draw one hand up along his flank and give his ass a squeeze to reassure him. My other hand slides up the valley of his spine and digs into his hair at the root. I lift his golden locks to find my collar snug against the nape of his neck.

Leandro says in his soothing voice, “I’m going to warm you up with the smooth side, ten to start. Then we’ll do a

round of ten with the studded side, and if you make it through that, we'll conclude with ten more on the smooth side. If you want me to stop, use your safeword."

"I will, I promise," Giovanni says.

"Silvio," Leandro says pointedly, "you too."

I nod. My apprehension at seeing my boy in pain mingles with my arousal at his willingness to make himself so vulnerable and causes an altogether confusing sensation. Giovanni trembles, prostrated before Leandro, and I remind myself to breathe. "You can do this," I say to him as Leandro slides his capable hands into black, leather gloves.

"Thank you for your confidence, Sir."

"Color, sub?" Leandro asks.

"Green, Leandro."

"Silvio?"

"Green."

Leandro, now with a solid grip on the paddle, says to us both, "Your Sir will count out the blows because I don't trust that you'll be able to keep track, and I want you to feel free to cry and wail from the very painful impact. This is a safe space, Giovanni, one where you can truly let go."

"Yes, Leandro."

"*Cominciamo*," he says and takes aim. The paddle comes down with a forceful thwack against Giovanni's backside, landing squarely in the middle of both cheeks. Color blooms on his skin immediately. Giovanni groans and sinks deeper into his posture.

"Silvio?" Leandro asks, and I remember it is my job to count.

"One," I say, my mouth dry.

Leandro continues with the paddling, his technique solid and unwavering, smacking the center of Giovanni's ass with every hit, priming it for a much sharper pain. After ten swings

he announces that he is flipping the paddle. Giovanni nods, fingers digging into the leather with both hands.

The next blow is a solid one—Leandro shows no mercy—and when he pulls back, there is a pattern of raised red dots like an angry rash across his buttocks. Giovanni whimpers and tears sprout in his eyes.

“How was that, sub?” Leandro asks.

“It was... really painful,” Giovanni gasps, trying not to cry.

“Color?” Leandro asks.

“Green,” he says, and there is a pause, where I realize Leandro is also waiting for my response.

“Green,” I say with a little less confidence.

Leandro continues, landing blow after blow on Giovanni’s tender flesh. Distantly, I hear myself counting while my gaze zeros in on the pinpricks of blood that bloom like a field of poppies across his golden skin. Before long, Giovanni’s whimpers escalate into cries, then wails, and then a deep keening noise I recognize from his sessions with Valentin. He squirms in my lap and tries to inch away, making it so that I must hold him more securely, but he does not safeword.

“You’re doing very well,” Leandro says to Gio when that round is thankfully through. Leandro’s temple is beaded with sweat, his bare chest and arms too, and there is an electric verve in his eyes. He lays one leather-encased hand on Gio’s head. “Ten more to conclude this session. Color, sub?”

“Green, Leandro,” Giovanni says resolutely, and I echo him. With my heart racing and body tense, it’s a lot to process, but it’s what Gio wants. More important, it’s what he needs.

Leandro resumes striking Giovanni’s backside with the smooth side as if swinging a bat, both leathered hands secure on the handle. The impact is deafening. I imagine what it must feel like against his already wounded flesh, like a brush fire blazing across his skin. Meanwhile, Giovanni’s sobs sound as though his very soul is being ripped from his body. My arms

are sweaty where I hold him. His ass looks like a slab of tenderized meat.

“Thirty,” I hear myself say, relieved that it’s over. Giovanni, now a sobbing, sniveling mess, crawls into my lap and clings to me. Leandro sets aside the paddle and hands me a wipe for his bottom.

“To disinfect the wounds,” he says quietly.

I maneuver Giovanni so that I may gently clear away the droplets of blood. The wipe must have some antiseptic component because he hisses from the contact and braces himself against the couch while I complete the task. As soon as that’s done, he crawls into my lap again. Leandro brings us both a blanket and says, “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Leandro leaves and I do my best to soothe him. I adjust our positioning so that I’m lying on the divan with him splayed on top of me, ass open to the air, blanket draped over his back, only. The skin is red and inflamed, still bleeding in some places. It does not arouse me to see it, and I don’t have it in me to fuck him right now, not if it might cause him more pain.

“It hurts, Sir,” he says pitifully and buries his face in my t-shirt.

“I know it does, baby, but you did so good. Sir is very proud of you for being so brave and telling Leandro what you need.”

“Are you going to fuck me now?”

“I don’t think that I can, sweetheart.” I place his hand over my soft groin.

“It doesn’t turn you on at all, does it?” he asks with a note of sadness. Perhaps he feels pity for me, or for himself.

“No, baby, it doesn’t. How about you? If you weren’t wearing the belt, would you be hard right now?”

“Probably. The fear and pain excite me. They remind me of my place, which is as a tool of pleasure and subjugation. Master stripped me to the bone, then breathed life back into me. I was remade in his vision every time.”

He sounds so wistful, and it makes me sad that I cannot complete the cycle for him. At my extended silence, he asks, “Does it still scare you, Sir?”

“Not as much. I’ve learned a lot since your Master did this for you, and I trust Leandro.” I think back to the beginning of the scene, the moments when I was briefly aroused. “I want to satisfy your needs, Gio, but it may take some practice and fine-tuning to figure out how.”

“I trust you to take care of me, Sir.”

He draws my hand to his mouth and sucks on two digits, soothing himself while the tears dry on his cheeks. Leandro returns a little while later with food and water for us both and a cold compress to lay across Gio’s buttocks.

“How do you think that went, Silvio?” he asks while we snack on bread, cheese, and fruit from the platter Leandro provided. I’m still mostly reclined with Gio straddling my hips so that he doesn’t have to sit up. I feed him small bites of food and he licks my fingers after every serving, docile and content.

“It was intense,” I say. Neither good nor bad, it was simply a lot.

“Did you feel as though you were part of the scene?”

“Yes, I liked holding him. That made it better for me. I didn’t feel as helpless, as I have in the past.”

“I liked it too,” Gio says softly.

“Did it hurt?” Leandro asks Giovanni.

“Terribly.”

“In a good way?” he asks.

“It hurt in a necessary way. The pain purges my toxic thoughts and quiets the voices. Even without the sexual component, I find it very cathartic.”

“Maybe once you’ve healed, you’d like to try again with the whip,” Leandro suggests. It is something we’ve discussed already in private.

“If my Sir will allow it, but I want it like this,” he says to me. “I want you to hold me.”

“That can be arranged,” Leandro says to us both.

“What do you say to Leandro, Giovanni?” I ask.

He glances up at Leandro and says very sweetly, “Thank you, Leandro.”

“It was my pleasure.”

Giovanni drops his head back onto his chest, tugs at my shirt collar to nuzzle his nose against my chest hair, and purrs contentedly. I throw the blanket back over top of us while Leandro dims the lights and plays some soft music. Within minutes, Giovanni is out like a light.

I remain wakeful, vigilant. Despite my happiness for Giovanni and my gratitude toward Leandro, my thoughts are troubled. Even with training and guidance, this sort of treatment is not something I can provide—I know that with complete certainty now. The most I can do is be an active participant, which means that for as long as we are together—and I hope it is forever—we will have to rely on a sadist to fulfill Giovanni’s more masochistic desires. Not only that, but Giovanni’s arousal is mingled with pain. Mine is not.

I tell myself that this is yet another obstacle we will overcome, and it’s simply the way we are both built. Even still, I can’t help but compare myself with Leandro and Valentin, sadists whose desires are better suited to fulfill Giovanni’s needs. Rational or not, I can’t help but feel somehow deficient as a Dominant.

Giovanni has chosen to stay with me here among the living, a triumph in itself, and yet I sense with a mounting awareness, my brother's eyes upon me. His presence haunts me from the dungeon to the bedroom, maddeningly silent, causing me to doubt myself without uttering a single word.

"How is your Master?" I ask Giovanni one sultry summer afternoon, after a rousing bout of bondage and sex. We are now lying spent on the dungeon bed. There is nowhere on his body my hands haven't touched. Still, I crave him.

"He's lonely," Giovanni says.

This gives me pause, the idea that my brother might be suffering from beyond the veil.

"He told you that?" I ask.

"Not in so many words, but I can sense it. Sometimes, we communicate that way. Just feelings being projected back and forth. Like, imagine being cold and walking outdoors into the sunshine. The sun doesn't have to say that it loves you because you feel it on your skin, warm in its embrace."

It is not an embrace that I imagine when I sense my brother's presence, but a cold, prickling disappointment. I will never be the Dominant he was. My desires will never complement Giovanni's in the ways that his did.

"You said that he misses me," I say.

“Master was always very private with his feelings, and he’d never admit it to me because he doesn’t want me to join him there. But he misses being here with us. I can sense his despondency too.” Giovanni motions to the dungeon, all of Valentin’s toys and trappings on display but unused, a sad tribute to the man himself. “He was never much of a voyeur before, but now that’s all he’s able to do. I feel guilty sometimes, about keeping him here, but I need him, and I think you do too.”

As always, Giovanni has given me much to contemplate. Part of me rebels at the idea that he’s been communicating with Valentin, but a larger part of me thinks, why not? Why wouldn’t the two of them carry on their special bond beyond the grave? And even if it’s only an illusion, Giovanni’s demons are real enough, so why shouldn’t his Master’s voice be just as real to him?

“Does he think I’m doing a good job?” I ask Giovanni. “Taking care of his... things?”

Gio stares at me, the subtle hitch of his mouth expressing sympathy. “This slave does not speak for his Master. You should ask him yourself, Sir. I promise there is nothing for you to fear.”

“I’m not afraid,” I protest.

“Of course not,” he says.

A COUPLE DAYS LATER WE ARE IN THE BEDROOM. GIOVANNI’S head is buried in the sheets where they are rumpled at the foot of the bed. My fingers are threaded through his golden hair, and my cock is lodged deep inside him, stroking his sweet spot, and though my attention should be on the whimpers and moans of pleasure coming from my beautiful boy, my gaze is locked on Valentin’s. More than just watching, he is provoking me.

How does he feel, Silvio? Is my schiavo warm and tight around your cock? Does it excite you, to know the noises he makes now are only for you?

I shake myself out of my delirium and focus on the sleek arrow of Gio's lower back pointing to his round pink cheeks that bounce with my every bruising thrust. My eyes catch on his collar, secure around his slender neck. I place my hand there at his nape and squeeze lightly, remembering a time when I watched Valentin pin him against the wall by only his throat and fuck him like a demon.

How does it feel to finally go first, Silvio?

"È fantastico," I say aloud. Giovanni's spine ripples and he shouts an enthusiastic agreement. I am just hitting my stride when a rare and terrible thing happens to me.

"Sir?" Gio says, glancing back at my stuttering movements.

I try to regain my momentum, but my erection flags, limp and lifeless. I pull out and pump the traitorous organ with my fist, but he is not responding. Bastard.

"Sir, what's wrong?" Gio asks, kneeling in front of me now, wide eyes searching my face. "Did you come already?"

"That was a strange one," I say and guide him back around. I settle his ass in the cradle of my hips so that I may stroke him to completion. Giovanni's head lists to one side, and I suck a vicious bruise onto his neck while my hand works him over.

Am I only imagining it, or is that a smirk on my brother's face?

MY MENTAL BLOCK PERSISTS, WHICH AFFECTS MY PHYSICAL performance as well. Giovanni is on his knees one morning, trying his hardest to excite me, but despite his talent and dedication, my erection is wilted and sad.

"Perhaps you should go to the doctor," Gio says, concern radiating from his features.

I'm desperate enough to remedy this troublesome condition that I make an appointment on my next trip to Napoli. The doctor says that this sort of thing is normal,

especially as men age, and that so long as my diet is healthy, my fitness level is good, and my bloodwork is normal, then the problem is sure to rectify itself. If not, I can come back in a couple of months to discuss medicinal supplements.

I'm too fucking young for erectile dysfunction. I am a virile, healthy man with a surplus of seed to expend. My balls are swollen and ripe with cum that needs draining and I have a beautiful boy who is eager to do it. This is not normal or right. This is not who I am.

There is only one explanation for this. My brother is fucking with me. I mention it to Giovanni one evening over dinner, thinking he'll laugh it off—hoping he will—but he only nods gravely.

“You think that it's true?” I ask, dumbfounded.

“I don't know if it's true or not, but it sounds like something Master would do. Take away the thing you are most proud of, if only to humble you.”

This is not humbling, it is humiliating.

“But why would he do that?” I ask.

Giovanni sighs as if this is all very tedious. “He must be trying to get your attention. I've told you already, Sir. He misses you.”

THREE WEEKS WITHOUT A REAL ERECTION, AND I AM STARTING to unravel. Sleep has never been a problem for me before, but now I lie awake in our bed with my balls tender and aching and my dick unwilling to cooperate. I rub my half-hard cock with an oiled fist, trying to resuscitate it, but the stubborn beast is in hibernation.

Giovanni lies beside me, peaceful in his slumber, so soft and beautiful that I want to reach out and gather him up in my arms, kiss him until his lips are swollen and red, then slick him up and mount him, but I don't want to disturb him without some guarantee. What if I can no longer satisfy him sexually? What if my dick never wakes up?

This battle of wills between my brother and me is becoming a full-blown crisis.

I go to the bathroom for a piss, tugging at my dick in irritation. Back in the bedroom, I walk right up to his portrait. “Why are you doing this?” I demand and get nothing but a cryptic gaze in response. “What do you want?” I drop to my knees on the carpet as Giovanni has so many times before, prostrating myself before him. I must be delirious from lack of sleep and sexual frustration because I actually hear him respond.

You are angry at me.

I stare up at the painting, feeling both self-righteous and shocked.

“Yes, I am,” I admit.

Why, Silvio?

“Because you lied to me. You... manipulated me. And your gift came with conditions.”

Conditions?

“You should have better prepared me. Prepared us.”

This is about Giovanni?

I wrack my brain for the source of my frustration. Why am I so angry—so *furios*—at him still?

“You made him rely on you for everything, and then you abandoned him. And you left me to pick up the pieces. You made a mess of us both, and then you... you left.”

I am sorry that I had to leave you, fratellino.

Little brother.

It is sometime later, minutes or hours, when Giovanni finds me, huddled there on the carpet, eyes burning, chest heaving, cheeks stained by my tears. “He left us,” I tell Giovanni, indignant in my anger.

Giovanni pets my head and says quietly, “Yes, he did.”

WE SAIL TO THE ISLAND OF CAPRI FOR A LONG WEEKEND because I need the distraction, to get away from my brother's riddles and his villa where everything belongs to him, even some parts of the young man I love most dearly. This is not me running away. I'm simply taking time to clear my head.

Thankfully, my sexual vigor returns, and in between trimming the sails and steering the boat, Giovanni and I make love on every surface available. We are frenzied, starved, and drunk on each other's lust. I make him wear my pearls of cum like jewelry. There are bruises and bite marks all over his body from my fingers and my ravenous mouth. He walks gingerly up the cabin steps to bring me a drink—he's not permitted to wear clothing—and from my captain's chair, I make him sit with both knees raised and show me his swollen, gaping cherry.

"Does it hurt?" I ask while he fingers himself at my command. I want him debauched, whorish, covered in my cum. But I must temper my appetite.

"I like it. I want you to exorcize your demons with my body and bury your frustrations in my skin."

"This is not the talk of a Stoic," I remark.

"These are not my desires, Sir, but yours. I am a reflection of your passions. My pleasure is in pleasing you, kneeling for you, hurting for you, being a warm, eager receptacle, for you."

The power he entrusts in me is intoxicating. Despite his irresistible allure, I vow to be gentle with him later—he'll need his strength for exploring the island tomorrow—but that afternoon an unexpected storm rolls in while we're anchored off the island, and between keeping the boat anchored and afloat and the nausea-inducing waves, our survival takes precedence over any sensual pursuits.

"What more could you possibly want from me?" I yell at the lashing sky because the source of this bad weather can only be my brother. He's followed me here to torment me still. "Haven't I done everything you've asked?"

My voice is eclipsed by the echoing thunder. I am soaked to the bone, choking on raindrops and sea spray when Giovanni, lit only by flashes of lightning and wearing the raincoat and life-preserver I wrapped him in, grabs me by the hand and drags me inside the cabin. He strips me bare and hands me a bottle of *grappa*, then gently dries me with a towel, including my sopping wet hair, before bundling me in a dry blanket.

All the while the storm rages outside, and inside of me too.

“What is happening to me?” I ask as I cling to him, certain I am going insane.

“Sir, you are grieving.”

I come down with a fever that sends me straight to my sick bed. Giovanni says it's because I attempted to best the gods during that storm, and they are punishing me for my hubris.

I believe my brother is at fault.

Gio cares for me while I wrestle with the bedsheets, twisting and turning, freezing cold and then burning hot, weak and achy all over. Visions of Valentin swirl in my mind with no clear beginning or end, until I can no longer tell if they are memories or dreams.

We are on the beach with a storm brewing in the distance, gray and ominous, when he first tells me of his illness, that there is no cure, and his death is imminent.

"You may have him, Silvio, when I pass. My intention is to leave my schiavo in your care, if he'll allow it, but you must be patient. We'll both need time to adjust."

My eyes drift then to Giovanni, gagged and kneeling at the shore, innocent and ignorant to my brother's plan.

"He's not an object," I argue, impassioned. *"You cannot simply decide his life for him as if he were a pet."*

"I can, and I will. I know what's best for him. You do not."

Now, we are in the sauna. Giovanni has just left us to clean up for dinner, having been used by us both in every way imaginable. I am urging Valentin to be honest with him, to tell

him the truth. *"I can't,"* he says, looking haggard and sad. *"Not yet."*

"It's not fair to him," I protest. Or me.

"It is my right to decide when he knows, and he's not ready. Nor am I."

My brother, just as stubborn as ever.

And now we are in the dungeon. Giovanni has just been whipped mercilessly and is sobbing at my brother's feet while Valentin pets his head fondly. Giovanni's back and buttocks are striped with fat red welts, some of them bleeding. It turns my stomach to see it.

"How could you do this to him?" I ask because I don't understand—may never understand—why they must go to such extremes.

"He needs it," Valentin says calmly, self-assured in his dominance.

"But why?"

"The question is less of a why, Silvio, and more of a how. How will you provide him this release when I am gone?"

"I don't know," I say, helpless as a tern caught in the storm.

"Well, you'd better figure it out."

It's that feeling of helplessness that persists beyond these waking dreams, being trapped in a web of my own making, the rope that binds me, ever tightening its hold. And all the while my fever rages.

We are now in a church—Valentin and me—sitting side-by-side in a pew. I am a boy again with combed hair and a clean face, uncomfortable in my church clothes, shoes pinching my growing feet. Valentin wears his funeral suit, the same one that he was buried in.

"Are you still giving me the silent treatment?" my brother asks, his voice soft and amused, the way it was whenever I was being obstinate.

“*Maybe,*” I say, arms crossed, feet kicking at the wooden pew in front of us.

“I didn’t want to leave you. There were so many things I didn’t get to tell you, Silvio.”

I peer up at him. Even in dreams, he still appears so large, so strong and self-possessed. “*Yeah? Like what?*”

“How much you mean to me. You are more than a brother to me, you are like my son, and I’m so proud of the man you’ve become.”

“*I wasn’t there for you in the end,*” I remind him sullenly.

“You were there. You were a ray of light in a very shadowy time.”

“It was hard to watch you die. To see you so sick and in pain. I hated it.”

“We said our goodbyes. I was ready. It was Giovanni who wouldn’t let me go.”

“*He still won’t.*”

“*Does that bother you?*”

“Sometimes. You’re more than a man to him, you’re a god, and he worships you still. I will make mistakes, but you will live on as his perfect Dominant forever, his beloved Master. How can I possibly compete with a ghost?”

“You don’t need to compete with me, Silvio. He worships you the same.”

“*No, he doesn’t.*”

I am older now, sitting at the bedside of my ailing brother. Valentin’s speech is broken, throat raspy and weak. Not much longer and he will be unable to speak. Our time is running out.

“*Am I doing enough?*” I ask. I need his validation now more than ever.

“More than enough. I trusted you with my most precious possession and you’ve cared for him just as I knew you would. You are teaching him so many things.”

“He misses you.”

“I know he does, but he is yours now, Silvio. He chose you. He chose to love you and serve you, so cherish him.”

“But there are things I cannot give him, may never be able to give him.”

“You will find a way. A man as stubborn as you, I know that you will.”

Valentin’s voice fades away, replaced by the church piano. Giovanni is playing while the rest of the congregation sings, open-throated and worshipful. The harmonies ebb and flow in my mind, our past, present, and future melding into one circular chorus, and when my fever finally breaks, I open my eyes and find my beautiful angel staring down at me.

“There you are,” Giovanni says with a smile of relief. “Thank the gods.”

“YOU’RE COMING WITH ME TODAY TO VISIT MASTER,” Giovanni says to me the next morning when I’ve fully recovered from my strange illness. Despite his gentle tone, I know this is not a request.

It’s part of his daily routine, the short pilgrimage from the main house to the sculpture garden where Valentin is buried, one that we used to do together, until I began making excuses—work, emails, phone calls, etcetera. But Giovanni, devoted, loyal Giovanni, has faithfully visited my brother’s gravesite every single day he’s been on the island.

The cobblestone path is lined with bougainvillea that spills out of large, weathered urns. There are a few natural fountains as well. When Valentin was bound to a wheelchair, we would stroll along this path and admire the various sculptures my brother had collected and commissioned over the years. I have pictures of Giovanni posing by some of them, looking silly for the rare smile of amusement from his Master.

Giovanni is the one who arranged to have Valentin buried here on the property, enlisting the help of Valentin’s lawyer

and probably spending a small fortune in bribes. The sculpture that marks his grave is something Giovanni had custom-made. A winged god swooping down to cradle a nude woman and revive her with love's kiss. It's a smaller marble replica of the sculpture of Psyche and Cupid which, Giovanni explained to me, depicts the story of a courtship and marriage between a god and a mortal that transcended even death.

Giovanni is a romantic.

The flowers on Valentin's grave are fresh, handpicked by Gio from the garden and arranged artfully by his own hand. I've brought my offerings as well, the type of cigar Valentin liked to smoke and a bottle of his favorite Scotch.

Giovanni says a few poetic words, then walks a little ways down the path so that I might make my offerings in private. I go down to one knee and arrange my gifts. The marble headstone is cold as I draw my fingers over the etching of his name.

"I miss you," I say, for that is at the core of my anger. Valentin was the one who'd taken me under his wing when everyone else, even my mother, had thrown up their hands and given up on my future. The things Giovanni wants from me—to be his rock, his anchor—that was what Valentin had always provided to me.

"And I'm sorry," I continue, "for my distance near the end. I'm sorry that I couldn't be there for you the way Giovanni was, if that was what you wanted."

I run one hand through my hair and shake my head.

"You were always so strong, never wanting anyone to see you when you were sick or in pain. I didn't know what to do or how to help you. And everything you've given me... I sometimes feel like I don't deserve it. You were the one who taught me gratitude and at times I feel so... ungrateful."

I take a deep breath and summon the song of my heart. "But I am grateful, for your many gifts and all that you've taught me. For your guidance and support. All this time I've worried you might be disappointed in me, but it was just my

own insecurities. I will make mistakes with him, just as you have made mistakes, and I will make it right. None of us is perfect. Not even you, my beloved big brother.”

I drop my head, tears slipping silently down my face. The gravesite is silent, save for the buzzing of insects and twittering of birds overhead. A cool breeze lifts the hair from my forehead and tickles my neck. The warmth of the sun blankets me, and I recall what Giovanni said about being encircled by his Master’s golden light. Perhaps there is room in there for me too.

“THERE IS SOMETHING I CANNOT GIVE YOU,” I SAY TO Giovanni a little while later. We are down by the shore sitting in the sugar-soft sand with our feet being licked by the shallow water.

“What’s that, Sir?” he asks sincerely.

“Pain.”

He stares at the ground between his knees, using his fingertip to make an artful loop in the damp sand. “I know that.”

“I will never be a sadist, Giovanni, I will never desire to hurt you in the way you need to be hurt.”

“Why are you telling me this now?” he asks, his voice strangely hollow.

“Because I need to be honest with you about my limitations. For as long as we are together, we will need to rely on someone else to provide you with what you need, and there is a chance you may gravitate to them, to what they can give you, and I must make peace with that.” It might be Leandro or some other sadist who hurts him so good that he forgets about me entirely.

“No, you must not,” he says sharply, glaring at me with scorn. “I want you and only you, and if you see me going astray, then you must chase me down like you promised and

punish me until I am back on course. That is your job, Silvio. To stop me from sabotaging myself or ruining what we have.”

“You cannot know what the future holds, sweetheart.” I reach out to hold him, but he shrugs me off.

“God, you sound just like Master,” he says with a growl.

This is a surprise to me. Except for when Valentin hid his illness, I’ve only ever heard Giovanni speak of his Master with love and adoration.

“In what way?” I ask.

“Master loved to have these man-to-man talks with me. They were stupid and pointless, and I hated them. Do you know why I ran away from him and made that plan to shoot up heroin until I died?”

“No, Valentin never told me anything about that.”

“Because Master was worried he was too old for me, that our age difference meant that he couldn’t keep up with me, that he couldn’t satisfy me. And what the voices heard was that he was going to leave me, and they convinced me of it, too. And I’d rather be dead than be left alone. So, *Silvio*, are you planning on leaving me?”

“No, Giovanni, never.”

“Then you must find a way to be okay with who you are and who I am. Master couldn’t give me his youth. You cannot give me pain. I cannot give you something simple or easy. These things will not change, but your desire to possess me must be stronger than your worries about not being the perfect Dominant. I love you with everything I am, you are my *eros* and my *ludus*, and I want you to be my *pragma* too, but I need you to man up and figure this thing out. If not, the voices will win. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly,” I respond ardently.

Giovanni shrugs off his clothing and wades into the water, disappearing beneath the waves only to surface much farther out, a nymph seeking comfort in the arms of Mother Ocean. I realize moments later that my hands are shaking.

I've been given my marching orders.

We've moved our family portrait, along with the easel that supports it, from the bedroom to the dungeon where Giovanni has created an altar for his Master replete with candles, flowers, cigars, and spirits. We decided that as part of this scene, Valentin will be joining us, and I think this is a more fitting place for him, as the king of his court and Master of his dungeon.

"Can you explain it to me?" I ask Leandro while I hold the whip he will soon use on my boy. Giovanni has left us to prepare, and we are alone for now.

"Pain is multifaceted. It can break you down, rip you apart, and destroy you. Or it can start a fire that razes one's terror and trauma. For Giovanni, the pain is cleansing. It releases the poison he holds inside himself, allows him to be pure and whole again. For himself and for you too."

I imagine it as scraping away the barnacles attached to the hull of my boat, allowing the vessel to move faster through the water, without the weight of all that crud holding it down.

"And for you?" I ask.

"Hurting a submissive who craves the pain is thrilling, makes me feel alive, desired, even if only for the relief I can bring them. It takes a lot of skill and technique to inflict pain without damaging their bodies. I enjoy other aspects too, the noises they make, the way their skin and muscles react. I like seeing the marks. People tend to bare their true selves when

they are in pain. I enjoy taking care of a sub as well, though perhaps not as much as you.”

“And it doesn’t scare you?” I ask.

“It would only scare me if I felt as though I wasn’t in control. When I see you lifting Giovanni in your rope, that seems scary to me, because I don’t have your skill and expertise.”

Giovanni arrives then, nude save for his glittering jewelry and silk choker. In his hands, he holds the box containing his Master’s collar.

“Will you put it on me, Sir?” he asks meekly. “It should fit over yours.”

“I would be honored.” I reach into the open box and remove the gold collar from its satin lining. Giovanni turns and sweeps his hair off his neck so that I may affix it around his throat. Leandro watches our ritual with a pensive expression.

“We’re ready now,” Gio says and smiles at the portrait of Valentin before bowing his head slightly to Leandro and standing with his legs shoulder-width apart, presenting for the two living Dominants in the room and the one who looks on from beyond the veil.

Leandro allows him the space of a few breaths to gather himself, then says to me, “You may take your sub to the cross.”

With my hand in his, I lead Giovanni to the St. Andrew’s cross, like a father escorting a bride down the aisle. There I climb onto the mount with my back against its padded center, legs spread wide enough that Giovanni can stand between them. I reach up for the handles to grip and Giovanni circles his arms around my waist, holding me tightly with his cheek pressed against my shoulder. His body is warm and tense with anticipation. My cock, much like the rest of me, is aroused but wary. Meanwhile, Leandro explains his plan to both of us again. The last bit of costuming is Giovanni’s blindfold, which Leandro affixes to his face.

“Color,” he asks.

“Green,” we both respond.

“*Cominciamo*,” Leandro says.

He begins with the flogger. Leandro uses the impact of its light falls to warm up Giovanni’s skin, his back, buttocks, and upper thighs, all targets for today’s session. Giovanni groans and I feel his prick swelling against my groin. His arousal heightens my own, especially when he begins to subtly grind against me. The room is warm, warmer than I initially thought, as my body flushes with an erotic fever and a little bit of fear. Meanwhile, Giovanni’s utterances are open-throated and musical in their cadence.

“I’m moving onto the whip now,” Leandro says. “There will be thirty lashes in all, and every single one of them will sting. Color, sub?”

“Green, Leandro.”

“Green,” I echo as Giovanni’s arms tighten around my waist.

When the first lash falls, Gio stiffens, tensing from the impact with his mouth taut and head lifted, followed by a guttural groan of relief.

“One,” I say aloud.

The whip’s tail kisses flesh again. Giovanni whimpers and lays himself flatter against me, seeking comfort or perhaps wishing to meld us into one. “Hurts,” he whispers. Because of the way we’re standing, his mouth is just inches from my own, and even though I cannot feel the sting of the whip, I absorb some of the impact as my own.

“You’re being very brave,” I tell him. “Master is watching. Can you sense him?”

“Yes.”

“Me too. What is he saying to you right now?”

“He’s proud.”

“Of course, he is very proud of you.”

“He’s proud of you, Sir.”

My eyes drift to the portrait. His face is the same, stern and uncompromising, though perhaps there is a gentle curve of his mouth, a slight nod of his head, conveying something like approval. I hope that it might be true, that he is pleased with me for seeking answers and providing for his *schiaivo*, for putting Giovanni’s needs before my own. I have grown into the man and Dominant my brother always knew that I could be. He had faith in my abilities, even when I did not.

Giovanni’s shrieks of pain bring me back to the present, and I realize I’ve been counting all along. He releases a broken, high-pitched sob, and then, a scream. I continue to keep my voice steady as I count, my body strong. I will be Giovanni’s anchor and safe harbor in his times of distress, even in these dire moments when he is shaking, bawling, and barely able to hold himself up.

The last ten are difficult for us both. We reek of sweat and endorphins. He howls with every lash, a deep guttural roar that is at the root of his pain and residual trauma. At thirty, Leandro signals that it’s over. My arms come down to gently encircle him, avoiding the marks from the whip, as he collapses against me, unable to stand and unwilling to move. He sobs for a little while in my arms. I whisper comforting words and kiss his forehead, his wet cheeks, his sweaty temple. “Let it all out, princess.”

Still with the blindfold covering his eyes, he whispers, “Use me, Sir. Please?”

I guide him down from the cross and onto the floor mat. Gently, I lower him to his knees. We are naked already; my dick is hard and wet at the tip. I’m not aroused by his pain, but by the way in which he clings to me, needing me so desperately.

I guide his mouth so that he may savor my cock like a soothing balm. Giovanni is delicate at first. With his throat ragged from screaming, it is an effort for him to take me in deep. Gradually, his passions overwhelm his discomfort, and he sucks me with a frenzied fervor. Leandro stands off to the

side, observing our intimacy while stroking himself to a chorus of whimpers and groans.

“Yes, Giovanni, you make your Sir feel so good. An angel with a heavenly mouth, show Leandro what a sweet and grateful boy you are.”

Gripping him by his hair, I pull him off me and steer him around. Blindly, he falls forward on his hands and pushes out his whipped ass for my attentions. Deftly but with care, I remove his golden plug and replace it with my cock, dribbling oil at the juncture where skin meets skin. I avoid looking at his welts and instead focus on the place where my cock penetrates him, striking the match inside his nubile body, again and again. Giovanni sobs and spreads his arms wide, sinking down into his submission until his chest is flush against the mat, a worshipper at the altar.

“Take it,” I murmur, the fever rising in my temple and in my loins, power surging through me like an electrical current. “Is this what you crave, Giovanni? To be used like an object by your Sir?”

“Yessss,” he hisses, mouth open and panting, breath hitching with every hammer of my hips into his tender backside. “Ruin me, Sir. Make me remember who rules me.”

“I rule you,” I answer. I stroke in and out of him in a rhythm that is for my pleasure first. I yank his hair so that his spine curves and ride him harder, obliterating him with pleasure atop the pain. His body shudders and his channel tightens around me, squeezing me like a fist. He arches back, muscles going rigid as if caught in a spasm. I reach down in time to catch the seed spitting from his cock and smear it along his heaving chest. Knowing he’s come hands-free sends me into my own ever-increasing spirals of ecstasy, and I roar my expressions like a savage beast.

When the sexual fog clears, I spot a second pile of pearly white ejaculate on the mat beside us. Leandro has left an offering of his own.

I guide a sightless Giovanni into my arms where he clings to me like a bear cub. I remove his blindfold at last, and he

blinks his eyes open like a newborn, glancing from my face to Leandro and back.

“You both did very well,” Leandro says while he cleans himself up and tucks his manhood back into his pants. “I’ll give you both some time to recover and check on you in a little while.”

I ease my whimpering boy onto the bed, lying on his stomach so that I may tend to his wounds. I trace over the lash marks with medicated wipes, checking over his skin and applying salve on some of the deeper cuts. I’ll use a cold compress once the medicine has soaked in and another lotion later for the bruising. The skin will heal, I remind myself, and like death and rebirth, the cycle will continue.

Once the ritual of aftercare is complete and he’s resting comfortably, I resume my favored position as his human mattress. Giovanni purrs contentedly, cheek pressed against my pectoral with his fingers buried in my chest hair. Just when I think he might be falling asleep, he says, “Does it bother you that I invited Master to our scene?”

I glance over at my brother, and for the first time since before his passing, I am at peace. I can accept that there are places within Giovanni that I may never reach, that the bond between him and Valentin will endure, just as the bond between my brother and I will persevere. Their attachment doesn’t diminish the love Giovanni and I have for each other. If anything, it encourages us both to be better.

And I resolve to no longer run from my grief but to embrace it. To not compete with Valentin’s ghost but welcome his guidance. My feelings, even those I’m not proud of, will be felt to their fullest, and I will be a better man for it.

“I understand why you wanted him here,” I say to Giovanni. “This was something special the two of you shared. He is part of you, as I am part of you, and I will not make you choose, except...” Giovanni peers up at me, waiting for me to continue, and I muster up the courage to ask, “Do you still wish to join him?”

His brow furrows and I brace myself for his answer. “No, Sir. I want to stay here with you for as long as we’re both able. Master can wait. Patience is the virtue of both the submissive and the Dominant.”

My joy threatens to overflow in the form of big, fat tears. I grip the back of his head and with a fierce sense of pride and ownership, I say, “You belong to me now, Giovanni, to love and to cherish. You are my submissive, my lover, and my lifelong companion. You follow my rules, you honor my virtues, and when you need something, you must ask me for it because I am the one who provides for you. That includes both your pleasure and your pain.”

“Yes, Sir, I will. I promise.”

Emboldened, I continue, “You may save your soul for Master, but your heart belongs to me.”

He smiles shyly and kisses my stubbled cheek. “My heart is yours, Silvio, always and forever.”

There is no greater gift.

It is a few weeks later, once Giovanni has healed from our scene with Leandro, that I ask myself where I feel most powerful, where I have the most command. It is not in the dungeon, nor is it in the bedroom, it is on my boat.

In the pre-dawn hours while Giovanni rests, I make my preparations. I have planned out this excursion with meticulous care. I want him to be overwhelmed in all ways, to bow before me as his god and savior, to exhaust him and excite him. To reward him for his devotion and express my own in return.

“We’re going on trip,” I tell him the morning our adventure is about to begin. “I’m taking you to a secluded island that very few people know about. Once there, I’m going to tie you to my mast and fuck you. I’m going to put you on your hands and knees on my deck and fuck you. I’m going to bend you over the bow of the boat and... can you guess what, princess?”

“Fuck me?” he asks with parted lips and bated breath.

“That’s right. I’m going to fuck you until you’ve forgotten your name. Together we’re going to explore our hedonistic sides as we never have before. We will give into every sinful temptation and indulge our carnal natures. The food will be rich and fattening, and no craving will be denied. How does that sound to you?”

“Green, Sir.” He nods eagerly, then glances around our bedroom, befuddled and bewildered. “What should I pack?”

“Absolutely nothing. I want you only in your skin.”

GIOVANNI’S ARMS ARE RAISED, HANDS GRIPPING THE CLEATS that are anchored to my mast. His legs are bound, my rope snaking under his knees to spread him for my pleasure with his ankles flush against his upper thighs. His genitals are on display and his hole is exposed. His chest is a harness of rope that work in concert with the others to lift and support him. Naked and blindfolded, he is strung up in my rigging like a prisoner waiting to be plundered. His nipples are clamped too, and I tug lightly on their chain, eliciting a kittenish growl from my beautifully bound lover.

“Are you still with me, gorgeous?” I ask, as my oiled fingers circle the rim of his hole. My other hand drags leisurely along his cock and balls, lubricating his freshly waxed skin so that it glistens.

“I am with you, Sir.”

“Do you know how helpless you look right now?” I ask as I sink one thick finger inside him.

Gasping, he responds, “Tell me, Sir.”

“You look like you’ve been captured, princess, and dressed in the conqueror’s finest jewels in preparation for a public claiming.” I coax his mouth open with my own, dipping my tongue into the well of wet heat. Giovanni sucks it lewdly. I add another finger to my invasion of his lower half, twisting and forking my digits to stretch his tight channel. He whines and moans at the aching penetration, trying to work me in deeper by squeezing his muscles. I thrust in time with the gentle rocking of my boat, slowly driving him mad.

“Sir,” he begs.

“Steady now,” I say with one hand splayed against his chest. I pluck at his jewelry and tug on the clamps to torment his sweet nipples.

“*Per favore,*” he moans. “*Per favore, Signore.*”

I press my body flat against his and wrap one arm around the fiberglass pillar that supports him. I've affixed a mat around the mast to cushion his back as I brush my hard, naked shaft along his well-oiled cleft. My fingers have not relented in tormenting his prostate, priming him for my cock.

"Dimmi cosa vuoi." I whisper in his ear. *Tell me what you want.*

"I want you, Sir," he says, breathless, tossing his head like a spirited horse. "I want your cock inside me. Relieve me of this torture. Fuck me like I'm yours."

I take hold of his body and raise him slightly, then let gravity guide him onto my turgid cock. The descent is achingly sweet as I allow his body ample time to accommodate me. He twists in his jute bindings, rubbing his skin raw, but there is very little give and no escape.

"It burns, Sir," he says, panting.

"I know it does, my beautiful boy. This angle is for my advantage, not yours, but it will fade soon enough, won't it? And you look so beautiful here, like the masthead of my ship, mounted on your Sir's thick, meaty dick."

"I love being impaled by you, Sir."

"I love it too."

I gather him up in my arms, nuzzling my nose deep in his hair, smelling his sweet musk, then licking along the delicate skin of his neck, tugging with my teeth at his silk collar. Giovanni presses against the mast and thrusts his hips forward, trying to force me deeper inside him.

"Let your Dominant take care of you, Gio. Trust that your Sir will take you there. Relax now and show me what a sweet submissive you are."

He goes pliant at my urging, soft as silk and so supple. I begin to move at last, slowly filling him like the tide, giving him a little more of my cock each time. His moans are musical, rising and falling melodies that ebb and flow with our movements as he adopts my rhythm as his own.

“So beautiful,” I murmur. “So soft.”

“Feels so good, so right. Use me for your pleasure, Sir.”

And now, the lusting beast emerges. My fingers curl into claws and my teeth begin to show. His neck is the perfect anchor for my bite. He cries out, tightening his hold around my cock.

“Sir, you’re hurting me,” he says, and it’s not a complaint but an entreaty for more. My fingernails scrape along his ribs, then follow the chain to the two clamps tormenting his nipples. I yank them off viciously. Giovanni gasps, and arches from the sudden sensation, howling like a wounded wolf.

“*Cazzo*,” I mutter, close to my peak already. “You are insatiable, sweetheart, like a nymph from your stories.”

“And you are a satyr, Sir, the kind who hunts and fucks his prey.”

I am suffused by the vision, my conquest now trapped in my lusting embrace. “Come for me, Gio. Come because your Sir says so.”

“I—” he says and his channel spasms, wringing out my orgasm one delicious squeeze at a time. I grab hold of his cock just in time for him to spill over onto my hand. I pump him full of my seed while he calls out my name in an ecstatic wail. The sound echoes across the water. Even the gods of the ocean will know that he is mine.

NOW WE ARE LYING ON THE DECK, ON A MAT THAT I BROUGHT for this very purpose. The sun is setting over the water, casting him in pink and golden hues. We are fed and hydrated, still tangled in each other’s arms, when I tell him, “I have a gift for you.” His eyebrows quirk and I tell him to close his eyes, then retrieve a white canvas bag and pull from it something I made just for us, a token of sorts, a physical manifestation of my desires. I lay it over us like a blanket and tell him to open his eyes.

“What’s this?” he asks, fingering the fine gold web, woven with a delicate silk rope.

“It’s a golden net, like from your story. I made it for the two of us, to be trapped in, for all of eternity. If you try to run from me, Giovanni, I will catch you. I will tie you up and make you sorry that you ever tried to leave me.”

He grins, eyes alight with happiness. “I love it, Sir. The gift and the sentiment behind it.” He rolls with me on the mat, until we are both tangled up together. His long legs straddle my hips as he raises his arms and clutches at the netting with his fingers, drawing it down over his head so that it resembles a bridal veil, so pretty against his skin.

“Are you Ares then, or Hephaestus?” he asks. “Or perhaps you are Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty?”

“I am the poor fool who was struck by Eros’s arrow, and you are the golden nymph who brings me to my knees.”

“You know there is only one way for me to show my appreciation,” he says, sliding his groin against my stiffening member.

“Again?” I ask, because I thought I’d worn him out already.

“Again and again and again,” he murmurs, dragging the net sensually across his skin.

Lying on the deck of my boat with the light of the setting sun glinting off Giovanni’s golden hair, he moves above me, flesh fusing until we are no longer two men, but one beautiful, lusty beast.

“I’m keeping you forever, princess. For as long as I live and breathe, no one will take you away from me.”

“Promise me,” he says.

“I promise.”

This is our new beginning.

EPILOGUE

GIOVANNI

Sir buys a gorgeous speedboat toward the end of summer and names it after me. *Giovanni* is written in an elegant gold font on either side of its sleek navy bow where I like to stand when Sir guns the engine. I love the feel of the wind in my hair and the sea spray on my face, holding onto the railing as the boat cuts through the water like a snake in the grass. Sir teaches me how to pilot it too, saying that it's time I do more than simply look good on his boat but, as it turns out, I can do both.

After attending a few more seminars with the Socratics and another nudge from my Sir, I decide to enroll in the Classics Department at Federico University, part-time for now. Sir insists on a trip to Milano to buy me new school clothes, and I repay him with increasingly imaginative sexual favors, including letting him write the crudest things on my body and parade me around in front of his friends. He is not so shy in front of others as he used to be, and the words in Italian don't hold power over me the way they do in English. His sex talk has become quite filthy!

I should tell his mother.

We split our time between the mainland and the island. The academic aspect of school is thrilling, the social side, less so, but I am finding a balance between taking risks and retreating to the safe harbor my Sir provides. His only expectation is that I try, and he says that if I complete this semester, he'll get me a Prince Albert piercing for Christmas.

I can't wait to show it off to my new friends.

Leandro, the sadist with kind eyes, has become a dear friend to us both, and he continues to discipline me when I need it, or reward me, as the case may be, but always with my Sir as part of the scene. I appreciate Leandro's talent for inflicting pain, but it is my Sir whom I want to soothe me.

For my birthday, Sir takes me to Rome to see my favorite painting, *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, and I share with him its significance to Master and me. My beloved Master still visits me, in my meditations and in dreams, in the throes of ecstasy too, when pain gives way to pleasure. I sometimes find him in a searing note of music or the sudden burn in my eyes when I encounter something beautiful and unexpected. Master has not left me, and he swears he never will.

When it comes time to harvest the olives, Sir takes me with him on a tour of Calabria in search of a new supplier for the Fortuna Brothers' bottling company. Sir negotiates with the mill's owner while I sip from a tiny cup of olive oil and admire the trees that produced this godly elixir. Sir catches my eye and grins, then winks to remind me that I am never far from his mind. I have no doubt we will be sampling the oil's other uses later tonight.

And I think to myself, how might I demonstrate my virtues for my Sir? On my knees, bound and gagged by his rope? Bent over and splayed like a whore for his amorous attentions? Perhaps I will goad him into some petty argument just to get his blood pumping and his heart racing, then seduce him into unleashing his passions on me. I might make him chase me, then resist until his only recourse is to hold me down and fuck me with brute strength. Whatever it takes to make his toes curl and his back arch in ecstasy. That is my talent, after all, understanding intimately the men I serve.

There are many ways to love and countless ways to show love. Three great men taught me that—my grandfather, my Master, and now my Sir. Sir would tell me he doesn't wish for me to stand in his shadow, and I would tell him that I still prefer to kneel at his feet. There is no rule that we must agree on everything. Love without a quarrel makes mold.

As I contemplate my boundless love for Sir and my endless devotion to Master, I tilt my head toward the dappled light and say a silent prayer of thanks to the goddess Fortuna for blessing me with both her sons, my beloved Dominants and lovers, who came into my life when I needed them most.

Master saved my life. Sir showed me how to live.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is with some bittersweetness that I write this, for I have become quite attached to these three men over the course of writing this accidental trilogy. Penning “The End” on any project comes with a bit of mixed feelings. Having to say goodbye to beloved characters and their world is a tiny death each time.

I came into this project wanting to explore the topic of grief, specifically how it manifests between two lovers engaged in a dynamic where one is almost entirely dependent on the other. *Master’s schiavo* was my first endeavor, but Valentin and Giovanni simply wouldn’t let me go. So, I revisited the origins of their dynamic in *Giovanni*, and in that way, was able to act as a god and bring Valentin back to life.

And then readers wanted to know, well what happens after *Master’s schiavo*? What is Giovanni and Silvio’s story? How do they recover from such a loss? And as it turns out, my muse wanted to know as well. This is my attempt to heal you after the devastation of the previous installment. To quote one of my favorite childhood movies, *The Last Unicorn*, “There are no happy endings because nothing ever ends.” I hope that if this story has not left you happy, then it has at least left you content.

But enough navel-gazing! I’d like to thank my editor Anette King, who has been with me since the beginning of this trilogy and has encouraged me all along with both her feedback and her “inspirational pictures.” She has been a longtime advocate for Silvio and insisted that I plumb the depths for his character, just as I’d done for Valentin and Gio.

I’d like to thank my BDSM experts, Alisa, Scarlett P., and Sharon, all of whom gave me excellent feedback on the M/s and D/s dynamics and all that the lifestyle entails. Sharon, a former English teacher, went the extra mile to correct my

grammar for all three books, and I swear, one of these days, I will master the usage of lie vs. lay.

To my beta readers Claudia Petrovic and Shanie Williams, thank you for reading an earlier version of this story and offering your feedback. I hope you will find your comments reflected in the final version. To Carolina Cordeiro, who sent me a five-point essay on what she wanted to see in *Virtuous*. They were great guideposts for when I later sat down to write it.

And lastly to my readers, whom I always save for my final send-off. It is your passion and enthusiasm for my stories that fuels my desire to create. Don't ever change!

BOOKS BY LAURA LASCARSO

Contemporary M/M Standalones

WHEN EVERYTHING IS BLUE

A MADNESS MOST DISCREET

A SOFT TOUCH

NIGHTINGALE

BEAUTIFUL ADAM

Hiroku Duet

HIROKU

THE BRAVEST THING

Giovanni Trilogy

GIOVANNI

MASTER'S SCHIAVO

VIRTUOUS

Mortal and Divine Trilogy

BOOK OF ORLANDO

BLOODBORN PRINCE

PAROUSIA

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Lascarso wants you to stay up *way* past your bedtime reading her stories. She aims to inspire more questions than answers in her fiction and believes in the power of storytelling to heal and transform a society. When not writing, Laura can be found screaming “finish” on the soccer fields, rewatching *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and trying to convince politicians to act on climate change. She lives in North Florida with her darling husband and two kids. She loves hearing from readers, and she’d be delighted to hear from you.

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