

G. D. BROOKS

**DASHING  
DEVIL 3**

A SUPERHERO HAREM ADVENTURE

# Contents

[Dashing Devil 3](#)

[Forward](#)

[Missing Excerpt from Dashing Devil 2](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterward](#)

# Dashing Devil 3

By G. D. Brooks

# Forward

Hello, everyone.

First off, apologies for the late release, and thanks for picking up the book anyway. I wanted to let everyone know about a change made during the audio recording of book 1 that I decided to adopt and work into the text. In an effort to keep the voices varied and distinguished the voice actress, Hannah Schooner, used a British English accent for Channel 3 reporter Kayla Baily.

Well, I liked the decision, and it made sense for the character. So, giving credit where credit is due, thanks Hannah! I wanted to give you a heads-up before you stumble onto the inconsistency in book 3 moving forward.

Hello and thank you for picking up the next installment of Boyd's adventure. It's been a while, sorry about that. I personally think the wait was worth it much in thanks to Dutch Palmer's advice and editing. There are some changes from the prior books ahead that will hopefully lead to a better reading experience for you.

First, the tense. I chose present tense for the prior releases because I thought the text would benefit from it. It didn't contribute in a meaningful way, so from 3 forward we're making the switch to past tense for better readability.

Another change will be pacing. Books 1 and 2 had a lot of blocky paragraphs and extra thick chapters. Book three will see sleeker paragraphs that shouldn't turn your screen into a wall of text. The paragraphs are also broken into easier to consume morsels.

I also wish to address the fact that this series is not a trilogy. This is certainly not the last book. By the end of this book, we will be roughly a third of the way through the story. If I were going by my original plan and outline, the series would be twelve or more books.

After talking with other writers and discussing it with fans, I am bringing that down a bit. I thought about aiming for

six books about this length—but that would require cutting more than I’m willing to leave behind. I’m going to tell the story as it was originally intended, but with some characters pulled and moved to other stories... err, I mean books.

Ahead is an excerpt I realized was missing from Dashing Devil 2. I wrote it, I proofed it (I did my best!), and my wife remembers proofing it. Somehow, it never made it into the final manuscript. It was mentioned again in book 2, “He had no idea what Daisy’s Power was, just that she glowed brighter than Silvie when looked at under his Black Flame.”

I’m sure I had some of you scratching your head and flipping back pages, sorry about that. Well, here’s what you were missing...

## Missing Excerpt from Dashing Devil 2

(Belonged at the end of Chapter 13, after Boyd left Daisy and Connor in Laura's care.)

“Yes, thank you,” Daisy smiled carefully over her shoulder while letting herself be led away.

Boyd felt a sense of pride as he saw the crimson blanket still wrapped around her.

He wasn't sure why he did it. Some instinct drove the action, but Boyd pulled the Black Flame to his eyes. He winced as his eyes adjusted, in part because Daisy shone incredibly brightly in a multitude of colors.

It was too dazzling to look upon. So much so, that he couldn't make out Connor or Laura walking beside her. Daisy was at least ten times more radiant than Silvie. There were so many colors that he couldn't count them before he deactivated his Black Flame sight because the swirling colors started to make him dizzy, and the brightness gave him a headache. The iridescent haired and positively dainty fairy woman must have possessed immense power—that, or brightness was not the indicator of Power he'd thought it was.

The small group moved back through the doors and into The Tower. Boyd made a mental note not to cross the tiny woman until he's figured out more about the world he saw through his Black Flame. Then he leapt from the side of the platform and returned to the sky.



# Chapter 1

“Come on Big Guy, show me what you’ve got. I can take it.” Raev was panting from her recent exertions.

“You’ve more than proven that,” Boyd rumbled right back at the foxy woman.

The redhead had really impressed him this morning. She was obviously showing off a little, using her long, well-toned legs and lithe form in ways he hadn’t expected. Her exposed skin was coated in a fine layer of sweat that made her lightly tanned skin shine. Her hair was mussed from their combined efforts.

With her chest rising and falling with deep, filling breaths, Kitsune smirked at him. “You haven’t seen anything... yet,” she purred, her usual velvet tone filled with playful challenge.

With a grunt, she popped up into the air and kicked Boyd in the side of the head—yet again moving in a way he hadn’t expected.

Boyd rolled his neck into the kick, trapping her ankle between his shoulder and cheek long enough for him to get his massive hand around her calf. He swung her out to the side and away from him, throwing her to the side of the room.

Raev flipped around while still airborne, three fluffy tails wrapping tight around her before landing on her feet. Sliding back several feet, she came to a stop with her tails fanning out behind her. Head snapping back up, she immediately charged Boyd, far lower to the ground than seemed reasonable.

Boyd had learned that her tails provided her a counterbalance and her somewhat oddly shaped lower legs made this strange way of moving natural for her. Boyd prepared himself for the coming attack, raising his hands in a loose guard designed to allow for quick responses to attacks that came either high or low.

He'd also learned that just because she'd started low, didn't mean that would be where Raev would end up. He watched her approach closely, attempting to spot something that might tip him off to how she would attack. In this, he failed... again.

When she got to about four yards away from the big man, she leaned a bit further forward, planted her hands on the floor, and began a handspring from her bent arms. At about the halfway point she extended her arms and sprang into the air in a rapid flip.

Her tails confused Boyd as he tracked her silhouette; they provide the agile woman just enough cover to make the leg that shot out to slam into his shoulder a surprise. But Boyd had trained for combat his entire life, and his reflexes allowed him to raise an open palm with which he slapped aside her descending calf.

Raev had worn the new, mostly white, suit that Tinker had made her. It provided his sparring partner with a significant defense, but the control a palm strike gave him made him much more comfortable that he wouldn't hurt her. Boyd would hate to accidentally break her leg or otherwise hurt her.

Boyd's palm caught her on the back of her lower leg and launched her into a backflip. This time, her tails fanned out—slowing her backward momentum and helping her to land closer than he'd expected she would. With a bounce that caused her suit to move in a rather distracting manner, she grinned widely at him before holding up a hand to indicate she needed a breather.

They'd both enjoyed sparring this morning, pleased to discover the other to be a surprisingly well-suited training partner—though for different reasons than one might expect. Raev got good practice fighting a larger, stronger opponent who could soak up her hits, while Boyd got to practice against a smaller, agility-focused fighter.

Even his having to moderate his strength so as to avoid seriously hurting her had proved to be a great exercise in

control. He'd had to dial things back a lot less than he'd expected to. Neither was so over or under matched that the benefits of training were diminished. If Boyd was being honest with himself, the arrival of the leggy redhead had caused him to work harder than he'd planned to this morning.

Raev had found him in the gym about an hour ago, where he was trying to work off some nervous energy. His heart hadn't been in it, though—mostly because of Silvie's absence. A last-minute change in their transfer plans had led to Silvie staying away from their base overnight. She'd disappeared yesterday evening with a Grav Sled, along with their new teammate, and a bunch of cargo.

Their newest team member had mind-based Powers that allowed her to scan the area of their new home for intelligent life. If she found anything, Silvie should be able to deal with it. They also had a couple of Powered guards familiar with the area with them. These were contractors assigned to guard Boyd that Director Davis was using to scout the area.

It made Boyd uneasy to have Silvie so far off, tucked away at a location so secret he wouldn't be briefed about it until they were on their way to join her. Silvie was stronger than ever, though, and their Bond allowed him to at least confirm that she was okay... if also anxious about the distance separating them.

Their shared anxiety had kept them both awake all night. Boyd almost felt like he was some sort of delicate flower, wilting now that he was separated from his source of light. He did not like the sensation.

He could tell that the source of this emotion wasn't himself, but Silvie. She'd projected the feeling so strongly that he had mistaken the emotion as his own, at first. It was both charming and disconcerting, knowing that was how she felt about him.

While he certainly didn't enjoy being away from her, they should still be able to function independently. That brought up another worrying thought. Was this emotion of hers

a result of his Power? Had he warped her mind to feel that way about him?

It was plausible. Hell, it certainly fit the trend of his Enhancement. It wasn't uncommon for Powers to have built in self-defense mechanisms like that. His power likely made those he Enhanced feel like they needed to stay close to him, to protect their source of Power.

His power had characteristics similar to an addiction, after all. It might be something that only affected someone at the permanent stage—what they'd decided to call Devoted—so had been overlooked in testing.

That certainly aligned with another aspect of his Power, the part commonly referred to as his aura effect. Boyd's aura either made him incredibly attractive or terribly intimidating to those within range of its effects. Which effect one experienced depended largely on the targeted individual's sexual preferences.

Boyd kept his aura on a tight leash, suppressing it with a minor but continuous exercise of his will. Thinking about it, he realized he probably had a similar effect on those he Enhanced. Maybe not being close to him was literally making Silvie feel like she was wilting. She was out of range for him to contact, so he couldn't ask her about the strange emotion—and their Bond wasn't giving him clear information.

Fortunately, Silvie had left him a plate of her cookies in her absence. They'd helped quell the unsettling thoughts and emotions, at least while they'd lasted. He probably shouldn't have eaten all of them over the course of the night, but so far as they could tell, things like sugars and fats don't have the detrimental health effects on him that they would on another person.

That was after he'd managed to sneak away from Raev so she could sleep. The poor thing had exhausted herself trying to wear him out once it became clear he couldn't fall asleep on his own. She'd begged him to breed her over and over again until he'd found her limit—not that she ever actually gave up.

He'd been forced to pretend to fall asleep to get her to rest. Only when she thought he'd dozed off did she exhaustedly cuddle against his slowly rising and descending chest and fall asleep—in less than ten seconds. She'd slept well, getting a full eight hours before waking up an hour ago to an empty bed and coming to find him.

Boyd had taken advantage of those hours, using the free time to its utmost. He was used to having much more alone time than he'd had in recent days. He'd started by testing his strength. The ladies in his life had kept him too busy to do it the day before.

Like Silvie, he'd found he was roughly five percent stronger, adding three tons to his recently set sixty-ton squat press record. He didn't update the board, though, because they'd agreed that a new personal record only went on the board if it increased the old record by at least five.

It wasn't worth logging his new personal best, seeing as they only wrote down PRs to the nearest 5 tons, rounding down. Besides, they were leaving the suite anyway. He made a note to remember to congratulate Silvie on getting to ninety-five tons—gains were harder to come by for her and deserved to be celebrated.

Tinker had made him a practice sword with the same dimensions and the same weight as the very sharp obsidian-bladed weapon she'd given him two nights ago. A gift which one of her drones had recovered from the roof where it had landed when the porter attacked him. He figured that if he was going to start using weapons, he needed a refresher and then to develop specialized training for them.

He'd been in the sparring area of the gym with the training sword when Raev had sauntered in wearing a backless and very short nightgown. Boyd was retraining himself on anti-porter techniques. The encounter the day before left a sour taste in his mouth—a sour taste that only thorough training and preparation would wash away.

At first, Raev had just watched Boyd with hungry eyes. Then, she had started to use her illusions to enhance his anti-

porter training. This training mostly consisted of reacting as quickly as possible to randomized attack pattern callouts from the suite's AI system. After figuring out the pattern of the callouts he trained with, she'd started making corresponding illusionary opponents appear and attack him.

Of course, Raev being Raev, she'd decided not to warn him of her intent.

This resulted in what had felt like a second very real encounter with the porter that had attacked him the day before. Boyd dodged three diving grapple attempts before sensing amusement across the Bond he shared with Raev. Instead of dodging the next attack to avoid being captured and ported away, he'd countered with a wide slash. His sword passing through the illusionary woman was all the confirmation Boyd had needed to confirm the Kitsune was up to her tricks.

After chasing Raev, and several illusory duplicates of her, around the gym in an effort to seek retribution through the best-known form of punishment for tricky little foxes—tickling—they'd returned to his training. Before they started up again, Boyd studied the illusion across from him.

His illusionary opponent was unusual, her features were vaguely pretty but only felt half formed. After seeing how he'd studied the illusion, Raev had explained that she hadn't gotten a good enough look at the porter to perfectly duplicate her features. Then, wearing a wicked grin the entire time, she proceeded to put him through the wringer, forcing him to dodge and counter her illusory porter for the next half hour.

Once she'd realized he wasn't about to run out of steam, she got bored. One porter became two, and then there were three illusions trying to tackle him. Boyd had stopped the exercise at that point as Raev had clearly lost her focus.

It was then that she'd asked to spar with him. Boyd had been hesitant at first, but when she'd batted her eyes at him and all but begged, he'd relented. A brilliant smile lit her face when he finally caved to her puppy-dog eyes—or was that fox-kit eyes?

## Chapter 2

Boyd didn't even like sparring with Silvie, though he knew he couldn't hurt her without using his Black Flame or Mental Domination. When he sparred with her, he simply didn't use either power. Sparring with Raev, however, would be different. One miscalculated strike could do a hell of a lot of damage to her. Boyd could potentially kill her.

When he'd voiced his concerns, she'd gone and put on her suit. Only after she proved it was tough enough to withstand a hit would Boyd train with her. Tinker had built in some kind of a reactionary weave into the material. The big man didn't pretend to understand all the techno mumbo-jumbo Raev had spouted at him, but he understood that it had something in it that robbed blunt-force trauma of a lot of its power.

The downside, however, was that it was less effective at preventing cutting or slicing attacks and was only fair-to-middling against piercing attacks. According to Raev, Tinker insisted that while the next iteration would be a lot better, even this one would keep her reasonably safe against Boyd's blows in unarmed combat.

He'd still been careful, pulling his punches. He was so careful that Raev started punishing him for it. After the short break to catch her breath, Kitsune picked up where she'd left off.

She came in low, only to swing out wide before popping up into the air and spinning around to strike him with a blindingly fast kick. When he lashed out at her with a jab, she came in low, rolling under his strike to drive her small foot into his knee or thigh. She tried layering such attacks, hoping to wear him down from a hundred small injuries.

It was a fairly standard tactic for dealing with a threat too tough to damage with a single powerful blow. Wearing them down with repetitive strikes worked much better. Of course, it was a standard tactic because it was effective. Usually.

Boyd was just a little too tough for it to be a truly effective tactic to use against him. Raev did manage to get him to strain his knee at one point, timing a kick to land right when he'd overextended it. It was then that she'd discovered something like that didn't slow him down.

Boyd's Mental Domination quickly locked away the pain, lessening the psychological impact of such injuries on his ability to continue to fight. Combined with his ability to heal minor injuries in a few moments, the damage just didn't accumulate the way she needed it to.

At the same time, Boyd was having a hard time landing any solid blows—partly because of his caution and partly because Raev was so damn slippery. She was quick, limber, extraordinarily coordinated, and maintained amazing situational awareness of where she was in relation to her opponent and the room, despite all of her spins and twists. She never remained in one place for more than a moment and seldom moved in a predictable pattern.

Her unusual digitigrade lower legs enabled her to spring into motion, accelerating rapidly enough to justify her D-Rank in speed and C-Rank in agility. Boyd had gotten around to reading her file in his free time, although the information was likely out of date. Seeing her in action—or rather, being on the receiving end of that action—he knew those rankings were too low.

Of course, it wouldn't have been nearly as much of a problem if he'd been willing to hurt her. His seven-foot-long, spade-tipped tail was just as affected by his A-Rank strength as the rest of him. He could probably whip it through the air at hip level and cut her in half if he was going all out. He wasn't about to do so, obviously. He was trying to grab her with his tail, to wrap her up. Unfortunately for Boyd, she was exceptionally adept at avoiding his tail under those circumstances.

Which brought them to now, about twenty minutes into their spar, most of which had been flurries of exchanges with a pause here and there for his smaller opponent to catch her breath. Boyd could tell Raev was trying to lure him into



pursuing her. She'd come in to strike at him and then bounced away, prepared to dart further back if he pursued her.

The Bond they shared told him this tactic was partly because it was fun to be chased when nothing was at stake. But mostly, it was because Raev's illusion Powers were more effective when her opponent was the aggressor rather than the defender. To counter that, he stayed defensive—for the most part.

He saw the moment she realized he was perfectly content to leave this as a battle of attrition. He'd keep getting closer and closer, closing off her escape angles until he got a solid grip on her. From there, wrapping her up would be easy enough. Meanwhile, she was unable to do enough consistent damage to overwhelm his recovery power.

A competitive glint entered the kitsune's previously playfully sparkling emerald eyes. "I suppose I need to get serious," she said, her velvet tones untouched by aggression, despite a slight hardening of her features.

"Show me what you've got," Boyd rumbled back, adjusting his stance slightly.

Raev didn't hesitate, dropping low and charging to the right to circle him. A second kitsune appeared and dropped low, circling to the left. As quick as the woman was, that complicated matters. When each of the two kitsune split again and came in at different angles, Boyd lost track of which was the real Raev as the shell game she was playing became downright hard to follow.

Unfortunately for Boyd, since he'd Enhanced her, each copy of her produced footfalls that sounded the same. If his Black Flame Vision, as Tinker had dubbed his new sense, didn't cause him dizzy spells, it might tell him which one was the real kitsune. Boyd supposed he could snap his wings out and buffet all four of her with them, gently enough that he didn't think he'd hurt his lover.

It wasn't very sporting, though. Besides, he knew it would almost certainly muss her tails up, and he knew that would cause her significant distress. Instead, he prepared to

block what he could, but was ultimately prepared to take a solid hit and respond with a counter the moment her attack revealed which one was the real Raev.

The four Raevs closed in on him from his three, five, eight, and eleven o'clock. While using his wings would be unsporting, his tail was still on the table. He turned towards his nine o'clock to face the two kitsune that attacked from that side. Meanwhile, his tail lashed through the two that came at him from his right. Given the speed of his tail, Raev would certainly have felt it if the strike landed, but some instinct pulled him towards the kitsunes to his left and he trusted that instinct. The tail slash was just a precaution.

The three o'clock Raev rolled in low, likely aiming for his legs. The eleven o'clock kitsune stayed up, which was still low for him, though not below his waist. Each of them spun out in opposite directions as Boyd prepared to block blows from both sides. Sure enough, three o'clock aimed a driving kick at his knee, so he turned his leg in to take the kick on his thigh while his tail continued its swing around in an attempt to capture her leg.

Boyd swung his left arm wide in an attempt to corral the kitsune at eleven o'clock, which he suspected was the real Raev, while tucking his right arm into a defensive position so as to counter either three or eleven. His suspicion was correct—the eleven o'clock kitsune proved to be the real Raev.

Guessing right did not prepare him for what came next, though. He wasn't even sure how she did what she did. As he looped his arm down and around in a hook to grab her shoulder, the next thing he knew, her hands had gripped onto his wrist, and she was above his arm.

Her arms pushed down until they were between her thighs as she swung her legs around in something that resembled a move he saw in the dance movie they'd watched the other night. Her hands spun around, rotating horizontally on his arm as she used him something like a gymnast's bar. Her knees tucked up to her chest on the first spin so her feet didn't connect with anything, but her tails caught him square in the face... Fump-fump-fump.

They didn't exactly hurt him, being far too fluffy to feel like a blunt impact. It was more like being smacked with a silky pillow—not really harmful but awfully disorienting. It triggered an instinct to close and protect his eyes for a moment, though, a fatal mistake in any fight. He didn't see it but felt the top of one of her feet collide with the side of his head. The kick wasn't hard enough to turn his chin, but it was enough to sting.

She didn't let go of his arm, so he tried to shake her off.

Clinging to his wrist like a young child might hold onto the candy bar his mother just told him he couldn't have, Boyd felt her grip twist around it before releasing. Opening his eyes to track her, he was surprised to see she was spinning back towards him—a handful of emerald green fire hurtling right towards his eyes.

Raev didn't actually strike him with it, as much as she simply tossed the strange fire into his face.

Boyd let out a grunt as a stinging sensation—almost like nettles—set into his eyes and nose. He had to blink back tears, so only heard Raev as she flipped away. The emerald fire didn't burn his eyes or anything, it pretty much just flash-dried them. It also stung his nasal passages, making his nose crinkle in agitation.

He tried to blink his eyes open, but they stung so badly that everything was blurred beyond recognition. And since he couldn't see anything anyway, he closed them for another moment. As Boyd used his Mental Domination to lock the pain away, Raev took advantage of the situation.

She slammed a heel into the back of his leg, trying to sweep it out from under him. Boyd's feet were planted, however, so the strike bounced off. He tried to whip his tail back around to wrap her up, but Raev wasn't there when he swung it out behind him.

She'd used those damn springs in her legs to leap over him, he realized, because her hands grabbed onto his horns to guide her body down into position in front of him. He felt her

thick, muscular thighs as they settled around his neck and squeezed. She put the strength of her entire body into an attempt to wrench his head forward by his horns, but once again was unable to move him.

Boyd's hands shot up to grab onto her by the hips, his hands closing like vices around her waist. His prize secured, he took control of her—deciding the outcome of the spar though still blinded.

“Well... shit. I forfeit, seeing as you could just squish me from here.” Raev sighed, after wiggling ineffectually in his grip for a second.

Boyd finally blinked his eyes open and looked up at her. It was a rather provocative position. She had her thighs wrapped firmly around his neck, while bent forward over his head and holding onto his horns. It puts his mouth and chin in a position he would normally enjoy.

Raev grinned down at him, looking a little nervous. “You're not mad I went for the eyes, are you?” she asked, chuckling awkwardly.

“No,” he replied. “That was a good, clean hit.”

“Oh!” Her cheeks turned a delicate pink, a rarity for his normally forward lover. “Maybe... ahh... you should put me down before you talk. Your voice is very... oh! ... rumbly.”

He grinned back at her, tempted to start humming a nice deep tune while holding her in place. He knew she felt guilty about going for his eyes, and it was throwing her off. Now may not be the time though, he realized, for that kind of fun.

Pulling the kitsune away from his face, Boyd set her down in front of him. He didn't, however, let go of her hips.

Raev reached up to gently place her long fingers on either side of his eyes. “They're all red. I didn't think I could actually hurt you.”

Boyd smiled down at her warmly, not feeling even a little discomfort at this point. “I expected you could... you're probably A-Ranked now, remember? Your Fox Fire was C-

ranked before, and now it's likely B-ranked, same as my resistance.”

Boyd was glad that he'd read her file. It had been a good distraction during the restless hours he'd spent roaming the suite last night. He'd sat at the table in the kitchen, slowly savoring one of Silvie's cookies, trying to make his limited supply last, while researching her powers. Raev's Fox Fire was listed as an Energy Manipulation Power—just like his Black Flame.

Boyd sensed a wave of concern and regret through his Bond with Raev. He remembered all the times he'd accidentally hurt someone in training. The same old sickening feeling churned in his gut that such memories elicited. The most memorable of these, was the time he almost killed Silvie when they were eight.

But that event wasn't a singularity, nor was it the worst. Accidents happened when teaching Powered children and adolescents to use their Powers in combat. Calling it good training for control only went so far to clear one's conscience when a good friend was sprawled on the ground before you, broken or bleeding.

Boyd reached up to cup her jaw in one hand, the other moving up to scratch behind one of her perked up fox ears reassuringly. “It's not that bad,” he admitted, “my eyes are quick to heal. I'll be fine in a moment.” Boyd said this as gently as he could, given his voice. Speaking at a low rumble was something he'd had to practice, since a shout from him could get into triple digit decibel levels.

“On a side note,” he continued, “that felt more like a chemical burn than something based on heat or some other energy transfer. I don't remember reading anything in your file about that.”

“Yeah?” Raev asked, looking down at her hand—though it didn't have any green fire around it at the moment. “It only ever caused minor burns to anyone before, even those with only D-Ranked resistance. The burns it caused obviously

weren't the result of heat, but they never identified a specific type of burn."

She frowned, looking up at him. "You think my foxfire has some kind of chemical effect, like acid?"

Boyd shrugged. "Acidic, corrosive, or caustic—one of those would be my guess."

He'd experienced similar pains from any of the above. He'd never been fully clear on what the differences between them were, though. Some acids were corrosive, but not others. Caustic only referred to extreme bases, which were essentially the opposite of acids. Caustics and acids should never be allowed to mix outside of very controlled conditions Boyd did not begin to understand and therefore would not attempt to replicate. That was about the sum of his knowledge.

"I'm sure Tinker could help us figure out which term is applicable," he said.

"Huh... Wait, did I just effectively splash acid in your eyes?" She looked and sounded appalled, peering into his eyes and touching all over his face.

What he sensed through their Bond made him think she believed what she had done to be a great evil. He equated it to a fan of art discovering they'd accidentally damaged a priceless masterpiece. Or, like he felt when he contemplated stealing another woman's free will. Boyd patiently waited for his lover to calm down. He simply smiled and let her inspect his features. Only his eyes and nose had been affected, and both were healing rapidly.

"Everything seems okay," she muttered, after inspecting every inch of his face with both her eyes and carefully probing fingers.

"I'm fine," he assured her.

"Good." She settled back and returned his smile, the tension that had built within her fading into relief. "Not only would it be a crime against womankind to scar that pretty face, Silvie would skin me alive... literally. She'd probably make you a scarf out of my tails when she was done, too."

Rave curled said tails around in front of her and hugged them protectively against her chest. He sensed that her concern was in jest—mostly. She knew that Silvie wouldn't actually hurt her... well, his first love probably wouldn't hurt her.

The three of them had been together with one another, had shared a single consciousness split amongst three bodies. Silvie was just as protective of Raev as Boyd was, and Raev knew it.

Boyd chuckled. "While your tails would undoubtedly make one of the best scarves ever, I'm fond of where they are. Good thing you only irritated my eyes and nose. It might have irritated my throat if my mouth hadn't been closed."

A surprising number of people didn't understand they should keep their mouth closed during a fight.

Her eyes went wide, her hand coming up to cover her gasp.

"It was a good tactic," Boyd told her, "and well executed, too. But you got greedy."

"I know." Raev sighed and massaged her temples.

At least Boyd didn't sense any further self-recrimination through their Bond.

"I doubt I would have gone for it in the field, so don't worry. Whenever I have to fight someone like you, I'll either distract them or keep them busy until a heavier hitter like Silvie or you arrive, or distract and evade until I get them away from civilians and I can break contact."

She snorted. "I'm not interested in getting myself squished in a fight with someone I can barely hurt." She flicked him in the arm. "Especially if the damage I do manage to inflict doesn't stick."

"Good." He nodded. "You were doing really well up until that point, but you already know that." He smiled down at the redhead. While she had a strange issue with rejection, she otherwise had confidence in spades.

“I do,” she purred, letting her forearms drape over his shoulders as she stepped in close. “But you were holding back a little too much. I’m not *that* fragile.”

“I know,” Boyd sighed. “I just couldn’t bring myself to actually hit you.”

“Well, I suppose it’s good control training for you.” Raev smiled up at him. “Properly moderating your strength and all that.”

“It is,” he agreed, before scowling. “Plus, you’re so damn slippery that it’s good training against ability focused fighters, too. We’ll have to spar more often.”

“Yeah, it was fun.” Raev grinned. “I take it we are done for now?”

“We have an hour and fifteen minutes until we are scheduled to leave.” Boyd had been keeping track of the time. “I would like to take a shower and dress before that... so, yes, we are done.”

“Hmmm, a shower could be fun,” the kitsune purred.

Boyd just smiled and turned her to face the gym’s bathroom. He knew she couldn’t resist saying something like that—which was why they were stopping now. He could shower and dress in a half hour and had been told not to bother making breakfast this morning.

That left a whole forty-five minutes he could focus exclusively on her.



## Chapter 3

“Are you ready?” Boyd called through the open doorway into Tinker’s room.

After showering, messing around with Raev, showering again, and then dressing, Boyd went to check on the team’s gearhead. He poked his head into Tinker’s room. It was the first time he’d seen her room in the suite, and it looked almost exactly like one of the empty rooms.

Boyd wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting. Tinker had spent a couple of nights in the suite, but he was pretty sure she’d spent them down in the lab. He’d even caught her trying to sneak down to her workspace after he’d sent her to bed last night.

“Yep,” Tinker answered, hoisting a pale pink duffel bag that was almost as big as she was over her shoulder.

While she struggled less than Boyd would have expected, given her barely over four-foot-tall frame, it was obviously an effort.

The petite woman shrugged. “I never really got around to unpacking and only brought my clothes up from my old room because my old-new lab has better equipment than the old-old one.” She blew a stray light brown hair that had escaped its braid out of her face, looking around. “Shame to leave it behind so quickly, I was just starting to break it in.”

She grinned up at Boyd. “It’s okay, though. While my new-new lab won’t have as much equipment as the old-new one here in the suite, what it should have looked really impressive—if the specifications they sent over are accurate.”

Her eyes glazed over a bit, and Boyd swore she’d started to drool. “Almost dreamy, really. I won’t need the quantity of equipment I’m leaving behind, given the quality of what I’ll be working with. It doesn’t really make sense for stuff like that to be at a FOB, but I’m not about to complain.”

“You’ve got a little... uhh...”

He gestured to his chin, and Tinker swiped the bit of drool off her chin with the back of her sleeve.

“Oops!” Tinker’s cheeks heated, almost matching the pink of her shirt.

“Well, hopefully we won’t be out there for too long,” Boyd said before stepping to the side to let her through the door.

“Well, as long as we are coming back to this lab, I guess. Don’t get me wrong... I do like it, but I might like the new-new one better.” She stepped around him, getting stuck in the doorway before adjusting the large pink duffle to squeeze through.

“There is one thing I have to get from my old room on the way down,” Tinker said as they started down the hall. “It’s pretty heavy and I... I was hoping you might carry it for me?”

How could he refuse those dimples? Boyd swore his weakness for dimples was probably noted somewhere in his unofficial file.

“I could use a gravlifter,” Tink’s voice carried in the hallway, “but they just don’t make them for people my height and I never bothered to make one for myself. It’s too delicate to trust the grapnels I use on my current drones—an oversight I will be correcting in the next version.”

She shook her head, sending her braid flying. “It was silly to use the PRV4s in the first place, really... the PRX4s more than make up for their weight. So, anyway, would you mind carrying it for me?”

“I would not mind at all,” Boyd said with his kindest smile.

Not wanting to be condescending, he withheld the chuckle brought on by the shy yet talkative woman’s roundabout way of asking for something so simple. “I’d be happy to help you with anything you need help with. Silvie took all my stuff with her yesterday, so I’ve got free hands.”

That was why he had come to Tinker’s room in the first place. He was glad he did, after only a minute of watching the

tiny woman carry the oversized duffle. He stepped up beside her.

“Here,” he said, “allow me.” Once he was close enough, he reached out with his spade-tipped tail and scooped the strap of the pink duffle off her shoulder, taking it from her.

“I can carry that...” she grumbled. The woman who glared up at him barely came up past Boy’s bellybutton, but she didn’t actually seem to be that upset.

“Still have both hands free, see?” He demonstrated by wagging his fingers.

Her hazel eyes met his more readily than they’d done a few days ago. The time spent relaxing as a team last night seemed to have brought the little techie out of her shell. She’d been quiet, for the most part, listening with half-an-ear to most of their discussions. She had engaged when a topic interested her.

Silvie had noticed the trend before Boyd did and had started making segues to get Tinker more involved whenever she started to withdraw—however awkward those segues had been. It was easy enough to keep her interested in the discussion by cycling through something she liked talking about from time to time.

They’d tried to stay away from Hero topics, though suit, gear, and other tool designs and ideas were still on the table. For her part, once Tinker had been purposely included in the conversation, she’d listened more attentively during topics that held less of an interest for her, as well.

Their conversations had given her a bunch of ideas, but eventually the little introvert ran out of social steam. It became clear she wanted to return to her work but seemed reluctant to leave the group. Raev had suggested a middle ground.

At the foxy woman’s suggestion, Tinker went and got a portable control tablet she linked to her lab. She used the tablet to program and control her weaver and some drones to move the things it made out of the way when it completed a project.

Boyd had watched over her shoulder for a while, but he didn't understand anything that she was doing. Tinker had made several items while sitting in or around the hot tub with the others, a happy compromise.

Her light brown hair was in a new braid today. Usually, she favored twin braids that the big man found adorable, but today she wore her long hair in a single, more loosely coiled braid that started near the base of her neck. Now that he was looking for them, he picked out a few copper strands of hair that were mixed in with the light brown.

These copper strands added a subtle shimmer when the light caught them. Tinker was wearing comfortable blue jeans, a pink t-shirt, and pink sneakers. Boyd had never questioned her about her favorite color. The pink shield and little pink lightning ball gun she'd lent him during their first brief meeting had been something of a giveaway.

Blinking away such thoughts, Boyd met her hazel gaze. "I don't doubt you could carry your duffle," he confirmed with a smile. He decided to continue to feed her ego—which had been starved for attention unless he'd completely missed his mark. "I would rather have you save all your calories for that amazing brain of yours."

He gave her a wink. "Raev's new suit is a work of pure genius, and I made good use of the practice sword you made for me this morning." He nodded to his leg. "The new dagger is strapped to my leg. Nice touch, by the way, the leg sheath."

Boyd walked down the hall, heading towards the stairs.

"Yeah? Does it fit? It should definitely fit, but does it?" Tinker looked at his leg as if she was waiting to see the dagger fall out of his pants' leg.

"It fits perfectly; nice and snug. I barely feel it," Boyd assured her.

"Good!" she chirped happily. "There haven't been any problems with the model I'm using for you so far, but you can never be sure about new equipment until it's field tested."

“Everything I’ve seen you make so far has been amazing,” Boyd added, taking another opportunity to build the little woman’s confidence. “Seriously, between weapons that utilize my Power, to the suit that improves the recharge rate of Raev’s Fox Fire, you’ve been a miracle worker. You should have more faith in your abilities, Tink—I do. Raev and Silvie do, too.”

“Oh, um, thank you,” Tinker muttered softly, her already soft voice becoming fainter. Her chin ducked down, successfully hiding her face from him, given their height difference.

He was sure she was blushing furiously. “You are very welcome,” Boyd rumbled back softly. His goal wasn’t to embarrass her, so he didn’t press any further. He let a comfortable silence settle between them, not changing the subject so that his words had some time to settle in.

He’d already sent Raev down with her overnight bag. Most of her belongings were in transit, anyway. They’d be forwarded to their new—hopefully temporary—home in the Wild Lands. The downside of quick transfers using Powers to teleport was often only being able to take what you could carry with you.

That’s how Raev had reached Glorith City when The Authority had rescheduled her transfer from weeks from now to a few days ago. It had been a spur-of-the-moment decision to try to keep Boyd in their suite of rooms in The Tower. He’d disobeyed orders to stay out of the public eye to make an unscheduled foray into the field to rescue Silvie from the first in a series of attacks that had targeted The Authority’s Heroes in Glorith City.

Something about the fiery, red-headed, foxy temptress had appealed to Boyd. She was perfectly suited to the task of getting him to bed her—despite the consequences. She might have been enough to keep him happy in the tower for a while, too, if not for the follow-up attacks.

First, a group of Powered Criminals had attacked Tinker’s now dissolved team, The Bionics. Boyd’s team

rescued those that they could, which thankfully included Tinker. After recovering from that fight, Boyd had enhanced Raev's Powers by taking her as a lover, recruited Tinker to the team, and grabbed lunch with his new lover before the next attack.

Omega Ray, the Powered Criminal, came to Glorith City.

The city killer had come with a specific target—Boyd. Each member of his team had played a role in the miracle that was ending the threat with no civilian casualties. Boyd had landed the final blow, driving a dagger Tinker had made to utilize his Power into the villain's skull.

From that, he'd receive a huge image boost, which he admittedly needed. Looking like a demon or devil like he did was something of a handicap in a system that valued appearances as much, if not more, than strength or abilities.

Unfortunately, he hadn't had a lot of time to utilize the PR boost beating Omega Ray should have granted him. The very next day another targeted attack had come, this time utilizing the creatures that resided in the Wild Lands—which was what they called anything outside of The Authority's walled cities and towns.

A Porter had chased a massive flock of Diamond Claws into the city, hoping to draw Boyd out. A total of eleven citizens had lost their lives as a result, including two children. More than anything, that loss tore at Boyd's soul.

To make matters worse, the Porter's attempt to capture Boyd had nearly succeeded. Silvie and Raev had to rescue him after the Porter got him to fly headfirst into the road. Boyd was tough, but it had been enough to knock him unconscious for several seconds before his Powered healing got him back up and in the game.

How much of a close call that had been scared The Authority. They didn't waste any time, ordering Boyd and his team out of the tower the very next morning. Part of what had kept the big man up all night were worries that there'd be

another attempt on him that might endanger Glorith city's population.

"I would never have thought of using organic materials from a Powered like that without the insights you gave me." Tinker's voice interrupted Boyd's remembering all that had happened—had it been only a week?

"No one would have," she continued. "You would think that, at some point, in the last thousand years someone would have stumbled across something like that, if only by accident."

"I mean," she tilted her head to one side and wrinkled her nose, before the words continued to pour forth. "Somebody once took a look at fermented, which is essentially rotted, milk and decided to try eating it. When he didn't die, as he probably should have, humanity figured out how to make cheese. To try using a Powered's hair to make a suit for them, though? Apparently, that was too much of a stretch."

Tinker spoke as rapidly as ever, but Boyd was having an easier time keeping up. He'd also discovered she had a slightly dry sense of humor. Boyd chuckled.

"While you're probably right, you are still the one who did it—the very first one. Yeah, I might have given you some insights others didn't have, but it was your idea. From what you told me when I caught you trying to sneak down to the lab last night, you've already thought of improvements to it, too."

"Oh, yeah!" Tinker cheered and a hop pepped her stride up for a few steps as they walked down the hall.

Tinker had taken a back corner room in the massive suite, something he'd meant to ask her about but hadn't gotten around to. The hallway that led back to the main living area and the stairs was a long one.

"I can't wait to try so many things! First, I need you to try to look at yourself and figure out what exactly you use to gather energy. It's safe to assume it's your hair, but does that include the fine hairs on the interior of your wings?"

“Huh...” Boyd pauses and extended a wing, peering closely at it.

If he were being honest, he had avoided looking too closely at himself. He wasn't really sure why, but seeing how he looked these days made him shudder. Looking at his extremities should be okay, though.

Boyd pulled Black Flame to his eyes and the world turned into a constellation of moving orbs of light in a cloud of gray dust. He was starting to get used to this new way of seeing things, but still found it a bit disorienting. Turning his head with Black Flame active was still something he tried to avoid.

He took a quick look at his wing with the ability active but regretted doing so immediately. The bright lights all went out when they hit his wing. Every single mote of shining color turned pitch black and was instantly absorbed. Actually, aggressively sucked up into his wing—and presumably into the pool in his lower abdomen—would be a more accurate description.

It didn't look pretty or peaceful like he'd seen with Silvie, Raev, Tinker, or Daisy. For the women he'd examined previously, motes that were similar in color to those that made up their cores were gently drawn into them through their hair, slowly changing to match their core color as they did. It was a little mesmerizing to watch, like a peaceful, pleasant light show.

With Boyd's power, the process looked forceful... almost violent. A chill went down his spine. He didn't want to look at this vicious process anymore, so blinked the Black Flame from his eyes. He shook his head to clear away the vision of light being overwhelmed by darkness before being swallowed by his power.

“What happened?” Tinker asked, concern in her voice. “You look like, I don't know... like someone just spit on a picture of Silvie, or something.”

The desecration of something so beautiful? Boyd found the comparison fitting.



“Yeah, it’s safe to say my wings gather whatever the motes of light are in their vicinity. It was different from everyone else I’ve seen, though...” Boyd’s voice trailed off briefly before he explained what he’d seen in short, simple details. He hadn’t really looked close enough to see if it was the short, fine hairs on the crimson inner section of his wings that swallowed the blackened motes or not. He was grateful that Tinker didn’t ask him to look closer.

He must not have described how aggressive the process was, because Tinker didn’t share his aversion to what was happening when he’d finished his explanation. Boyd could tell she was trying to hide her excitement when she spoke again.

“I hate to ask, but would it be okay if I take a sample of your wing membrane and hair after we get settled in our new place?”

Boyd shrugged. “How big of a sample are we talking about? A strip fifteen inches long and an inch and a half thick only takes me about an hour to heal, so it shouldn’t be a problem. I’m not sure I’d dare to risk a longer recovery time out in the Wild Lands.”

“I would only need a very small sample to analyze,” she admitted, before pursing her lips as her delicate brows drew together. “That was an oddly specific sample size.”

Tinker stopped and squinted up at him.

Boyd shrugged again and waved for Tinker to continue walking. “The Authority tests a regenerator’s limits pretty thoroughly... at least in my PAC they did.”

“Does...” She gulped. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

Tinker sounded uneasy, which drew his gaze.

Boyd didn’t understand the concern he saw in her eyes, or what she thought it meant. His training was classified, though, and Tinker didn’t have the right clearance, even if as his teammate she might have a need-to-know. He couldn’t explain how they inflicted various injuries on him in a

controlled environment and observed his regenerative process. He probably shouldn't have mentioned the fact that they'd tested it at all.

"I don't know what you think it means, but it isn't anything to be concerned about." Boyd tried to address what he could, which was her being upset by something he'd said.

Unfortunately, his words didn't have the intended effect. Tinker darted out in front of him, spun around, and stopped with her fists planted on her hips. She leveled a glare at him that contained a surprising amount of tenacity.

"I think it means they cut you up and probably broke your bones to see how long it took you to heal. If that was the case, it was definitely something to be concerned about. PACs are for kids! It's in the name, dammit! Powered *Adolescent* Center. They are supposed to be safe places for Powered kids to grow up, not to get tortured!"

Boyd wasn't sure what he should do—he really wasn't supposed to talk about his training. He tried being as circumspect as he could. "I wasn't tortured, Tink—I was in Hero training. Every Hero needs to know what their limits are and how far they can push past them—it's a necessity if you're going to be a Hero."

He paused and pinched the bridge of his nose before continuing. "It's particularly important for regenerators like me to know our limits. We can push through a lot, but if we push too far, we can die... just like everyone else. If a Hero dies at a critical moment, that can mean thousands are killed with them."

"You can't push yourself past your limits!" Tink snapped. "That's so messed up. They are limits, by definition. I can't believe..." Tinker looked more angry than upset or concerned, which Boyd could handle.

Suddenly, a look of horror crept over her hazel eyes and doll-like face. "How... how young were you... when they started?"

Boyd scratched the back of his neck. “The PAC Hero training program is classified. I can’t answer you... you should already know that Tink.”

Boyd frowned. He didn’t like not being able to address what was upsetting his teammate—or actively keeping secrets, for that matter. Unfortunately, now wasn’t the time for a heart to heart.

“I’m sorry, Tinker. I know you are upset but we are on a schedule. You said there’s still something you need me to get from your old rooms, right? Let’s go get it. We can talk more about this later, but we need to get moving.”

“Yeah...” The petite woman dragged a hand down her face. “And now I know why the training is classified. Fuck...” Tinker swore softly, as if no one was meant to hear. “I knew about the testing of your Enhancement Power, but at least you were an adult what that happened. Sorry... you’re right, this is not the time. That’s just... What they did to you wasn’t right. I hope you understand that Boyd.” With that, she turned and walked the last few steps to the stairs. “Okay, let’s go.”

Boyd contemplated her words as he walked behind her, ultimately deciding that she just didn’t understand. The Authority had warned him things like this might happen, which he was sure was part of why his training had been classified. It was part and parcel of what it took to become a Hero, but sometimes that was hard for others to understand.

Tinker had never wanted to be a Hero, so she never got into that mindset. If he hadn’t been trained and tested in the way he was, he wouldn’t know what he could push through. Hell, he might have stayed down any number of times in his fight against Omega Ray.

He didn’t. He got up until he didn’t need to anymore. That’s what it meant to be a Hero.

## Chapter 4

The Authority had kept humanity alive on a very hostile world for a thousand years. Their main tool, both sword and shield in this task, was their Heroes. They knew what was needed from their Heroes and how to train them to be the best that they could possibly be.

If it took having his bones broken, his skin cut and burned, and his organs subjected to various forms of radiation or acid... so be it. It didn't matter that some of his earliest memories had been of such tests. Starting early in a Hero's career just made the pain that much more familiar, that much easier to tolerate.

Besides, he'd learned how to block out the pain with his Power pretty quickly. By the time Boyd decided not to think about it until he could explain it to the others, they'd reached the living room where Raev waited for them. Tinker walked past her through the arch into the kitchen and on into the hall beyond the pantry that led to the elevator.

Raev's fiery hair was pulled up in a high ponytail today, it was nearly as fluffy and long as her three tails. She wore dark, tight-fitting blue jeans with a forest-green tank top. It showed off her moderately sized though pert chest and athletically slim waist. The tight jeans clung to her splendidly long legs and wide hips.

She was built for speed and grace, which he'd experienced this morning. Her sometimes predatory but currently warm smile and emerald eyes were a welcome reprieve from the less-than-pleasant topic of his conversation with Tinker.

Boyd returned Raev's smile as he started to follow Tinker down the hall—until she fanned her three fluffy foxy tails out in his path to stop him. They pressed against his chest and abdomen, and he regretted wearing a dress shirt and slacks when he couldn't feel them against his skin.

With Boyd's seven-and-a-half-foot height, things like a peck on the cheek quickly became complicated. Raev's feet

were also a little different from normal, part of her Change, so she was always on her toes. She couldn't stand taller than her just shy of six-foot height by rising up on tippy toe. The most logical thing would have been for him to bend down to his partner's level for such expressions of affection, but that assumed that all parties involved were normal humans.

Instead of floating up to him, like the shorter but gravity ignoring Silvie did, Raev had taken to using her D-Rank Strength and his shoulders or wing joints as a handhold to pull herself up. She climbed him to peck his cheek and whispered into his ear. "Don't worry so much, Big Guy."

The pointer and middle finger of the hand she wasn't using to support her weight pressed against his forehead gently, smoothing a crease he didn't realize had formed. "Tinker isn't upset in a bad way; this is a good upset."

Boyd might have questioned how she'd heard the conversation from the far end of the hall but the fox ears that protruded from her red hair explained that. Instead, he asked another question, "Good upset?"

"Mmmhmm." She nuzzled her cheek against his before kissing it one more time and dropping back to the floor. "It's the kind of upset that shows someone cares." The kitsune bent down, tails fanning out to help her keep her balance, and picked up her overnight bag, ready to go.

"Ah," Boyd breathed. He wasn't sure how to feel about that.

Tinker was an amazing person—in just a few days she'd completely revolutionized his Power use. Being able to imbue weapons with his Black Flame was a game-changer. His claws or fists worked in a pinch, sure, but weapons not only increased his reach but opened up the possibility of ranged attacks.

Given that his Black Flame was most effective against Energy Manipulators, closing the distance to use his hands was often a risky endeavor in the best circumstances. Of course, the shield Tinker had made for him helped make it a little less risky for him to get in close. He spent a moment

pondering how different his fight with Omega Ray would have gone if he'd had his sword and shield.

Then again, if he hadn't let his anger drive him and had opened with his Black Flame power, those initial punches might have pulped the former Hero's skull. He hadn't even thought to try to use his Black Flames until partway through the fight due to his desperate rage. He would have to watch out for that.

Then, she'd made a suit for Raev that nearly quadrupled the regeneration rate of her Fox Fire, giving her more potential uses of her primary offensive ability in any given fight. Tinker was a genius, plain a simple. She'd already proved a tremendous benefit to their team.

Plus, she was cute as hell.

Her diminutive stature was growing on him, although he was slightly concerned about the logistics of the two of them getting physical. She was just over half his height, and he weighed as much as seven and a half times as much as she did. He'd done the math after seeing her weight listed in her file. Why she wasn't deterred by their size difference, he couldn't say. It was clear it didn't seem to faze her.

When Silvie and Raev had started whispering the possibilities that their size differences opened up, he began to find their height differential less and less concerning. It didn't help that his little brain seized control at that moment and a memory of how all three women had looked in the large hot tub on the suite's balcony yesterday jumped front and center.

Silvie and Raev could have competed on an equal footing in a scandalous swimwear contest. Silvie's had at first appeared modest, but only for a moment. It was a white one piece that covered more than her Hero Suit. When she got in the water, though, it became nearly transparent and clung to her skin.

Boyd had considered asking her to change, but Tinker hadn't commented on it or seemed uncomfortable, so he'd let it be. Plus, it was really fucking hot—especially with her sun bronzed skin and femininely muscular body. You couldn't

*quite* see the details of what was considered polite to cover, but it was a near thing.

Raev went in a different direction. To her credit, her swimwear selection wasn't transparent at all. Whoever had made it must have been running low on fabric, though. It was a two-piece, made up of a web of thin black straps connected by gold rings. Her nipples and womanhood had been covered by the only pieces of solid fabric in the suit—which were rather cute little fox head emblems.

Her tails were what really impressed him in the big hot tub. They drank in the water and fluffed up instead of clinging to the bone beneath. When she'd brushed them over him under the water, it had felt like the most luxurious sponge bath Boyd could imagine. Even Tinker partook in what Silvie called 'the ultimate softness' after some convincing—something Raev seemed to enjoy greatly. She'd made Tinker apologize to the tail she had pulled a small clump of hairs from as payment.

Tinker had worn the most modest swimsuit of the three ladies—but it was still a rather daring bikini. Predictably, it had been pink. Though petite in stature, Tinker was built a lot like Silvie. Their resident genius was a natural bombshell—just more than a foot shorter and slimmer than his well-toned childhood love.

She was also the fairest of them, her skin turning a distinctly pink hue as she shyly walked out in her swimsuit with Raev symbolically herding her towards the hot tub. Her blush only deepened once they'd slipped into the hot water. After a bit, it was clear the heat was having an effect on her.

The normally shy and demure woman began to openly—if awkwardly—flirt with him, joining in with Raev and Silvie. A lot of her flirtatious remarks focused on his size. If he had to guess, he'd say the difference was more of a draw than a deterrent for her. It quickly became clear how badly she wanted a relationship with him. Equally clear was how nervous she was that a single miss-step might cause him to send her away.

Of course, he'd never do such a thing. Boyd continued to try to make it clear that she'd earned a permanent place on the team on her merits alone. It was becoming clear to him that she wasn't comforted by his words—that wasn't what she wanted to confirm her place. She wanted him.

It was endearing and difficult to discourage. But he didn't want to strip her of her free will like he'd done to Silvie and Raev. His original fear of forcing a woman whom he could not have feelings for to love him forever was evaporating. As far as Boyd could determine, he'd quickly fallen in love with Raev, though he'd only known her for a few days. He cared as much for her as he did for Silvie, a woman he'd grown up with and who he'd cared for most of his life.

Maybe he and Raev were just extremely compatible, but that felt like a bit of a stretch to him. It was far more likely that his Power affected him as much as it affected her, if not more. The same thing would likely happen with Tinker.

That meant he was only four orgasms away from being in love with any woman as he was with either of the women he shared a Bond with—Devotion, they had started calling it.

He still hesitated, though not as much as he thought he should. He'd agreed to take her on a date readily enough, after all. Boyd had no intention of backing out on that promise, either. It was a good thing she'd wanted a stay-in date. It would have been difficult to make reservations out in the Wild Lands.

He'd checked to confirm that what he needed to make linguine carbonara went out with the shipment Silvie had taken with her. That was when he'd realized he hadn't just accepted a date with Tinker, he was looking forward to it. Which felt... wrong.

Partly because that was the path that led to eventually stripping her of her free will. It was also a little because he was worried he might hurt her, given their size difference, but also emotionally through forming their Bond. It hadn't been pleasant for every woman he'd had sex with.



But mostly, he hesitated because he wasn't supposed to be forming this many personal attachments. If he was being honest with himself, he wasn't supposed to form any real personal attachments—it went counter to every warning he had been given growing up.

Every attachment a Hero had was a vulnerability. The most a Hero should allow themselves were casual friendships amongst their team. Even that was primarily encouraged because the public responded better to teams that appeared to be friendly with each other.

A Hero might be asked by The Authority to form false relationships, either romantic or plutonic. Boyd had always considered such attachments to be false. A Hero should be prepared to sacrifice a team member—or be sacrificed by them—if the situation called for it.

It was hard, if not impossible, to have a real relationship in that situation.

It was another reason he hated the cost of his Enhancement. Boyd knew he couldn't afford to Enhance anyone else. It had been proven twice over. He'd long known that he couldn't sacrifice Silvie. When he'd sensed she was in danger, nothing else had mattered. Not Orders. Not staying hidden. Not his public image. Not even being a Hero.

All those went out the window when she'd been in serious danger—a window which he promptly jumped out of. He'd even quit The Heroes, something he'd never seriously considered doing at any point in his life. The thought hadn't entered his head before then, no matter how hard the training was, or how much of an outcast he became.

He knew the same devotion now applied to Raev, which was even more worrisome. Raev was neither as strong nor as tough as Silvie. That increased the odds of her being in danger. Of course, she was also as tricky as the fox her gift borrowed some features from. She'd spent some time explaining the lore of her namesake the night before. It fit.

Thinking about it, he realized that maybe he wouldn't need to worry about her as much as the less danger aware

Silvie. To be fair, not a lot could hurt his silver-haired love these days, and that had been before her second Enhancement. They hadn't gotten around to re-testing her durability since then.

She might be so resistant to damage now, that he didn't need to worry about her anymore. She could be the kind of Hero who would survive the planet exploding out from under her at this point. He didn't put it past her.

Boyd's thoughts were interrupted by a flick to his chin.

"Okay, Mr. Broody-Face... I'll admit it's a good look on you, but we are on a schedule." Raev smiled up at him as he shook his brooding thoughts away. The flick didn't hurt. Raev probably could have punched him and not caused Boyd any real pain, given his own B-Ranked resistance.

"Right," Boyd rumbled with a nod. "Let's go." He started walking again.

Tinker was almost at the elevator door when they turned down the hall.

"Let me guess what caused the haunted stare... you're mad at yourself for developing feelings for me and Tinker?" Raev bumped her hip against his own as she stepped up to walk beside him.

Boyd blinked and looked down at her smirking face.

"Yeah." She rolled her eyes. "Thought so. We've covered the 'we are all Heroes, too' argument already. You know we've each accepted the risk."

She paused, her voice much softer when she continued. "I get how that doesn't actually help, though. It didn't help me, either. I completely freaked out when I realized you'd dropped me so you could go fight Omega Ray. It wasn't anger as much as it was pure fear. I didn't want to lose you. I wasn't ready to care so deeply."

Raev blew a raspberry. "I ignored orders that day, too. Did you know that?"

Boyd grunted. “That just proves my point. The Bond compromises not just me, but anyone I Enhance as well. What’s the point of Enhancing Heroes if it also interferes with their ability to do their job?”

“Hmm.” Raev considered his words, biting her lower lip as she worked through how to help him get beyond this sticking point. “Yeah, I see how you could take it that way, but you’re forgetting one thing, though.”

“Yeah?” he asked. “What’s that?”

“We won,” Raev retorted with her smooth as velvet laugh. “You made my illusions strong enough that I was able to distract that monster for a hell of a lot longer than I could have done before we Bonded. The extra two copies of me really upped my close-quarters game.”

Boyd’s brows crawled up his forehead.

“I didn’t know her back then,” Raev continued, “but could the Silvie from before your Enhancement have dragged Omega Ray to a mostly empty part of the city?”

“Probably not,” he admitted.

“We won *because* of your Enhancements.” The kitsune punctuated her statement by poking him in the chest. “We would have died pointlessly without them.”

“Omega Ray never would have come here if I wasn’t an Enhancer,” Boyd pointed out.

Raev rolled her bright emerald eyes, her natural eyeliner making them pop. “Yeah, and none of us would have Powers at all if we hadn’t fucked up our last world and come here a thousand years ago.” She gave him another poke.

Boyd scowled.

“What’s the point of what ifs?” she asked. “My grandma used to have a saying for what-ifs... ‘If ifs-and-buts were candied nuts, the whole damn world would be fat’.”

Boyd couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped him.

“You were born an Enhancer, Boyd. You were targeted because of that.” She shook her head. “You couldn’t control being born. The city is just fortunate that you Enhanced two amazing women who had your back and helped you fight that asshole.”

She might have a point, he realized.

“Nothing to regret so far. I just hope you don’t come to regret not Enhancing more amazing women like Tinker faster when the next threat shows up—and we both know that some threat will come knocking.”

Boyd slowed. That was a fair point. He *would* be targeted again. Maybe Omega Ray had been the ace up the sleeve of whoever was after him, but Boyd had his doubts. The simple fact that whoever it was had another attack prepared just a day after Omega Ray had attacked made it unlikely.

If Silvie or Raev died protecting him because they didn’t have enough backup or the right equipment, Boyd would never forgive himself. Enhancing Tinker might give his team the edge they needed.

Raev walked on ahead of him, her tails swaying in a swishing motion counter to her hips. “Don’t worry too much, Big Guy,” she said over her shoulder. “Silvie’s pretty certain this next one will wipe away all your doubts.”

## Chapter 5

Boyd thought he'd figured out who their new team member was. There was really only one person it could be, given the way Silvie had handled it. While only one person made sense, it seemed nonsensical to think that *she* would voluntarily join the team—especially given the circumstances.

It couldn't be someone he didn't already know. If that was the case, there wouldn't be a need for all this secrecy. He briefly considered it being some famous Hero all the guys were supposed to fantasize about, but he couldn't recall anyone with Mind Powers that fit the bill. The closest match would be Aphrodite, but Silvie couldn't possibly think that would be a good idea. Only the nonsensical option made any sense, which only confused him. It was one of the reasons why he'd been so restless last night.

Raev paused after a few steps when Boyd just stood there. She glanced back over her shoulder. "That was just an expression," she said.

When he didn't respond, she added, "You okay, Big Guy?" There was real concern in her voice.

Boyd considered asking her directly who it was, but then remembered his promise to Silvie not to. Plus, if it turned out he was right, he would just torture himself trying to plan for anything she might say or do... trying to prepare for the accusation in her nearly black eyes.

Those dark eyes had once brought him comfort. Now, though, he feared their dark depths. Knowing he would soon be encountering them again would be worse than just suspecting he might.

"Yeah." He cleared his tightening throat. "Yeah, you just made a really good point."

"I know I did." She grinned at him. "I'm no Tinker, but I like to think I'm pretty smart. Now, come on."

Something about her words made him check their Bond, just to see how she was feeling. Confidence swelled

inside of her, and she felt good; she felt confident. There was no uncertainty in her and it only took Boyd a moment to understand the difference.

Raev was no longer worried that Boyd might change his mind and reject her. It made him smile and he realized he could pull strength from her confidence. Raev wouldn't reject him, just like he would never reject her.

Even if he had to face those dark eyes again, she'd be there. Closing the distance between them, he pulled her overnight bag from her hand. She didn't resist, only leaned into him when he wrapped one of his wings around her in an impromptu hug of thanks. His tail wrapped around one of hers, the center one this time, as they continued down the hall.

“Why are we stopping?” Boyd asked when Raev pulled him to the side of the door that led out to the landing pad.

They'd reported to a private executive landing pad on the hundred and sixtieth floor. This one extended from the side of the building when needed, retracting back into the building when not in use. He could see the Grav-Transport scheduled to take them to their new home at some forward operating base out in the Wilds through a small window in the door.

The three of them were actually a little behind schedule. Picking up the oddly heavy cube from Tinker's room took a bit longer than he'd expected it would. Disconnecting it from the network, shifting it into standby mode, and ensuring the onboard power would last until she could reconnect it to a power source had taken several minutes. Then there had been the seven industrial cables plugged into it spread across four of its six sides that had to be carefully detached.

Boyd was carrying it, tucked under one arm in a bright yellow plastic carrying case. Inside the case, the gun-metal-gray cube was roughly two feet on a side. It must have weighed at least two hundred fifty and possibly as much as three hundred pounds. Other than the seven cable connections on four of its sides, it also had some sort of dock on the top of the cube that he hadn't recognized.

Boyd couldn't quite say what it was, but something about the piece of technology felt incredibly old. It wasn't that the cube was damaged or worn from age; it just seemed like something out of its time. He had no idea what function it served, and Tinker's reply had been rather cryptic when he'd asked what it was.

He'd tried to be casual about his query, hoping to spur a conversation after how their talk in the hall had ended. It didn't work. Tinker had simply said that it was important to her work and that she needed it to come with them before she went quiet again.

Now, Raev was being cryptic, pushing a finger to her lips to shush him as she guided him over to a corner where some potted plants hid a small alcove—well, to Boyd the alcove was small. It had a window with one way glass that overlooked the landing pad. This must be where the executives waited so they could see when their ride arrived.

Tinker either knew what was happening or had decided to play along, because she slipped into the corner with them without a word. Then, a copy of Raev, Tinker, and Boyd appeared back in front of the door. After a moment, the door opened to allow the trio of illusory duplicates out onto the landing pad.

There was no flight crew on the landing pad, which also struck Boyd as odd. Their three illusionary copies boarded the sleek black Grav-Transport, which looked to be one of the newest models deployed by The Authority. Its sleek lines gave it the appearance of a bird of prey mixed with an Old Earth stealth aircraft he'd once seen a picture of.

If he recalled that picture correctly, it had been called a Nighthawk—not to be confused with the Hero Night Hawk, who was a well-known tech user with nearly mythic tracking skills. Boyd had found the picture when he'd forgotten which book he'd checked out before when looking up the Hero's exploits. Ironically, the Old Earth plane had looked like something the darkness-loving Hero would employ.

Boyd had actually been looking forward to his trip on the advanced Grav Sled. He could fly on his own, sure, but this thing had active cloaking and generated an energy field that lets it achieve Mach-3 speeds without a sonic signature. Silvie couldn't even achieve those speeds, although she could almost reach Mach-3 after her second Enhancement. Boyd could go faster than he could fly on his own with the propulsion pack Tinker had built into his suit—but that was nowhere near the thousands of miles an hour a vehicle like this could slice through the upper atmosphere at.

Watching as the Nighthawk's bay door closed after an illusory copy of him climbed onboard before it lifted into the air and subsequently faded from sight as the active cloaking activated was more than a little disappointing.

“Wha-” Boyd started to say, but he was silenced by Raev's fingers pressing to his lips.

A moment later, a much less impressive Grav-sled flew up and settled down on the pad. The back hatch of the sled lowered to the pad, forming a ramp that Assistant Deputy Commander Ellis walked down. He was trailed by a moderately large crate on a floating platform which seemed to follow him all on its own.

Ellis was still a young man, closer to Boyd's twenty-one years than the Commander's forty plus years. He seemed to be much more put together than he'd been during their first encounter over comms. To be fair, he'd just lost four Heroes in a few minutes during what should have been a boring night shift.

That had been the night the Bionics had been attacked and he'd ordered Raev and Boyd into the field to extract the survivors—including Tinker. That won him points in Boyd's book. The man's dark blue uniform pants and jacket were neatly pressed, and his brown hair was combed and tidy. He led the crate off the landing pad and through the door.

Pressing a button on his FDU, the crate came to a stop next to them. Ellis and Raev exchange a nod as he stopped the crate beside their alcove. The man came around the side of the



crate facing them and unbuckled two heavy-duty latches to allow that side of the crate to swing open on recessed hinges.

The crate was empty inside and Ellis waved for them to enter.

Boyd frowned at Raev, who just smirked and pointed to the yellow case that contained Tinker's mysterious box and then to the top of the crate. Boyd set the carrying case down towards the center of the crate as Raev took her overnight bag and Tinker's large pink duffle from him. She tossed her overnight bag onto the top of the crate before waving to him to climb inside it.

It was not a very large crate—and Boyd was a very large man.

He climbed inside anyway, because it didn't seem like he really had a choice in the matter. It would have been impossible if the bones in his wings didn't flex in a way that allowed him to sit on them. It was far from comfortable, though.

He really hoped he wouldn't be trapped in the cramped crate for the entire journey to his new home. His legs barely fit, and only then if he kept them bent at the knee. He had to lay his tail down in a circle around his feet.

The worst part of it was how he had to keep his neck bent at an angle—even so, his horns pressed against the top of the metal box. If he sneezed, his horns would probably punch right through the top of the container. There wasn't much in the way of space left over once Boyd had stuffed himself into the cramped quarters.

Someone must have done the math, though, because Raev pushed Tinker's duffle in under the big man's knees before shoving it forward into his calves. After wrapping her tails around herself and stroking them a big flatter, Raev climbed into the space down by his feet. Her knees were propped over the top of the duffle, and she hugged her overnight bag to her chest. When her feet tucked in under Boyd's thighs, he'd been concerned about the playful woman's

placement—right up until he realized that Tinker was climbing in as well.

There was really only one space left for her.

Boyd couldn't hold back a snicker when the petite woman's cheeks reddened as she climbed over his thigh and settled into the space between them. He was suddenly grateful he'd asked Silvie to leave him a pair of khaki slacks and a button-down shirt to wear today instead of his standard shorts and athletic shirt. Tinker wiggled herself into position, shifting Raev's feet until she was pretty much sitting on them while straddling the kitsune's calves. This caused her shoulders to lean back into Boyd's chest, with the top of her head a scant inch or so below his face.

Tinker's hair smelled like shampoo—probably something vague like 'valley fresh' that he couldn't quite identify. The scent was pleasant enough.

Ellis closed the side of the compartment after everyone had settled into place in the *very* close confines. "You can talk, but quietly, please," the man said just before closing the door.

They were plunged into darkness for a moment before a faint green glow emerged from strips on the ceiling. It gave them just enough light for Boyd to make out the intertwined legs of the two women with him in the crate. Everyone waited for the sounds of the latches locking down before speaking.

"You couldn't have gotten a bigger box?" Tinker asked, apparently aiming the question at Raev.

The last one into the container wriggled around, trying to get comfortable. She ended up sitting on Raev's feet, but also Boyd's wings. Folded up like this, his wings were much less sensitive than normal. Boyd thanked the stars for small favors. Otherwise, Tinker wriggling her tush on the usually sensitive surfaces would have been *much* more distracting.

Boyd hoped she found a comfortable spot before things got awkward. Her squirming had caused her to move back further up onto him, so that the side of her head now rested against his jaw. With her leaned back against him the way she

was now, there was no mistaking the small woman for a child as her rather pleasantly soft butt cheeks ended up pressed into a *very* sensitive spot.

He didn't think she'd done so on purpose, but she seemed to be in no hurry to move.

## Chapter 6

“It was Silvie’s plan,” Raev admitted. “I only knew to send illusions of us to the transport and then wait in the alcove.” She squirmed a bit. “I’m a little worried that we’ll have enough air.”

“Don’t be.” Tinker waved a hand as if dismissing the concern before explaining. “The glow those light strips give off is a secondary effect. They’re made from a compound that pulls the carbon molecules off carbon dioxide bonds and converts it back to oxygen fit for breathing.”

She tapped one of the green strips. “The glow serves as an indicator of how full of carbon the strips are, we only need to worry if the strips turn brown and the light fades.”

Boyd was familiar with the useful compound—emergency light and air filtration all in one.

“Neat, but now I’m just waiting for the lights to go out,” Raev muttered.

When she continued to grumble, Boyd got the feeling that she wasn’t fond of tight spaces. He worked his tail into a position that allowed him to rub the small of her back, just above her tails, with its spade tip. She leaned back against it, and he sensed her gratitude across their Bond.

“It shouldn’t be a problem,” Tinker continued. “These strips would probably last a normal person several days. I know Boyd’s respiration is quite a bit more efficient than normal, likely to allow for high-altitude flight.”

Tinker paused before letting out a sigh. “I just realized they probably tested that in the worst possible way, didn’t they? What did they do... just lower the air pressure until you passed out? Every statistic and figure I have on you feels dirty, now.” She craned her neck to the side to look up at Boyd. Even in the dim light, Boyd saw the sadness in her big hazel eyes.

He didn’t want to answer, but denying her assumption would be lying. Confirming it wouldn’t be any better, though.

It'd only upset her more, as well as being a breach of confidentiality.

Raev came to his rescue. "Don't let it go to waste... that's all you can do. Use every piece of data he suffered for them to collect and make him stronger with it—strong enough that no one can ever do something like that to him again. Strong enough that he can change things if he wants to. That's the real opportunity this team has; it's real potential."

Boyd couldn't meet Raev's eyes without driving his horns through the roof, but he'd noted how she sounded almost reverent when she'd said 'opportunity' and 'potential'. He wasn't sure he liked that.

He could feel it through their Bond, too. Something had definitely settled Raev's anxiety. She was certain that everything would be okay. Boyd couldn't figure out how that meshed with their current reality. If everything was going to be okay, they wouldn't be in a crate being smuggled out of The Tower.

It was The Authority's seat of power in Glorith City. The fact that such steps were considered necessary made him more certain than ever that everything was far from okay. He was happy that Raev felt that way, though.

Tinker leaned forward to look at Raev as she started speaking, so Boyd could only see the back of her head and not her reaction.

The petite woman sighed. "Yeah, that's probably the best mindset to have. Still..." Her voice faded off.

She shifted around to press more firmly into Boyd, which was going to become problematic soon if she didn't ease off. It didn't help that the sweet smell of her hair filling his nose reminded him of sugar cookies now that he'd had some time to think about it.

"It just feels like..." Tinker began.

"Like you should somehow try to make up for the shitty childhood he had because how could he not be carrying

a shit-ton of baggage related to his training?” Raev finished the thought.

“Yeah.” Tinker nodded.

“I know the feeling,” Raev responded with a slight chuckle in her voice. “From the sounds of things, Regenerators have it really rough—and his PAC was one of the worst. Silvie could use some of that tender care, too. They’ve essentially been taking care of each other, but the benefit of being in a harem is having more people to share the load.”

Boyd could only tell that she’d shaken her head because of how the glow overhead flickered.

“You can’t focus on what happened in the past,” the redhead explained. “It’ll just upset you, which will upset him. All we can do is make the present and future the happiest we can.”

“Mmm...” Tinker made a noncommittal noise.

“You really don’t have to be upset on my behalf,” Boyd rumbled. “I didn’t have a ‘shitty childhood’.”

“Aww, sweetie,” Raev cooed. “Yeah, you did. I know you did because I did too, and from the sounds of things, my experience was a lot less shitty than yours. It’s okay, though, because now I have you and you have me. You’ll pamper me and I’ll pamper you. We’ll balance it all out, eventually.”

He wished he could see her face as that same surety surged across their Bond. She fully believed everything she was saying. Boyd was at a loss for words.

Any attempt to defend his upbringing would undermine Raev’s feelings of her own childhood. And while she wasn’t looking for consolation right now, he didn’t want to tear her down; he wanted to build her up. Having been masterfully outmaneuvered, he just made a rumble of acknowledgment.

“Woah!” Tinker gasped at the sound. “Jeez, big guy, you vibrate. It’s... uhh... it’s kinda nice. Do it again!” She shimmied back against him, pressing her shoulders into his

chest and the pert but soft tush he'd been trying not to notice more firmly into his crotch.

He was fairly certain she wasn't trying to sexually frustrate him, but between Silvie and Raev, he was more or less primed all the time.

"Uhh. Tink..." He started to complain as he tried to distract himself with thoughts of Hero Match records.

Raev let out a velvet chuckle followed by a faked gasp of pain. "Ouch! Leg cramp!"

Her feet suddenly slid forward until they were pressed into his butt. Since Tinker was sitting on said feet, she too got pressed higher onto him. Because Tinker was also straddling Raev's calves, her thighs got pushed further open—to the point that her legs were now pressed into the inner side of his thighs.

Boyd knew the gasp and pain were fake because he felt no corresponding signs of discomfort through their Bond. All he got from their Bond was a sense of wicked intent and amusement.

"Umm..." Tinker's hands pushed against Raev's calves.

"Sorry, sorry," Raev hissed in still faked pain. "Just let me..."

She shifted her legs up and down, causing Tinker's ass to rise and fall against him, effectively grinding her on Boyd's lap. Feeling his resistance slipping, Boyd decided that Raev was having too much fun at his expense.

"Enough." Boyd's rumble had no anger in it, but he also dropped his arms down from his knees so his hands could clamp down on Raev's calves.

Raev let out another velvet chuckle. "Just trying to lighten the mood." She eased her legs back, letting Tinker settle once again between Boyd's thighs.

"Which is why I let you get away with a little bit of teasing," Boyd grumbled. "I don't think either of us would

appreciate any more than that, though.”

“Right, sorry.” Raev doesn’t seem overly contrite, but Boyd wasn’t overly upset, so it all worked out.

Raev liked playing her little tricks. She was also a very sexual being. These two aspects of her personality blending in this way just made sense. He accepted that, as long as there were no victims. Tinker had been accepting Raev’s advice on how to woo him, which made her fair game to a certain extent—at least as far as Boyd was concerned. He examined that thought, unsure if it was his own or something supplied by his Changed Mind.

“It’s okay,” Tinker responded softly, interrupting his thoughts. “It didn’t really bother me. It was... ahh... it was actually a little nice. I didn’t want to say anything, but tight spaces make me a little nervous and it was a nice distraction.”

“See? I was lightening the mood,” Raev snickered.

The kitsune’s feet tried to shift forward again, but Boyd’s hands on her legs prevented it.

“Dammit... it sucks that you’re so strong, sometimes.” The redhead chuckled. “Of course, I didn’t forget that you have a fatal weakness.”

Her hand darted behind her back to close around the bottom of his tail, right near the spaded tip. The damn thing was selectively sensitive. The high winds of flying didn’t bother it at all, but under a lover’s touch it was pretty much his most intense erogenous zone.

Of course, Silvie had already taught Raev the tricks that set it off—something she’d taken advantage of at several inopportune times the day before. Starting in the hot tub.

“Wait...” Boyd tried to protest, but her hand closed around the spade tip and squeezed gently.

Sparks shot along his tail and up his spine. The problem he had succeeded in avoiding for some time now was suddenly unavoidable. Boyd attempted to shift back from Tinker. Of course, there was no space to do so, and he ended



up rocking back then forward. He'd accidentally let his grip on Raev's legs slip enough for her to press Tinker into him.

"Oh! Oh my," Tinker breathed, but notably didn't try to move away from his quickly hardening problem as it pressed into her rear. "Wow... umm... I see. Well, nothing to be done about it now." She relaxed back against him, almost like his manhood was a cushion or something.

Boyd was surprised—both by her action and her calm collected tone.

"Raev," the small woman said, "while I appreciate your intent, I would like this part of our relationship to progress at a rate Boyd is comfortable with. I don't want to be yet another choice that was taken from him."

Boyd couldn't help how what was clearly a statement of Tinker's amorous intent made him twitch.

She gasped and continued, the words tumbling from her lips, "Not that I'm implying it was like that with you!"

"I could pretend to be offended, if you want." Raev chuckled and released Boyd's tail. "I'm not, though. Yeah, I wanted Boyd, so I made him want me back. He had a choice; I just did my best to make it hard for him to say no—pun intended."

Tinker snorted.

"I respect your approach, though. It's probably a lot healthier for both of you." Her voice dipped, becoming softer. "I wasn't picked to fix Boyd, though. I was picked because they knew Boyd would want to fix me."

"Huh." Boyd and Tinker responded at the same time, which told him Tinker must have missed the kitsune's plot as well. It made him feel a little better to know he wasn't the only one who'd been clueless; she was a lot smarter than him.

"That takes some impressive insight," Tinker said.

"I... I suppose so. I realized it this morning in the shower, and it was honestly a relief. Took some pressure off, you know? I just get to be me, which is easy. If I had to guess,

it will probably be that way for anyone on Silvie's short list. Those questionnaires before I even knew what I was applying for were pretty extensive. In the first interview, I got the impression that personality mattered a lot more than Power. Since you were on the list too, it probably means that you—as you are—are a good match for Boyd.”

“I am right here,” Boyd grumped.

“I know.” Raev laughed before continuing. “This is as much for you as it is for her. Silvie picked Tinker because she thought you two would have chemistry.”

Boyd couldn't deny they had that.

“Tinker is interested in you. There are no barriers, and you two will be in regular contact with one another. Falling for our little genius is inevitable unless *you* put up barriers.”

The flickering glow told Boyd Raev was shaking her head again. “Silvie is that dangerous kind of smart—the kind you don't see coming. I figured that out this morning, too. We've all fallen into her plot. It's too late for any of us,” Raev finished with false melodrama. Amusement flowed down the Bond they shared.

“It does strike me as convenient that Glorith City just so happened to have a recently constructed Forward Operating Base that nobody else knows about,” Tinker said thoughtfully. “Especially given they plan to put a resort town in at that location. You would think that would be big news... FOBs typically are. Any push into the Wild Lands usually draws a lot of public interest.”

“It is something they normally like to publicize,” Boyd rumbled.

It was suspicious. Normally, the Director would go out with a full Hero team for a televised groundbreaking and everything. Boyd didn't like that an extensive list of facilities, supplies and equipment had been available, but no map or blueprint. Before he could put much more thought into it, the side of the box opened.

The light outside the box was bright enough to sting their eyes. All three of them were left blinking.

## Chapter 7

“Seriously?” A familiar, high, but musical voice filled with incredulity chirped from outside the container. “What is this... an orgy in a box kit?”

Boyd’s eyes adjusted to changes in light quickly, so it didn’t take him long to track the voice to its source.

Daisy Baker was a very pretty, Changed woman. Her iridescent eyes, wavy shoulder-length hair, and butterfly wings faintly glowed with the kaleidoscope of colors most commonly found in soap bubbles. Today she wore light gray slacks with a pale blue blouse. The outfit was both simple and professional.

It sent a clear message that Boyd happily received.

Daisy had taken on a support position with their team for the high pay and great benefits—one of which was sending her little brother, Connor, to one of the institutions that took in non-Powered children of active Heroes. It provided him with the best education possible, in a safe environment.

While Silvie had stated that she didn’t intend for Daisy to join whatever their relationship would become—Boyd wasn’t ready to call it a harem—she’d also offered it up to the beautiful woman as an additional benefit. Boyd hadn’t liked that at all; he was glad that Daisy didn’t either. By dressing in a semi-formal manner, she was sending the message that she was here for the job.

Now, Boyd thought, if only he could get Silvie to let it stay that way. At least she had promised not to push until things settled with the mysterious new team member he’d be meeting, or reuniting with, today.

Raev was the one to reply to Daisy’s question after a chuckle. “Nope! Our clothes are still on and there weren’t enough people, unfortunately.” She tapped her lips. “Maybe we should keep the box, it’s got possibilities. Oh! And sentimental value, too. Unless I miss my guess, it’s where Tinker gave her first lap dance.”

Tinker went stiff, blushing to the tips of her ears, but then laughed—surprising Boyd yet again. He'd expected her to react shyly, but instead she shook her head.

“That was pretty tame for a lap dance, Raev... and you would be wrong. I told you I had a boyfriend back in high school.”

Boyd felt something stir within him at her words. Something that probably signified the death knell of his resolve not to end up bonded to Tinker. It was Jealousy and Possessiveness—he could almost hear the capital letters in his head. Both were things he'd struggled with before.

“Oh-ho. Things were a little spicier in your past than I thought, then. When you'd said that things stayed 'pretty vanilla' I assumed...”

Raev's intrigued voice faded away before Boyd realized he was growling. He stopped.

“You okay there, Big Guy?” the kitsune asked, obviously amused. “Because it seems like you have an issue with Tinker having had a boyfriend. Now why would that be?”

“Oh my,” Tinker murmured, leaning to the side and tilting her head around to peer up at Boyd. “I like the vibrating seat, but is it a problem that I had a boyfriend before?”

“No,” Boyd huffed. “I just wasn't expecting the conversation to take that turn. Sorry... the growl wasn't for you.”

“No, I get it. Umm... I didn't mind,” Tinker replied shyly, still leaning against him.

Raev snickered and Daisy let out a sigh.

“While I'm sure this is a very sweet moment or something, maybe there are better places to have it than in a box on what is apparently the secret space-ship-subway-station under The Tower. Or, I don't know, one with fewer witnesses, at least. I don't need to see this.” She flipped a thumb over her shoulder. “This guy and the nurse probably don't either.”

The light, musical voice of the young woman carried a surprising amount of exasperation. It served as a reminder that her former job had been as a waitress, and that she'd raised her younger brother on her own for several years.

“Wait... a nurse?” Boyd grunted, having not expected anyone but Daisy and Royce would meet them. He couldn't exactly look around, so he gave Tinker a nudge to get her moving.

Tinker took the hint and started to extract herself from the crate.

Boyd closed his eyes, as Tinker climbing over his leg pretty much put her butt right in his face.

“Hello, Boyd.” The familiar voice of Laura, one of the nurses from the hospital in The Tower, called out. “You seem to be having a rather interesting morning.”

Her presence made sense. Every FOB needed to have a trauma nurse on hand for emergencies. The fact that they'd ended up with Laura was a little suspicious, but he was sure there'd be a simple explanation.

“Good morning, Laura. Yes, it has been an unusual morning, so far. I assume you will be our trauma nurse?” By the time he'd finished responding, both Tinker and Raev had crawled out of the box.

“Yes. Davis came to me asking which of my nurses would be best suited to spend some time at a FOB with a Hero Team,” Laura replied as Boyd swung his legs out and climbed out of the crate.

He took his time, letting his previous problem fade.

“Most of my nurses have attachments, and the rest aren't suited for it. I'm not attached and have no problems with a little danger, so I volunteered. The hospital wasn't pleased to lose me, but they'll survive. My understudy is well trained.”

Boyd re-evaluated the woman. She was not just a nurse, but a head nurse—or something on that level. He'd also

noted a slight inflection on the way she'd said 'a little danger' that set off warning bells.

After a moment, she added, "especially since it was your team." She'd said this last in a tone that blended irritation and warmth in a way that Boyd didn't have much experience with. It reminded him of some of his favorite caretakers from when he was young.

"I mean, given the timing, I was all but certain that it was your team." She gestured at the box. "And it's clear that someone needs to keep an eye on you. Don't think I missed the leg wound, mister. I won't hold the Porter induced head injury against you, but you let an overgrown buzzard get you?"

"To be fair, a Diamond Claw's claws are fairly sharp... it's in the name," Boyd rumbled back before promising, "I will try to be more careful in the future."

"Yeah, yeah... you keep saying that."

Laura's laughter confirmed his suspicion that she wasn't mad about the relatively minor injury. Sure, being slashed to the bone might have been a crippling wound for others, but it was just an inconvenience to Boyd.

"Well... um... welcome. I am glad to have you with us," Boyd responded as he straightened and glanced around himself.

"Happy to be here," Laura replied with a smile.

She was dressed casually today—the first time Boyd had seen her out of her scrubs. She wore a pair of blue jeans and a sage green blouse with the top few buttons undone. The outfit was reasonably modest, but the woman wearing it made it look good.

Laura didn't have the overt assets of some of the women Boyd knew, but she was well put together. Her dark brown hair was down, splayed across her shoulders in a straight sheet; it was longer than it had looked in the tight bun he'd seen it in before.

He'd assumed her advanced position meant she'd have advanced skills. She'd seemed professional and competent in their prior encounters, but he hadn't seen any of her trauma care skills in play.

To all appearances, she was a perfect match for what his team needed. While Boyd didn't worry about getting hurt all that much, having someone around in case Raev, Tinker, or Daisy were injured was important—especially where they are going. Having to ensure her safety so she could do that was a small price to pay.

His examination of the area revealed that, sure enough, the room matched what he would expect one of Glorith City's subway stations to look like. Clean, white and gray tiled floors and walls spread in either direction. Even the acoustic absorbing ceiling tiles were a slate gray, and view screens were strategically placed for maximum viewability.

There were several differences, though.

For one, there wasn't a staircase leading upwards to the streets. Instead, there was a familiar bank of elevators he recognized from the interior of The Tower. For another, the open maw of a tunnel was missing. On the side opposite the elevators was a solid wall with several windows and two sets of doors.

One of the doors was really large, at least twenty feet tall and thirty feet wide. Likely in place for larger cargo, Boyd realized. A smaller door, about the right size for Boyd to fit through without difficulty, stood open. On the other side of the door was a craft similar to the one their illusory duplicates had flown away in.

"Where is Royce?" Boyd asked when he saw no sign of his—and now the team's—Handler.

It was an unusual move that Davis had decided was appropriate, given Boyd's Powers. Most Heroes had an individual handler, and one of them served as primary Handler for the team. Boyd's Devoted were going to have the same handler in Royce, instead.



Officially, this was because of the Bond Boyd formed with his lovers. A single Handler in regular communication with each of them gave the Handler a better chance of spotting side effects of the Bond. Unofficially, it was an effort to keep Boyd's ability to Enhance others a little longer.

Ellis looked down at his viewscreen and flipped through some menus. "Ah, something came up that requires him to stay in Glorith... for now. It says here that he will contact you this evening with an update, but that he's going to be busy most of the day so, and I quote 'tell the kid not to bother me'."

Ellis shrugged. "I don't have any other details."

Tinker asked what was probably the most important question: "Where are we?"

"Ms. Baker may have said it best." The young man shrugged sheepishly while Boyd collected Raev's overnight bag as well as Tinker's duffle and the yellow case from the top of the crate.

"I just found out about it this morning. This is some sort of hangar underneath The Tower. At least the elevator from The Tower took us here, and it felt like we were going down for a long ways. Other than that, I don't know."

He held up the tablet he'd been carrying and tapped the side. "Seeing as my next order is to return this crate and then report to Dr. Phillips, I doubt I'll remember enough about this place to ask questions. They don't call him Dr. Redactor for nothing."

Ellis said the last comment with a lame chuckle before turning the viewscreen around to read something from it. "Yup, that's all I've got. Good luck... and thanks for saving the city."

Boyd would very much like to know what had Royce so busy, but knew he wouldn't get any answers by asking Ellis. "Goodbye Ellis, and thank you for your assistance."

"No problem." He tucked the tablet viewscreen under his arm and then waved. With that, the young man turned and

walked forward to close the crate. Then, with another wave, he headed towards the elevator.

“Okay, so what’s next?” Daisy asked the question Boyd was pondering, himself.

He turned to Raev; she was the one most likely to have an answer. His foxy lover, however, was looking around curiously, her ears flicking this way and that. She didn’t seem to have an answer.

“Well, boarding the Grav sled is the obvious answer,” Laura said with a shrug.

“Do you need any help with your things?” Boyd asked.

Daisy looked from the big pink duffle and overnight bag tucked under one of Boyd’s arms to the large yellow case under the other. Then they shifted to a large black duffle at her feet. It was standard issue for The Authority. Boyd recognized that it must be the Changed woman’s things. It sat at her feet and appeared to be over-stuffed.

Since it looked to be about the same size as Tinker’s pink duffle, that meant it was way too big for her to carry. Then again, Daisy burned even brighter than Silvie did under his Black Flame vision, so maybe it wasn’t too much for the slip of a girl.

“It’s pretty heavy, so I wouldn’t say no, but it looks like you’re...”

Having heard everything he needed to hear, Boyd’s tail snaked out to lift the bag by its handle.

“Oh! Okay then, thank you,” she finished a little uncertainly.

“Of course. Laura?” Boyd asked, turning to the nurse.

“Thank you, but my belongings are already loaded up.” She smiled at him.

“No problem,” Boyd assured her with a smile before heading towards the open door.

Ellis had already entered the elevator, so he wouldn't be any help. Getting on the elevator themselves would only be backtracking. Besides, from the glimpse of the Grav sled Boyd had caught through the open door, he was even more excited to ride this one than he had been the last.

Glancing over his shoulder, he confirmed that all four ladies were following him.

“Seriously, what’s with all this cloak and dagger stuff?” Daisy asked.

“Apparently, we are sneaking out of the city,” Boyd replied.

“But... you couldn't have used a bigger box?” She seemed fixated on the size of their box, of all things.

“Probably... but it was Silvie’s plan,” Raev quipped.

Boyd chuckled.

“Welcome to the team by the way, both of you. My name is Kitsune, but you should call me Raev. It’s because of my butt.”

Boyd snorted when he heard the sound of her spanking herself behind him.

“Nice, right?”

“Ah... right.” Daisy sounded uncertain and Laura let out an amused laugh. “What does it ‘being a Silvie plan’ mean?”

“That means the plan had two goals—sneaking Boyd out of the city... and into Tinker’s pants,” Raev stated with another velvet chuckle.

“Did you have to put it so crassly?” Tinker sighed.

Her voice filled with incredulity, Daisy asked “Is that seriously the reason?”

“I did warn you about her,” Boyd rumbled, then he shook his head.

“I am not getting in a box with you,” Daisy stated rather firmly.

He heard Laura’s voice say something that he couldn’t quite make out, but Raev’s raucous laughter led him believe it probably wasn’t meant for his ears, anyway.

“I promise never to ask you to,” the kitsune told Daisy.

Boyd sighed again, but then spoke up—likely because he realized that statement required a qualifier. “Unless we have to take cover from a bomb or some other life or death situation,” he added as he stepped through the open doorway.

He wasn’t sure what to do with Silvie. She’d promised to stop pushing him to add more women to their relationship, but then she’d plotted to put him in a small box with two attractive women. He was half surprised she hadn’t figured out a way to get Daisy and Laura into the box, as well.

“I think I’ll take my chances with the bomb, thanks.” Daisy’s musical voice dripped with sarcasm.

Boyd thought the sentiment was a little extreme, but he didn’t need another woman trying to work her way into his life. He wasn’t about to complain if Daisy wanted to keep them all at arm’s length.

## Chapter 8

The room beyond the subway station portion of the underground chamber was massive for an underground space—at least eighty feet tall and two hundred feet wide. Poured concrete walls and thick metal beamed ceiling gave it a hangar or bunker like feeling. Bright lights dotted the ceiling, illuminating the Grav-sled that was underground for some reason.

It was an impressive craft, painted a matte, light-drinking black. This craft had to be at least twice the size of the one they'd left behind. About a hundred and twenty feet long and thirty wide, it had two sets of slightly stubby-looking wings sticking off the fuselage.

The back set of wings spanned about sixty feet and connected near the midpoint of the craft. The front set only stretched about forty feet and connected towards the front of the craft. The nose tapered down to a point in a vaguely beak-like manner, giving it an avian appearance. Its cabin was a little boxy, but sleek organic lines negated some of the effect. The back, which Boyd could fly into with his wings fully extended in a pinch, was open with the ramp lowered.

Boyd couldn't see any exterior weapon hardpoints or sensor systems but suspected a suite of each lay just beneath the surface. The craft had the feel of something that could hold its own in a fight. Four landing struts with oddly shaped ends extended from beneath the fuselage.

Each looked something like a bird's talons—though with much thicker digits. There were two struts in the front and another two in the back. They looked like they might grip the ground, to allow for landing on uneven surfaces. The lack of wheels or landing gear indicated it was capable of vertical takeoff, not that such was uncommon.

There didn't appear to be any other doors to the cast hangar-like space, leaving nowhere else to go. He climbed the ramp and heard the other's steps on the black grip-improving-

coating that covered the metal deck. Inside, the craft was as sleek as the exterior, but not completely black.

The walls were primarily backlit white panels with steel accents, and the metal support structure was a dull blue steel. Comfortable looking ergonomic black seats lined both walls facing the center. Several large metal crates were already strapped down with thick webbing, taking up the majority of the space.

“I don’t recognize the design,” Boyd said, walking towards the back of the craft.

“Uh... Y-yeah,” Tinker agreed, a little awkwardly. “It must be a custom job.”

There was enough space in the webbing for Boyd to tuck the duffel bags securely into place, so he did that on the way to the front of the craft. Tinker’s oddly heavy device found a spot near the ground. That done, he continued forward and grunted as the cockpit came into view.

There was a strip of a windscreen that was probably more for ascetics than navigation. It wasn’t large enough to provide much in the way of navigational data. Three crew stations faced towards the front but left plenty of open space between them.

Two curved couches for additional passengers spanned the back wall to either side of the cockpit door as you entered. The relatively spacious cockpit was lit with a pale white light that shone off stainless steel or was absorbed by the black leather of the couches or crew chairs. The whole space toed the line between luxury and efficiency.

“This has to be a custom build,” Boyd murmured as he moved towards the primary indicator that the ship had been assembled, or at least modified, specifically for their team.

One of the crew stations was placed right in the center of the space. The chair was much larger than the others, and the backrest was oddly shaped. It had a cut out on either side that would perfectly align with Boyd’s wings when he sat in it.

There were two strips of paper taped to the back of the headrest.

Boyd recognized Silvie's simple but pretty handwriting. The first read '*Boyd's chair*' which he thought was a little redundant, given that it was so obviously designed for him. The second read '*Daisy and Laura can sit on the couches or in the back.*' After tucking the papers in his pockets and relaying the message to the two support staff, he walked around the chair.

There was even a divot in the seat which allowed his tail to fold in either direction while still providing lumbar support. The chair's construction looked sturdy and would partially encase his legs and torso. There was an array of buttons and small displays near where his hands would rest on the arms. He slid into the chair and, after blinking in surprise, let out a soft groan. It was the single most comfortable chair he had ever sat in.

"D-do you like it?" Tinker's quiet voice asked from near his shoulder.

"It's wonderful." He settled in a little more soundly. "The single most comfortable thing I have ever sat in." He repeated his thoughts exactly. "It's your design?" That was the only reason he could think of that she would ask like that—not that he was exaggerating for the sake of her ego this time.

Lumbar support was hard to come by when you had to deal with a tail, and his wings complicated matters when it came to the rest of his back. While he could sit in most chairs, this one worked around his additional limbs perfectly—while still supporting his spine. The headrest perfectly contoured to his skull, and he could easily see himself leaning back in it and falling asleep. That might have been in part because he'd skipped sleeping the night before, of course.

"Yes," Tinker confirmed. "The whole ship is my design, actually. Yes... ship, not sled. If they built it to my specifications, it is capable of space travel. Nothing far, of course, but we could get to the moons and back safely. I have

no idea how she got it built, though. It's... it's pretty resource intensive."

Boyd turned and arched a brow at her.

Tinker blushed. "It would be a hit to any city's budget. Again, that's if it was built to my specifications, which I doubt. They probably cut a bunch of corners to save money and resources. The design was intentionally over-engineered to show off my skills."

"Well, it looks awesome, Tink—and this chair is perfect. I hope they didn't cut too much out on your design," Boyd responded.

"Thank you," their brilliant engineer sighed. "Although... I always pictured it in pink."

Boyd withheld a snort. He wouldn't have gone for black, himself—but anything other than pink, really. Black was a color he tried to distance himself from. The ship looked a lot better in black than it would have in pink, though. That might be a little ostentatious for something this size. At least black had the added value of stealth in night flights and for space.

"I never thought it would actually be built when I was designing it," the petite woman admitted. "I was torn between thinking Silvie was either humoring me when she asked for my designs, or planned on using them but I would never actually meet you."

"Silvie isn't like that." Boyd frowned, wondering if maybe she was like that when he wasn't around.

She had been up to a lot behind his back. Could she be using and discarding people like that? He didn't want to think so, and it didn't feel like his lover. He had been one with her in a very literal way; he'd experienced the world through her mind.

That gave him a level of insight that made him certain his Silvie could do neither of those things. He also acknowledged that her... her Silvie-ness—was that even a



word?—might make people feel that way. Someone as intelligent as Tinker might feel like she'd been used.

Boyd discovered that the chair swiveled if he leaned with a little force, so he turned to face the women behind him.

“I’m sorry if she made you feel that way, Tinker,” he admitted. “Would you like me to talk to her about it?”

“Oh, please don’t.” Tinker rapidly shook her head. “I was obviously wrong to feel that way in the first place. She has been nothing but supportive about me joining the team and clearly took my designs seriously.”

She gave him a shy smile. “Silvie let me make your suit, after all—and that’s no small thing. If she takes anything seriously, it’s you. Now, she’s letting you fly in a ship I designed. If anything, I owe her an apology for thinking that way about her.”

Boyd was the one to shake his head this time. “You don’t need to apologize for your thoughts or feelings. It’s not like you’ve been slandering her. If you felt that way, she probably had something to do with it. She can be a little... well, I don’t know what.”

“A little Silvie?” Raev interjected.

“I can’t think of a better way to put it... so, yeah, she can be a little Silvie.”

“No, really.” Tinker shifted from foot to foot. “She was sweet and bubbly. Pretty and perfect and... it was a self-esteem thing on my side, not anything she said or did. It just...” She blew out a sigh. “It seemed too good to be true. Please don’t bring it up.”

He nodded. “I won’t, bring it up, then. That’s the ‘little Silvie’ we are talking about, though. We are also going to have to work on your self-esteem. Both of you are incredibly intelligent and beautiful women—truly a double threat. And you have no reason to be so self-conscious,” Boyd assured her.

Tinker ducked her head a little, cheeks turning pink. “Silvie actually said almost the exact same thing after our second meeting.”

“See?” Boyd nodded his agreement. “It must be true. Like you said, Silvie is sweet, bubbly, pretty, and perfect. How could she be wrong? Now, I don’t suppose designing it means you know how to fly this ship?” He frowned. “Does it have a name?”

“No and no,” Tinker responded ruefully, “but flying it should be pretty intuitive—at least that’s how it was designed to be. I can start it up, but I recommend leaving the actual flying to the autopilot. If I had to guess, given our trip in the box and the secrecy behind all this, it probably has a flight path pre-programmed.”

“Well, go ahead and start her up, Big Guy!” Raev strutted past Boyd, brushing him with her tails as she headed towards one of the crew stations.

Boyd swiveled his chair around to follow her and Tinker moved to the second station, which he noted was sized smaller—obviously made for her. The other two crew stations were similar to his, but had more instruments and screens angled to face them.

Tinker slid into her seat right after Raev and pressed a few buttons that had the viewscreens blinking to life. As the other stations came online, a screen raised on an arm from the side of his fancy new chair before swinging over partially in front of Boyd. There was another piece of paper taped to it.

*Hi Darling!*

*When you’re ready to come home to me, simply say “ship, take us home” ... and it will. See you soon! Love you!*

*Forever yours,*

*Silvie*

The signature was in her carefully practiced cursive. The Authority had trained them to write in cursive—for autographs and the like. Silvie used cute little hearts for dots of the two i’s. She’d even put thought into how she’d sign things with her personal name.

Boyd pulled the paper off the screen and carefully folded it before sliding it into his pocket. He had a small

keepsake box that he'd stash the letter in later. Turning back around to face the rear of the cockpit, he confirmed that Daisy and Laura had found a seat—sitting together on one of the two couches.

The two couches were set up behind his chair and curved slightly so that every seat faced him at the center. He noted that there were viewscreens hanging from mounts in the ceiling above the couches. Boyd assumed that there was a command that would lower them to a more usable position.

Daisy looked a little nervous and Laura was reading something on a handheld tablet so he judged neither would benefit from the hanging screens. He turned forward before asking “Is everyone ready? Our course is set on my voice command.”

“Yup,” Raev said, scanning the displays in front of her as they came online.

Boyd felt interest but uncertainty across their Bond. He assumed that meant she didn't know what she was looking at but wanted to. He would make sure everyone learned the basics of piloting the ship, but if Raev wanted to become the team's onboard specialist, he had no issues with her taking that role.

“Mhmm. Everything is looking good,” Tinker responded after scanning over the viewscreens in front of her station. Glancing her way, Boyd saw several dozen scales, dials and graphs were digitally displayed on the screens. They were all green, which Boyd took for a good sign. The numbers, dials, and positions meant little to him.

After a moment, Boyd swiveled around to check on Daisy and Laura.

Laura replied promptly with, “All set.”

Daisy blinked her colorful eyes twice before saying “Oh, I'm just a passenger, here. I didn't think you were asking me... but, yeah, I'm ready. Going to close my eyes though. I hate flying.”

“Really? You have wings,” Boyd pointed out. Personally, he loved to fly. Few things were as exhilarating, yet strangely soothing, as feeling the wind under his wings.

“Yeah,” Daisy admitted, “but I fly close to the ground and it’s nice and slow. I get the feeling this flight will be neither of those things.” Daisy leaned back into her couch and closed her eyes. “Just tell me when we get there.”

“Come here, dear,” Laura offered, sliding over to remove the space between them. Their trauma specialist draped her arm over Daisy’s tiny shoulders and pulled the delicate looking young woman into her side.

Boyd didn’t know Daisy well, but he was a little surprised when she leaned into the slightly older woman. Laura wore an expression Boyd wasn’t all that familiar with—somewhere between concerned and amused. He recognized it from some of the nameless caretakers in his earliest memories.

“It’ll be okay, Daisy. Didn’t you hear? This ship is Tinker’s design. It’s perfectly safe. The hospital had her look over all of our Grav-sleds and we haven’t had a problem with a single one since. They were constantly having minor issues before she made some changes.”

“Oh, logically I know it is perfectly safe.” Daisy nodded, keeping her eyes closed. “It’s not really about the ship. I think it’s an instinctual thing. I don’t like wide open spaces in general, and flying high in the sky seems to make it worse.”

Boyd made a noise of understanding. It sounded like it was something related to her Change, so he decided to drop the topic. Things related to his own Change weren’t something he liked to talk about, so he didn’t expect others to be any different. You just had to get through such issues sometimes. Turning his chair around to face forward, he said, “Alright... fair enough. Here we go.”

Gripping the armrests, he took a deep breath. “Ship, take us home,” he commanded. He heard the ramp raise and seal itself shut with a hiss at the back of the ship. Then, a notification appeared on the screen in front of him.

A percentage bar appeared below it and quickly filled. The notification read 'Depressurizing Chamber.' Then, the screen flashed with a green 'Complete' message.

Boyd didn't feel any motion, but the ship was either rising or the walls were lowering—based on what he saw through the strip of windscreen before them. He discovered that the far wall was actually a very large door when it split and rolled back into the sides of the massive chamber.

Beyond the opening at the far end of the chamber was the gaping mouth of a tunnel the station had previously been missing to fully qualify as a subway station. From somewhere on the ship's exterior a light kicked on to illuminate the tunnel. It was circular with a perfectly smooth surface. It looked to have been made of concrete or some another gray, stone-like material.

Then, the ship shot forward into the tunnel. The speed indicator on the screen before Boyd shot past three hundred and fifty miles per hour within five seconds.

"Woah!" Boyd rumbled.

He couldn't feel the motion at all. There was no hum of an engine or the rush of air to give context to their speed—not even a slight vibration. It felt like they'd remained perfectly still, despite the speed indicator closing in on seven hundred miles per hour another five seconds later. The only thing Boyd could hear were the sounds people make simply by living. Soft breathing and the sound of shifting in the leather seats was all he heard.

It was more than a little eerie.

Tinker gasped. "This tunnel must be in vacuum! The acceleration seemed way too fast, even with the forward projection screen I designed to reduce atmospheric friction. That's because there is no atmosphere out there."

She turned to look at her companions. "Other than countering planetary gravity, we are dealing with near-space speeds. When did they build this?"

“Daisy was wrong about not being close to the ground. We must be underground,” Raev replied.

“H-how fast are we going?” Daisy asked in a small voice from behind him, though her tone suggested she wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

Glancing at the speed indicator again, Boyd decided she probably didn’t want to know. They had left Mach 2 far behind and were closing on Mach 3.

“You don’t want to know,” he told her.

Daisy replied with a distressed whine. “It... it will be okay. Tinker was right when she said that Silvie wouldn’t let Boyd do this if she wasn’t sure it was safe.”

“You sure about that?” Raev teased.

Daisy didn’t sound so sure. The minor discord between him and Silvie regarding the fairy-looking woman might have given her the wrong impression.

“Completely,” Boyd interrupted. “I’ve bet my life on it.” He watched as the speed indicator started to stabilize. They had passed Mach 3 and were well on their way to Mach 4. Their speed was still increasing, but it did so now at a steady and stable pace.

“Yeah,” Daisy huffed, “but you don’t value your life all that much.”

“What makes you say that?” Boyd was taken aback.

It wasn’t the first time he’d been told something like that, but it had been a long time since someone had accused him of being reckless. He’d rediscovered value in his life around the same time his permanent Bond with Silvie had formed—a strange coincidence, to be sure. While he remained willing to die if it would make a difference, casually throwing his life away had no longer been an option from that point forward.

“Someone who valued their life wouldn’t have flown towards Omega Ray,” accused the Changed young woman.

There was something in her musical voice that made the statement seem important to her. Boyd hesitated before answering Daisy's accusation, tasting each word before he replied.

## Chapter 9

“That doesn’t mean he doesn’t value his life,” Tinker interjected, “he just values Silvie’s life more than his own. He would face anything for Silvie or for Raev.” Tinker, unfortunately, must have missed the tone.

“Just like we’d face anything for him,” Raev added as she glanced over her shoulder at Daisy with a concerned expression.

She likely had caught the odd note in Daisy’s tone, but Boyd sensed through their Bond that she wasn’t sure of its origins. “Which is why my dumbass *ran* into that fight. I can’t fly, but I knew I’d never forgive myself if I didn’t do everything I could for either of them.”

The kitsune glanced his way. “Before Boyd feels the need to reassure me, I’m also very thankful that I chose to do so and could buy him the time he needed to get back on his feet.”

“Me too,” Tinker put in.

“Yes, thank you for that. I would have been the last one out of the hospital—meaning I’d likely be dead today, if not for all three of your efforts,” Laura added.

“Right.”

Daisy’s single word response was tight, so Boyd glanced over his shoulder at the young woman. Her eyes were still pressed closed, but he recognized the frown on her lips and the set of her jaw. Laura had an arm around her and was rubbing her shoulder with that hand.

Boyd had seen expressions like Daisy’s on kids in training all the time, including his own. It was the look of someone who had recently failed in a big way. It typically appeared when one of the Mentors demonstrated a fatal weakness in a perceived strength—like taking advantage in a gap in the defense of a close quarter specialist. Or when they were shown how easy their Power was to overcome.



Boyd didn't know all the details because he hadn't known the young woman that long or that well. If he had to guess, she had failed at something recently. And based on the subject matter, it was likely related to Omega Ray.

She'd been a waitress, so it wasn't likely that it had been a professional failure. The only other thing he knew about her, was that she was Connor's guardian—which made it click. It was a shot in the dark but there was a certain logic behind it. If Connor had been close to the fighting, a guardian would have been expected to get him—but that also meant moving towards a monster who could kill you without trying.

“Of course,” Boyd said calmly, trying to stay casual—as if he was simply responding to Raev or giving a canned Hero response—“we're trained Heroes. I'd have to check our records to even hazard an estimate of the number of hours we spent training to face things that should kill us.”

He shrugged his wide shoulders. “We performed endless mental exercises that were supposed to make it easier to ignore our own survival instincts and run *towards* danger. Most people listen to those survival instincts and run away from certain death—it's the smart thing to do.” He paused, lips twisting into a smirk. “What's that saying... ‘the line between stupidity and bravery is success’? But no one would be praising me if I'd died like I probably should have.”

“Hmm... I used to think that way before meeting you, Raev, and Silvie,” Tinker replied, a little absently.

Glancing over, Boyd could see a set of schematics she'd pulled up on her display. She must be checking what modifications had been made to her design.

“You didn't fight Omega Ray,” the little engineer continued, “ignorantly thinking you would win without risk. You knew you might die—hell, you were probably all but certain you would. You did it, though, because you knew you had a chance, even if it was a small chance, to save Silvie and the city. Even if you had failed, it wouldn't have been stupidity.”

While her words made Boyd feel pretty good about himself, he wasn't the one who needed a boost at the moment. "Thank you, Tinker. If I hadn't had the training I did or the Powers I have, we can both agree it would have been pretty stupid to run towards Omega Ray, right?" Boyd continued with his casual tone. The straightforward question should do the job.

"Oh, goodness yes!" Tinker replied. "A civilian should absolutely obey the Code Black order and run away as far and as fast as they can." She pursed her lips, eyes distant. "I know that's what I did." She shrugged, cheeks heating. "Sorry. I'm not really suited for fighting, but I probably should have tried to..."

"It's okay," Boyd cut in, letting the thought continue would only undo some of his esteem building efforts. "It's more than okay, actually. Protecting yourself should always be a priority for non-combatants. You did good—that what I want you to do."

"Mmn... no." Tinker shook her head. "I may not be on the front lines, but I'm not going to promise to run away every time."

"Fair enough," Boyd agreed readily because he didn't want to discourage the display of confidence from the often-insecure woman.

"We're slowing down," Raev noted, having seen that after making it about halfway from Mach 4 to Mach 5 the indicator had paused for a moment before it began decreasing at a controlled pace.

"We must be halfway there," Tinker responded absently again.

Which made sense, Boyd realized. Without the friction of atmosphere to slow it down, the craft didn't really have a maximum speed. Well... other than whatever equipment onboard countered the effects of gravity on an object as it approached the speed of light. Somewhere along the way, the ship would suddenly crumble if it accelerated without end and that equipment exceeded its tolerance limits.

“Really? That wasn’t so bad, we must not be too far from Glorith.” Daisy sounded relieved.

“Hmm, based on the time of flight and our speed so far, I’d estimate we are somewhere between two to two hundred and fifty miles from Glorinth. Have we been curving at all?” Tinker asked.

Boyd had been keeping an eye on the plain gray tunnel that he could see by the lights cast by their ship. It looked like they were going straight, but at the speeds involved he doubted he would have noticed a curve in the tunnel with his naked eye. It would have to be almost imperceptibly gradual.

“Not that I can tell,” he replied.

“Wait, we’ve only been flying for a few minutes. Just how fast were we going?” Daisy asked, sounding even more uneasy than before.

Before Boyd could remind her that she didn’t want to know, Tinker answered her. “Currently, we are going just under three thousand miles an hour. We topped out at three thousand six-hundred and seven miles per hour.”

Daisy’s reply was a retching sound. At least there was no splatter.

“You okay?” Boyd asked.

The ship had that new electronics and fresh leather smell he’d really rather not be overlaid with vomit—not just yet.

“I’ve got her,” Laura responded gently.

“I’m fine...” Daisy’s voice was a little muffled. “Just going to pretend I didn’t hear that.”

“That might be best.” Boyd agreed.

He tried to change the subject. “Hey... did you know that Diamond Claws only form flocks in the month before their mating season? Otherwise, they typically travel in mated pairs. They don’t mate for life, though. Every year they gather into a flock, and if either partner is dissatisfied with the other, they’ll abandon their mate and find a new one.”

It was the first random fact he'd thought of to distract her with. Probably born from the refresher research he had done on Diamond Claws in the middle of the night since he couldn't sleep.

"Uh... that's... cool?" Daisy's reply was full of uncertainty, but she didn't sound like she was about to hurl anymore.

"Yeah. If both of them like the other, they still join the flocks but only to socialize," Boyd continued. "We aren't sure why, but although they interact with the single birds, no mating behavior is exhibited on either side. Somehow, they seem to know which Diamond Claws have mates they are happy with."

"This conversation is starting to feel a little pointed," Daisy noted, an edge to her musical voice.

"What?" Boyd queried. After thinking about the factoid he'd tossed out there to distract her and the woman's situation, he realized that certain connections could be made. "Oh! I didn't mean to compare my relationship to being a happy Diamond Claw."

Raev let out her velvet chuckle. "I wonder if a female Diamond Claw ever tried to set her mate up with another female. What would that even look like? Do they have a mating dance, bring food to each other, or something like that?"

"Uh, I don't know," Boyd admitted. "I'm not an expert on them, I just read the basic brief last night."

"I still wish you'd gotten me up. I could have at least sat with you."

Boyd could hear the frown in Raev's voice.

"Anyway," the redhead continued, "whatever their mating behavior is, if Boyd was a Diamond Claw and Silvie was his mate, she would be out doing whatever it was with other females, trying to draw them to Boyd."

"Really? So he wasn't bullshitting when he warned me that all that would come from Silvie?" Daisy asked.

Boyd was pleased to see she was using personal names, despite wanting to keep them all at a professional distance. He didn't like hearing Silvie's Hero name used in private settings. It grated on him for some reason.

"Nope," Raev confirmed. "Boyd has been surprisingly resistant to the idea of a harem."

That was the second time Raev had so casually used that term today. Boyd couldn't remember ever agreeing to form a harem.

"For example," and now her grin came through loud and clear, "I can't see his face, but I bet you he winced when I said the word 'harem'. Any sudden twitches back there, ladies?"

No, Boyd thought, don't...

"Harem. Harem. Harem!" Raev all but shouted.

Her antics caused Daisy to let out the musical laugh Boyd remembered from the day before. It filled the bridge of the small ship with her amusement. "Yep, I definitely saw him flinch. Every time you said the word 'harem'... and yep, there it goes again." Her voice was a little breathless from giggling.

Boyd could tell she was addressing him when she continued, "I guess I owe you an apology; I was wrong. I figured you had to be involved somehow. You really just wanted to give me a job in The Tower, didn't you?"

"Yes." He sighed. "But what happened to keeping your eyes closed?" he teased.

The snort from behind him was exactly what he'd hoped to hear. "I am resistant to the idea of having available and interested pretty young women placed around me," he admitted. "Especially given what you don't know." He paused.

"Well, I suppose now that you are on the ship and have no way of passing on the information, I might as well tell you." He glanced back over his shoulder at the two women on the couch. "I checked and you have been granted the necessary clearances—I suppose it would be hard to live with us, otherwise. Which seems ridiculous, seeing as there is no way

you could have been properly vetted. I really have no idea how...”

“Are you going to tell me what the big secret is, or are you just going to keep complaining about telling me?” Daisy interrupted him with a put-upon sigh.

“I’ll admit I, too, am becoming more and more curious. Director Davis hinted that there was something special about your team, but this conversation went in directions I didn’t expect,” Laura added.

As their Trauma Specialist she would certainly have the clearance to know.

Boyd grumbled a complaint under his breath, which came out as a sub-sonic rumble. He watched the speed indicator dropping at a similar rate to which it had climbed. It was a little wild to consider they were under the surface of the planet but traveling through vacuum in a vessel designed for space. Having such a cool setting made the conversation a little easier.

“I’m an Enhancer,” Boyd explained. “My Power starts to work on women the moment I climax inside them. Silvie used to be A-Ranked, like me. Raev was B-Ranked.”

“Ah,” Laura said, “I figured something was going on when I witnessed that scene in the hospital. I’d figured it was on the level because Silver went in right ahead of me. That explains a lot of things.”

The Enhancer part didn’t seem to faze her.

“Oh... wow. Okay,” Daisy stammered.

Boyd could tell by her tone she was about to go down the ‘that must be a dream come true’ path. Not really wanting to hear it, he continued with a bit more of a growl in his voice than he would have preferred to direct at the young woman. She was innocent in this and did not deserve the harsh tone.

“Which doesn’t sound so bad, right? Just set me loose on all the female Heroes that are willing to sleep with me for a rank boost. The problem is, it needs to be replenished once a week. Even worse, it is addictive—so skipping a week

absolutely sucks. Oh, and if inflicting physical addiction on another person isn't bad enough, my Power also warps my partners' minds, forcing them to love me—permanently. Stripping them of their free will in the matter. They don't get to fall out of love with me no matter what I do, as far as we can tell.”

There was a silence following Boyd's statement. It held for a moment as they dropped under Mach 2 and began slowing much more rapidly. Raev broke the silence by huffing out a breath.

“He's leaving a lot out.” She sucked her teeth before continuing “Boyd, I'm shocked. You said you wouldn't try to scare her off. Silvie is keeping her promise, why do you think these two didn't end up in the box with us?”

“That was for the duration of the conversation yesterday,” Boyd clarified, not that he was honestly trying to scare her off.

He was just being cranky. Nothing that he said was untrue anyway. Although it did serve as a reminder that Silvie had sworn off pressuring him into accepting new lovers—at least until things settled with the new team member. It was comforting, but also reminded him that he was quickly approaching the FOB and said new team member. Given his suspicion of who it was, he tried to banish the thought.

“Well, as one of your partners whose mind has been ‘warped’ as you so lovingly put it, I would appreciate it if you found a better way to describe it.” Her voice trod a line between pissed and sickly sweet.

“Right, sorry.” Boyd agreed promptly. It probably wasn't the kindest way to describe their relationship.

It seemed their side conversation gave Daisy enough time to process the words because she responded. “So, you have a Powered dick that makes ladies fall in love with you and boosts their Powers. Okay, I've heard crazier things. Sex Powers aren't all that uncommon. I mean, there's Aphrodite and her cult of simps.”

Aphrodite was a particularly interesting member of The Authority's Heroes. Her strength and resistance were amplified depending on the number of people fantasizing about her at any given moment. So, she put out porn and had an alert system that sent all her fans a new video or pictures when she was going into a fight.

"I take it that's the reason you didn't want to sleep with me that you couldn't say yesterday?" Daisy asked.

"Yes," Boyd confirmed.

"Right, well, you don't have to worry about me. Believe it or not I'm already S-Ranked so I don't need your magic dick's boost."

Boyd was perfectly willing to believe it.

"I'm sure it's wonderful but not really a temptation for me. Plus, don't take this the wrong way, but you aren't my type. The devil look isn't bad, but the size thing is a bit much, just generally. I also want someone more fun, you know? You're too serious, I bet it's all work all the time with you. I need someone who will let their hair down. Lay around and cuddle or get in random tickle fights. Working hard is important, he needs that too, don't get me wrong, but fun is important to me too. So what I'm saying is I'm just here to work."

Raev snickered and Tinker let out a giggle, "Oh, you're doomed."

"Hey, no, why?" Daisy sounded a little put out by Tinker's response.

Tinker replied quickly, "Boyd spent at least an hour chasing a squealing and giggling Silvie around yesterday, trying to grab and tickle her. Every now and then she would just give him this look and they'd be off, darting around the place. Raev would get in on it too, and then there would be three of her and two Silvie's running around the place with Boyd trying to catch them. He would too. I don't think Silvie was letting him either, she just wasn't breaking through walls



to get away. It was also clearly something that happens regularly.”

“Please forgive Mr. Grumpy Pants over there,” Raev said.

Boyd could hear the eye roll in Raev’s voice.

“He’s testy because he’s separated from Silvie. Couldn’t even sleep last night, although that had something to do with the civilian losses in yesterday’s attack, too. Something that he failed to mention about his ‘mind warping Power’ is that it forms a Bond between us. It lets him sense your wants and needs which is... really nice.”

She paused, then hummed briefly before continuing. “It’s hard to explain just how nice. We’ve been calling it ‘Devotion’ because the name fits. It goes both ways. You don’t just fall in love with him, you get a devoted partner you can count on. With the harem, you get more than one. So, what that means is that he’s got the fun part covered.”

“Oh. Well, that doesn’t change anything,” Daisy responded, for which Boyd was grateful.

It’s not like he had a rebuttal for anything Raev stated, it was the truth. He would do anything with his Power to make Silvie or Raev happy—except take a bunch of new lovers. Being able to sense what would make them happy without them having to communicate it to him made things pretty easy. There was logic behind Tinker’s argument for him being more or less designed to form a harem. They were under Mach 1 at that point so the conversation needed to wrap up anyway.

“That would be best,” Boyd agreed.

He also felt like he was being watched—intensely. That strange feeling you got sometimes when someone’s eyes were on you. Boyd followed the feeling and glanced over his shoulder.

Laura hadn’t said anything, but she was watching him intently. Focused. Interested.

Boyd averted his eyes and looked forward. She wasn’t even Powered, so he hadn’t considered she might be interested

in him. That look said differently, though. Boyd grumbled internally.

Unfortunately, Tinker wasn't done. "You just haven't thought it through yet, give it a little time. Once you see how he is with them you'll start to want in. Trust me. Even having Silvie tell you a few of the stories is enough to paint a dick-ture."

Tinker had started off calmly enough, but after the apparent Freudian slip, she continued more rapidly. "Picture! Wait. Okay. Um, so like you've had a really bad day and he senses it. He gets all cuddly, puts on a show you like and brings you snacks. Then he pampers you until you realize he is big and smells really good. Then he... wait... this isn't where I wanted to go with this...." She ended on an adorable whine.

Raev turned in her seat to look across the bridge at Tinker before turning further to level a frank gaze at Boyd. He blinked back at her, unsure what she wanted from him. She was much better equipped to rescue the flustered genius.

"I haven't experienced exactly that," the red head said, "but he is supremely snuggable. His wings are like weighted, heated, suede-lined blankets. He looks all hard, but everything seems to make the perfect pillow. Arms. Chest. Abs. Legs. All of him."

Her eyes flicked to his waist with the last line. "He also seems to actually enjoy helping me brush my tails. Which is just so nice. I wouldn't normally trust someone to do it, but he does it just right. I also don't have to worry about him getting bored of it because of our Bond. I won't stop liking having my tails brushed, so he won't stop liking brushing them."

Her lips curled into a sly smirk and amusement shined within her oval pupiled emerald eyes. "As for the rest of it, I'm pretty sure his real Powers are all sex based. I wasn't exactly a blushing maiden when we met but, Mnnha," she let out a sexually charged sigh, "he can do things I didn't think were possible. So yeah, the dick-ture Silvie painted for Tinker sounds pretty realistic." Raev let out her velvet chuckle as she finished.

Daisy's more musical laugh joined it, although it sounded a little forced. Laura's laugh was rich and hearty, filled with honest amusement. He wasn't sure if her relative silence was a good or a bad sign for him. Tinker didn't join in, but Boyd appreciated Raev's efforts.

They were almost down to a hundred miles per hour, so he ended the conversation. "Alright, almost there, let's stay quiet for a moment." He had no idea what to expect, but they would be finding out soon. He saw the light at the end of the tunnel approach rapidly—a little too fast for his personal comfort.

At least he learned that the armrests of his chair could take his grip. He didn't even feel the ship settle down, but the speed indicator showed zero then switched to a 'landing complete, grapnels deployed' message. That one was replaced by a rapidly filling pressuring bar that cycled through 'Complete' then disappeared.

"Uh, we're here," Tinker said a little lamely.

Boyd could hear the ramp at the back of the ship dropping. What little of the room they could see through the strip of a windshield looks much like the room they left. There was a ship-sized-door in front of them, so either this one had more than one exit or the ship had spun around without him noticing.

He felt it then. A familiar mental touch brushed against his mind; one he'd failed to identify the last time he sensed it in The Tower. Now that he suspected the source, he wondered how he didn't recognize it before.

Boyd was certain that the new member of his team, one assembled with the intention of him Enhancing each member, was his ex. Mind Witch was nearby. He would soon be face to face with his biggest regret, the person he'd most wronged.

He felt his stomach tie itself into knots as the sensation brushed against his consciousness again. It withdrew before he could decide how to react to it. Boyd stood on instinct, not sure what to do with his nervous energy.

Raev stood and gave him a worried look, but before she could act, Silvie's melodic voice filled the ship. "DARLING!"

## Chapter 10

Boyd was hit from behind with enough force to send him to the ground. He landed on his chest, his forearms coming up to protect his face and throat as had been trained into him. Then, in an instant, small hands gripped him at the sides, picked him up, flipped him over, and slammed him back into the floor between the two front stations of the ship. A familiar feminine form pressed against his front, settling down onto him.

He smiled and wrapped his arms around Silvie, engulfing her splendid body in his much larger arms. She hadn't hurt him at all, not even winding him. It would take more than being tossed around a room to cause him any real discomfort. He leaned down to press his lips and nose into her name-sake silver hair. He inhaled the sweet floral scent of the shampoo she preferred as he kissed the top of her head.

She laid limp against him, totally relaxed. He could almost feel her shedding anxiety in his arms. Then he realized he was sensing it happen through their Bond, she was very literally feeling better by the second now that she was in his arms. It makes him certain that the anxiety they'd shared the night before had primarily been generated by Silvie. She had not liked leaving him behind in Glorith City.

She'd worried someone would come steal him away while she wasn't there. It had kept them both up. Neither's performance would be impacted by missing a single night's sleep, though. The energy she manipulated seemed to provide Silvie with endless stamina. Boyd's regenerative Power could effectively heal through the detrimental effects of a missed night of sleep. That didn't mean it had been a pleasant night for either of them. At least Boyd had found some time for research and training.

Boyd just lay there and enjoyed the feel of Silvie against him as she lounged on his chest, her hips pressed against his pelvis with her legs between his. He regretted the button down and slacks again. He wanted to feel more of her against him. She typically favored clothes that showed a lot of

her sun-bronzed skin, so he was used to more direct contact when they touched like this. Eventually, he sensed Raev's somewhat impatient amusement and Daisy cleared her throat from the couch.

Silvie raised her head and gave Boyd her warm and open smile that filled her crystalline blue eyes with love. The silver flecks scattered through the already shining orbs now gave off a faint glow, making her more beautiful than ever. She ignored Daisy's attempt to remind her that others were present and kissed Boyd deeply.

He grinned into the kiss before returning it. Boyd had done his best to warn Daisy and he'd missed Silvie terribly. He stopped things from getting too heated after a moment, the two breaking the kiss and panting for breath.

Raev stepped up to look down at them, arms folded under her chest and hip cocked to the side. It brought a lot of attention to her long slender legs. "I bet on their being a bed or somewhere better than the floor of the ship for that."

"Oh! Hi Babe! Yes, I made sure there are lots of better places, of course. This couldn't wait for that though." Silvie floated up, pulling Boyd to his feet before blurring through the air to Raev. She wrapped the other woman up in a much gentler hug that let them keep their feet but kissed her no less passionately.

Silvie was wearing a pair of high-waisted light blue shorts that covered none of her legs and very little of her butt. She'd paired them with a tight white tank top tucked into the shorts that left her femininely muscled arms and shoulders exposed. The two women coiled together kept Boyd distracted for a moment before they broke apart and he remembered the person who was waiting for him somewhere in this base.

"Tinker, sweetie," Silvie said brightly and exchanged a brief, much more sisterly hug with Tinker. Boyd even saw her hands hover briefly over the smaller woman's hips before she dipped down to give the hug before stepping back.

"Does the ship meet your expectations? I had them add a few things I knew Boyd would want. I hope they didn't mess

anything up. They seemed pretty confident. Said something about it almost seeming like the design was built to incorporate most of what I asked for, or something. Still. I didn't want to come back to you. I already felt like I was using you by taking the design even though I couldn't guarantee you a spot on the team. You were so insistent after I mentioned wanting to see them, and I hoped Boyd would meet and like you so... please tell me they at least didn't mess anything up."

Tinker lips parted in a smile Boyd wasn't sure how to classify. A cross between relieved and apologetic was the closest description he had. Then she threw her small arms around Silvie's waist and buried her face in her shoulder. Silvie blinked down at the top of her head, then at Boyd.

Boyd gave her a thumbs up so Silvie gently wrapped her arms around Tinker and rubbed her shoulders. The familiar warm smile spread across Silvie's face, pleased by whatever headway she'd just made with the tiny genius.

Eventually, Tinker stepped back and Boyd could see her eyes were wet.

"Sorry," she sniffed, obviously close to crying. "Just relieved. I saw the ship and got really excited. Then I started looking at the schematics and spotting changes. Some of it was designed to be upgraded, like whoever 'they' are said. I didn't want to blow a budget in one shot. Some of what they did was okay but... I could do better. But then I got in my head, I was thinking... well, it doesn't matter. What you said made it better."

"Oh sweetie. You probably thought I went to someone else because I thought they were better, didn't you?"

Tinker shifted from one foot to another and nodded, an uncertain frown on her face.

"Not at all. I wish I could have consulted you every step of the way. The people I worked with were full of themselves and annoying. Just because they designed Sky Watch Station, they assumed they knew better about everything. Kept trying to cut features you made sound really

important and replace them with their stuff, which didn't even sound as good as what you already had."

Tinker stiffened and gasped. "Wait, did you work with Dr. Gregour or Dr. Rumlin?"

"Mhmm," Silvie nodded. "Well, I worked with them through an intermediary Director Davis set up for... reasons."

"Both of them!?" There was some alarm in Tinker's voice now.

"Yup." Silvie's head tilted in confusion at Tinker's level of animation, it caused her recently lengthened hair to spill over her shoulder down to her waist in a cascade of flowing silver.

Tinker was now bouncing nervously from foot to foot and looking around the ship with wide eyes.

Boyd recognizes the names. They were near the top of The Authority's R&D department. It was Dr. Rumlin's name that had signed as the final approver for the testing methods used for Boyd's Enhancement ability. Boyd didn't like to think about that much, though.

"And they didn't scrap everything?" Tinker gasped again. "They kept my design? If it was those two, I'm sure they could have come up with something much better than this. Don't get me wrong, I'm proud of it, but it's no Sky Watch."

Boyd recognizes hero worship when he saw it. Probably best not to mention that one of them had ordered some of the testing Tinker was so against.

Silvie either didn't recognize the name, which he finds unlikely, or was similarly disinclined to tarnish the image of one of Tinker's idols. She smiled brightly, "Yup, they were actually both impressed with the design. Dr. Gregour even said that she'd never seen some of the equipment combinations you made but felt dumb for not noticing the potential. She said you were thinking well ahead of your time and made me promise to send your info to her if you didn't join our team. I think she wanted to take you under her wing."



While she may not have wanted to ruin Rumlin's image, she was happy to direct Tinker's attention to the other option.

"Wh-what?" Tinker spluttered. "No, you're lying..."

"We don't lie to each other. We are The Devoted," Silvie cut in, blending gentleness and stern rebuke in an oddly maternal tone—at least for Silvie.

"Fine, even if you aren't lying, the combination thing is just the result of my Power anyway. It's nothing too impressive. Someone else has to invent something for me to use it. No, even if she actually said that, Dr. Gregour would lose interest once she saw my limitations. I'm incapable of creating anything original. I just steal other people's ideas and make minor improvements using other people's stolen ideas." Tinker seemed determined to deny the possibility that someone she looked up to could be impressed with her.

Boyd frowned, knowing the statement was far from the truth. Even if that was how her Power worked, she had still created several original inventions in the short time he had known her. He wouldn't allow the fact that others were involved in the inventive process to take that away from her.

"Doctors Rumlin and Gregour head The Authority's R&D for a reason. They didn't get there by being easily impressed or handing out false praise. I bet they have hundreds, if not thousands, of engineers working for them—all of them submitting designs and schematics fairly regularly. I guarantee they are the closest thing we have to experts on unoriginal thought. They wouldn't praise you if you'd designed something they'd seen before."

"Besides, she can't have you anyway," Raev interjected. "They missed their chance at our little doll-faced gadgeteer. If she's lucky, Tinker will let her review her notes after she revolutionizes Hero suits."

"That too," Boyd agreed readily. "Soon your name will be up there with Gregour, Fillman, or Bell."

Fillman was the one who'd figured out gravitic technology back on Old Earth. Without him, the seed ship that carried their sleeping ancestors to their new home would not have been possible. Their brand-new ship likely used an improved version of his designs. Not much had changed from the original, to Boyd's understanding, mostly efficiency improvements and the incorporation of exotic materials not found on Old Earth.

Bell was a name from the early days of The Authority. Originally the Hero Tech-Kid, he retired after a very classified mission that involved a lot of Heroes going missing. He was one of only a few survivors, but he was more famous for founding Bell-Corp. It was a company that revolutionized technology in almost every field, most notably drones, nanomachines, and artificial intelligence. The company remained active to this day.

Aiden Bell, the founder, disappeared from the records in his mid-twenties, at least as far as Boyd's access let him research. He had several children that appeared sometime later and took over their father's company. None ever lived up to their ancestor's name, but the family was still in the news from time to time and the company still provided a large percentage of the market with their technological needs. Boyd had spent a little time buffing up on basic sciency stuff the night before in preparation for his date with Tinker tomorrow.

"I doubt that. The impact of the suits won't be nearly as far reaching as Fillman's gravitic principles and both Gregour and Rumlin have contributed so much. I'll certainly never match up against Aiden Bell either."

Tinker's hazel eyes shifted to Boyd for a second, then her cheeks flushed with a pink blush. It was not the one he was used to, though. This blush made it look like she wanted to cry but was holding back.

Silvie gave Boyd a meaningful look from where she floated, hands still on Tinker's shoulders. He doesn't know what he'd done, but he'd obviously just stepped in something. "My idea will be a great benefit to... No, I really want to test

the hypothesis before I even mention it. Speaking of, when do you think I might be able to collect a sample?"

"Whenever you're ready," Boyd offered. If she asked for it now, he could put off his upcoming reunion a little longer.

"Sample?" Silvie asked, releasing Tinker and floating back to tuck up under Boyd's arm.

His wing swung forward a little to wrap around her side and back. She snuggled back into it and Boyd enjoyed the feel of her exposed skin and the soft fabric she preferred against the sensitive inner lining. It was a pretty decent replacement for the contact lost due to his shirt and pants.

"Mhmm. I need a sample of his wing membrane and hair. I think the fine hairs of his wings gather energy just like your hair does so it's possible that... I should test some things." Tinker finished her statement deliberately cryptic, like she was cutting herself off.

She was excited about something but was trying to temper their expectations. She couldn't let them down if she didn't get their hopes up. Boyd didn't think now was the time to push. Praise was the way to go with Tinker, not pressure.

"Oh, would it have to be fresh?" Silvie asked, slipping a hand behind Boyd's back, under his other wing, and starting to guide him towards the back of the ship and ramp.

"Oh, hello Daisy! Sorry, we've been distracted. And it's Laura, right? You must be our Trauma Specialist."

"Yes. It's a pleasure to be here," Laura responded politely. "It sounds like I'm in for interesting times."

"Hello." Daisy said shortly but politely as Silver guided Boyd past them.

"We do try to have fun," Silvie giggled in reply to Laura more than Daisy. "So, Tinker, would older samples work?"

"Mmmm. I'm not sure for the wing," Tinker replied. "It's still not clear what is causing the process. Is it organic or

purely elemental? Probably not for the hair. That's not really alive and apparently functions. I doubt freshness matters."

Boyd paused to gather the pink and black duffels under his free arm, using his dexterous tail to extract them. Raev's overnight was passed to the hand which was draped around Silvie. He grasped the handle of the heavy yellow box with his tail and carried it with that. The limb could handle several tons in flight, several hundred pounds wasn't a problem.

As he finished gathering everyone's bags, Silvie replied, "Well, I procured every sample they took from Boyd back in the PAC and the... other facility. They are all in storage off of your new lab. I was going to ask you to destroy them but if there is something you need feel free to take it. Just ah, destroy it when you're done?"

She began leading Boyd toward the ramp once he'd collected the bags. He figured there must be a plan for the additional cargo. They could probably get to it later. He knew their food stuff had gone out with Silvie the evening before and everything else could probably wait.

"Oh, that would be perfect!" Tinker cheered from behind him.

Boyd was grateful. While it wasn't a problem, it always itched to have a hole in his wing. Plus, he got the impression that taking a sample might be an issue for Tinker.

"There is a catalog for the storage. I can probably show you how to pull it up. Someone showed me once." Silvie didn't sound confident.

"I'm sure I can figure it out. Where is my new lab?" Tinker's excitement built.

Traveling had taken a lot less time than Boyd had anticipated, but it was apparently too long for the eager scientist to be away from her lab.

"I'll give you a tour, but first the grand unveiling." Silvie led him down a ramp and into another hangar.

Boyd got the distinct impression they were underground, although that might be because of the tunnel that

had brought them here. This hangar looked much like the one they'd left, although this one had three ship sized doors that took up three of the four walls. The fourth wall had a single, smaller—but still large—set of double doors in it. Silvie led them towards it.

It rapidly slid open with the hiss of pneumatics as the group approached. There was another similarly sized door standing closed behind it. The room between the two gave Boyd the impression of an elevator, but there were no buttons or floor indicators.

Silvie led Boyd onto it and kept him facing the opposite side. He heard another hiss as the doors closed behind them, presumably with everyone inside. Boyd noted he could vaguely sense where Raev was on the Bond, just behind him.

“Stop that,” the kitsune hissed.

He didn't know how, but he could tell that his feeling for her was making Raev's ears flick back and forth. Boyd heard a whoosh that somehow implied upward movement without feeling it in his gut or feet. It felt artificial, produced by hidden speakers in lieu of a floor counter or other indication of movement.

“Here we go.” Silvie shivered against him in excitement.

“Oh, Raev!” Silvie spun out from under Boyd and grabbed Raev, pulling her in front of him in a blur of motion. After another moment, a second blur of silver motion produced Tinker, also in front of him. Silvie pushed them back into him and slid back under his arm just in time for the pneumatic hiss to announce the door opening.

“Welcome home, Darling!” Silvie cheered.

The doors slid open on what could only be described as a great room. Great in size, as well as in function. It bore some similarities to an amphitheater, but was clearly a living space—just sized for several dozen people. The space was split into three descending tiers he could see from the elevator, each with about a five-foot drop between them. Staircases were

placed sporadically to allow access to each level from the others. The tan and gray natural stone ceiling was at least fifty feet high over the highest tier. The massive room was shaped like an oblong semi-circle, the top and middle tiers each forming a horse-shoe shape.

Boyd had to step out of the elevator to take the room in. There was a lot of open space but also plenty of furniture and decorative plants to break it up. Everything blended a modern aesthetic with a sense of comfort. Plenty of clean lines and stainless steel blended with the natural features of the plants and the softness of overstuffed cushions. The floors and stairs were all light well-polished hardwood. The walls were all made of smoothed out natural stone in light browns, rich tans, and pale grays like the ceiling.

The top tier was clearly for food preparation and enjoyment. Most of one arm of the horseshoe was a kitchen fit for a large-scale hotel or restaurant. Six or seven people could work in it without worrying about tripping over each other. The equipment looked top of the line and brand new. The other arm had a dining table fit for at ten to twelve and several smaller tables with arrangements for anywhere from one to four.

The middle tier was mostly seating areas with tables set up for activities. Couches and armchairs were mixed in here and there, comfortable places where one could work on handheld viewscreens, or they could converse with each other. There was plenty of open space on both the top and middle tiers—a design commonly used to account for people with Powers.

Boyd noted that he could comfortably fly around this room and easily find a place to land. He suspected it was designed with him doing just that in mind.

# Chapter 11

The bottom tier didn't have any open space at all, though. The entire thing was taken up by a very large piece of furniture. It looked like what might be produced if a couch had a baby with a bed big enough for at least two dozen people. Its back curved, lining the wall between the middle and lowest tiers with overstuffed cushions. The rest of the surface looked pretty much like a mattress.

Its light tan upholstery made Boyd worry about keeping it clean, but it was likely made of an advanced material which addressed the concern. The only floor space on the bottom tier was near the foot of the couch-bed, where a staircase from the middle tier allowed access at either side.

It took Boyd a moment to spot the viewscreen he was sure corresponded with the massive piece of lounge equipment, mostly because of the size of the thing. It didn't register because it just looked too big, like it belonged in a stadium and not a living room. Then again, the room wasn't that much smaller than a stadium. The massive screen was angled down towards the bed-couch, which was clearly meant more for laying on than sitting.

Looking to the back, Boyd saw a fourth half-tier, this one was thinner than the others and only covered the back third of the horseshoe. It consisted of a walkway with four hallways that led out of sight, placed at equal distances. There were staircases at either end, dropping into the center of the kitchen and dining areas, as well as on both sides of the large elevator. He could see a railing above the open doors of the elevator, so he assumed this was the top floor it went to.

"This... is awesome," Boyd didn't want to be an asshole and shit on something that clearly had taken a lot of work, but he also had a lot of questions, "but it isn't a FOB."

Silvie just let out a bell-like giggle, not put out by his initial lack of excitement in the least. "No, it's a Regional Outpost, or if you want us to get really serious, A Continental

Protection Center. It even meets the requirements for a Global Response Base.”

Boyd frowned, working through her statement before responding. Silvie wasn't dumb, so pointing out why they had no business in any of those options would only lead to her having a solution he hadn't considered. He'd rather track it down as far as he could, first. The ship would probably be fast enough to qualify them for Regional Operations. He guessed the base was located within range of enough towns and cities to qualify. They could match the response time, but matching a Regional Response Team's combat readiness requirements might be too much for their small team.

Continental Protection Centers required a porter strong enough, or other transport fast enough, to get the team where they were needed if a call came, anywhere on the continent. S-Ranked porters were vanishingly rare because of one unfortunate fact—powers developed in babies, typically not long after birth.

Plenty of infant porters just disappeared without a trace, others in explosions or tears in reality. Some of those baby porters probably accidentally sent themselves into non-survivable environments, like the vacuum of space or the depths of the ocean.

A-Ranked porters were a little more rare than others of the same rank, but he would bet Silvie had a list of eligible women for him to pursue, along with at least one recommendation. “Assuming you have a Porter lined up?”

“Nope.” Silvie shook her head over his arm and blew her cheeks out in a pout. She floated out from under his arm and to their front before spinning to face Raev, Tinker, and him.

Boyd had probably shuffled the other two forward when he'd stepped up to look at the massive room. He hadn't noticed.

“What I have, is a list of candidates in my notes. I'm officially off duty as your matchmaker. My job was to get you to this point. The rest is up to you. What we have would make



an excellent Regional Response Team with a little fleshing out. No need to Enhance anyone else, though, if that's what you really want. Of course, we both know we could build something so much more."

She spread her arms wide and spun in place, legs flowing languidly beneath her. Sometimes Boyd believed she moved like an underwater stripper on purpose, other times he believed her explanation that it just felt natural because of her Power.

"I included everything we talked about as kids. There's a lot more, of course. See those staircases leading under the dining area from the living area?" Silvie pointed out stairs that receded into the floor between the middle and kitchen tiers.

"The one on the right leads to the weight room. On the left is a general purpose or sparring room. The walls in there can even take hits from me. I tested them last night. Can't take my eye beams, but it's pretty safe to go all out in there otherwise. Shouldn't even feel any rumbles out here."

She waved into the air. "Plenty of space to spread your wings, of course it was just so you could jump around when we were little." Boyd had sensed it already on the Bond, but it was becoming abundantly clear she had expected him to be more excited.

"There are plenty of rooms for team members and support staff on this floor. Twenty single suites and ten doubles for anyone that might want a roommate. There is another floor with ten family units and there's room to expand. We have labs for the smartest techies, which we already have one of. And a big hangar for response crafts. We will also have access to this amazing valley once we clear it and deploy a sensor net. It has a waterfall, a little lake, and some hot springs and everything. You'll see, it's going to be great."

Boyd stepped around Raev to pull Silvie into his arms. He didn't like how tight her voice had gotten towards the end of her statement.

"You've surprised me, is all. It's all very nice. Perfect. Much better than I imagined when coming out here. Thank

you for building us a home like we talked about. I love you so much.” He pressed his lips to the top of her head.

She trembled for a moment, and he felt her falter through their Bond. Something more was wrong. Silvie was much more upset than he would have expected in response to the situation. It made him nervous.

She snuggled into him for a moment and said quietly, for his ears only. “I should have waited to build it together, huh?”

Silvie was uncertain, which was not something he was familiar with. Ever since the Bond had formed between them, he had sensed her surety, her confidence in their path. Even when it seemed like she was acting against his interests, she’d felt sure she was doing the right thing. It was oddly comforting. Now, though, she felt like she might have messed everything up.

This was not just about building the base. A lot of things. Everything. The anxiety from the night before had been fueled by it. Boyd wondered just what the hell had happened to her? Who had done this to his Silvie?

He felt pressure building in his chest. It had to be her. She was here for revenge. Revenge against him he could tolerate, to mess with Silvie’s head, though?

“Wait!” Silvie clutched his shoulders hard as he started to pull away to go find her.

“Wait. Calm down. It’s okay. Wow, did you feel that?” she asked the last over his shoulder.

“Like I’m supposed to go hunt down and capture a pretty, if a little bit chubby, goth girl?” Raev asked uncertainly from out of sight. She had a dangerous edge to her tone, though, as if she was totally onboard with the idea.

Boyd appreciated that.

“Because that’s the urge I got. Mental image and everything. Was that Mind Witch?”

“The last he saw of her, yes.” Silvie said this over his shoulder before floating down until their faces were inches apart. “Darling,” Silvie said cautiously. “You’ve clearly figured out who our new team member is, but she didn’t do anything to me I didn’t ask for. Actually, all she did was undo something I once asked her to do. It’s okay. I love you dearly, and everything is going to be okay. Please calm down. I can’t explain it all right away, but she didn’t mess with my head or anything. It’s okay. Shhh shhh shhh.” She started to gently pat and rub his shoulders, trying to soothe him.

“You’re okay?” he asked, managing to keep the growl out of his voice.

He started probing their Bond, tempted to take her to the nearest reasonable flat surface to see if he could trigger a deeper connection. He wanted to turn over every stone in her head, to make sure everything was where he’d left it.

She leaned in and gave him a slow kiss. Upon breaking it, she rested her forehead against his. “Yes Darling. No harm done. Only good things. I might just need a little reassurance for a bit.”

“I can do that,” Boyd confirmed.

He also had enough experience with mind stuff to know that good things happening could look bad in the moment. Honestly, a little uncertainty might do Silvie some good. He would keep an eye on her, but other than being a touch vulnerable, Silvie felt otherwise fine as far as he could detect.

“I know you can.” She smiled and kissed him again before floating back. “Now, let’s try this again but in super supportive boyfriend mode. Welcome home, Darling!” she cheered once more, waving to the room at large.

Boyd grinned and took it in once more. The walls were all smooth, with a gentle domed curve near the top. They reflected the light and brightened the space. The air tasted fresh and clean, bearing no dust or other indication of their being underground. The hardwood floors were broken by strategically placed area rugs and patches of soil with plants

growing out of them. The lighting, high ceilings, and scattered plants made it easy to forget they were far from the surface. It gave him the sense of security of being deep underground, without making him feel trapped.

It had clearly taken a lot of thought and work.

“It’s amazing, my love. How did you manage to get all this done?” He widened his grin; the question was genuine. It wasn’t that hard to summon some honest excitement, either, despite all of his curiosity.

“Oh, it took some doing.” Silvie beamed back, looking quite proud of herself. “Davis is rolling the dice, hoping you’ll get ambitious and swing for a Continental Response Team. He poured a lot of discretionary funds into this with that in mind. It will give him clout with the other Directors if we go that way, and even more if we go global.”

Which made a degree of sense. “Well, I’m impressed.”

Raev felt it, too. Actually, it was closer to awe, although she was still playing catch up. She was still a little revved for a fight from Boyd’s apparently unconscious mental command. He would have to watch that. Apparently, she’d picked up on his aggression and the effect wasn’t something to be ignored.

“Much nicer than you let us believe. Very sneaky. I approve,” the redhead said.

“Wait until you see the bath, I had you in mind when designing it. I doubt you’ll worry about missing spa visits after you see it. The five-star spa I visited back in Glorith has nothing on our bathroom. We can do the treatments on each other too. I got all the stuff for it,” Silvie chirped happily.

“Tinker, remember how I asked you to describe your perfect lab?” Silvie used a rising, leading tone.

Tinker gasped. “You didn’t!”

“I most certainly did.” Silvie nodded and grinned ear to ear. “As close as I could get it at least. Let me know if anything needs to be changed. Laura... should I call you Laura or something else?”

“Laura is fine, there aren’t enough people out here to stand on formality,” Laura responded.

“Good.” Silvie held her smile. “We promote closeness amongst our team. We have a fantastic medical bay. There’s a larger one that is inactive because well, it’s too big for one Trauma Specialist to operate even with all the automation. The team med bay is really nice and there is a two-bedroom suite off of it for you. It’s a little nicer than the others because you are on a different floor. Is that okay? Procedure requires...”

“It’s fine dear.” Laura smiled warmly, “I enjoy my privacy and I’m sure you can respond to any creature incursion very quickly. I doubt you have your trauma bay far away.”

Even underground, there was always the risk of Wild Land creatures finding their way inside. Powers could do all sorts of interesting things. Hoppers, for example, were frogs large enough to eat a child whole, with teeth that allowed them to take chunks out of adults. They also teleported to a random location within a few hundred yards each time they jumped. Normal humans could kill them with weapons, but the surprise of finding one in your kitchen with you led to occasional victims.

“It’s accessible through both the weight room and sparring room.” Silvie spun in the air to point to the respective staircases. “The elevator also opens right up on it. I could be there in a few seconds and Boyd would probably take ten or so from here and maybe twenty from his rooms.”

“Then, no, I don’t mind being a little separate.” Laura nodded.

“Phew, okay. Daisy dear,” Silvie turned to the young woman, “I don’t have anything specifically for you, but if there is anything you are interested in, let me know. You can pick out your personal suite in a little bit. Each has a living room with a kitchenette, a bathroom, and a bedroom. You can do anything you want with it. Heck, since you’ve been so understanding you can take one of the doubles or family units if you want. They are two and three bedrooms respectively.

Family units also have an extra bath with bigger kitchen and living rooms.”

Daisy had been looking around with an interest tempered with a curl to her lip that hinted at disgust. Looking at it from her perspective, this place likely appeared to be a massive waste of resources that could have been better spent on citizens. Boyd could understand the perspective, he had even been trained to mitigate it. The canned response to questions about the excess and luxury connected to Heroes was that a Hero risked their life every day and deserved a little comfort during their off-duty hours.

It made sense, to a point. Sort of the logical reverse to the Old Earth adage: ‘to whom much is given, much is required.’ If you wanted to require someone to risk their lives against Powered Criminals and creatures from the Wild Lands, you had to give them a lot.

People were born with Powers they often felt were theirs to do with as they wished. Boyd thought they’d missed the point of the adage, altogether. It didn’t matter if you were born with Power or not, or who it belonged to. Having the Power to help others made you responsible to do so.

That said, providing comfortable accommodations and good food to those who risked their lives for the good of society seemed appropriate. Just because you should be responsible to help if you could, didn’t mean that those you helped shouldn’t be grateful for what you did. Boyd was still of the opinion that Heroes could be given a lot less—not that he was complaining about his new home.

Besides, The Authority often got work done at expense. A couple Powered rock-shapers and some drones would be able to do work like this with relative ease. A quick trip to Dr. Redactor and you had a hidden base. It wouldn’t have taken thousands of man hours and a bunch of expensive equipment to dig the place out, so it probably wasn’t quite to waste of resources Daisy was picturing it to be.

“Thanks, I’ll stick with the single, the extra rooms won’t really matter to me,” she said a little lamely. Her eyes

drifted to the massive kitchen arrangement. “Is that where I’ll be working?”

“Mhmm.” Silvie kept her bubbly cheer going, despite the slight pushback she was getting. “It should have just about everything but let me know if something is missing. There’s a viewscreen by the fridges that will tell you where everything is. It uses smart tracking so it’s in real time. I tested it. It knew when the strawberries were on the counter or in the fridge, neat huh?”

“Yeah, pretty neat.” Daisy’s wings fluttered, and Boyd could see a little wonder replace the disgust that was curling her lip. She must have realized that *she* got to live in this excess and luxury now. Her iridescent eyes moved over everything again and a small smile formed on her lips.

“Pretty neat,” she said again, a little more slowly. “So, to confirm, this is my home now?”

“Yup! Welcome home, Daisy!” Silvie cheered again.

“Thanks.” Daisy shook her head at Boyd’s exuberant lover. “So, uh, you mentioned a suite? Boyd’s got to be sick of carrying my bag by now.” Boyd had honestly forgotten he was carrying the bags.

“Oh, yes, I’ll give you four a tour, but Boyd is needed somewhere. Go ahead and put the bags down here, I’ll help get them where they need to go.” Boyd’s stomach sank. The excitement over his new home faded in an instant.

“Oh, you...” Silvie frowned, either feeling something through their Bond or seeing his trepidation in the look on his face. “It’s going to be good. You’ll see.”

Boyd didn’t see how that could possibly be the case, but he hoped she was right. It was either that, or his brain was about to be scrambled to the point where he wouldn’t recognize himself anymore. He supposed that would be kismet, at least—his one unwilling victim scrambling his brain in a return of karma.

## Chapter 12

“Here we are,” Silvie said as they stepped in front of a door.

They hadn’t gone very far. Silvie had pointed out the door to his ‘master suite’ on the way. It was right off the great room, over the elevator. She took him down the hallway to the right of the elevator. She’d said this side was the personal suites, while the other side had a bunch of different rooms.

Boyd would gather the details later.

The door they’d stopped at was set into the natural stone that made up the wall of the hallway, lightly polished and layered with tans and light browns. The color palette was growing on him the more time Boyd spent here. It gave the place a healthy, natural look.

“That’s me.” Silvie pointed to the door they’d just passed on the left side of the hall, the 1 one closest to his master suite.

He tried to smile, but it died before forming.

“You are actually scared, aren’t you?” Silvie asked, worry in her voice. It brought her brow down and her pink lips formed a pout. “I don’t like seeing you like this. I’m sorry, Darling. You’re supposed to go in alone, but I bet I could...”

“No.” Boyd sighed.

He recognized that his reaction wasn’t rational, but that didn’t help. Silvie wouldn’t let him go through the door if something bad was going to happen to him on the other side.

“I should face this alone.” Boyd nodded firmly, mostly to convince himself.

“Jeez. I don’t want to laugh at your feelings but... we’ll laugh about this later, together.” She dropped her voice in a poor attempt to mimic him. “I should face this alone... Do you think I would let you go in there unprepared if you were in for a fight? Just go in, ya big lug!”

With that, she shoved him forward.



The door slid open, and Boyd's stomach leaped into his throat at the same time his heart skipped a beat—which was unsettling. He wondered if he could heal through a heart attack. They'd probably induced cardiac arrest on him at some point in his testing. He squashed the urge to go check the records, knowing it was a coward's excuse to run away. His reaction had been caused by a visceral reaction to something he hadn't been prepared for: her scent.

The smell of jasmine incense wafted out of the dimly lit room beyond the doorway. It brought back memories of times spent secluded in a room with a beautiful girl who had accepted every aspect of him. She would casually lounge against him and pursue his thoughts, as if his soul was a particularly engrossing book. She loved jasmine and favored the scent in her incense, perfume, candles, air fresheners, shampoo... the works. Anything the trainees were allowed to ask for, she got in jasmine.

The only source of light in the room was the flickering flame of a single candle. It was tall and skinny, tapering towards the top like the ones used for fancy dinners. This one was crimson, a near match to his own hands, feet, and the inner folds of his wings. It was set in a black holder that blended artistic flair with function in its thick wire construction.

Boyd was familiar with the candle and why it was there, placed just so for maximum effect. The candle was a message, but Boyd wasn't sure how to read it. It was set in front of a chair, but not one designed for sitting in.

Boyd recognized the design from his PAC. He'd sat in such chairs at different times while his wings were examined, or their limits tested. Boyd remembered one of the personnel who had been into trivia saying that such chairs had originally been used by massage therapists to work on patients in an upright position. This particular chair was sized for him and looked to be fairly non-portable. Instead of a folding metal frame, this chair was made from dark wood with black leather padding attached to the wood using bronze rivets.

Boyd knew without a doubt that it had been made specifically for him—a custom order from an excellent craftsman. It was something he should watch his strength around because it would be difficult to replace. He knew this because the thought wasn't his own.

He felt the familiar brush of her mind against his own. He'd been told that most Powered with mental abilities had a distinct feel to them. It was one of the things they had been trained to pay attention to. This particular mind was one that he'd had the most experience with, and it felt like a thin smoke or a fog as it brushed against the surface of his brain.

Boyd knew that the brain didn't have sensory nerves to detect something like smoke, but that was the only way he could describe it. His brain translated the sensation as comforting, but he knew of others that had described it as unnerving or distracting. It was probably just familiarity on his part that led to his interpreting it as comforting.

He'd spent a lot of time with Mind Witch, despite their relationship only lasting a few months. Silvie might have been his first love, but Mind Witch had been his first anything else. Well, at least any real anything else.

Boyd couldn't see her in the room, and he knew that was intentional. She wasn't ready for him to see her—something had to be put right, first. He knew she was implanting these thoughts into his head. She wasn't attempting to be subtle and even made it easy for him to block her... if he so chose.

She wasn't ready for him to hear her voice yet, either, so had elected to start with this method of communication. Boyd would have preferred other means of communication, but this expression of her Power was functional enough. She could project her mental voice to others' minds over short to moderate distances, which was a little clearer and not subject to the recipient's interpretation.

Sending thoughts to him like this meant his own experiences and temperament could tint or shift the content of such thoughts. This was actually beneficial for covert use, as it

made the target less likely to notice the thoughts were not their own—not that she was trying to do so now.

If anything, she was deliberately trying to flavor the thoughts with herself. If she came into physical contact with someone, she could do some pretty intricate mind work, but at a distance nudging was all she could manage. Boyd's own Mental Domination had more of a kick at range.

Once she touched someone, though, Mind Witch could go so far as to read and modify memories, implant nagging thoughts or obsessions, or even create associations and habits. It took her a little time to figure out a new mind, but once she did, she could meddle in all sorts of ways. Which, of course, made everyone a little nervous—Boyd included.

That was, until he'd gotten to know her a little better. Before he came to know her, he'd thought she was cold and uncaring, withdrawn from the other trainees and Mentors alike. They'd been asked to do several questionable things as part of the Mental Power training program... things to demonstrate the importance of restraint.

Things that were meant to disgust the trainees, even as they did them.

The Mental Power training program had been small, made up of only two Mentors and a handful of kids. Boyd didn't remember the exact number, or the exact number of other trainees that he'd grown up with, in general. He just didn't think about it all that much.

He remembered some, friends in the early days, and a few people he'd respected and liked after his Change. Other than them, though, there were only a few Mentors and some less friendly faces that had left an impression on him. He wouldn't go so far as to call them his enemies—they were all going to be Heroes after all—but he'd be happier if they never met again.

Each of the kids in the mental group had tried to control their reaction to some of the things they did as part of their training. Controlling their reaction was a large reason for the training, after all—that, and breaking the rules at least

once. It was the best way to demonstrate the reason the rules were in place. Boyd had lost his lunch a couple of times when he'd tried to hold back or otherwise skirt the tasks assigned to him.

Mind Witch was the only one who never made a face or otherwise showed her discomfort with or rebelled against any of the things they were told to do. She had later confided in him that she was of the opinion that what they'd been asked to do was like teaching weapons safety to children by having them shoot someone. Yeah, it worked, but there were better ways to do it.

Boyd got the impression she'd wanted to say more at the time but had held her tongue. Boyd was just as sure that there wasn't a better way to do it, or that's how it would have been done. The Authority knew what was required to protect humanity.

Once he'd gotten to know her better, Boyd had learned that she was anything but cold or uncaring. She had a deep well of emotion and ideals hidden behind the mask she wore at all times. Almost everyone learned to wear such a mask growing up in the PAC. They even had courses on the topic, so of course they'd all picked it up.

Expressing and emoting correctly was key to keeping the citizen's support. Being able to control her thoughts and emotions meant that keeping them hidden was easier for her than for most. It made Mind Witch's mask a particularly good one.

Under that mask was a warm and compassionate person. She'd offered him warmth and comfort—forced it on him really—at a time he'd actively rejected comforting but had probably needed it most. For a short while, she'd helped him to feel okay. He'd wanted nothing to do with comfort back then, but still sought her out time and time again.

She was even more conscious of the moral application of her Power than Boyd. It was something he'd respected and come to emulate. The way she used her Power impressed him,

too. It was completely different than how he would have used the same abilities but was so much better.

Honestly, he'd initially thought the Bond had been an expression of her Power when he'd first established one with her. It felt like something she would do—an expression of her will, that she was choosing to share those pieces of herself. Maybe she'd thought so, too, because she had never corrected his belief. He'd never voiced the thought, but she spent a lot of time in his head during their relationship and she would have seen him thinking about it.

She liked to spend time in his head because, while her ability to affect minds at range was limited, she could see or hear thoughts at much longer distances. The range varied, based on a host of factors that were more related to other people's minds than her Power, but it was pretty far. Unfortunately, she couldn't turn this Power off. The only time she wasn't hearing everyone's inner monologue, stream of consciousness, mental images, or thoughts within about a mile radius was when she was focused on the mind of someone she was touching.

Being touched by her, of course, made everyone even more nervous because of her ability to meddle with their head. At least she required physical contact for that, and they'd had lots of training on not letting people touch them. Knowing your thoughts could be read from a mile out was harder to deal with. Boyd could shunt people out of his head using his Mental Domination if he sensed them there, but most people couldn't.

For most people, the best they could hope to do was to hide certain thoughts or memories. Even being able to do that took intensive training. All Heroes got such training, of course, along with the majority of The Authority's staff. People don't like the idea of their thoughts not being private for good reason.

Mind Witch had complained to him all the time about the 'fucked up shit' people thought about. She never gave him any details, under the Principle of Privacy, but Boyd got the general idea of what she meant and really didn't want to know

more than that. Everyone had something they thought or believed that they would rather not share.

Mind Witch, herself, was a prime example. Boyd had often asked her why she felt so negatively about herself after their Bond had formed. She always got really embarrassed when he addressed such thoughts and asked him to just ignore her. She'd said she dealt with such feelings in her own way and that his attempts to reassure her made her feel awkward.

It hadn't been easy, and it didn't feel natural, though. Boyd only had to deal with sensing but ignoring feelings from a single person. He couldn't imagine what it would be like if it was everyone within a mile of him.

Now wasn't the time for reminiscing—he got the sense that could be done later. For now, Boyd knew he was supposed to go and sit in the chair at the center of the room. Then, she would set things right and their reunion could be what it should be... instead of what it would be as things stood.

Boyd wanted to apologize first, but as soon as he thought about doing so, she made it feel like that would be a very bad idea. Boyd took that to mean Mind Witch did not want him to apologize. He realized his choice was simple: he could play along, or stubbornly insist she let him apologize. But who would that be for?

Boyd took a moment to consider the merits of both options. This apology was years overdue, and it was important to him. Mind Witch, however, clearly didn't want him to apologize... at least not right now.

Was an unwelcome apology worth giving? Boyd decided that it could wait until she was ready—until whatever needed to be put right had been corrected. That was the goal of apologizing in the first place, at least it was to him.

Shaking his head, he strode forward into the room. On the way to the chair, he noted the floor was highly polished hardwood. Much like the great room. He couldn't see the walls, so he had no idea how big the room was, which was odd for him.

Seeing in darkness wasn't normally an issue for Boyd. It couldn't be that big of a room, he thought, based on the air pressure and flow. His wings told him that much, even though they were mostly folded. The dim light didn't reach the walls to reflect back to his eyes.

Boyd started to climb into the seat but paused when he realized he should unbutton his shirt. He let out a snort, wondering if whatever this was really required him to remove his shirt. In the early days of their relationship, she often came up with pretexts to get him to partially strip. It wasn't until their Bond formed that he'd caught on; she just liked seeing him topless.

“Kuh-heh.”

He heard the familiar short laugh from somewhere behind him. It was comforting, something she'd let slip when she'd heard a funny thought. It started with that breathy 'kuh' that made it instantly recognizable. He didn't mind taking his shirt off. At the same time, he'd put it on because he suspected they would be meeting today, and he wanted to be presentable when they did.

Boyd received the thought that the sentiment was appreciated, but he needed to be able to completely relax and the shirt was uncomfortable; it was just a little too tight in the shoulders and the arms. Sighing, Boyd looked down and gingerly started undoing buttons.

He was due to grind his nails back soon, as they were getting a little too sharp. He started to worry about how he would undo the buttons below his wings, but figured he could probably figure it out by feel. A hand gently rested at the small of his back, alerting him to her presence right behind him.

## Chapter 13

Boyd stiffened at the touch, but now that she was in physical contact with him, he felt Mind Witch scoop up his anxiety and wrap it in a nice warm mental blanket—at least that's the impression she gave him. Everything would be okay; she was just helping him with the buttons. True to her thoughts, the hand slid over and began fiddling with the buttons under his right wing.

Boyd felt a little unnerved by her sudden proximity, and she didn't remove that feeling. If she had changed or wanted revenge, she could do all sorts of unsavory things to him. He knew she wouldn't, though—he couldn't rightly tell if that certainty came from her or from himself.

Suddenly, the hands working at the buttons under his wings pulled away and her mental presence pulled back. She was giving him the chance to decide if he wanted her to touch him, which he appreciated. To be safe, he used his Mental Domination on himself, tossing his own anxiety back at his mind to amplify it and using the spike of adrenaline to sharpen his thinking.

The Power caused his nerves to jangle and spark for a moment, but that was the point.

He used the nervous and suspicious energy this created to determine whether or not he should trust Mind Witch. Once upon a time, the answer would have been an implicit yes. He was younger—and dumber—back then. Mind Witch had been the one person who'd penetrated his defenses. She was the one person he allowed himself any sort of personal connection with, largely because she needed it even more than he did. Of course, he'd trusted her completely as a result—heck, probably more than he'd trusted himself, given what he had already done and what he feared he would become.

That was then, though, back before he'd learned he was an Enhancer and became something to be targeted and used. Before the testing. Before he lost her and learned what heartbreak felt like.



None of that was Mind Witch's doing, though. The only one he could blame for that was himself. Mind Witch's mind tentatively brushed against his again, probing for acceptance. Boyd wanted to know what she wished to communicate, so he let her in.

The touch of a warm hand reappeared on his back. Then he learned that there were others to blame for their separation. It was not his fault... Mind Witch could show him. She refused to use her Power to do so forcefully, though. While that would be the easiest method, it would not be the healthiest way for him.

She offered to use her Power to guide him. She would help him relax and then show him what he needed to know. Boyd had been lied to and she needed to make it right.

Boyd didn't like the sound of that. He wanted to know who had lied to him and how. Apparently, all he had to do to find out was to take off his shirt, sit down, and relax. Mind Witch would show him in his memories—all he had to do was to trust her... if he could.

Her presence withdrew once more, allowing him to make the decision outside of her influence. She could still hear his thoughts, so he knew he didn't have any privacy as he came to a decision, but she couldn't help that. Boyd would have to fly off a fair ways if he wanted to think it over without her being privy to the process.

It wasn't really that difficult of a decision, anyways. If she wanted revenge or to do something untoward to him for another reason, she already could have. The first time she'd put her hand on his back, she could have frozen him up and taken her time doing whatever she wanted to his head. Maybe Silvie or Raev would have felt something if he'd called out using the Bond, but they hadn't tested that type of thing yet. Besides, Mind Witch might have been able to shut the bond down or block it out.

He didn't know how far away she was from him now, but if she wished to do him harm, she was likely fairly close. At this thought, Boyd heard intentionally heavy footfalls on

the wood floor as she took a couple steps back. He smiled at the reminder of her presence and appreciated the non-mental communication. With a shrug, he began unbuttoning his shirt again.

Mind Witch's mind brushed against his and he welcomed it. He also welcomed her aid with the buttons under his wings. He was likely to tear the shirt if he tried getting them himself. Buttons were such fiddly little things.

The idea of asking Tinker about wardrobe upgrades came to him. The little inventor could likely make him shirts that would be much easier to get on and off—not that he should wear shirts more often than was absolutely necessary. Because of that last bit, he knew the idea was not his own.

Boyd mentally thanked Mind Witch for the idea. Something like the seams of his suit would be much easier to work with.

She made quick work of the buttons then stepped back as he pulled the shirt up over his wings and off each arm. He was familiar enough with the chair to climb into it without instructions, placing his shins, forearms, chest, and head against their respective pads. The one for his head was a perfectly designed ring, even having divots in it to account for his horns. As he settled into the chair, his eyes aligned perfectly with the flickering candle.

In this case, perfectly aligned meant just above his natural eye level. The pleasant light drew his eyes up just enough to strain them a little. As the candle slowly burned down, his eyes would instinctively follow it. This would create both a strain and a feeling of relaxation over time. Boyd recognized the technique from training. It could be used in concert with other methods to lower someone's mental resistance to certain Power uses.

Boyd also knew that Mind Witch was intentionally using a method he was familiar with. She wasn't trying to trick him. She only wanted him to accept her help; she would not force it on him. Boyd accepted her intentions and allowed his eyes to be drawn to the pleasant light. Fire had always held a

special place in the human psyche—a nearly mesmerizing effect.

Boyd sensed when Mind Witch stepped closer to him. She needed him to relax and wanted to help by giving him a massage. First, he needed to relax his wings, he was holding them too stiffly. He shifted them, the rasp of suede on leather loud in the otherwise silent room.

Likely reacting to this thought, Boyd heard the sounds of a finger tapping on a screen. A moment later, gentle flute music and the sound of rushing winds started to flow through the room from several speakers. They were balanced to allow the sounds to seem directional, moving slowly through the room.

The sounds of shifting winds brought a smile to his face, as he recognized her intent. The sound was similar to what he heard when he lazily circled at a high altitude, letting an updraft keep him aloft. Effortless. Peaceful. Relaxing.

After letting his wings open a little and hang more comfortably, he re-settled his chest and shoulders, letting the muscles go limp as the chair supported his weight. He hadn't even noticed how tense his wings and shoulders had been until she'd brought it to his attention. It wasn't even that his perception that noticed it, it was Mind Witch feeding the sense of his body she gained from her Power back into his mind.

Boyd took and exhaled a deep breath, trying to release the tension that remained. After spending a moment to start a cyclical deep breathing exercise, he found himself wondering if she was going to start. It took him a moment to realize she was asking if she could touch him.

He approved but was skeptical of her ability to massage him. His resistance and increased density meant someone without physical Powers—which Mind Witch lacked—couldn't compress his skin, let alone his muscle tissue. Silvie could, but his regeneration meant he didn't need massages for their various health effects.

Of course, they still feel good. He also got tension related knots, from time to time—and the heavens knew his

last few days had been tense ones. Raev and Silvie had done much to reduce his tension, but it had been a long morning.

Mind Witch started, pressing a thumb into the muscle just above the joint that connected his right wing to his body. She applied a surprising amount of pressure, too. It was enough pressure that he let out a deep, resonant groan as she immediately found and began to work at one of the tension knots that had formed.

“Kuh-heh.” She let out another short breath of a laugh.

Boyd got the impression Mind Witch was quite satisfied with herself for surprising him. She’d requisitioned a pair of gloves that gave her the grip of someone with C-Ranked strength, just for this purpose. They were cuter than Boyd might expect, too, although he didn’t get a mental image with the thought, and his definition of ‘cute’ might be suspect. Boyd didn’t care if they were hideous bulks of wires and tubes.

Being in his head gave Mind Witch a similar advantage to what Boyd enjoyed having with Silvie and Raev because of their bond. She could gaze into his head and see what felt good. There was no guesswork, no need for communication, not even the need to rely on reading his body language.

She worked through the first knot quickly and efficiently and it felt glorious. She wanted him to relax and enjoy. If he needed anything, he didn’t even have to speak. She would take care of it.

So, that’s what Boyd did. He let himself settle in and lost track of time. This reunion was better than any he could have foreseen or even hoped for. Even if he was being played and this was some long-con trap, he figured he might as well enjoy this pleasant part. Nobody could pamper like Mind Witch. Well, he could more than compete when it came to those he’d bonded with, but no one could pamper *him* like Mind Witch.

She worked on his back slowly and methodically until every muscle group got a little attention. She slid her arms up under his wings when needed, sometimes letting her forearms

rest on his back. The gloves she wore felt like rubber, or maybe leather, but her arms were covered in something much softer. By the time she was done with his back, his wings hung limp in a relaxed, puddle-like state on the floor.

Then, she moved to his shoulders and neck, removing all of his tension from there as well. His eyes had stayed locked on the candle since she'd started, lazily drooping, drawn to the flame. Just as intended, there was a bit of strain at first. As the flame lowered a couple inches, the strain was replaced with a pleasant feeling, and he felt the tingly burn one experienced after exercising the perfect amount.

Once she was done with his neck, her hands pulled away for a moment. He heard something being unclasped, then the sound repeated itself. Before he could wonder what had been clasped in the first place, her hands returned. This time, she touched him with her bare hands, and he realized she must have removed her gloves.

He could tell the difference immediately, because there was no mistaking the sensation of nails gently scratching his scalp. She wanted him to sink down into the relaxed puddle he was becoming. So, he did.

He let the scratching massage of his scalp push him under, into that relaxed state some people never achieve. It could be reached in all sorts of ways, of course. One way was pursuing a familiar action, one that was so second nature you could forget doing so while completing it. Other methods included meditation, long term physical exertion, certain chemicals—both natural and manufactured—as well as controlled exposure to the elements.

People had been seeking out and finding this state for a long time, all the way back to Old Earth. However it was reached, the results were similar. The unconscious mind took over and did its thing. The inner person that normally hid behind a mask got to take a little break.

It was that person-mask that protected the subconscious mind. It became much easier for the mind to be manipulated when the mask came down. Boyd's Mental

Domination was all about breaking through or powering past the person-mask. Mind Witch either worked with it, or lulled it into a docile state, like this. People commonly referred to it as a hypnotic state.

The Authority had trained Boyd to call it a vulnerable state.

This mentality served a Hero better in two ways. First, it was a reminder to be vigilant. When you let yourself enter a vulnerable state, you made yourself an easy target for Powered Criminals—especially those with Mind Powers. The second reason only applied to Heroes with Mind Powers of their own. Inducing a vulnerable state made interrogations much easier. It was not a simple process to get an unwilling target to enter this state, though. Even if you managed it, it was easily lost if you made a single misstep.

Boyd being willing to enter the state made things a lot easier, but a misstep would still break it. So, Mind Witch didn't push into his mind right away. Or maybe she did and was being subtle enough that he didn't notice. Of course, just thinking about it had him rising up out of his relaxed puddle.

He disengaged from the thought and focused again on the candle, letting all such thoughts slip away. At some point, Mind Witch started helping him—dulling his thoughts as they rose and making them easier to set aside. Eventually Boyd was thoughtless and even the concept of passing time stopped mattering.

Only then did she step forward, pressing her pleasantly soft body into his back and resting her forehead at the base of his skull. After that, Boyd was in the past.

# Chapter 14

More accurately he was re-experiencing a memory.

In this memory, he was a teenager. Already Changed. They'd already been moved to a lower floor for older kids and were permitted more freedom. Optional skill building workshops and classes in the evenings became available, in addition to the ten hours of standard daily training. Boyd was on his way back to his room after one of those workshops with a diamond bladed circular saw tucked under his arm.

A girl he recognized from training but had never spoken to stepped out in front of him, hands planted on her hips. She was a couple of years ahead of him, one of the more advanced amongst the Mind Powered sub-group. She was an A-Ranked, held back from S-Rank by her lack of range and an inability to force someone to harm themselves. She could read thoughts at a distance, though, which explained the concerned and angry look she'd leveled at the teenaged Boyd.

"I'm not going to let you do that," she stated, her normally soft and breathy voice firm with anger.

Like most people with strong mind-based Powers, she didn't have much—if anything—on the physical side. She also didn't seem to enjoy exercise or carefully controlled diets, either, because she carried some extra weight, something uncommon in the PAC. Boyd had been raised around retired Heroes or those still in training, and muscular, firm, and athletic was the standard. This girl carried the extra pounds well though, mostly in her hips, thighs, and a rather prodigious chest—a chest that his teenaged eyes couldn't help but be drawn to.

One of the freedoms gained in their teenage years at the PAC was a personal wardrobe. They could select clothes from a catalog and wear them during applicable optional training or down times. This girl chose an open baggy black jacket over a tight black shirt with loose fitting black pants and clunky black boots. It was a darker aesthetic than he was used to—one he didn't have a word for yet.

She was somehow paler than Boyd had been before his change. And he thought he'd been about as close to white as someone could get. She was white enough that he wondered if she was a Changed that had gotten lucky enough to appear pretty much human. The line got fairly thin sometimes.

Her black hair was cropped at her shoulders and was currently straight, though he had also seen it wavy or curly before—he wasn't sure which was natural. She used a large amount of deep purple eye makeup that made her already dark eyes seem almost black. Her lips were painted a matte purple a shade or two darker than her eye makeup.

It gave her appearance an overall dramatic—and unique, in Boyd's experience—look. She had a bit of a belly, and her arms held some of her surplus weight. But overall, she had drawn Boyd's eyes more and more as puberty took root.

To be fair, most of his female peers had started getting his attention. It was different with this particular girl, though. Her softer physique combined with the unwelcoming dark and dramatic look added an element of intrigue to his standard overload of hormone-based response.

“Mind Witch, right?” Boyd asked with a frown.

He'd thought about approaching her a dozen times but always decided they would both be better off if he didn't. He'd blamed his want of friendship for the urge each time and scolded himself for it. He was a Changed now, a monstrous one. Someday he might go Primal and anyone close to him would suffer. Because he couldn't know when it would happen, it was best to play it safe and not let anyone close... ever. So, even though the girl often looked like she felt as alone as he did, he knew she was better off without him.

“Yes, that's the name they gave me. Yours is still Boyd, right?” she asked, her dark eyes glancing at the saw under his arm.

“Yes, look I don't know...” Boyd began.

“I'm not going to let you cut your horns off. It's self-abuse,” she stated, firmness returning to her voice.



“Hey...” Boyd scowled, realizing she must be reading his thoughts.

“I can’t help it, okay? I can hear everyone in the PAC... all the time. I try to tune it out, but you’ve been loud today, so I can’t just ignore it and let you do that.” She set her jaw, waving a hand at the saw before setting it on her hip again.

She had an oval shaped face that suited her. She used makeup to cover how pretty she was, but Boyd had seen her without makeup more often than not. She normally had soft features, even if she held them stiffly most of the time. Her bottom lip was bigger than her upper, giving her a near constant pout made more pronounced by her current scowl.

“Look...” Boyd tried to tell her to mind her own business, but she cut him off—again.

“I know about it, so that makes it my business now.” She narrowed her dark eyes at him. “I’m not here to fight with you. You have two choices. We can go back and you return the saw, and then we can go back to your room and have a pleasant talk about this... Oh, and I’ll get that itch under your right wing you haven’t been able to reach. That’s the nice option. The not-so-nice option is I go get one of the Mentors and tell them what you planned to do—probably Victory Seeker. They frown upon self-mutilation. You’ll probably lose meal privileges for at least a day, maybe two. It’s up to you if you want to suffer so badly, starve, and remain itchy.”

He dropped his eyes to her feet, defeated. Boyd hated losing meal privileges, especially after his Change. He didn’t need to eat as much as he did, but he felt hungry almost constantly. He could use his Mental Domination to block out the pain of sawing off his horns, but constantly blocking out hunger was harder for some reason.

Boyd let out a rumbling growl of frustration. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t like they wouldn’t grow back in like half a day. He just wanted to go back to looking almost normal for a little while. To be able to look in a mirror again.

Plus, that itch was getting *really* annoying.

“Hey,” Mind Witch spoke a lot more softly, sadness in her breathy voice. “I’m sorry, okay? I’m not trying to take anything from you. I want to help a little... if you will let me. Let’s go put the saw back and have a nice talk. If you still want to hurt yourself another time, I won’t stand in your way.”

Boyd let his eyes rise to hers. He focused on their warm, dark depths for a long moment. It was almost like time stopped when their eyes met.

That wasn’t what he remembered, though. Boyd remembered seeing gentle concern in her eyes and shying away from it. It was how Silver and Hopewing had taken to looking at him recently. He didn’t like it.

In this memory, though, he stared into her eyes long enough to begin sinking into them. Then, the memory he was changed around him. She was still there, but everything else was different.

He was in a darkened room, in Mind Witch’s room. He recognized it immediately. The smell of jasmine hung heavy in the slightly smoky air. She covered her vents, which would otherwise pull the incense she liked to burn from the air—including any scent they generated. She had a purple sheet she’d taken a black permanent marker to, drawing an intricate looping knotwork pattern on it before hanging the sheet on her wall.

It was a night he’d re-lived as a nightmare for a long time.

Boyd wanted to recoil from the memory, but felt as Mind Witch wrapped her consciousness around his and soothed him. Warmth and comfort cascaded through his thoughts, bringing him back to a calm center. She didn’t need him to relive much of it, just a couple seconds. His focus was on her dark eyes, right at the moment of his Power activating.

She removed everything from the memory but his sight of her eyes and the part of her nose between them. None of the sensations or emotions he experienced that night were attached to that image. He was thankful for the limitation, although Mind Witch hoped he wouldn’t always feel that way. She

would like him to be able to look back on that night fondly. As he watched, her dark eyes shimmered and shifted to something very different from the dark eyes he remembered. They became the purple of a well-cut amethyst, staring wide and dilated back into his own eyes.

The memory faded and Boyd floated in a light gray-purple smoke. It was likely a place created by Mind Witch so they could communicate for a moment between memories. She wanted him to know that was the last time they'd been in a room together—until today.

That didn't match with what he remembered. They'd met again. How he remembered it, the last place they'd been in the same room, he'd been strapped to a rack and muzzled.

Suddenly, he was there, strapped again to the rack. In a moment, Mind Witch would walk into the room, looking nervous. Her fear of him would break his heart all over again. Then, the memory skipped a beat, sparing him that pain.

Instead of seeing her walk into the room, she appeared at the table which separated them, frozen in place. Mind Witch must have chosen the moment carefully because there was no fear or worry on her face. It looked as though she had just finished saying something, but he didn't remember what it was.

The current Mind Witch wanted him to look at the memory Mind Witch's eyes, so that was where he focused. It took him a moment to notice what it was she wanted him to see. In this memory, her eyes were dark... the way he remembered them.

They'd turned purple when he Enhanced her, though, something he hadn't remembered until she'd showed him. To be fair, the next moments after that image had been fairly traumatic, and he'd probably blocked out as much as he could. Then he felt himself being pulled back to the surface, to the real world.

As his vision cleared, he found himself looking into a set of amethyst eyes in the dim light. The real Mind Witch, who had moved around in front of him, was backlit by the

candle. She finally spoke, her breathy voice having changed very little over the years.

“The last time we were together was the night we shared. Your memories were modified to suit a different narrative and prevent you from Enhancing a bunch of girls in the PAC. They worried over the control you might gain through the emotional aspect of your Power. I never blamed you or felt violated like they made you believe. I hate that they used me to hurt you like that.”

Boyd was still in a very relaxed state, which was probably for the best. It had been a lot to take in. He could tell Mind Witch was holding him in that state, too, her hands on his shoulders as she stared into his eyes.

“I want to show you my side of things, so you understand. Would that be okay?” she asked.

Boyd tried to say yes, but he was a bit groggy. Mind Witch understood, though, through his thoughts. Suddenly, he was back in a memory of that night, experiencing the moment their Bond solidified and her Enhancement took hold.

Boyd realized this was her memory of that night.

She was surprised and unprepared. She was worried he would see things about her she didn't want him to yet. She'd instinctively lashed out, breaking the bond in an instant. It had simply been a command to stop.

But Mind Witch hadn't understood her new level of Power. Previously, she'd been unable to make someone do anything that caused any amount of harm to themselves. That was why she didn't understand how to end it when she'd stopped his breathing with the simple command. He experienced her panic in that moment—wanting to help, but worried anything she did would just make things worse.

She'd called for help, much to her regret.

By the time help arrived, Boyd was unconscious and had started to breathe again. She'd tried to play it off, but the Mentors that arrived had insisted on questioning Boyd, as well. They'd just started dragging the two of them apart when

Boyd woke up. She hadn't had the time to arrange a story or to modify Boyd's memories, because she knew he wouldn't even think of trying to hide anything.

Lying wouldn't help, but she knew nothing good would come of this. The night that she'd spent in the medical ward had been heart-rending for her. They'd both been detained, and it was determined that it was best to separate the two of them. They'd reasoned that Boyd may have established some sort of control over her, despite her protests and assurances.

They'd tested and confirmed her Enhancement until it faded, keeping her isolated until then. The withdrawal had sucked, but she'd figured she would be able to see him again once it had passed. Surely they would assume that any control he had would fade with the Enhancement. She was wrong. They decided to transfer her to another facility to finish out her last year. She hated it there.

From there, Boyd experienced several years of her life as flashes—pieces of moments, sensations, and emotions. She wasn't permitted to communicate with him in any way. Their separation had been as heartbreaking for her as it was for him. She'd tried to learn what she could about him. She was permitted to, and regularly communicated with Silvie, who helped her keep an eye on him. The Authority had consulted her when he'd resisted the testing, but she'd refused to help them.

Another regret.

When she learned what they'd done, resorting to getting to him through Silvie, she'd raged. Plates were broken. Pillows punched and screamed into. Complaints were filed. She'd helped Silvie as much as she could—helping her figure out who to speak to when she threatened to go public and promising to testify, should it come to that.

From then on, she and Silvie had worked together. Mind Witch became a silent partner in building a team around Boyd. It was the compromise the Commanders involved in the program had agreed to, in exchange for their silence.

In the interim, she had been working for The Authority—mostly to manage the mental health of Heroes. She helped them to deal with the various traumas that came hand in hand with the job. She didn't share a lot of that time, sending him the thought that most of it was confidential but mostly boring.

As Silvie had told him, Mind Witch was meant to be the team's first addition. They'd thought it would be best to address the issues he had with his Power, and sex in general, created by the false memories The Authority had implanted about their first time together. They'd even gotten the required permission from Commander Davis to remove those false memories. Which, now that Boyd was caught up, Mind Witch wanted his consent to do.

Boyd considered the situation as he was trained to do—with skepticism. Sensing that he needed a moment, Mind Witch pulled him back into the light purple-gray mist. He sent her a mental chuckle.

She didn't want to influence his decision making, other than to continue to dull what would likely be an intense reaction. He could feel her working to sooth his rising anger while simultaneously wanting to let him experience it as he should. If she were to stop touching him and remove her influence, he would rage.

If that happened, he would break a lot more than just a few plates.

## Chapter 15

This revelation changed *everything*. Mind Witch hadn't rejected him—which hurt but was something he'd had to accept. She had been *taken*. He did *not* have to accept that.

A more recent memory flashed through his mind—a simple promise he'd made to another love—one growled in a moment of excitement but completely heartfelt. He'd promised to never let them be separated. To go to war with The Authority itself if it came to it.

He'd never made that promise to Mind Witch, but it applied to her just the same. In her case it was retroactive, but he made that vow to her, to Silvie, to Raev, and to any other lover he may or may not end up taking. *That* was the Rule as of this moment.

Any rule of The Authority came second to that single Rule. Never again would he let anything force them apart. Anything that tried to separate them would learn to regret it. Anything that succeeded wouldn't survive his retribution.

He could feel Mind Witch begin to struggle. He'd been feeding on his anger, and it was growing. She'd been reaching out, but he didn't notice until just now. Boyd had been too focused on figuring out how to access the orders that had separated them. The signatures on those orders would make an excellent list upon which to begin wreaking his vengeance.

Someone had succeeded in separating him from his Mind Witch. Retribution was owed.

A cold sensation ran down his spine as he realized what was happening. Those thoughts weren't his own... not completely. It wasn't just his anger that Mind Witch was wrestling with. His Changed Mind was making a push, gorging itself on his rage and trying to take over. Boyd was in the process of going Primal. He was sure of it this time.

'*Sorry.*' Mind Witch's mental voice sounded a little strained in the gray mist, but unconcerned. '*I've got this. For*

*one thing, it isn't what you think it is. For another, he's a big old softy as long as you know how to interact with him.'*

Boyd did his best to remain calm. Mind Witch wasn't able to suppress his conscious mind while wrestling with the more unconscious Changed part of him. This was demonstrated by the purple fading from the mist, leaving only a light gray behind to represent his mind in a calm state. Allowing himself to panic would only disrupt his mind and make things more difficult for her.

*'It really is okay.'* Mind Witch assured him. The strain was already easing from her voice. *'Well, don't panic... but it would be okay if you did. I'm just about done calming him down, and by him, I mean you. It's just another part of you.'*

Boyd realized that she was, too. The best way that he could describe it was a churning storm cloud of dark, angry energy building in his mind. It was distinct from the light gray mist that surrounded it, which seemed to consume it as it spread. That was likely because a raging storm cloud was the description that had stuck when he was learning to control it. He'd never had to really use them, but he was trained to use mental constructs to try and combat going Primal if he felt it happening. Supposedly it helped.

In training, he'd pictured a sphere forming around the angry cloud. That would stop it from spreading further, as long as he was determined enough. Then, it was just a matter of deep breathing and calming techniques—a blending of skills, taken from whatever had worked best.

The goal was to calm the cloud, to get it as light and fluffy as he could. Then, he squished it down until he could fit it in a nice secure box and locked it back up. It might take hours; it might take minutes. He might fail and go Primal, or he might succeed. It all depended on how determined he was to remain himself and remain loyal to The Authority—to being a Hero.

Mind Witch made settling it down look a lot easier than Boyd had been told to expect. She shared a different version of the mental construct with Boyd, but he also knew



she saw it differently. Mind Witch didn't think he was ready to see it the way she did, though, so made up the approximation she showed him instead. It still had features like an angry cloud of energy, but the way she handled it was totally different from how he'd been trained to do.

A pale purple mist started to float up around the cloud, surrounding it but not entrapping it. The mist got thicker but didn't take shape. Instead, it seemed to flow along the surfaces of the angry cloud, matching it for a time. Then the purple mist slowed a little, guiding the angry energy to slow along with it. The process was relatively quick as the construct representing his Changed Mind reacted to the pale purple mist of Mind Witch; it seemed to be drawn to the mist, to be familiar with it.

Once the dark roiling cloud slowed enough, Mind Witch's mist started to sink into it, suffusing a pale gentle purple into the dark gray and black of the cloud. The angry cloud turned positively docile at that point, lightening dramatically and transitioning from boiling tendrils to a flowing, almost pulsing, peaceful little cloud. The lighter gray mist faded into the intermixed pale purple of the cloud. What had once looked like something taken from a nightmare became what a talented artist might paint Hopewing lounging upon.

Boyd got the sense that the cloud, or his Changed mind, was as thrilled to reunite with Mind Witch as he was, now that his memory had been set straight—which implied a level of familiarity he wasn't aware existed.

*'Yes, I spent time with this part of you back then. Often. Oh my... and yes he, meaning you, does seem to have missed me.'* Her breathy mental voice's little squeak at the 'oh my' gave Boyd the distinct impression that his Changed Mind had done something untoward.

Somehow, the cloud had done something, and Boyd didn't like it. He mentally growled at the now docile cloud. It rapidly darkened and black tendrils begin to boil just below the surface.

*‘Hey!’* Mind Witch’s mental voice rebuked them. *‘Watch it, both of you.’*

Boyd let the growl fade, not wanting to make her job more difficult. The cloud also seemed to settle down after a moment.

*‘That’s just ridiculous. Feeling jealous or possessive of me with yourself. You are pieces of each other. Ugh, this part I can’t really understand. Just a moment. I see your box... Yuck! So much like a prison. No wonder he’s so cranky. I’m fixing it.’*

Boyd watched as his ‘box’ appeared. Its size wasn’t really defined, because it was a mental construct; it was exactly as big as it needed to be. He had chosen to make it from thick metal with lots of supports and rivets to convey strength and solidity. The swinging doors on the front were windowless and had three thick metal bars that could be thrown across it to secure it from the outside. Then, there was a thick chain he could wrap around the bars and the rest of the box, sealing it all with a big, sturdy lock.

It was important that he believed it could hold his Changed Mind. The walls of this box were thick enough that he couldn’t break out of it. And if he couldn’t break out of it, neither could his Changed Mind. At least that was Boyd’s reasoning when he’d constructed it.

Suddenly, his heavy, sturdy, over-constructed metal box dissolved into smoke which dissipated into nothing within seconds. Boyd was a little put out with how easily Mind Witch destroyed the construct he’d worked so hard on. He was more put out when he saw what she replaced it with. It was still a box, but the walls and top were pretty, thin wooden slats with a lot of space between them. Boyd couldn’t squeeze between the slats, but they wouldn’t keep Raev in.

The wood was light and polished. It looked more like a room separator than anything secure. The floor inside became a thick off-white carpet as a stone fireplace formed against one of the walls. A blazing fire sprang to life within it. What appeared to be oil paintings faded into existence—there were

four of them. They were tasteful renditions produced from Boyd's own memories. There was one each of Silvie, Raev, Tinker, and Mind Witch.

The paintings were almost certainly some of his favorite moments. There was Silvie in a night gown on a night they'd spent together, grinning as she floated away from him, engaged in one of their games of chase. In another, Raev wore a mischievous smirk, an open challenge in her eye, back in the kitchen of the suite. In the third one, Tinker was in her light pink bodysuit, animatedly explaining something—or maybe animatedly asking a question. One of those. Mind Witch's painting wasn't a memory, but blended her current self into a fantasy they would share together from time to time back at the PAC. She was wearing a simple black dress and a wide brimmed hat to keep the sun off her pale skin. She gave him a gentle smile while standing in a field of wildflowers nestled in a hidden valley.

The paintings placed themselves on the walls that ran perpendicular to the fireplace, two per wall. A door made of the same wooden slats formed in the fourth wall, along with a round mattress with wine red silk sheets and pillows that filled the center of the box. To be honest, it now looked more like a room than a box.

*'Hmm, missing something... Oh, I know.'*

Two life sized plush dolls popped into existence on the bed: one resembled Silvie and the other Raev. They weren't particularly lifelike, though, more like pillow versions of the women he loved.

*'Uhhh...'* He sent his skepticism to Mind Witch with his mental voice. Boyd wasn't sure how he felt about Silvie and Raev pillow dolls being left in here with his Changed Mind.

"Kuh-heh," he heard the real Mind Witch laugh near his ear.

He got the impression she'd worked her way back around him and was pressed against his back, her chin resting on his shoulder. Mind Witch's reply came with an eye roll that

he could feel in his mind. She'd seen his concern in his thoughts and found it amusing.

*'Are you an agalmatophiliac?'*

"A what?" Boyd responded out loud. He'd never encountered the word. Why would he have encountered the word?

*'Fair point.'* She responded to his unspoken thought first. *'Have you ever been romantically or sexually attracted to a doll, mannequin, or statue?'*

"No," Boyd responded out loud.

Part of him wondered if he might, though. Now that he knew what daily sex was like, if he were to find himself cut off and in the presence of a doll that looked like one of his lovers... No. Even then, he wouldn't abuse the doll—primarily because it was clearly designed for cuddling and doing so might ruin it. Then, he wouldn't be able to cuddle it.

He drew the line at dolls designed for other purposes, though.

Mind Witch sent him another mental chuckle. *'Yes, that wouldn't be appropriate... at least without their permission. Even then, it probably wouldn't be healthy for either of you. Anyway, that's much better, don't you think?'*

*'It doesn't seem secure,'* Boyd sent.

He knew the primary purpose of the box was to contain the representation of his Changed Mind—which was currently a cloud of flowing purple energy being followed by a stream of light gray cloud, flying in little patterns through the lighter gray of his consciousness. It sort of looked like they were dancing, or maybe the mental equivalent of playing chase like he did with Silvie.

*'It's plenty secure.'* Mind Witch responded with another laugh. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

The experience was surreal for Boyd. This was a moment he'd feared since a few days after his Change. That was when the training had started and the full risks of his

going Primal had been revealed. Before then, there had been vague warnings about the instability that made every Changed a potential threat to humanity. It wasn't until after his Change that they'd told him why.

After his change, they'd told him about the presence that came with being Changed—a presence that could lurk beneath the surface for years and years. A presence that watched and waited. A presence that could push him, affecting his decisions to bring him closer to it, to strengthen itself until it was ready to take over. Then, it would lock *him* in the box and make *him* watch as it acted while using *his* body.

It wasn't always bad—going Primal might leave you as a fully functioning member of society. There had even been Heroes that didn't join up until after they'd gone Primal later in life. That little factoid was one that Boyd clung to. It indicated that some Changed became more heroic after going Primal; they became better versions of themselves.

Statistically, though? Statistically it went the other way.

Changed who went Primal acted on instinct. They took what they wanted. Hurt who they wanted. Killed who they wanted. Fucked who they wanted. The rule of law stopped mattering to them. Consent stopped mattering to them. They became criminals.

Because all Changed were also Powered, they became Powered Criminals. They became monsters. And Boyd didn't want to become a monster.

A pale purple mist surrounded and then suffused his mental being. It soothed the thoughts, wiping them from his mind like they were nothing more than dust on a shelf.

*'Hush. You're okay. You aren't going to become a monster. The box is nice and secure, you don't need to worry. Besides... look.'*

He watched as more of the purple mist guided the now pleasantly fluffy gray cloud of energy through the open door. The cloud took an interest in the space, specifically the bed. Boyd wasn't sure how he could tell but it was initially curious,

tentatively poking around. It almost immediately took a liking to its new home, settling down in a puddle on the mattress as the purple mist slipped out, closing the door behind it.

There was a simple latch that the purple mist threw, but it seemed to be more symbolic than functional. Then again, this was a mental construct of an open slat cage attempting to contain a cloud of currently docile energy. The whole thing was symbolic. What seemed important about this symbol was that the cloud wasn't interested in leaving.

It liked the space. The bed was comfy, the fire warm, and the dolls smelled like the women they represented. He could tell his Changed Mind would prefer the real women, but it seemed to understand its situation and accepted these substitutes. Honestly, Boyd thought it felt sort of... lazy—like it would be perfectly content to just lounge around this room all day unless something required its attention.

By making the box comfortable, Mind Witch successfully contained his Changed Mind in shackles of luxury.

*'Yes, that should feel familiar, but I digress. Nothing to worry about, see? Like I said, perfectly secure.'* She sent feelings of surety along with the mental words.

Boyd knew that's how such things really worked. If he believed it would contain his Changed Mind, it would. Mind Witch was always better at such things than him, so he decided that if she said it would work, it would work.

*'Good. This is much better than some metal cage. How would you react to being locked in a cage?'*

He would, of course, try to break free. Which helped him understand the merit of the changes she had made.

*'Plus, this lets that part of you see what's going on. In the cage, it was only able to sense your stronger emotions and reacted accordingly. The next time you got really stressed, like Silvie being in danger, he would try to break free. He would want to help. He loves Silvie just as much as you do. Now, he will know if you need his help.'*

“Its help?” Boyd knew Mind Witch was using masculine pronouns for his Changed Mind to humanize it. He’d been thinking about it in objective language to keep it classified firmly as an ‘other’. He wasn’t ready to give that up yet. He was also skeptical as to what kind of help it could give.

*‘Now isn’t the time.’* Mind Witch’s mental voice contained a heavy sigh. *‘We wouldn’t be talking about him at all yet if he hadn’t reacted so strongly. It’s my fault... I underestimated your anger. I can see why so much has built up already. We’ll have to work on that later, though. For now, let’s get back on track. This has already taken longer than I meant it to. You have people that worry about you now... concerned about what the Mind Witch might be doing to your pretty little head.’* She injected her amusement into the thought.

She was used to the reaction.

Right. She didn’t have limited stamina for mental work, other than needing to sleep. The mental effort this took could be taxing if her target resisted her, but Boyd hadn’t been fighting her. Wrestling his Changed Mind...

*‘Soothing your anger,’* Mind Witch corrected his thought.

After a mental huff, he refocused. Soothing his anger might have strained her a little, but he had been working with her otherwise. Almost like walking beside her, instead of forcing her to drag him along.

It did take time, though. That time inside his head didn’t always line up with what passed outside of their respective minds always came as a bit of a shock. She’d always seemed to be able to tell how much time had passed outside, but Boyd never had learned the trick.

Sometimes time seemed to fly forward in his head as if in a dream and he experienced hours or days in a matter of seconds. Or it could pass equivalent to real world time. Other times, she’d pulled him in here for a few minutes to show him a new construct, only for him to discover that hours had passed in the real world. Of course, that just meant hours of

laying with her nestled against him on her bed, so he'd never really minded.

It took Boyd a moment to remember what they'd been talking, or thinking about really, before his Changed Mind had made its push. He could still see the simple wooden slat walled room with the gray cloud that represented his Changed Mind settled on the bed, engulfing the pillows. The sight was incongruous with the mental image he'd built up around the being that shared his body.

Mind Witch reminded him that he'd been deciding whether or not to let her remove the memory that The Authority had implanted about their parting.

Boyd thanked her for the reminder and resumed trying to dismiss recent events enough to consider it logically. It was possible that Mind Witch had implanted the memory of her eyes changing and had them permanently changed in the interim to convince him of her version of events. He still couldn't think of a single good reason for her to be lying, though—other than that he wanted her to be lying, if only to preserve the integrity of The Authority.

Personally, he wanted everything she'd revealed to be true. Now that he was aware of the falsified memory, he wanted it removed so he could forget it had ever been there. He could just pretend it had never happened to him... if he wanted to.

The calm gray cloud began to rumble, dark tendrils forming beneath its surface at that idea. That part of him was pissed. It was one thing to think that Mind Witch had rejected him—she had that choice. But someone else had kept them apart and had poisoned his mind to do so. The only thing preventing that part of his brain from rampaging was that Mind Witch had asked it to settle down. It balked at the idea of letting himself forget what had been done to him.

They took Mind Witch away from him!

Boyd found himself agreeing with the sentiment. Forgetting would be nice, it would be simple. He could just pretend the unforgivable action never happened and live a



happy life with Mind Witch from here on out. Boyd couldn't let himself take the easy way out with this, though. An unforgivable act had been committed—forgetting that fact was unacceptable.

An acceptable alternative came to mind, though. Mind Witch must have been watching his thoughts carefully because she responded to it immediately. *'I see what you want. I can do that easily. In fact, it's perfect. I should have thought of it.'*

After she shared the thought of what she believed him to want, he confirmed and consented to it. The discovery that one of his worst memories had been implanted was both a relief and enraging. He'd lived in a terrible reality, only to discover it to be false. That memory needed to be removed, but not forgotten. This would achieve that, as well as clear away much of the twisted emotions that surrounded Mind Witch.

*'Okay, I'm going to start now. It won't be difficult since you are willing.'* Mind Witch sounded pleased as her voice washed through Boyd's mind.

When she continued, her mental voice gained a strange intensity—warm and comforting, but also firm and enveloping. *'All you need to do is listen to my voice and follow along. Step by step. Nice and simple. Nothing hard. Only easy. No fighting. Only resting. So easy. So simple. So soft. So comfy. Fluffy, soft thoughts. Good... Very good. Now, for the first step, I need you to sink for me... Good.'*

## Chapter 16

It was hard to judge time when you were in a heavy trance, so Boyd had no idea how long they spent working on his new memories. When they were done, he found himself standing outside Mind Witch's door. He knew he was meant to walk in without knocking, she knew he was coming. Boyd also knew that he should just go back to calling her Mindy. Unlike Silvie, it was her original name.

He didn't remember going in the first time, or the conversation that had followed, but he did remember what they had discussed. He knew, somehow, that he'd crossed this threshold once already, despite not being able to remember doing so. It all seemed a bit odd, producing some cognitive dissonance that he also knew was to be expected—though he didn't know why.

Boyd felt really good. He felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders the first time he'd gone through this door. He had been made to believe that he'd victimized a woman he loved. Many people told him it wasn't his fault, that it had been an accident.

That didn't remove the memory of the fear and hurt in her eyes—the feeling that he'd simultaneously inflicted something on her while stealing something else away. He knew better now, though. Boyd hadn't hurt Mindy. She'd never felt violated.

He also knew that he was carefully *not* thinking about the fact that someone had kept Mindy from him. With a mental puff of breath, he cast away the thought he'd not been thinking about, that Mindy had been kept from him. Now was a happy time.

He was about to be reunited with Mindy... again... but for the first time.

He stepped up to the door and the two panels slid to either side with a soft hiss. The familiar and comforting smell of jasmine filled his nose. It brought with it pleasant memories of the times they'd spent together.

They'd rarely needed to talk much—Mind Witch was in his head most of the time they were together. He didn't know it at the time, but he'd used his Bond to glean her thoughts and feelings, as well. A smile formed on his lips as he caught sight of Mindy standing within.

The room was dimly lit by lights recessed into the ceiling. Black bolts of folded cloth had been hung on the walls, to make the room appear larger than it was in the low light—like it just continued off into shadows in every direction.

She was dressed in black but gone were the baggy pants and jacket she'd once favored. Today, she was wearing a dress. He wondered if she put it on for the same reasons he was in a button down and slacks, each wanting to look good for the other.

His thought caused her lips to curl up in a smirk, confirming their shared nervousness.

The dress was cut simply, and the top would be considered modest, if it was on someone else, at least in the chest. The hem of the short skirt might be a little high to call modest, but Silvie had started to influence his opinions on what counted as appropriate. These days, it took something barely there for him to consider it scandalous.

Mindy's dress looked to be made of black velvet, with a short pale purple skirt that matched her eyes. It clung tightly to her torso while leaving her shoulders bare, trailing down her arms to her wrists. The skirt flared a little where it hung from her hips to her upper thighs. It had a fairly high neckline that didn't display any cleavage. Then again, she didn't need something as obvious as bared cleavage to draw attention to her chest.

She had lost weight, and a fair amount of it—too much weight, if you asked Boyd. He'd enjoyed her softness during their long hours spent studying or performing mental exercises. Her slight belly had disappeared, and the extra padding had melted away from her face and arms. While he would miss the softness, he also had to admit she looked

good... really fucking good. Especially her thighs, which the dress was clearly meant to draw attention to in conjunction to the black lace topped stockings she wore.

She'd always been tall compared to other girls at almost six feet, but Mindy also favored *very* high heels—the kinds with platforms under the toes because a spike under the heel just wasn't enough self-inflicted torture. Already being taller than a lot of guys, her pension for the highest of heels and her Power combined to make her rather intimidating to approach. Once he'd gotten inside of her guard, she'd admitted it was intentional, meant to drive people away in the same way as the scowl he had taken to forcing himself to wear at the time.

Today's heels added at least six inches to her height and had a thick buckle clasped at her ankle. The pair of stockings she wore rose to mid-thigh, where the straps of simple garters held them in place. The short skirt left a few inches of her pale thighs exposed. And though her thighs still looked soft and inviting, he could see smooth muscle flex beneath the garters as she shifted her posture a little.

She hadn't just lost weight, she had put time, work, and effort into her fitness. Boyd was surprised by that realization more than anything. Mindy had always pushed back hard if he even opened the topic of getting into better shape.

It had never been about appearances for him, something she knew from his thoughts. He just thought she should be in better shape in case she ever needed to defend herself, or even just so she could run from danger. It had been a mild source of conflict between them, but only when Boyd pushed. He'd stopped pushing after a few good-natured attempts.

The bare strips of her thighs he could see were still as pale as he remembered them being—a porcelain white, instead of anything sickly looking. It was a look cultivated through avoiding harsh lights and protecting her skin if she couldn't avoid the sun, as opposed to a pallor gained through self-neglect. His eyes drank her in.

He wouldn't have changed a thing from the her he once knew if given the choice, but this new her had his attention in different ways. A lot of the weight she'd lost came from around her waist, leaving her with an exaggerated hourglass figure any woman would envy. It was the kind of figure that could turn a blind man's head.

“Kuh-heh.”

Her laugh sounded almost a little sheepish and caused a matching chagrined smile to appear on his face. He tried not to be too embarrassed about his thoughts, it wasn't his fault she came back looking like a fertility goddess.

“Your reaction makes all the work worth it,” Mindy admitted out loud. A pale, pleased blush made its way through her makeup.

Boyd started to respond, but she smiled and shook her head. “I know I didn't *have* to. I've been in your head, remember? It was never really about that.”

She arched a thin, dark eyebrow at him. “Mmhmm... a little bit of it came from the idea of competing with Silvie, but I mostly used that for extra motivation. I knew you liked me the way I was. I got in better shape because if I was going to be on a Hero team, I had to meet the minimum fitness requirements.”

“Ah.” Boyd felt better knowing that she hadn't gone through all that work just to be appealing to him—although part of him liked the idea that she might have done it for him. He carefully didn't feed that part of his ego.

“Oh... don't get me wrong, I have an ego too, you know?” Mindy smirked and resettled her posture, shifting her splendid form and drawing his eyes to new places to admire. “I did the extra work because I wanted to make sure to draw your eye. I'll be competing with the likes of Silvie and Raev. Even little Tinker packs a lot into that small package. So... yeah, I know I didn't *have* to do the work for you to get you to give me your attention, but my ego made me want to. I wanted a body that will stir your lust as much or more than the others did... so I worked for it.”

So much for not feeding that part of his ego. It was nearly purring in contentment after that stroking. Which was something Mindy must have judged he'd needed. He would complain, but that would make him a hypocrite. He regularly did the same thing with Tinker, and he wasn't even in her head.

Mindy shifted again and he returned his attention to her.

Her style blended softness and sensuality with some risk mixed in, too. She still favored dark and dramatic makeup, but the edges were softer than she once used. Her eyelids were colored purple, only a few shades darker than her eyes. They blended through a darker purple to a deep black line along her thick, black lashes. Her lips were painted in similar tones, a dark purple near the center fading towards black on the outer edge. It made her look both dangerous and alluring at the same time.

Her black hair now hung in a straight sheet that flowed over and down her shoulders on either side. The ends blended in with the black dress where they reached the tops of her breasts. Boyd tried not to let his attention linger on her chest for long. Having notably large breasts and hearing the thoughts of every teenage boy around her had caused Mindy to resent them during their time together. He caught her lips as they quirked into a slight smirk when he wrestled his eyes back to an upward trajectory.

She folded her arms under her chest and lifted a little.

Message received... Boyd let himself stare like a teenager for what he hoped was an appropriate amount of time. While the dress did its best to cover them, there was only so much simple fabric could be expected to do. The thick cloth strained with the effort, but Boyd was certain it was intentional—the dress had apparently been tailored just for her. Once he managed to pull his eyes away from her most obvious charms, they caught on her throat while on their way back up to her face. More specifically, they caught on what she was wearing around her throat.

He recognized the accessory immediately. He should, seeing as he was the one who'd made it. It was nothing fancy and he'd expected her to have discarded it by now. At best, maybe she'd have kept it in a box at the back of a closet, if she ever thought of him fondly.

Knowing what he knew now, he was still a little surprised it had lasted all these years. It was a simple inch thick strip of black leather with a small heart shaped pendant carved from obsidian dangling beneath it. The heart rested right in the hollow of her throat, held in place by two silver chains that were sewn into the hem of the leather strip. That had been the hardest part.

Mindy had a birthday during their short relationship. She'd said she'd prefer something he made when he asked what kind of present he could get her. Most of them at the PAC didn't celebrate birthdays, but he wanted to at least give her a present since she knew when her birthday was.

He'd carved the charm by hand, without tools. He used a Dremel to shape his nails into the proper instruments and then used them as his cutting tools. The leather strap, assuming it was the same one, had a crimson suede-like interior. It was the real reason Boyd knew exactly how long it took for him to heal a fifteen by one-and-a-half-inch strip of his wing.

She raised a hand and her purple-painted-fingernails played with the charm. The black of the leather and the obsidian charm contrasted with her skin, making each appear darker and paler, respectively.

"I had to have it shortened a little as I lost weight, but it's the same one," she confirmed for him. "I missed you, too." Her darkly painted lips parted in a bright smile.

Boyd quickly crossed the distance between them, enveloping her in his arms and wings. His tail wrapped up around her legs as tightly as he dared. Her height and the frankly ridiculous heels she was wearing made it easy for her to push her face into his neck and nuzzle in.

Mindy's arms tucked under his wings to wrap around Boyd with just as much urgency and longing.

He knew it was false, but he replayed the memory he'd asked her to implant in place of the terrible lie The Authority had inflicted on him. It was the parting they should have been allowed.

Boyd, ever aiming for stoicism, fought his tears manfully during their fake goodbyes. Mindy let them flow, ruining her dramatic makeup while Boyd wiped away her tears and just held her. The Authority had decided they needed to be separated and wouldn't tell them when they would be reunited. They'd promised each other they would, though.

And now they were fulfilling that promise, after far too long.

He felt Mindy shake in his arms, holding back fresh tears. He clutched her as tightly as he could without hurting her. She didn't have the resistance required for him not to be mindful of his strength. His hands held her shoulders, and he rubbed them gently.

The velvet of her dress was soft beneath his touch and encouraged him to explore. His hands roamed her back, enjoying the feel of the cloth and the woman beneath it. She shared the thought of her pleasure at his touch—inviting his touch was the point of this outfit, after all.

“No crying,” he rumbled, “your makeup will run then you'll have to spend the rest of the day fixing it.”

He was joking, of course. Poking fun at the time it took for her to do her makeup became a thing after she'd demonstrated just how quickly she could repair it. She'd demonstrated how she could completely transform her face in about ten minutes, right before his eyes. Multiple liquids, powders, pencils, and other implements were all used.

Boyd had legitimately wondered if she should be retested for some sort of speed-based Power upon witnessing it the first time. She'd mentioned using Old-Earth tutorials and



was thankful she didn't have to worry about the drying time like they did back then.

“Little shit.” Mindy laughed in his arms; her laugh matched her breathy voice.

She had a nice laugh, not contagious or anything like that, but always welcome to the ear. She also had a habit of letting out this short little laugh fairly often, either in conversation—as if using it as punctuation—or just seemingly at random. It didn't particularly matter how serious the situation or conversation was, either.

There were variations to it, but the main one, the one that meant something was actually funny, started with a ‘kuh’ sound. Little kuh-hehs and kuh-hahs. Almost like a scoff preamble to each laugh, just a little breathier.

Boyd thought it was cute, and it always cropped up at inopportune times. Like during the goriest parts of the horror movies she preferred, or in the middle of an otherwise silently focusing room—brought on by someone having a particularly funny errant thought or being scared by cheesy gore. It was a break in her otherwise stiff public mask that only seemed to unsettle most people even more.

Boyd understood the sentiment. Before he got to know her, the apparently emotionless dark eyed and haired girl going “Kuh-heh” from the back of class when something horrible had just been discussed or displayed was more than a little unnerving. Then, he'd learned she'd probably been laughing at something someone thought rooms away from where they were. Because she tried to hold such a cold and stiff exterior out to the rest of the world, it made the whole thing absurdly adorable to Boyd.

He smiled into her hair, breathing her in. They exchanged feelings, not really needing to use words, given her Power. For now, she had to share her emotions intentionally, but soon the Bond would reform, and it would be intuitive again.

That they'd reform their bond was inevitable with Mindy. He wouldn't fight it—not with her. In fact, if she

asked...

Mindy laughed again, this time pulling her arms from around him and pushing at his chest. She leaned back and leveled a playful glare at him before shaking her head.

“Not even five minutes in and your head is full of filthy thoughts,” she scolded him playfully.

He grinned down at her. She had assured him that she liked his dirty thoughts on more than one occasion—and that was back when he had even less control over them. It was easy for a teenager to be subconscious about such things, and that was without a telepathic girlfriend.

Having read his thoughts—which amounted to, *‘Yeah, so? You love it.’* Mindy rolled her very pretty, bright purple eyes and laughed again “Cad.”

“Mhmm. I love your eyes by the way. Didn’t you want...?”

“Yes, I always planned to wear contacts like these once I could... maybe even find a Powered to change them to this or get surgery for it. Now, I don’t have to.” She wrapped her arms around his neck, deciding that she did not have to push away after all.

Which was for the best because Boyd wasn’t ready to let go yet. He studied her face while listening to her.

“Silvie and I talked about it after her hair grew again. We think there is an element of actualization when it comes to the physical changes made by your Enhancement. We can’t tell if it takes it from your mind, or the Enhanced’s mind, though. Did I get eyes like this because I wanted them, or because you knew that I wanted them? Either way, it seems a bit much of a coincidence that I ended up with eyes the exact shade and color I wanted.”

“Hmmm...” Boyd hummed, studying her eyes. He would miss the dark depths, but these carried the same deep, emotional core that he remembered. They would still allow him to sink into them. Just, now the world inside might be a little brighter.

“We should ask Raev, err...”

“Use whichever names you are comfortable with. I prefer the affectionate personal ones, though,” Mindy answered the question before it could fully form. “We’ll discuss the how and when, but of course I want into the family you are building, the family I’ve been quietly helping to build.”

“Right,” Boyd agreed.

Calling it a family felt more natural. He’d seen in various forms of media that families could take many forms. Besides, both Silvie and Raev deserved a family. Most things with families in them made having one sound important—families were supposed to be good for you.

His loves deserved good things.

“Raev would be the best control, I suppose. I had no way of knowing if she wanted additional tails. Things... ahh... they escalated a little too quickly for me to get those kinds of details before it just happened.”

If it came from his side, it would have to have been subconscious—at least he didn’t remember having a thought about her wanting extra tails.

## Chapter 17

“You don’t have to be embarrassed.” Mindy smiled warmly at him—the sincere kind that reached her eyes.

He was a little embarrassed, but couldn’t identify why, in particular.

“You learned relationships from me. I set the standard you’ve been holding them to ever since. We took things slow and spent a lot of time together before any real intimacy started. You think I will judge you because things moved faster physically with Raev?”

She chuckled. “I won’t. You think Silvie was able to find her on her own? I knew you two would hit it off like an open flame and explosive gas. Of course, that was supposed to be after you and I worked on some of the underlying issues you have with your Power.”

That was the advantage of a telepathic girlfriend, Boyd thought. It really cut down on the time spent on verbal communication. He didn’t have to waste any time trying to express his thoughts properly.

“Oh? Girlfriend already, am I?” She arched a thin dark eyebrow dramatically at him and quirked her lips.

Which, in addition to ‘are my thoughts too horny’ insecurities, was a disadvantage to having a telepathic girlfriend. Wandering thoughts getting you into trouble should only be a thing if you were dumb enough to voice them. Boyd didn’t let her win this round, though. He just smirked back at her, putting a challenge in his eyes. She knew why she was here.

Her smile blossomed, wide and bright white against her darkly painted lips. “You still are a little shit, aren’t you?”

Feeling confident, Boyd leaned in to steal a kiss.

“Woah there...” She pulled back and he didn’t pursue. Instead, he leaned back and blinked at her, taken aback. He had assumed...

“That’s just it,” she shook her head, “you haven’t thought this through. You’re running on something of a high, after the relief at discovering you never hurt me. That was messing with your self-perception a lot. You even worried that Silvie’s love was only something like Stockholm Syndrome. It’s not, by the way. You don’t remember any of the times she went through withdrawals and the effect faded, but she was checked thoroughly just like the others.”

Had he once thought Silvie’s love could be completely artificial? He supposed he had.

“Yes, part of you was convinced the implanted memory of me was the only one who’d been honest with you. Somehow my Power spared me the full effect and let me break free to express my true thoughts... that Silvie and the other’s felt violated but were unable to be honest because of the effect of your Enhancement or something.” She pursed her lips, brows drawing together. “It was all just silly insecurities caused by that very false memory. Silvie has always loved you.”

She smoothed her expression. “Anyways, you’re not emotionally stable right now. Changing such a core belief about yourself will have adverse effects on your behavior and thinking. You shouldn’t be making decisions about who to kiss at the moment, although hugging is okay. Friends hug, they even cuddle sometimes.”

Boyd didn’t think friends hugged like this, which made her smirk at him again. She’d molded herself to him and felt just as soft as he remembered. He did wonder how long it had been, though. He sensed curiosity and anticipation on his Bond with Silvie, but Raev’s curiosity was starting to shift into concern for him.

“It has been several hours, uh...” Mindy glanced around the room for a clock that was not there, “at least three, maybe four hours.”

Boyd regretted remembering so little of it, which made Mindy stiffen in his arms. Her brow knit with worry before it

became that clear she'd made a decision, which showed in her eyes.

“I suppose... just one kiss won't hurt.”

With that, she leaned up and oh so gently pressed her lips to his. It was more of a gentle brushing of lips than a real kiss. But while it was chaste, it lasted, lingering long enough for her to restore his memory of their first reunion—at least up to the point where she'd started the in-depth memory replacement.

His massage took most of the time. He could tell that was mostly because she had enjoyed being able to pamper him again. Like Boyd, she gained almost as much as the person she was pampering from the experience. Relaxing him relaxed her, in turn.

When she broke the kiss, she leaned her forehead against his chin. His nose nestled into the part in her hair along the centerline of her head. She never did like bangs.

“I don't want to be like them. I shouldn't have asked you simply to forget just so we could have a better reunion,” she murmured.

Boyd smiled. It hadn't been a big deal in this case, but he appreciated the thought behind her words. “It was my idea and more than worth it. I like it. This way, we get both.” He let out a laugh prompted by a stray thought.

“Kuh-heh.” She let out his favorite little laugh. It preceded her mimicking Silvie mimicking him: “ ‘I should face this alone.’ So dramatic.”

She softened her words with another eyeroll and then a smirk. “Okay, I suppose we should go introduce me to the rest of the team. Raev's going to come looking soon if we don't. Tinker is convinced this was all some sort of trap. She thinks I'm turning you into a mind-controlled puppet and is preparing to fight for your freedom.”

Mindy tilted her head to the side. “She's adorable by the way. Thinks *way* too fast, but adorable.”

Boyd blinked. “Wait... what? She’s getting ready to fight?”

“Yes.” Mindy shook her head ruefully. “She’s in her lab desperately assembling something that will restrain you without hurting you. She can’t figure out what to do about Silvie, though, and thinks Raev will come down on her side. She has a pulse weapon that will put a pretty big hole in me, so... you go first.”

“I don’t think she means anything by it.” Boyd felt the need to defend Tinker. It would be easy to take offense at someone preparing to kill you with a pulse weapon, and he didn’t want Mindy to get the wrong idea about her.

“Oh, I know,” Mindy assured him. “It’s mostly because of the impression Silvie has left her with. Which is pretty fair if we are being honest. She thinks you need to be protected from her wiles, and I’m associated with Silvie. According to how she perceives all this, we came out here last night and then lured you to a secret base where Silvie whisked you away to meet me. Now, you’ve been gone for hours and Silvie was evasive when Tinker asked when you might come back.”

Boyd frowned.

“She knows I have Mind Powers,” Mindy continued. “From her perspective, that’s a lot of red flags. She thinks you need to be saved and she wants to be your Hero.”

Boyd blinked.

“You’re right, I’ve probably said too much. She wouldn’t want you to know she thinks that way. It’s pretty sweet, though, isn’t it?”

Boyd thought it was sweet, but also a bit worrisome given that Tinker was smart enough that she might hurt one of the women close to him because of a misunderstanding. Worrisome, but sweet.

Being raised outside of a PAC gave Tinker a very different perspective, it seemed. She also lacked Boyd’s insight into Silvie’s thoughts and emotions. She’d simply observed Silvie acting against Boyd’s stated interests and had

come to her own conclusions from there. She missed the part where Silvie was certain she was acting in his best interests—as she perceived them.

Boyd could sense Silvie's absolute confidence in that fact.

Boyd had stated that he'd wanted a monogamous relationship with Silvie, but that was only because his Power had modified her mind so that she would permanently love him—no matter what he did. Doing right by her and being the best partner he could be was only right. He would have preferred that she was free of him, able to be a Hero without being attached to a Changed like him.

Mindy scowled at him but didn't say anything, so he continued his thought process.

Silvie was confident he should have many more lovers, that he should Enhance he was afraid to ask how many women and form a massive team around him. Boyd blinked as the revulsion at the idea of it that typically followed such thoughts simply... didn't. He no longer feared inflicting something unpleasant on his partners when his Power activated. He still had issues with stripping the free will of a Hero simply to Enhance someone, at least.

“We'll track the source of that belief together, once you acclimate to your new memories and the way they change your preconceptions... that's for later, though. Tinker actually already had something ready for Silvie and was shielding it from her mind so I wouldn't pick it up. She actually has a really solid mental defense. She's getting ready to make her move soon.”

“I'll go talk to her,” Boyd stated the thought out loud, though he knew Mindy had already read it.

“Yes.” Mindy agreed. “The fact that I won't be Enhanced when we walk out of here should help. She'd decided to blast me and capture you if you'd Enhanced me already, no matter what anybody said. That would be a sign you'd definitely been turned into a puppet.”



“Yeah... let’s go de-escalate that situation.” Boyd reluctantly stepped back before he thought to remind her, “My promise stands.”

He was speaking of the promise about her being welcome to touch him and enter his mind at any time. There were only a few of them out here, but sometimes she had trouble blocking out even a single person.

She smiled, holding onto the collar of Boyd’s button down to halt his retreat. The Tinker situation must not be urgent enough to end the conversation. “I’ll take you up on that if I need to. The people Davis put on guard duty are keeping their distance, but Tinker does think awfully quickly. Daisy has a lot of anger. Silvie is a darling, but also a little... uh... never mind about Silvie. I can’t be sure without a full dive into her mind, but Raev seems like she might be almost as comfy as you.”

Mindy’s smile turned into a smirk. “From what I gleaned from you and Silvie, she’ll be down for some cuddles. That would be nice. Think she’ll have a problem with me lounging around in her head?”

Boyd considered her question. Mindy would let him know if there was any real urgency in the Tinker situation. He replied verbally out of habit, and she let him because she was polite.

“Probably not. I don’t think she filters herself all that much—a little bit, but not a whole lot. She was having some issues with rejection, but those seemed to be better this morning. I’m guessing something could set that off again. It’s not something that disappears overnight. Speaking of issues... Silvie was a little off. Is there anything I should know about?”

Mindy nodded. “Yes, but we’ll get to that shortly. Tinker is almost ready.”

“Do you need help walking in those?” He waved down at her platform shoes as he turned.

“Still a little shi-iit,” she added a sing-song tone to her breathy voice. “I’m fine, thank you. They just take a little

practice. I can even run in them, as long as it's in a mostly straight line. Besides, they are perfect. I almost went a little higher, but I'm glad I didn't. I like how you fold down over me just a little, not too much. Just right."

She shoved him back a step, "But not if you're going to be a little shit."

Boyd chuckled and shook his head as he walked to the door. He was starting to get a little anxious about the Tinker situation and wanted to address it. Part of him regretted not listening to the urge to create the intimacy required to form the initial Bond with her when it had cropped up the night before, but he'd ignored it.

At the same time, he wasn't quite ready to be separated from Mindy, so his tail reached out and coiled around her wrist. She didn't complain and wrapped her fingers around the part that passed near her hand. He checked his Bonds again, wondering what—if anything—Mindy picked up from them.

"Nothing," she answered his thought. "I can sense your thoughts related to them, but I sense nothing of Silvie or Raev through your mind unless you think it. Of course, they are close enough that I can hear them anyway. I'm a little curious to see it in action—their thoughts and how you react to them."

Boyd grunted. Both Silvie and Raev were much the same as when he'd last checked in with them. It didn't take long to leave the hall and enter the Great Room where Silvie was watching for them, sitting at a table in the middle tier that had good line of sight with this hallway. Raev was with her at the table, also facing the hall, but Silvie closed the distance between them in a blur.

She came to a stop, floating in front of them at eye level.

She wore a big, open smile, looking rather pleased with herself as her bright eyes tracked to where his tail remained coiled around Mindy's hand and forearm.

"It went well." It isn't a question, but a cheer.

“Better than I thought it would,” Mindy replied, smiling but pulling her hand from his tail.

Boyd still wasn’t quite ready to let her go, but he did.

“Tinker is on her way, and... oh my. She has something that just blocked me out,” Mindy said with some concern in her voice.

“Which hall leads to her lab?” Boyd asked, starting to move towards the opposite hallway.

“Ahh, the far left hallway from this one. What’s happening?” Silvie had picked up on there being something wrong.

“She thinks Mindy is turning me into a puppet and intends to fight you all to free me. I’ll handle it, stay with Mindy please,” Boyd requested.

Tinker wasn’t actually a danger to anyone, but a pulse weapon wouldn’t hurt him all that badly and wouldn’t even scratch Silvie. It was best to keep them between her and the much softer Mindy. He reached the hall and saw Tinker walking down it.

She looked more frightened than actually ready for a fight, but she determinedly put one foot in front of the other. To be fair, she thought she was about to face an A-Ranked and an S-Ranked Hero with what she could put together in only a few hours.

It took guts to make it even this far.

“Hey Tinker,” Boyd said calmly.

She was wearing the skin-tight shiny pink jumpsuit with the darker pink tactical rig he recognized from the night they’d met. The rig was big and bulky, covering most of her in various tools and gadgets which he barely recognized the general functions of. It explained how he’d missed the rather pleasant little body all that gear had hidden from him when they’d first met.

She’d even suited up to try and save him. He might just be in a good mood from having the weight of implanted false

memories lifted from him, but Tinker's intent to murder Mindy and save him from her clutches charmed him. It was probably because she was so overmatched, knew it, and was willing to try it anyway.

From her perspective, this was her Omega Ray.

“Oh!” She nearly jumped out of her suit when he came around the corner and spoke. She was still about twenty feet down the long hallway, but still backpedaled a couple of steps and almost fell, barely catching herself. She scrambled for and pulled a large metal canister with a handle from her rigging and aimed it at him. It was not a pulse weapon he recognized, so he assumed it was a non-lethal she'd designed just for him—which was also charming, in its own way.

“Woah!” He held up his hands and dropped to his butt with a thump, sticking his legs out straight. His tail helped guide the motion and kept him from toppling onto his back. His wings slid out in front of him to either side, following their natural bend.

“I appreciate you taking the time to make that, but please don't use it,” he called to her.

“B-Boyd?” she asked with a shaky voice, holding the large canister-looking device aimed at him.

“Yup. Just me. Mind control free,” he promised.

“Then how do you know I think you've been taken over?” Tinker glared at him from down the hall, settling the weapon on him more solidly instead of lowering it.

“Good question,” Boyd nodded. “The Mind Powered was in your head until just a moment ago. Whatever you are using to block her out is working now, but it wasn't before. She told me what you were thinking before we came out of her room.”

It took a second for his brain to catch up with his mouth. “Which doesn't mean I Enhanced her,” he quickly added, “because I didn't. Nobody has been turned into a mind-puppet. Thank you for worrying about me, though. I mean it.”

Tinker just continued to glare at him, unconvinced.

He didn't blame her. "She's my ex from back at our PAC," Boyd continued. The only thing for it would be to keep feeding her the truth until she accepted it. "I'm sorry I was gone so long. We were catching up and she did do something in my head that took some time."

Tinker flinched, which he'd expected she would do. He was just glad she didn't accidentally set off the weapon.

"Hmm. Yeah, not sounding great, I know," Boyd agreed. "She removed a false memory placed by The Authority. In it, they had a fake her tell me that our... first experience together, and my Enhancement of her, was terrible for her." He grimaced, even the memory of having had the false memory stirred his rage. "It was a violation. Pretty much the same as rape."

The last words came out as a low growl. It was only after the words were said that he realized that information was likely subject to confidentiality rules, and he should not have told her. He couldn't find it in himself to regret it; the anger made it easy to dismiss.

*'Please be careful. You are not yourself and may regret your actions later. If I had known this would happen I would have waited until after I at least introduced myself to her,'* Mindy's voice floated through his mind.

*'It's fine, I'll be careful.'* Boyd thought back before continuing out loud. "So, she removed that terrible false memory and gave me a better fake in its place."

"Why place a new false memory if she wasn't trying to control you? Do you remember everything? What year is it? When did we meet? What did you have for lunch the day you came to my room? What's the first thing I made for you?" Tinker shot off the questions rapid-fire, but Boyd did his best to keep up.

"Right." He nodded when she stopped at the sixth question. "She replaced the false memory of our last meeting with a better, more realistic one where we promised to meet again one day after she'd been sent to a different center. I am aware of a gap in my memory that was restored and the reason

behind it but cannot be sure there are not more. The year is 1014. We met the night your team was attacked by Blast-Front. Lunch when I came to your room was... Chinese food, a bunch of stuff from the food court. The first thing you made me was the dagger I used to kill Omega Ray... I think. It's the first thing you gave me, at least. Does the ship count?"

His goal was to give her time to calm down more than anything. She'd spent a long time preparing to fight, and it would take a little while to get her out of that mindset. The best thing he could do was to keep talking until she decided that he was still him.

"No, I meant the dagger," Tinker replied, a shudder in her high-pitched voice. "But, since there is a gap in your memory, I'm sorry... I can't trust you." Then she fired her Boyd capturing device.

## Chapter 18

Boyd threw himself back in an attempt to dodge.

The canister flew forward about five feet before it popped open. A truly massive net of interlocking metal pieces unfurled out of it and continued towards him. He wasn't sure what propelled it, but it spread to fill the hallway in its entirety and flew rapidly towards him.

Boyd scrambled back, hoping to clear the hallway and avoid the net. He was only partially successful.

The net caught him right at the mouth of the hall. It wrapped him up, clinging to him like a living thing. It was made of hundreds of small discs connected to one another by wires. Each disc seemed capable of manipulating the wires. The discs wound the wires in, tightening the net around him, and setting the base of the discs against him in the blink of an eye.

He felt small hooks on each disc set into his skin, right through his clothes. Then, the jolts started. Small electrical charges start arching between each disc. It brought him to the ground—not in pain, but from muscle spasms.

He toppled over as his arms, legs, wings, and tail jerked about beyond his control. His body's reactions were driven by targeted jolts of electricity to his various muscle groups. He managed a groan as his arms and legs locked up; the net was apparently intelligent enough to figure out which jolts had locked his muscles in one position. It began to constantly deliver shocks to those areas. Boyd doubted the metal the net was made from was strong enough to hold him, but it managed to incapacitate him anyway.

“Darling!” Silvie's cry of alarm filled the room.

Boyd fell in a position that let him see what happened next. Tinker was still down the hall, looking shocked—both by what she had done, and that it had worked. She blinked and dropped the canister, pulling another device from her side.

Silvie blurred towards him, coming to a stop and looking down at him, her concern clear on her face.

Tinker finished pulling out her second weapon and let out a high, drawn-out scream as she fired it. “AHHHHHHHHHHH...”

This second device was composed of two tubes mounted side by side, about six inches apart. A narrow tube fed into the back of it, which led to the pack on Tinker’s back. When she fired the device, thousands of small metallic balls streamed from both barrels.

They didn’t fly like bullets though—almost as quickly as bullets, but not in a straight line. Instead, they spun through the air, spiraling around each other in a chaotic whirl of marble sized metallic balls. Some tangled in the air and fell to the ground with a clatter. Some missed and went spinning off into the great room. Many of them wrapped around Silvie, tangling up her limbs and binding them together.

It was then that Boyd recognized them as tiny bolos, connected by long, thin, metallic looking cables.

“Ah!” Silvie cried out when one of her arms got tied down to her side. She started to take evasive action, but the little steel balls seemed to follow her through the air.

“What the heck?!” Her legs were bound together next, as dozens of the small bolos wrapped them up. Her other arm got trapped across her stomach as dozens more of the bolos wrapped up her torso.

“...AHHHHHHHhhhhh.” Tinker’s scream held through the whole thing. She didn’t stop until hundreds of the tiny bolos had wrapped themselves around Silvie, binding her up quite securely.

“Huff, huff, huff,” the smaller woman panted, looking wide eyed at a confused Silvie where she came to a stop near Boyd after it became clear her evasive actions weren’t helping.

Silvie looked down at the small objects that bound her. “Is this my hair?” She sounded more confused than concerned.



Boyd was still being held rigid by electronic pulses coursing into his body from the net wrapped around him. Even his wings and tail were held stiff under the jolts' influence. He couldn't get a good look at what took Silvie down, but the strands that wrapped around her did appear to match her hair. They pressed into her skin and the thin fabric of her top and shorts in ways that would normally distract him.

It almost looked like she was wearing tight, asymmetric netting.

“Yes,” Tinker answered her. “You had samples in storage too. It was the only thing I could think of that you couldn't break. Once the first one got you, the others were drawn to it.”

Boyd wondered if she realized she probably shouldn't be answering such questions. He couldn't tell her to keep quiet if he'd wanted to. The nearly continuous electrical shocks made breathing an interesting task; he didn't think he could pull off speaking, too.

“Very clever but totally unnecessary, dear,” Silvie told her sweetly.

“Yeah, well... I'm not taking chances.” One of Tinker's hot pink dinner plate sized drones came floating down the hallway. “I'm going to take Boyd back to Glorith—nobody has to get hurt.”

“I can't let you do that, dear,” Silvie sighed.

The little drone dropped something from its bottom to the floor not far away from Boyd. It was a small disc-shaped device that gave off an electronic hum.

“I promise you that we aren't going to hurt Boyd, or you for that matter. I'm sorry I made you doubt me so much. Really, I can't really blame you. We aren't... EEP!” Silvie was cut off with a squeal as she was abruptly pulled from the air to the disk the drone had dropped to the floor. She landed on her butt with a grimace on her gorgeous face.

Boyd could almost see whatever force the small disc was generating to hold her in place distorting the air around

her.

“I can’t let you stop me, dear,” Tinker returned Silvie’s term of endearment.

Boyd would have smiled at the attempted banter if he wasn’t being electrocuted. The jolts didn’t actually hurt, but his muscles being held so stiffly was not comfortable.

“Tinker, I love you, but you didn’t think this through,” Silvie replied from her spot sitting near Boyd.

Tinker hadn’t left the hallway yet, and Boyd could see that she had switched weapons yet again. She seemed to be studying a screen attached to this new one. If Boyd had to guess, it likely had a way to detect illusions. It seemed Tinker was preparing to deal with Raev next.

“Yeah, what didn’t I think through?” Tinker asked, still fiddling with the small screen.

Silvie showed her, unleashing her eye beams into her own thigh.

A surging of panic spiked Boyd’s nerves for a second—he wasn’t certain her resistance was high enough to take her own eyebeams. She must have been confident she could, though, because she wasn’t harmed by them at all. It didn’t cut the hairs there either—not even that concentrated destructive force seemed capable of cutting through her silver locks. That wasn’t the point, though, it had just been a demonstration.

“This might have worked if you’d covered my eyes,” Silvie explained. “If I was truly your enemy, I would just cut you in half and have Mind Witch or Raev untie us. Fortunately, I’m not your enemy.” She gave the smaller woman a gentle smile. “I count you as part of our family and will happily explain everything so you can feel comfortable with that again. Now, please, stop electrocuting my Darling.”

She was keeping her voice calm and friendly, but Boyd could sense impatience building beneath the surface. Silvie didn’t mind being tied up and locked down, but his state had her concerned.

“I have a dead man’s switch on my person,” Tinker responded. “If my blood pressure drops or my heart stops, the reactor for the nano weaver in the lab goes critical. It might not kill you... but everyone else here, including Boyd, wouldn’t survive it.”

“Argh!” Silvie groaned then nearly shouted. “Just stop electrocuting Boyd!”

The little pink drone floated his way. He watched as a hypodermic needle extended on an arm from an open panel and didn’t like the look of it—at all. Silvie must not have either, because a short burst from her eyes took the drone out of the air. It pretty much popped into hundreds of pieces under the intense beam.

“Yeah, none of that. No drugs,” she huffed.

“Hey!” Tinker cried as her drone shattered and its pieces clattered to the hardwood floor. “I was just going to put him under so I could move him without the net! I don’t want to electrocute him either.”

“No drugs,” Silvie repeated firmly. “I almost didn’t accept him being put under after all the damage Blast Front did to him. You don’t get to knock him out here so that he wakes up being questioned back in Glorith. I won’t let him go through something like that ever again... not if I can help it.”

“Everything okay over there?” Raev’s voice called out from somewhere in the room.

Hopefully she was covering Mindy. Boyd would like to see this situation resolved without further violence.

“No!” Silvie called back, “Tinker won’t stop electrocuting Boyd and she’s got me all tied up!”

“Raev,” Tinker called back, “don’t let the Mind Powered touch you! If she hasn’t yet, please help me get Boyd out of here.”

“Tinker, what the hell?” Raev’s voice shouted back. “Stop electrocuting Boyd so we can talk this out.”

“I can’t do that! I think he’s been suborned by the Mind Powered,” Tinker called back.

“If he had been, she would have made him Enhance her right away. The last time she was Enhanced, she became S-Ranked,” Raev explained calmly. “You may have some protection against her, but she wouldn’t have to touch me to take me over. So, if that’s really what you think happened, you’re on your own.”

Tinker’s eyes got even wider upon hearing this.

“Now, I didn’t feel him Enhance anyone,” Raev continued. “Silvie said she felt it when it happened with me. I vote you stop electrocuting Boyd so he can talk... I assume that’s why he’s not responding?”

“Y-yeah,” Tinker was sounding less and less certain about her recent decisions. “But...” she started to say something, then stopped. Apparently she wasn’t sure what to do next.

“Listen, Tinker. I was a little worried, too. Boyd was gone for a while. I kept waiting to feel him Enhance her and then have my brain scrambled. I’m a little worried now because I can’t see Mind Witch. I keep expecting her to sneak up behind me and lay a whammy on my brain.”

She wasn’t lying. Boyd could sense a legitimate concern through their Bond, though it felt like she viewed it as unrealistic. It was similar to the general discomfort most people experienced knowing a Mind Powered was around.

“I’m over here!” Mindy’s voice called from what sounded like the opposite side of the room from Raev. “And I’m not interested in whammying anyone. I am a little worried about Boyd. How long is it okay to electrocute him like this? I’m pretty sure the shocks themselves won’t hurt him, but it’s starting to feel like he’s going to tear his muscles apart.”

Her description was accurate. Holding his limbs so stiffly was starting to become a real strain.

“Oh no!” Tinker gasped, and a second later the jolts stopped.

Boyd let out a gasp as he took his first deep breath since the net hit him. He just lay there in blissful release as his muscles relaxed.

“Are you okay?” Tinker called out, concern in her voice.

“No, he’s not okay!” Silvie snapped.

“I’m... fine,” Boyd corrected her with a croak.

His throat was dried out from the short rapid breaths he’d managed to take. He swallowed a few times to wet it before trying again. “That wasn’t pleasant, but I’m okay now that it’s over. That was an excellent design, Tink, but please don’t use it on me again.” In truth, his muscles were a little sore, but that should fade quickly.

“Oh, good... Just stay still, no sudden moves,” Tinker shouted, sounding uncertain about what to do next. She clearly hadn’t had much of a plan and things were not progressing as she’d expected.

That was dangerous, and Boyd really didn’t want to be electrocuted again. He needed to figure out a way to end this situation peacefully as soon as possible.

“Okay. I won’t move without your say so,” Boyd agreed. “I think we should talk this through—you and me, together. We can go back to your lab if you want. If you can convince me that Silvie or Mind Witch mean me harm, I’ll help you fight our way clear.”

Boyd knew she couldn’t convince him of that; he would be spending the time convincing her of the opposite. Offering her the ability to do so gave her a path forward, though, which was something she needed at the moment.

“O-okay. One second.”

Boyd heard the clinking sound of metal on metal, then a solid thunk.

“Okay, you can get up, slowly. That net can be reactivated, and I have a second one loaded just in case I need it.”

Boyd tried to slowly get to his feet, a task made that much more complicated by the net with all its barbs still in him. They tugged at his wings as he shifted around, causing him to grunt in pain.

“Tinker,” Mindy called from somewhere in the massive room, “you don’t know me yet, but please trust me with just this. Those little hooks are still in Boyd... and it’s hurting him. I can tell from your thoughts before this all started that you really don’t want to hurt him at all. They got his wings pretty good. Is there any way you can deactivate those or something?”

“Sorry!” Tinker gasped.

A second later, the barbs slid smoothly out of his wings and his body, and he let out a sigh of relief as the net began to fall off of him.

“So sorry...” she whined sadly. Tinker looked like she was on the verge of bursting into tears.

“It’s okay, Tinker,” Boyd rumbled as he slowly got to his feet and pulled the net from himself. Looking down, he saw that his white button down was now covered in little red dots. The barbs hadn’t caused much bleeding, just enough to give his shirt tiny red polka dots.

“I’m not mad at you. You didn’t hurt me too badly. The muscle strain is fading quickly,” he explained. “It’s okay, let’s go talk.”

“Really?” Tinker asked.

Boyd didn’t need a Bond to know how distraught she was. It was written all over her face.

“I promise.” Boyd nodded to reinforce his words, and then repeated something Silvie had said that he’d liked. He decided to join her in making it a thing. “We don’t break promises in this family. With that in mind, I promise I haven’t been taken over and that this isn’t a trap.”

With that, Tinker dropped the fresh canister she’d been aiming at him. It clattered to the ground, and she covered her

face with both hands, slumping in on herself. “OHHhhh... This is so embarrassing,” she whined.

“No. No, it’s really not,” Boyd assured her, waiting to move for a moment longer. “It’s impressive. You managed to restrain two trained Heroes—an A-Ranked and an S-Ranked, no less. I was completely out of action but that’s not all that hard. Countering Silvie, though? Phew! Not many could do that these days.”

“Sh-should I let her up?” Tinker kept her face in her hands, but Boyd decided it was safe enough to move.

He stepped over to his love who looked up at him sullenly. Except for the expression on Silvie’s face, the scene was fairly entertaining. The little metal balls were all being pulled toward the disk that had to be under her butt. Each ball was connected to another metallic ball by several strands of silver hair. Silver hairs crisscrossed her entire body below her shoulders. The hairs were pulled tight, making her skin bulge around them. With her tight clothing and Silvie’s amazing looks, it was a fairly erotic visual.

After committing the scene to memory and making a mental note to ask Tinker about certain options her discovery opened up, he responded, “If Silvie promises not to retaliate or try to stop us from talking alone, she’ll keep it.”

“And I do promise, Tinker,” Silvie said. “I promise I’m not mad at you at all. I won’t retaliate and you can talk to Boyd, or everyone, until you are comfortable with us again. I’m really sorry I made you think you had to save Boyd from us.”

“It was never you,” Tinker replied.

“It was my actions that made you think Mind Witch took me over a while back... which she hasn’t... it was just me,” Silvie explained. “She’s already figured out where it went wrong. Would you like to talk about that, or talk to Boyd first?”

“Boyd first,” Tinker muttered. She looked down at the FDU on her wrist, tapped it a few times, and the electronic

humming the disc had been giving off suddenly stopped.

Silvie floated up from the ground a moment later and Boyd hugged her bound form to his chest. Then, pushing his Black Flame to his hands, he carefully used his claws to cut the hairs that bound her. He had to be really careful—his claws would cut Silvie as easily as her hair when his Black Flame was in his hands.

It took a moment, but he got it done. He'd spotted Raev while doing it. She was moving closer but was staying well back to avoid setting Tinker off again. As soon as Silvie's arms were free she started patting Boyd down, confirming he was okay.

"I'm fine, love," he murmured, keeping his voice as low as he could. "Thank you for not hurting her."

"I would never," Silvie responded with similar softness before nuzzling into his chest for a second.

"I know, and thank you for that," Boyd rumbled back. "You remaining so good is part of what convinces me I'm not evil." He wasn't quite sure what made him say that, but it was an honest thought.

"Oh, Darling!" she murmured into his chest. "You're the best man I know... the furthest thing from evil."

Boyd made a noncommittal noise. He understood that the little nagging voice that insisted he was evil for what he did to the women he loved didn't have to be right. It was still hard to ignore or disregard.

Silvie let out a sigh. "My big lug, we'll have to work on that. Mindy will help. For now, go settle Tinker before she zaps you and ties me up again."

"Right." Boyd hugged her one more time, kissed the top of her head, then stepped back and turned to a very embarrassed Tinker who was still waiting in the hall. He started to walk her way slowly, but she didn't go for the second net cannister she'd dropped at her feet. She'd either decided she was wrong or given up on fighting.

Hopefully it was the former.



“Come on.” Boyd nodded down the hall as he approached her.

## Chapter 19

“So, that was her?” Tinker stared in the direction she’d heard Mindy’s voice come from when she’d called out.

Boyd led her deeper into the hall before he responded. “Yes. Her Hero name is Mind Witch, but she would prefer everyone called her Mindy—it’s the name her parents gave her.”

He’d received the thought that it was okay to share the information from Mindy, otherwise he wouldn’t have revealed that last part. “I know Mind Powereds are pretty unsettling at the best of times. As a reminder, I am one. I could force you to calm down, then use that enforced calm state with other techniques I’ve been trained in to make you accept that Silvie and Mindy are not your enemies if I wanted to.”

Tinker glanced back over her shoulder at her net cannister.

“Fortunately,” Boyd continued, quickly holding his hands out palms up, “I learned to use my Power ethically—taught by the same people who taught Mindy. However, I learned even more from her than them, in the end.”

Boyd frowned, realizing the statement was true. The rules Mindy enforced on herself were stricter than those required by The Authority. Boyd had adopted them once she’d explained the merits, especially once he’d started living with the Bond.

“They’re up to something.” Tinker let the whisper out in a hiss. “You must see it. You’re smarter than this.”

Boyd nodded in response. Of course they were up to something. He couldn’t let himself think about it too much, though. There must be a reason they hadn’t told him about, whatever they were up to.

If he had to guess, part of why they brought him out into the Wild Lands was to gain a secure place to do just whatever it was they were up to. If that was the case, Tinker probably wouldn’t have felt the need to rescue him if she’d

only waited a few days. If not, then thinking about it too much might put them in danger in ways he couldn't predict.

It was the only reason he could think of that Silvie would hide something from him. Having literally been her when they'd become one in the bond, he was confident about that. Well... other than hiding her attempts to add more women to his life. With a sigh, Boyd closed his eyes and tried to think of another option.

Silvie and Mindy *were* hiding too much. He had to fight not to think about what they might be hiding and the various things that simply didn't add up: the base; the seemingly unlimited resources; hiring Daisy to a base position without any of the normal training or vetting; the clout it would take to blackmail The Authority itself falling into the hands of two young Heroes.

It wasn't like The Authority didn't have the means to silence Silvie and Mindy and then stick Boyd in a deeper, darker hole when they'd threatened to go public. Somehow, the two of them had enough standing not only to do that, but they continue to wield the power necessary to requisition personnel, samples, and resources. And they seemed to have the ability to classify and declassify information at will.

At best, it smelled of splintered factions within The Authority. At worst, they were aligned with a powerful external force. Boyd groaned, having followed the thought too far.

"Now I'll have to have Mindy wipe the memory of the thoughts I just had about how obvious it is they are up to something," he muttered to himself.

Boyd scrubbed his face with his hands. "Yes, they are up to something... but I have no idea what. I do know that Silvie believes she is doing it for me. I've sensed it in her since the first time we fully Bonded and we were one for a moment. She's been doing it for a long time. Since we were... twelve or thirteen. Since before... shit."

Boyd groaned again. Letting himself think about things he'd been intentionally ignoring had that effect.

*‘No, our relationship developed naturally,’* Mindy’s voice cut into his thoughts, picking up sadness as they continued, *‘I did not get close to you, in that way, because of what we are involved in. I was at the PAC to find you, but I didn’t know that until the last night we were together. This is what I was trying to hide that night... why I lashed out. I won’t have to wipe this, though. You are correct that we brought you here to get away from watchful eyes and bring you fully into the fold. Just so you know, you’ve been using your Power to lock away the memories of what you notice about this in your sleep, knowing that they’ve been scanning your mind. The other part of you has been protecting Silvie. He should stop doing that now because he is more aware of what is going on in your conscious mind.’*

Boyd, for the first time in... well, ever, had a reason to be thankful for his Changed Mind.

*‘That other part of yourself,’* Mindy corrected his thought.

Although Boyd didn’t have the ability to erase memories—at least not consciously.

*‘Apparently he does... at least your own memories, that is. I always told you your Mental Powers were stronger than you knew. You hold back too much.’*

Tinker shifting uncomfortably beside him reminded Boyd that this wasn’t the time for mental conversations.

“Sorry, got distracted,” he explained. “I had the thought that Mindy might only have approached me back then because of whatever they are involved in—and that would have sucked. Apparently not, though. I also learned that my Changed Mind has been wiping my memories in my sleep to protect Silvie.”

*‘Not wiping,’* Mindy corrected him again.

It would take him a little while to get used to her always doing that again.

*‘He’s been pulling them into his part of your memory,’* she explained, *‘and defending them jealously. I think he knows*

*you'll want them back... Or he might just be unwilling to destroy a memory related to Silvie.'*

Boyd decided that part of their conversation didn't need to be shared at the moment. It also revealed a lot more agency on his Changed... err... on his other self's part than he'd thought it—no, than he'd thought the other him had.

*'Nothing has changed, you're still you. He has always had the same capabilities as you do. Nothing's different. He's been with you since you were five or six and your identity took root. Think of it as a second... no.'* Mindy gave a mental growl of frustration. *'This really isn't the time.'*

"No, it is not," Boyd agreed out loud.

Tinker's hands were still over her face, but she peered up at him from between her fingers.

"Sorry... Mindy is trying to recalibrate my thinking. She keeps correcting stuff I think before I even say it." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "It's a pretty basic principle of both programing and deprograming an asset. I'm trying not to let that freak me out too much."

He looked up to make it clear that he wasn't talking to Tinker this time. "Can we have a moment?"

*'Of course, sorry. I'll keep Silvie here, she's already getting antsy, though.'*

Mindy's voice faded away and he felt her presence depart. Unless she was in contact with someone and focused on them, she would still hear his thoughts and their conversation through him. Boyd took the few precautions he could.

He boxed up a piece of his—reasonable, under the circumstances—apprehension. He took that and reached out with his Mental Domination and shunted it back into his own mind to break any connection Mindy may have left that he hadn't sensed.

Boyd trusted Silvie completely and he desperately wanted to do the same with Mindy, but he had to temper that intense desire. Fortunately, he was confident he would feel

something on their Bond if the latter had subverted the former. He remembered a strange tickle on their bond the night before that probably coincided with whatever Mindy had done, when she'd worked on Silvie. He sensed no such thing now.

Still, better safe than sorry.

“You were able to lock Mindy out somehow. Is that something you can share?” he carefully didn't ask how Tinker was doing that.

“Not quickly.” Tinker shook her head.

Boyd kept cycling through using his Power on himself, hoping the wash of his Power was enough to keep Mindy out of his mind. He nodded further down the hall and began to walk. Depending on how this conversation went, access to Tinker's lab could be vital. His inventive companion still seemed nervous, which wasn't good—for anyone.

He hit her with a wave of calm that was trained into him. Tinker, now benefiting indirectly from years of rigorous training in keeping his emotions in check through Boyd, began to walk more calmly beside him. Whatever blocked Mindy's Power didn't stop him.

Once he thought they were out of range of Raev's hearing, just to be safe, he muttered quietly, “Do you want to run?”

“Is that an option?” Tinker asked, just as quietly.

“For you it is,” Boyd replied. “I can't leave Silvie, but I will help you get away. I can get you out and stop Silvie from chasing you—if that's what you want to do. I owe you that much.” He sighed. “I got you into this. I didn't think I would have, but apparently I was being willfully ignorant.”

Boyd was frustrated with himself above all else. He'd been blinding himself... for love. Literally. It had been the death knell of many a Hero in the past. To think he'd once thought them fools. How hard was it just to focus on the job? It's not like this was an unfulfilling life. It wasn't like you couldn't get laid.

Just don't fall in love.

Boyd didn't have the benefit of blaming it all on his Power, because Mindy also played a role in why he wouldn't run. He wanted to trust her. He wasn't sure he would have run or turned her in—even if she'd been the only one showing signs of dissidence.

He knew he should turn her in. At this point, a part of his brain was shouting that he should turn *himself* in. It was getting harder to ignore by the moment, and he found himself spending every third round of Mental Domination suppressing it. Which made him realize it had to be a fucking compulsion—one laid either through the use of a Power or by more conventional means. For all he knew, Mindy had laid it on him in training and then someone else might have removed the memory of her doing so from both of them. It made sense, but he hated it.

The Authority supposedly valued free will as highly as life itself. Compulsions like the one he was currently countering in his mind were *very* illegal. Otherwise, someone like Mindy could spend a little time with any given Powered Criminal and force them to be law abiding citizens again.

The fact that they'd used one or more compulsions on him meant they probably used them on everyone. Or maybe his being an Enhancer made him special. No, that didn't track. He'd have noticed something with how much attention he was paying to his own mind by then. This had to have been laid on him shortly after he'd formed both identities.

At this, the other him seemed to stir in his wooden slat cage and took over suppressing the compulsion. It also started to handle the use of his Mental Domination on both Tinker's and his own mind, keeping them both fresh and calm. Which was good because Boyd was having difficulty multi-tasking while thinking things through.

While it was good, it was also new... and unsettling. The transition was so smooth that Boyd couldn't have stopped it if he knew it was coming. Cycling the use of his Power was a minor strain, a distraction that made unraveling complex thoughts and possible nested strategies difficult. After his Changed Mind took over, though, it became a background task

—it was just happening much more efficiently than Boyd knew how to do on his own. Once his Changed Mind took the reins, it more or less left his perception.

His Changed Mind's recent displays of control and the fact he had actively been hiding things from himself added just the right amount of zest to the shit sandwich that this situation had become. It was just too much. Despite all that, he still couldn't bring himself to abandon Silvie.

He would help Tinker run—if that was what she wanted to do. She deserved that chance. If Raev wanted to run as well, he would look for a way to break their Bond or Devotion. For now, he would help Tinker run, grab lunch, and then take a nap. When he woke up from that nap, he knew everything would be back to the way it had been just... had it only been ten minutes ago? He and Silvie and Mindy would face the consequences of Tinker's flight together, after the fact.

"I don't want to leave you," Tinker said after a moment of walking quietly beside him.

They were moving at her pace, and it was a fairly long hall. He briefly wondered just how big this base was.

Boyd understood that she had a crush on him, but she hadn't committed to anything yet. "Tinker..." Boyd started to say but was immediately cut off.

"No. I'm not leaving you. So... what's the next option?" Tinker stopped in place and planted her feet in a wide stance of defiance. Her bulky rig with its multitude of vaguely dangerous looking but mostly pink tools and gadgets lent her more of a presence than her small stature normally inspired.

"Well... I'm either going to forget everything that is going on, or the others are going to tell me everything soon and I'll remember. It doesn't seem to be totally in my control," Boyd rumbled with a shrug, coming to a stop a few strides away to account for their height distance.

He didn't want her to have to strain to look up at him. He did stay close enough to avoid having to raise their voices.



“So... there is something I want to do if you are set on staying. I won't force it, but I want to be able to make sure you're safe even though I may not remember the others are up to something.”

Tinker blinked at him owlshly.

He pursed his lips. “You obviously aren't in on whatever is going on, and though I really don't think you are in any danger from either of them... I don't know what's coming. Whoever Silvie and Mindy are working with are in hiding. That means they aren't in the dominant position... in whatever is going on. I don't know who they are...” He paused and took a deep breath. “I don't know who we are opposed to, but we are the underdog.”

“Right, I suppose I should have expected Silvie's fight to become your fight,” Tinker agreed, still calmer than Boyd would normally have expected the inventor to be. He couldn't help but notice how good the confidence looked on her—especially decked out for battle like this.

He let that visual distract him for a moment before Tinker asked, “It's you doing this right? You're calming me?”

“Yes.” It had slipped his mind after his Changed Mind took over. “Should I stop?”

“No, it's helping... a lot.” Tinker shook her head rapidly.

Seeing the familiar behavior made him feel better about continuing to keep her calm. He wasn't totally suppressing her normal reactions, which meant he shouldn't be influencing her decision making. He should still be sure, though.

“I do have to stop doing it for just a moment.” Boyd sighed. “I need you to take four deep breaths then decide again if you want to run or to stay. I might have influenced your decision the first time without meaning to. Four deep breaths isn't really enough time but I don't want you to start panicking. So, if you want more time after the four breaths, just say so, okay?”

“Okay,” Tinker agreed to this with a calm nod, but Boyd could see the worry in her eyes.

“Here we go.”

He told his Changed Mind to stop calming Tinker, hoping it would respect the need to ensure Tinker’s free will was respected. If it really was a part of him like Mindy said, then it should share his same morals.

The best way Boyd could describe the way his Changed Mind handled his Power was reducing it to a trickle as opposed to Boyd’s method of tossing a full bucket at people. The trickle method seemed much more effective and more useful. He could tell when the trickle of Mental Domination going to Tinker stopped.

Boyd blinked again when he realized he’d just gotten a lesson in the proper use of his own Powers from... himself.

“Right...” Boyd nodded to himself. “This is getting really fucking weird, but let’s breathe together. Ready?” he asked Tinker.

He could see that her stance was already starting to shift. The set of her shoulders changed as anxiety started to set back in. When she looked up at him, he could see trust in her eyes. Boyd was certain he hadn’t done anything to have earned her trust, but he also accepted the responsibility to earn it at that moment.

“Okay... breathe in... two, three, four, five... breathe out... two, three, four, five, six, seven.” He walked her through the first in and out and then joined her for the remaining three iterations.

She held his eyes the whole time.

Boyd couldn’t be sure she took the time to actually think about her future in those few moments the way he’d intended. Luckily, it seemed Tinker was smarter than him because after four breaths she blinked and held up her hand.

“I need another moment... I was just staring into your eyes, and...” Her cheeks heated until they matched the pink of

her suit. “You are right, though; I should think about this. Are we going against the whole of The Authority if I stay?”

Boyd scratched his cheek. “I actually have no idea. I’ve been intentionally ignoring and then forgetting anything I’ve noticed for...” Boyd didn’t know how long it had been.

But then his Changed Mind decided to be helpful again. It let him know that Boyd had only noticed a thing or two until he’d finally fucked Silvie—because he was a bootlicking ‘yes’ man with his head stuck up so far up The Authority’s ass he couldn’t see daylight. The other him had known since their time with Mindy... who they should be cuddling right now.

Boyd blinked at the vehemence of his own thoughts about himself. “Uhh... Right. I guess I’ve been keeping myself blissfully ignorant for at least three years, now. But some of that was spent in a drugged stupor, so I’ll only take responsibility for some of it.”

“Rightht...” Tinker drew the word out then let it fade, clearly not sure what else to say.

“We may very well be against all of The Authority. It seems unlikely, though. Silvie and Mindy have gotten a lot done...” Boyd waved to the base around them. “They had to have support for something like this. It isn’t just them, at the very least. Maybe this came from an organization outside of The Authority, but that seems unlikely. Commander Davis is clearly supporting them. If a Commander is supporting them, they have at least part of Psy-Ops on their side. They randomly get scanned by Psy-Ops way too often for them not to at least have the backing of some agents.”

“You’ve thought about this a lot... for someone who hasn’t thought about it,” Tinker observed.

“It’s possible this is stuff I’ve thought about and forgotten, but now it is coming back to me,” Boyd admitted.

He prided himself on his good critical thinking skills, so maybe he was just following the rational threads now that he was allowing himself to think about it, but he couldn’t say

for sure. These thoughts were just popping into his head; whether they were new thoughts or old thoughts, he couldn't say.

“Okay, so they are part of what... a splinter group?” Tinker asked.

“That seems to be the most likely scenario,” Boyd agreed. “An Enhancer would make a juicy target for a splinter group—give them a way to turn the balance of power in their favor.”

“And what, you're automatically on their side just because Silvie is?” Tinker arched one of her eyebrows, crossing her arms and hugging herself. Well... hugging her tools more than anything, really. The bulky rig prevented her from getting her arms around too much of herself.

“Yeah. Pretty much.” Boyd sighed, letting his wings and shoulders slump. His tail had been coiling and uncoiling in agitation. “If it's something evil, then I'm with Silvie until I can pull her out of it.”

“You won't help them destroy the world?” Tinker asked, looking and sounding skeptical. “Because it kinda sounds like you might, if they wanted to.”

He chuckled. “No, I can't do that.”

Boyd shook his head. “They live here. They like nice things, too. I can't make everything, so we need a society to make them nice things. Silvie likes to watch movies, for example, and there won't be anyone to make movies if I burn everything down for her. That should keep most things safe.” Listing things he wouldn't do actually helped his mental state a little.

“Well, that's good at least. Okay...” she pressed her palms to her eyes and then nodded to herself. “It sounds like I definitely need to stick around. If for no other reason than to pull *you* back if it needs to happen.” Tinker nodded again firmly, making her decision.

Boyd accepted that. He would have preferred if it wasn't for him, but it was a justifiable reason to risk herself.

He rephrased her reasoning in his mind to be that she wanted to make sure that he didn't destroy humanity for his love. He really hoped they couldn't convince him to do something like that.

He was fairly sure they couldn't... or rather, he was fairly certain they wouldn't try to convince him to do something like that. He'd been Silvie and he felt like he would have noticed if she'd had a desire to burn the world down. Having someone watching him to make sure she couldn't... well, that wouldn't hurt.

He accepted Tinker's resolve. There was just one last condition, though. He knew Tinker well enough by now to know she wouldn't mind it.

"Okay," he said, "I'm going to have to kiss you, then."

Tinker sputtered and blinked her big hazel eyes for a solid four seconds before she gasped and covered her face. "Gosh, that is so embarrassing," she whined. "Jeez, way to bury the lead. You could have probably just started with that, you know?"

"I didn't want to unduly influence you." Boyd chuckled ruefully. "Besides, I didn't think you would mind—it's to establish the first level of the Bond. The bond tells me when Silvie is in danger. I also felt something new last night; it wasn't bad, so I ignored it at the time."

He'd honestly believed she tried taking care of herself and he didn't want to embarrass her. "I'm pretty sure it was Mindy doing something in her head. This way if I have the Bond with you..." he trailed off.

"You'll at least be able to try to save me if they try anything." Tinker nodded her understanding.

"Or, if whatever they are getting us involved in blows back on you," Boyd added.

He would do his best to protect Raev, Daisy, and Laura from that, as well. He wasn't sure what to do about Daisy. If he went to her now and told her to leave, he was sure she

wouldn't listen. He could force the issue, if he had to—but that came with a slew of other issues.

“Okay... so. Um. You are going to, um... kiss me?” Tinker squeaked out the last two words, somehow even more nervous than she'd been earlier. “I was hoping it would be... never mind. It doesn't matter.”

## Chapter 20

Boyd frowned. Of course she wanted their first kiss to be more special than this. He stifled a growl, a little frustration with Silvie building for having forced them into this situation.

“No,” he did his best not to growl, “how a first kiss happens matters. How about some cuddling? That’s what did it with Mindy the first time around.” He only had two experiences to work off of here, since he couldn’t remember the forming of the other five bonds he’d made—including Silvie’s.

“Oh, that’s... No, well... I mean yes, we can cuddle... but after.” When Tinker lowered her hands, her cheeks glowed a faint pink.

She looked down at herself and started fiddling with her rig. After a few clicks and hisses, the rig fell off, pooling at her feet like a dress might—except with a lot more clattering of tools and gadgets on the hardwood floor. She flinched at the sound and stepped out of it.

Without the rig on, her tight suit gave a very different impression. It fit her snugly, even compressing her body a little. Of course, that meant it displayed her curves in exciting detail. The sudden reveal as she dropped the bulky rigging only made the effect more pronounced.

Her suit was done mostly in two shades of pink. A dark metallic pink covered her chest, outer arms, hips, and ran down her thighs, shins, and feet. The rest was a lighter, almost pale pink with flashes of copper running through it that reminded him of the suit she’d made for Raev. The pattern, with its cleavage window, intentionally called attention to her curves, making it clear the short woman was no child.

“I was going to say I was hoping to look a little nicer, but I think this might work.” She pinched the bottom of the cleavage window and pulled her fingers down. The suit split on a seam he hadn’t even seen, widening the ‘window’ to about half-way down her chest, unveiling and drawing his eyes to the inner slopes of her perky breasts.

“The when and how never mattered, really. Just that it’s you. Heck, I wanted you to kiss me in like those thirty seconds the first night we met.” She fluffed her hair, trying to work some volume into her light brown locks.

“It would be nice if it was memorable for you, though... wait. You’re not going to forget this, are you?” She froze in place, fingers mid tussle, with a frown on her face.

“Ah...” Boyd frowned, but then his Changed Mind opened communication again—apparently his other self had been paying attention. Boyd would most certainly *not* forget this moment. The knowledge came with the distinct impression of salivating excitement at the prospect of a new and novel meal... one that smelled particularly delightful.

Boyd wasn’t sure he liked how his other self was looking at Tinker—which was all sorts of confusing. “No, I’ll remember,” Boyd promised. It came out as a growl with more heat than he’d intended. “I could never forget.”

Tinker had been avoiding eye contact ever since she’d started preparing herself for a kiss, but his words drew her eyes to his.

Boyd would be lying if he denied liking the feeling her primping to kiss him gave him. After looking into his eyes for a moment, hers widened just a little and she gave a sharp intake of breath. She let it out, a little shakily, before she said, “Silvie mentioned there was something you could do.”

“Hmm?” Boyd felt the mood beginning to set in himself, more than he’d thought it would. Maybe her growing excitement was infectious, or maybe he was more excited about this than he knew. Or at least a part of him was.

Tinker and Boyd seemed to be frozen, only a few feet apart, both waiting for something to happen before they moved.

“She called it an aura effect.”

“Oh,” Boyd smirked, he didn’t see a reason not to, so he released his control over that part of his Power. It flowed out of him, naturally reaching out to about thirty feet. He could



push on it, to make it reach out a fair bit further, but he usually pulled it in close around himself. It amplified any attraction someone might have for him, and their uneasiness or fear of him if they didn't.

“Like this?” he asked, as her eyes dilated and refocused on him.

“Y-yeah, I... uh... I wanted the full effect.”

Boyd decided it was time to break the stillness and stepped forward. Tinker's chin raised as her eyes followed his and the distance between them closed. If she wanted the full effect... well, that was something else—she *did* ask for it though.

As if responding to his thoughts, his Changed Mind acted again. A trickle of his Power began flowing into Tinker as she shifted from foot to foot, and she let out a gasp.

“Woah!” Her eyes dropped a little from his, down to his lips.

She wet her own lips, her small pink tongue flicking out and across them. Then, those lips parted slightly as her breathing picked up in anticipation.

He drew her attention to his lips, making her crave their touch. Her arms raised as she came up on her toes and Boyd reached down to scoop her up, with one hand supporting her back while the other lifted her by one thigh. Her hands went to the back of his neck, and she pulled herself up the rest of the way. Their eyes locked for just a moment before she closed her eyes and tilted her head back.

Boyd leaned in and took her lips—gently, at first, as he should. He took his time, finding her lips eager for each soft new touch. He slowly deepened it, his tongue shrinking down just a little to better match his smaller partner. His mouth didn't change, though, which added a certain level of the exotic to the kiss that both of them enjoyed.

He could tell the Bond had formed between them, because he could feel how much Tinker was enjoying the kiss. It felt like it had formed so readily because of Boyd's intent—

he'd stated that it was the reason for this kiss. And because they both wanted the Bond to form, it did.

The kiss was better than she'd imagined it would be, and he realized the size difference between them wasn't something she was looking past or simply accepting. No... actually, it was part of her attraction to him. She liked the fact that he was so much bigger than her! It excited her, and... there was something tied into that he couldn't quite identify. There was something about her that made his large stature ideal for her.

The kiss didn't end with the Bond's forming. It lasted for several long minutes, Tinker shifting in his arms to change the angle and deepen it further, after impatiently waiting for him to do so. She began to sigh into it, thrilled at being held and kissed like this. Her previous experiences kissing another hadn't particularly impressed her, but this one did.

She loved how his tongue wrestled hers, gently pushing hers around, guiding its movements. Through the bond he felt how small she felt compared to him—and how much that thrilled her. Their fledgling Bond fed her enjoyment back into Boyd, so that made stopping the kiss for him even more difficult.

Not that he was in a hurry. She wasn't the most skilled kisser he had had the pleasure of tangling tongues with, but she made up for any lack of skill with her enthusiasm and by how much she simply thrilled at the moment. Besides, that also meant he got to experience the steps she took while learning.

She was a quick study, too, seeming to pick up new tricks as this first kiss went on and on. Boyd decided that, technically, it only counted as one kiss because their lips never broke apart, despite its length. Eventually, though, as with all good things, it did end.

Tinker leaned down and pushed her face into his neck. Both of them were taking heavy, heated breaths. Boyd could feel his Changed Mind pushing for more, to take this new physical relationship to its conclusion. Tinker deserved better

than that, and his Changed Mind must have realized this, because it backed down without much of a fight. Boyd hoped things would go back to how they'd been before on that front, after his nap.

This new—much more active—version of his Changed Mind unsettled him.

After a long moment of clinging to him and breathing into his neck, Tinker muttered, “You smell good...” into his neck.

Boyd pulled his aura back in, although he noted that his Changed Mind had taken it upon himself to lessen the effects once their kiss had started—which surprised Boyd and led him to reevaluate that part of himself. Like Boyd, his other self would rather his partners enjoy his company without his aura affecting them too much. He wanted them to be drunk on him, not on his aura.

“Like, really, *really* good.”

Boyd smirked, pressing his cheek to the side of her head. He'd give her another moment, but he expected Silvie would be taking action any moment now if he didn't reassure her.

“So, cuddles?” he asked once her breathing leveled out into something more relaxed.

“I need to do something first.” Her high voice had an almost dreamy quality to it. “I can't tell you what, or it would defeat the purpose. I can't keep using what I am to protect my thoughts from the Mind Powered and want to do something before I remove it. I... I only used a limited version, but they still have detrimental effects on the psyche with prolonged use.”

She pulled back and gave him a shy look. “Could you finish walking me to my lab?”

“Mhmm,” he confirmed, reaching out to collect her rig with his tail.

When Boyd did, he noted there was a large backpack on the back of it, with a hose that connected it to one of the

tools holstered on the rig. The whole thing was a lot heavier than he'd expected. Heavier than the woman herself, still in his arms.

“Woah,” he rumbled, “how do you wear this thing?”

Tinker pulled her face out of his neck and pushed down on his shoulder to perch herself up where she could see what he was talking about. The pose put her pink-clad chest and its recently widened cleavage window pretty much right in his face. He let himself look for only a moment before glancing up at her pink face. He could feel how much she liked drawing his eye through their Bond.

He smiled up at her and she grinned back. “So this is what it's like to be this tall,” she said with a bit of wonder as she looked around the hall. Then she spotted her rig being carried by his tail.

“Oh! It has built in gravitics, I'm actually ten percent lighter when I'm wearing it. Makes running so much easier,” she explained, before turning to look back down the way they were going.

They'd almost been at the end of the hall where they'd stopped to talk. Looking back the way they came, Boyd couldn't see the Great Room because of a slight curve he hadn't noticed in the hallway while walking along it. The hall ended at a set of thick looking blast doors helpfully labeled ‘Lab A’ in big yellow block letters above the split in the double-doors.

Boyd could see that there was a piece of paper taped below the label. He couldn't read it but was sure it read ‘Tinker's Lab’... or something to that effect.

“Silvie is really sweet. She's kind, giving, and good,” Tinker said, only a little uncertainty in her high-pitched voice.

Boyd guessed that the comment was prompted by seeing the note herself.

“Yes, she is,” Boyd agreed.

He didn't want to try to convince Tinker of anything—he knew he was not impartial when it came to either Silvie or

Mindy. Of course, the same could be said about Raev, and now Tinker.

She was his in all the ways that mattered. Even if their relationship didn't develop past this, which he sincerely doubted would be the case, she was his. She felt too good against him like this and was far too willing. With no reason to do so, Boyd doubted he would resist the temptation for long now that this initial step had been taken.

"I'm going to be prepared anyway," Tinker nodded to herself, turning back towards him with determination in her big hazel eyes and on her doll-like face. "For you."

"Just stay safe," Boyd tried to keep the plea from his voice. He could feel her determination across the Bond just as easily as he could see it on her face. Determination like that could get a person killed.

"I will. I'm no Hero, don't get me wrong." Tinker's lips quirked in a shy smile. "I make stuff—that's what I'm good at, so that's what I'll do. I'll make sure to be prepared if we need it, but I'm not going to be launching an attack to free you again—at least not from the women you love. I saw how that worked out the first time. If you need to be freed from someone else, I'll think of something." She bounced her brows at him as she tapped her head. "Now, can you do anything to protect my thoughts through the metal door and a little distance?"

Boyd frowned, he didn't like the idea of letting her out of his sight, but knew he'd have to get over that at some point. Normally he used this Power in bursts, but he'd never had to hold it on at a distance. He could throw it pretty much as far as he could see, though, so his range shouldn't be an issue.

His Changed Mind sent him the impression that it wouldn't be a problem.

"Yes." He nodded.

Then Boyd got another lesson in how to use his Power from himself. His Changed Mind seemed to wait for him to be paying attention before he somehow deliberately attached

tendrils to specific parts of Tinker's mind. His other self conveyed that, by connecting to these parts and sending a steady trickle down those connections, it should prevent others from connecting to her thoughts without affecting Tinker, herself. The trickle started up and held before his Changed Mind sank back onto its bed.

"I should be able to keep others out for a time." Boyd noted how the connection seemed to dull the sense he got from her over their new Bond, too.

"Good." She leaned in and pecked his nose. "Please put me down then." She kicked her legs towards the ground as if they would grow and let her reach it on her own.

Boyd leaned down and carefully set her on her feet, reluctant to let her go.

She smiled and flushed a deeper pink, "Give me a half hour and then I think you mentioned something about cuddles."

It was only then that he remembered he was supposed to reassure Silvie after Mindy's meddling. "Ah, yes please. I should probably ask about cuddling and the others though." He wasn't sure how to broach the subject.

It took Tinker a second to catch on, but then she laughed. "Oh... because I don't want to um, you know, with them? No, cuddling should be fine. I just don't think I want to kiss or... do other stuff with girls. I've shared beds with girls and figure I will again, especially if I want to sleep in your bed with you—which I do—so cuddling won't be an issue. Do you think they'll want me around, though? Especially after this?"

Boyd's first thought was that it didn't matter what Silvie or Mindy thought after all this, but that was just his grumpiness speaking and he knew it. His Changed Mind even signaled its displeasure, sending him a vaguely growly threat about treating all his women properly. Boyd found that just fantastic—now he was threatening himself.

So, instead of being grumpy or flippant, he gave it some actual thought. Then, he checked in on the Bond he

shared with Silvie for a hint about her current mentality. What he found brought a warm smile to his face. Silvie was really worried—so much so, that it made his gut clench in a sympathetic reaction. But she wasn't worried about anything remotely rational, given the situation.

He chuckled and shook his head. “Yes, and it's good you are okay with cuddling the others. I think Silvie might be a bit more clingy with you than me once we get back.”

“What?” Tinker's brow furrowed in confusion. “Why?”

“This whole time,” another chuckle forced its way out, “her biggest concern has been that this might mean we won't end up together—you and me, that is.”

“Seriously?” Tinker's brows jumped in surprise, incredulity on her face. “Not that I'll turn her in, or turn you against her?”

“Nope,” Boyd shook his head, “she's a little worried about the second one, but she isn't worried about being turned in at all.”

“Huh!” Tinker grunted.

“Yeah, it pretty much confirms that they are connected to a splinter group,” Boyd shared his conclusion with her. “They probably control Glorith City, or at least enough of The Authority there that you getting back there to blow the whistle wouldn't matter. So, if you do end up running, don't go back to Glorith.”

“Right.” Tinker nodded. “Okay, I need a half hour. Um, could you guard the door? I'm not really worried anymore, but knowing you are out here would still make me feel better.”

“Of course. I think I might call Silvie down here, though. She is *really* worried this will mean sending you away. Is that okay?” Boyd asked.

“Sure. I'll lock the door. It should take her more than a few seconds to get through the lock. It's not like her being down the hall would make that much of a difference in how long it would take her to get to me if she wanted to.” Tinker

shrugged her slender shoulders. In the wide-open cleavage window of this skin-tight suit, the simple movement drew his eyes lower.

“Yay!” she murmured softly enough that he was fairly sure he wasn’t supposed to hear it.

He could also feel across their Bond just how thrilled she was to draw his eye each time she had over the past few days. With that, he also got confirmation that she had indeed been trying—including with that shrug—to do just that.

He made a mental note to look more often. It was just a sacrifice he would have to make to build up her self-esteem. Boyd gave her a smile as she seemed to wait, seeing if he might look more now. He scanned her up and down one more time, as she shifted her stance as his eyes travel up her petite, but toned body.

“I really like your suit, by the way,” he told her.

“I hated it until this moment. Now, I never want to take it off.” Tinker laughed a little awkwardly.

“Hold on now,” Boyd said seriously. “Those little fabric body suits of yours have their merits, and are much softer than they look... much better for cuddling.”

“I’ll have to thank Raev for convincing me to wear them. I bought them by accident; they were supposed to be full sized, for working in,” Tinker explained.

“A *very* happy accident,” Boyd rumbled.

Tinker’s cheeks flushed once more. “I’ve got a clean one I’ll put on. Um... I’m gonna go now. Um... the kiss was nice. *Really* nice. Um... I’ll be back.” She turned and scurried away.

Boyd got the impression that it had suddenly all caught up to her and kept an eye on their Bond. She felt a little nervous, but mostly excited—a little overwhelmed, but mostly in a positive way.

The large blast doors hissed open as she approached, and Boyd could see lights coming on in the large lab on the



other side. Bright white lights reflected off all the chrome, steel, and glass of the equipment that took up most of the room. He didn't get a good look before the doors hissed closed behind her, though. Plus, it took him a good second or two to pull his eyes from her cute bubble butt to see the lab.

Once she was out of sight, Boyd took a second to settle himself, drawing and releasing a few deep breaths. Damn... had all that just happened? It was a lot to process at once, but no one ever said being a Hero would be simple.

## Chapter 21

Once he had finished processing everything one more time, Boyd checked his Bonds. There were three of them now, and likely to be four in the near future. Tinker was quickly coming down from her excitement and had entered a focused, almost fugue-like state. The transition impressed him. Raev was mildly concerned but was also confident that everything would be okay. It felt like she had simply decided that Boyd would see them through whatever was going on.

Silvie, however, was a ball of concern, worry, and guilt. She was more upset than he had ever felt from her—more upset than she'd been in the hospital, after he'd almost died. The difference this time was that she was filled with self-recrimination. Boyd couldn't have his love feeling so poorly about herself, so he tried something new. He summoned his love for her and reached down their Bond with it. He tried to mimic what his Changed Mind had done, sending a slow but constant flow of his fondness for her down their bond.

His Changed Mind sent him another derisive thought about his own ineptitude and took over after Boyd fumbled it twice, not being able to get the stream to connect in the same way. This time, it felt like his other self grabbed Boyd's perception of his Power and pulled him closer, making him pay close attention to what it was doing. Then, it connected his Power to Silvie slowly and deliberately—as if demonstrating the process.

As soon as the connection formed and solidified, it broke and faded away. Boyd was left feeling that he should try again as his Changed Mind withdrew. Boyd grumbled about his other self being an asshole, as he tried to replicate what the other him had done. It took another two tries, the first attempt faltering after partially connecting.

On his fourth total attempt, though, it latched on and stabilized. Suddenly, he felt his love for Silvie flowing towards her. It settled her emotions almost immediately. His sense of her through the Bond filled with warmth as she soaked up his

love. Then, he sent her his desire for her company—something that never really went away.

Excitement and joy filled their Bond. A moment later she came floating around the curve in the hall at a moderate—for her, at least—pace. It was faster than he could manage at a sprint, and his strength made him no slouch when it came to straight line speed. She stopped a few feet away from him, chewing at her bottom lip with a worried expression.

Silvie glanced around, looking for Tinker. “Is she gone?” She sounded so sad that it broke his heart a little.

“No.” Boyd shook his head with a small, reassuring smile. “She’s not going anywhere. We’ve actually formed the first layer of the Bond.”

“Really?” Her bright eyes lit up with hope, then confusion. “Wait... why?”

“So I’ll know if she is in danger,” Boyd replied, opening his arms to beckon her into them.

Silvie floated forward and draped her arms around his neck as he hugged her close, pressing her against himself.

“You don’t think I would hurt her, do you?” She sounded hurt at the very thought.

“Of course not. I’ve been you. I only thought it might be possible while she was hurting me. Outside of that, I know you wouldn’t harm her intentionally.” Boyd ducked his head and brought his lips to her neck, which he gave a little nip.

She tilted her head to the side, giving him better access to kiss and nibble on her there. “Mindy wouldn’t hurt her either.” She sighed, relaxing as he distracted her.

“While I want to believe that, and pretty much do, you know I have to take precautions. I brought Tinker onto the team, meaning I brought her into whatever is going on. Besides, this will help me keep her safe from any outside threats, too,” Boyd rumbled into her neck before turning his head to find her mostly bare shoulder, kissing along her soft skin.

“Hmmm, alright.” She cooed directly into his ear. “You aren’t going to ask?”

“I’d just forget.” He shrugged. “Apparently I’ve been noticing that you are involved in something since we were thirteen or fourteen, but mostly since we bonded. My Changed Mind has been making me forget in order to protect you.”

Silvie laughed weakly in his arms. “It wasn’t until we were fourteen, so you must have noticed like right away. I thought I was being so sneaky, too. Oh... and Mindy says to tell you ‘other self’. I’m supposed to scold you every time you call it your ‘Changed Mind’, too.”

Boyd smiled into her shoulder, moving back up to her neck with a trail of kisses. He enjoyed the closeness, her feel and her scent. He would be lying if he said this situation didn’t have him on edge. He didn’t like not being on the same side as Silvie. They were always on each other’s side. That was just a fact of the universe, as far as he was concerned.

“Right, my other self,” he rumbled, “who has been hiding a lot from me.” That had a second unsettling revelation, and he hadn’t even had lunch yet.

“Mindy said she put you two in touch and it might be scary for you. The timing of this couldn’t be worse.” Silvie said this against the side of his head, holding him a little more firmly. Her thighs slid up and she wrapped her legs around his waist.

“I’m supposed to remind you that he is just part of you and that he doesn’t scare me at all.” She said before kissing his ear. “I see him in you sometimes—mostly when you are fighting or fucking.” Silvie nibbled his ear. “He’s always been there, though, a part of you.”

“Yeah?” He rumbled, a little heat entering his tone.

“Mhmm,” she purred, nipping his ear again before pulling back to look him in the eyes.

He could see the excitement that his kissing and nipping had built in her, it danced just beneath the surface of

her blue and silver gaze. “You don’t have to be scared of him,” she said with surety.

“Okay,” Boyd agreed. But, of course, it wasn’t that simple.

The fact that his Changed Mind had been rather helpful, if a bit rude, went a long way to calming his worst fears. At the very least, both of them valued the women in his life and neither wanted any harm to come to them. Not having to worry about hurting those closest to him went a long way towards making his potentially going Primal less terrifying. He was still holding Mindy at bay, so she could only hear him through Silvie, and was unable to correct his thoughts.

“So, what’s next?” Silvie asked after a moment. “Oh, and what am I feeling? It’s really nice. I can tell it’s your love, but... how?”

“Oh, my Cha...” Boyd coughed to the side. “My other self taught me a new trick.”

He grinned. He’d forgotten he was holding it, given how simple it was. Boyd was fairly certain he could hold it indefinitely if he was so inclined. Come to think of it, that didn’t sound like such a bad idea.

“Is it distracting?”

“It’s a little intense,” Silvie confirmed with a nod. “It’s really nice, though.”

Boyd looked internally, trying to figure out if he could lower the intensity without removing the connection. He expected his Changed Mind to make another appearance, but while Boyd did feel it was watching his efforts like a hawk, it remained silent. Boyd was able to figure it out on his own, lowering the trickle down to a steady drip.

“How about that?”

Silvie closed her eyes with a pleasant little smile, focusing on the feeling for a full minute before answering. “That’s less intense. Hmmm...” She made a humming little purr. “At first it felt like when you are that needy kind of

cuddly—the kind where you start kissing and biting the good spots to get me excited like you were just doing.”

Sher gave another happy little sigh. “Now, though, it’s more like you’re standing right behind me with your hands on my waist or hips... like you are watching what I’m doing over my shoulder but don’t want to distract or stop me. You just want me to know you are there and that you love me.”

He hummed into her neck, liking the sound of that. “Mind if I leave it there for a bit?”

“Can you?” she asked hopefully.

“Feels like it,” he nodded in confirmation. “I’m pretty sure I can just sort of leave it there. Actually... it feels like it will make connecting to you for other stuff easier if I leave it there—kind of like a guide rope. It might fade in my sleep, though.”

“I hope not, I would love if it always felt like this.” Silvie grinned at him.

“I’ll leave it then, and if it fades I can put it back. At least I think I’ll remember how. Not sure how my other self making me forget things works,” Boyd admitted.

Just how much of this all was he going to lose?

“Well, I noticed it happen once...” Silvie scrunched her lips to one side. “You overheard part of one of my calls with Mindy. I was... I was sloppy. We got in a little fight about me not telling you who I’d been speaking to, or what we had been talking about, but it was late, and I had an early day, so we went to bed after a bit. In the morning, you remembered the fight but thought it was about a stupid mistake I’d made in the field earlier that week.”

Boyd’s brows drew together as he tried to remember. Had it been about what happened at the bank?

“I kinda think the other you just found something to justify the fight with, but it was a valid mistake. I totally didn’t check my blind spots clearing that bank. Difference was that when I brought it up to you, you simply updated my training.

We didn't actually fight about the mistake, but you apologized for being so hard on me about it the next morning."

"Huh." Boyd grunted.

He remembered the fight and how silly it had felt after the fact. The mistake wasn't enough to justify his perceived frustration about it. He'd spent an entire workout session trying to figure out why it had happened, ultimately deciding that he was just being pissy because of their circumstances.

"Well, that explains that."

"Yeah, you seemed a little confused, but I distracted you with a quickie for an apology and everything was okay after that." She grinned one of her devilish grins.

"That does typically do the job." Boyd grinned back.

She nuzzled her nose against his before leaning back and adopting a more serious expression. "Although, you don't have to forget much longer. We can't answer all your questions because we don't have all the answers, but it's time to bring you in on what we do know... Raev and Tinker too."

Silvie paused before continuing, obviously carrying on two conversations at once. "Mindy would like to ask how you are dealing with the compulsion that was laid on you."

"My other self is taking care of it. He uses my Mental Domination in ways I never even thought about," Boyd responded.

"She says we should probably remove it before we tell you too much more. It would be best if you were asleep for that. Also, she told me that your Mental Domination is much stronger than we thought," Silvie said, ending with a frown.

"No!" She scowled. "I'm not going to call my Darling a little shit."

Boyd snorted, long ago having accepted that when Mindy called him a little shit, she did so with affection. It never quite became a nickname—not like the way 'Big Guy' seemed to have become one with Raev—but she used it often enough almost to qualify.

“It doesn’t seem to be a problem for my other self to repress it,” he explained, “but I want the compulsion out so that I can hear the full explanation.”

“So, that brings us back around to... what’s next?” Silvie asked again.

“Food.” Boyd nodded gravely. “Then I’m dragging you, Raev, and Tinker to that giant fucking couch-bed thing I saw for a nap so that Mindy can pull the very illegal compulsion out of my head. That way, you can tell me all about whatever it is that you have gotten us involved with.” Boyd let more of his frustration out in his words than he would have liked—they came out with a light growl.

“We’re fighting to free you from people that will lock you in a cage and pump you full of drugs so you pump the women they choose full of Power if we let them.” Silvie held his eyes firmly, her devilish grin replaced by a tender, understanding smile. “I’m sorry, Boyd. I would tell you everything I know, but Mindy says that the more you hear, the stronger the compulsion to submit yourself for questioning will get.”

Boyd could feel her sincerity through their Bond, once again confirming that, at the very least, she wholeheartedly believed what she was saying. Silvie might present a public appearance of simplicity or air-headedness, but anyone who knew her would tell you it was a mask. As Raev had described her, Silvie was the ‘dangerous kind of smart’.

While it was possible that someone was manipulating her—especially someone with strong Mind Powers—that felt unlikely to him. He also had to accept that, to an extent, it simply didn’t matter. He chose to trust her because he loved her.

Boyd imagined the sound of distant funeral bells, tolling the fall of yet another of The Authority’s Heroes. His Changed Mind stirred once more, displaying even more of that worrisome agency as it mentally smacked him upside the head. It left him with the feeling that he was being an idiot and should stop.



He was hungry. Silvie was needy. He had other women to worry about—one who was starting to miss him, and another he could feel a nervous anticipation starting to build within. Boyd grunted.

“So, food then a family nap.” He left off any extra drama this time. His Changed Mind seemed satisfied with this.

“Both of those things sound nice,” Silvie’s grin reappeared, large and bright this time.

Boyd felt a thrill of excitement run through her.

“By Tinker’s inclusion in the family nap, I take it she’s being accepted into the family?” Silvie’s joy at the rapid progress nearly overwhelmed him.

“Yes,” Boyd rumbled. “I’m still trying to cope with stealing her free will, if we get that far.”

“Should we run through the normal debate on the topic?” Silvie asked, tilting her head to the side quizzically. “Mindy says repetition can help reforge neural pathways or whatever. Slowly rework the way you think away from the ingrained thought process.”

Boyd shrugged. “We can, but I have it memorized by now. The one that seems to help the most is the ‘it’s an expression of free will to give up a piece of theirs in exchange for the Power to protect more people’.”

“Mhmm,” Silvie agreed, settling against him. “By denying her the opportunity, you would do more to suppress her free will than you would by accepting her. Plus, by now you must realize how happy it would make her. How much she wants to be in love? How good you could be for her?”

Boyd’s lover shook her head. “If you deny her, she’ll either stay on the team and probably never date again, or find love and leave, or leave and maybe find someone that would not treat her right. Who knows what kind of person that would be?”

Silvie’s face and tone filled with worry. “Before today, I would have worried for her. With her personality, I would

have been concerned about someone taking advantage of our little genius—someone who knew how to push her buttons and who used her low self-esteem to manipulate and use her.”

Boyd felt his Changed Mind stir again, agitated at the idea Silvie proposed. It already felt particularly protective of Tinker—possessive, even. Boyd found himself torn between frowning at himself or growling at the scenario Silvie had mentioned.

“But,” Silvie transitioned both her expression and her voice from concerned to proud and delighted, “after today I will worry less. Being prepared to fight the whole team to get you out is more than I expected from her. I’m surprised in the best way.”

## Chapter 22

Boyd remembered Tinker standing in the hallway and aiming the net thrower at him, a determination enforced by sheer will overlaying the fear in her eyes. His Changed Mind stirred in a very different way at the thought, pleased with what he already perceived as his woman.

Boyd scowled this time, causing Silvie to tilt her head to the side with another quizzical expression.

“My Cha... my other self feels a lot more active since earlier. It also feels like you were talking more to him than me just now. Trying to get him to react, or... Are you trying to make me go Primal?” Boyd voiced the concern that had been building inside of him. Parts of what Mindy had said, combined with how responsive his Changed Mind had been to Silvie’s words made it hard to ignore.

Silvie frowned and moved her hands up to his cheeks, taking them softly in her hands and staring into his eyes. “Darling, you know I would never hurt you, right?”

Boyd nodded.

“Good.” She leaned in and kissed him, slow and tender.

After breaking it, she stayed close, looking into his eyes, their breath intermingling. “Now, Mindy says she will explain it in detail later, but ‘going Primal’ is just a myth. It’s an outdated concept that anybody in a field that touches on Changed psychology scoffs at. They’ll tell you that it is both inaccurate and detrimental to the mental health and perception of the Changed.”

Boyd continued to frown as he asked, “Then why does The Authority teach it?” They sent out informational pamphlets on warning signs of Changed behaviors to neighbors and co-workers, and everything.”

He’d been taught from the beginning that it was important to pay attention to any changes in personality or behavior of the Changed, as they could be early warning signs

of going Primal. People were encouraged to report any concerning observations to The Authority so they could reach out and offer assistance.

Silvie shrugged, still gently holding his cheeks. “I don’t know. I’ve seen the evidence though, and I’ve talked to doctors about it. They won’t say any of that publicly, of course—apparently bad things happen if they do. But Mindy put me in touch with a few who were willing to talk off the record. They all said that your ‘Changed Mind’...” she removed her hands from his cheeks for just long enough to do air quotes, “is just a grouping of your baser instincts that you were taught to suppress at a young age.”

She pursed her lips, frowning. “Like as early as when your identity was forming young. They said that they take on aspects of a personality because of... a bunch of psycho mumbo jumbo. ‘Going Primal’ is what happens when that personality grows too big to be suppressed anymore. The Changed either ends up with a dissociative disorder or the previously suppressed personality takes over and becomes dominant.”

Boyd contemplated her words. There was a logic to them. It sounded like something that could be real. He wasn’t educated nearly enough on the topic to feel confident in his judgment, though.

Silvie continued, “So... no, we aren’t trying to make you go Primal. That would be bad. I love this Boyd. We love you.” She again pulled her hands away from his face to pat his shoulders before returning them to his cheeks.

Her hands were small and dainty compared to him, but also pleasantly cool and very soft—a benefit of her energy-manipulation-based resistance. It prevented any injury that could damage her skin.

That reminded him he needed to make sure Tinker took better care of herself.

“If we want to keep you,” Silvie’s sweet voice prevented his mind from wandering, “we have to get you to stop repressing the instincts and emotions that are attached to

that growing personality. We have to get you to integrate with your whole self.”

Boyd’s throat felt a little tight. The way she was talking made it sound simple, but it terrified him. He didn’t trust his Changed Mind—not in the least. Sure, it had been helpful these past few minutes, but Boyd had spent his entire life vigilantly guarding against the being living inside of him.

“I’ll change,” he rumbled. That much was certain—at the very least.

“Yes, a little,” Silvie agreed, nodding slowly but smiling warmly. “You’ll become who you were meant to be before you were trained to shut away certain parts of yourself. I know it must be scary, but it’s something I’ve been looking forward to. I love you, darling, but it’s been so hard to watch you for... well, forever. It’s been even worse these last couple years, where I’ve caught some glimpses of your other side, only seeing the real you when I’m able to drag it up out of you.”

Boyd felt his frown deepening. “What do you mean?”

Silvie’s warm smile shifted to the side as she thought about how to say whatever was on her mind. Her faintly glowing eyes studied his as if searching them for the right words. “So, I know it’s a pretty big no-no, but I got a lot of advice from your ex. I think it might be best to let her explain what I was doing... I pretty much just followed her instructions.”

Boyd grunted, not satisfied with the response.

Silvie rolled her pretty eyes but her smirk and the amusement he felt across the bond from her took any bite out of it. “You could just stop doing whatever you’re doing to block Mindy out and let her start talking to you instead of distracting me and trying to get me to play telephone. She’s kinda freaking out.”

“I can’t do that until Tinker comes back—sorry Mindy. It’s not that I don’t trust you, but I owe her that much, at least,” Boyd said, knowing that Mindy would hear his words

through Silvie if she was paying that close of attention to them.

“She understands and says she will tell you everything she can about your mind and her goals for it as soon as you give her the chance,” Silvie repeated the message.

“I’d appreciate that, but won’t I just forget during the nap?” Boyd was under that impression, at least.

“Mindy doesn’t see why. You don’t have any compulsions to report something like this to anyone but your handler. Royce is in the know, by the way. That’s why he’s taking over the full team. Carrie wasn’t in the know, and wouldn’t be a likely ally if we tried to bring her in. Commander Davis and his people are, though.”

That confirmed some things for Boyd.

Suddenly, Silvie looked up and to the side, obviously talking to Mindy but replying out loud for his benefit. Or maybe she just hadn’t learned how to have thought-based conversations yet. “No. I’m not going to try to explain all that. It’ll only be a little longer. He’s not running away. Look, he’s clinging to me.”

Boyd was, too. At first, it had been in response to her need for the assurance contact brought, but it transitioned at some point to be more for him somewhere along the way.

Silvie frowned. “You can tell him over lunch.” Her eyes shifted back to his, “Oh, Daisy is making pizza, lots of meat sound good?”

It took Boyd a moment for it to register that she’d switched back to talking to him. “Yes, lots of pizza, too.” He’d skipped breakfast.

The doors to the lab hissed open behind him. “It was a lot... oh.” Tinker’s high voice started and then dropped off, likely upon seeing Silvie.

Boyd could picture her doll-like face dropping with her voice.

Silvie's smile shifted to a warm and welcoming one, making it clear that no grudge was being held.

"Hi, Silvie."

"Hi sweetie," Silvie replied with as much warmth for the smaller woman as she'd ever shown. Silvie floated back from Boyd so he could turn to face Tinker.

Her cheeks burned red, and her eyes drilled into the floor, as if the tiles there were suddenly the most interesting thing in the world.

"Let me be clear, right away," Silvie explained. "No one is mad at you. No one is disappointed. You didn't let down or betray anyone. I'm really happy that you are looking out for our man. I promise you I'm not a threat to him, though. I only want good things for him—for us. And 'us' includes you now, by the way. I heard he formed the first stage of the Bond with you. I'm sorry it was under these circumstances."

"Oh, um..." Tinker shifted her stance from one foot to the other, crossing her arms over her stomach. Her suit was still partially unzipped, so this caused some interesting things to happen to her cleavage. "It was just a kiss. The best kiss I've ever had, but it's not like it was my first kiss ever. Besides, with Boyd I get the feeling it would've been the best kiss I'd ever had, no matter what was going on."

"Oh? Ohhhhh!" Silvie grinned and let out one of her musical giggles. "Sorry. When Boyd said you'd formed the first layer of the Bond, I thought he meant something else."

Boyd sighed while Tinker's already embarrassed face nearly melted from the heat of the blood rushing to darken her cheeks. "N-no. Not y-yet," she managed to stutter.

Boyd was at a loss for words. Silvie legitimately thought he had done... what? Taken a couple minutes during the short period he and Tinker were discussing their next steps to pump one into her?

"Um..." Tinker didn't seem to be having much better luck on the vocabulary front.

“No, my Love.” Boyd looped his arm over Silvie’s shoulders and pulled her to his side. “Just a very nice kiss.”

He threw a wink at Tinker, whose lips quirked up in a slight smile as she glanced his way. The pleased but shy expression on her doll-like face was getting him excited to start flirting with her more openly. When he tried to squash that emotion down like he always did—out of habit—this time it didn’t work.

He reached for his Mental Domination and it just fluttered out of his grasp. “What the...?”

Silvie turned to him with a curious expression as Tinker looked on with concern.

“I mean... I suppose I should be trying to break the habit anyway, but... So, I’ve been...” He paused.

Boyd had started to explain himself, but then realized who he was talking to. Silvie wouldn’t be pleased to learn he had been using his Power to repress the urge to flirt with the women around him. He changed the subject.

“Oh, wait... Tinker, would it be okay to let Mindy back into my head? Might be easier to show her and then tell you.”

“Oh, yes,” Tinker said with a nod, face still red. Then a dark thought flickered across her face, and he felt a spike of anxiety on their Bond. “I mean, as long as she isn’t about to puppet you... you know, to kill me or something. Although puppeting Silvie would be more efficient, and she’s right there. Just Pshh!”

She held up her hands so that her pointer fingers stuck out from her eyes, mimicking Silvie’s eye beams. “Silvie could cut me right in half... so, um... I guess she doesn’t want me dead. I guess I probably owe Mind Witch an apology, and yes, you can stop keeping her out of our heads.”

“Thank you,” Boyd said, meaning it. “I wouldn’t trust her with your life if I didn’t legitimately trust her.”

Tinker offered him another shy smile and started to approach them. “Oh...!” She’d spotted something over Boyd’s



shoulder. “My rig. Um, I don’t really need that. I don’t think.”

Boyd had forgotten he was holding it aloft with his tail.

“Here.” Tinker held up her wrist and tapped her FDU to life. She selected a few buttons and her rig floated in his grip.

Boyd was momentarily unbalanced when she did this and leaned against Silvie. He let it go and it floated up over his head. Tinker approached the door to her lab to get it to open and the rig disappeared inside.

Unburdened of Tinker’s rig, he reached inside and figured out how to disengage the part of his Power that was holding Mindy away from their minds. He felt her presence brush against his mind and immediately welcomed her in.

*‘I am so sorry. We should have known Tinker would be smart enough to pick up on something right away. Is she okay? Wait... Oh no, she’s terrified of me.’*

Looking down, Boyd could see it on Tinker’s face.

*‘Wow, the technology she used to block me out is rare and strictly controlled. Of course she’s trying not to think about it, so is thinking about it constantly. Looks like someone else around here doesn’t mind breaking some rules.’*

Boyd was still busy trying not to think about that.

*‘Right... sorry.’*

“Mindy is worried about you and impressed by your disregard for the law,” Boyd said, letting Tinker know that the jig was up.

Tinker’s shoulders slumped. “I was never any good at that. Hello Mindy. Sorry I thought you were evil and here to... you know... actually, I’m not even sure what I thought you were going to do. Hmm? Oh! No. Yeah I’ll try thinking my responses. Um...”

Boyd walked around to come up beside the little genius. Reaching down, he guided her down the hall with one hand. There was a learning curve to having a private mental conversation that would likely distract her for a few minutes.

He was getting hungry; it had already been a long day.

Food.

Nap.

His Changed Mind stirred just enough to add 'Women' to his list, and Boyd couldn't find a reason to object.

## Chapter 23

Silvie let him walk in silence, floating along tucked under his arm. He continued to guide Tinker who he could tell must be having a complex mental conversation with Mindy, given her emotions across their Bond. Silvie seemed to be content as could be, and he remembered the steady drip feed of his love he was sending her.

Zoning in on the Bond he shared with Raev, Boyd checked on her state. She was bored and starting to get a little horny. Part of Raev's change included a rather interesting effect to her libido. So far, she'd only seemed marginally more amorous than Silvie was—though Boyd wasn't sure his silver-haired-lover represented a realistic baseline. If he was asked to guess, he would say that most women were more like Mindy. Intimacy was important to her, and was something she enjoyed, but some evenings were better spent on shared or individual activities than doing the horizontal tango.

What made Raev's libido so interesting, was that once she got turned on, she stayed turned on. If she got a little horny, she stayed a little horny until she achieved a full release. Boyd made a mental note to address that at some point. It also made him a little curious as to what had gotten her so worked up. Then he remembered that she was likely in Mindy's company, with Mindy's new body in that outfit.

*'Kuh-he. Hello.'* Mindy said into his mind, likely drawn from her conversation with Tinker by his thoughts of her. *'Oh, no. I actually just said a quick hello and then apologized to Tinker. Then, you put your hand on her back like that to lead her here, and she didn't want you to take it away, so she stayed quiet like we were talking. I was gathering Raev so we can meet for lunch.'*

It was at that point that they walked out of the hall and into the large kitchen area. A counter separated them from the majority of it—across which he saw Daisy fluttering around on her wings. He was distracted from the brightly colored iridescent fairy woman by Mindy coming up the stairs at the center of the U.

Where he was on the end gave him a great vantage point on a somewhat comical scene. Mindy, who was already tall and in those ridiculous platform heels, was wearing a skirt that was on the short side. She walked up the stairs in front of Raev. His fox-featured lover's tails stood rigid and fluffed up, her ears were at stark attention, and she was bent just slightly forward at the waist. Meanwhile, her chin was tilted up.

She couldn't more obviously be staring at Mindy's ass if she was trying to. And Boyd could sense she wasn't particularly trying to, either. She was just mesmerized by it. It had to be the garters, Boyd decided—not that he could blame her.

*'Oh yes, Raev is definitely interested in cuddling. And more... so much more. Kuh-he.'* Boyd noted the extra little sway in Mindy's hips and chuckled. *'It's been a while since I've wanted to be desired. Humor me.'*

By then, she'd reached the top of the stairs and Raev took a couple quick steps to come up beside her, waiting for them as they approached. Raev must have said something that Boyd couldn't hear, but he sensed a playful wickedness over the Bond from her.

Mindy said something back and they both laughed, Mindy swishing her skirt back and forth. *'You were right about her filter... or lack thereof,'* Mindy sent him.

As Boyd's group approached, both smiled and Mindy stepped forward. "Hi, Tinker, it is nice to actually meet you."

Boyd kept his hand on Tinker's upper back for comfort. Mindy didn't close the gap to shake hands or anything like that.

"Oh, wow..." Tinker said with a little awe. Her gaze had been down, lost in thought while they walked. She'd likely just caught sight of Mindy for the first time. "You're... uhh... you're tall."

Mindy laughed one of her little laughs. "The heels help." She bent one knee and twisted her foot up to the side in demonstration.

Boyd could almost feel Tinker's eyes widen. Or maybe they actually did. "Jeez. Yeah, those would help. I'm sorry I thought the worst of you."

Mindy just smiled to reassure her.

Raev got his attention from behind her. The kitsune's eyes found his, moved to Mindy, then raked up and down her, before returning back to him before widening comically while she mouthed 'wow!'.

Boyd grinned and nodded his agreement.

"Alright. Sit, you lot," Daisy said from behind him.

She fluttered past him, a large round pizza balanced on each outstretched hand, three more pizza trays floating along behind her, with a full pitcher and five glasses already filled with ice water trailing in their wake.

The smell caught his nose next: meat, cheese and sauce. He followed his nose, guiding Tinker and Silvie to the dining area, trusting the others would follow. Daisy set one of the pizzas she was carrying by hand down at the head of the ten-person table.

Boyd could see a lot of meat. Deciding that this must be his seat, the back clearly having been designed for his wings and tail, he deposited Silvie in the seat to its right and sat down. He pulled a blinking Tinker into his lap instead of letting her find her own seat, pulling her back into his chest with his left forearm across her stomach to secure her.

"Uhh... What's happening?" she asked. Her voice was a little anxious, but Boyd only sensed excitement across the Bond.

"You're feeling uneasy and insecure. He's reacting to that," Mindy explained, waiting for Raev to take her seat out of respect for some hierarchy.

Boyd would probably have to keep an eye on silly stuff like that.

Raev didn't seem to support that type of thing, either, sitting to his left but a seat further away, leaving the spot next

to him open for Mindy.

“Thank you. Seriously.”

Raev shrugged with a smile, eyes fixated on the pizza trays that had settled on the table. “You filled me in enough to know that you’ve really missed him. Thanks for giving me the chance and all, but I think stuff like seating arrangements and access to Boyd should be need based, not on something dumb like seniority.”

“Kuh-he.” Mindy giggled with a small smile.

Boyd was overjoyed to see that her cold mask wasn’t going to be used in front of the others.

“You and Boyd really think alike. We’ll have to work all that out, but first...” Mindy turned to the still fluttering fairy woman, “Daisy thank you so much for the food.”

Boyd turned to Daisy for the first time. She still wore the same outfit, just with a white Daisy-sized apron over it. She fluttered off to the side, politely waiting to ask if anything else was needed, and clearly not planning to sit with them.

“It was literally nothing,” she replied. “There is a pizza machine. A machine! It makes pizza... like from dough... in like five minutes. It can make up to five different large pizzas at a time. I watched it.” Her iridescent eyes were a little wide with wonder.

“I really just pressed some buttons. That said, does everyone see something they like? Mindy said two meats, a pepperoni, a veggie, and a pepperoni with onions and banana peppers. I figured that since she can read minds, it was a safe bet.”

“Where is Laura?” Boyd asked.

“She’s still going through the inventory in the clinic, but I’ll share a pizza I made for us with her when she is done,” Daisy said. “Does dinner at six sound good? I’m planning a pasta with grilled chicken for those who like meat and a side salad,” she asked.

Once again there was a round of mutters of ascent. For some reason, everyone seemed to be vaguely unsteady, something about Daisy's tone or mannerism discouraged a real conversation. Boyd wondered if it was related to the seemingly magical waitress abilities she'd professed to have mastered.

"Okay," Daisy clapped her small hands together. "I'll see everyone at six o'clock sharp. Please wash your hands before dinner." Then, she floated away on fluttering wings.

"Um..." Tinker said after a moment, head leaning into his chest as she looked up at him. "I'm really okay, I can..."

Boyd gave her a gentle squeeze with his forearm across her stomach.

"Okay. Um... can someone pass me a slice of the pepperoni?"

Silvie passed Boyd an empty plate and Tinker one with a slice of pepperoni on it.

"You don't have to feel guilty," Mindy said as everyone gathered their food.

Raev just pulled the other meat pizza tray in front of herself.

Boyd didn't particularly see the need to put the slices on the plate but did so because he was worried about making a mess on his companion. He started with only three slices, because that was all the plate could hold.

"He does it almost as much for himself as for you," Mindy explained. "He can feel what you are feeling, now. If something is wrong, helping fix it literally makes him feel better."

"Oh, right." Tinker muttered. "Shoot, now I'll feel guilty about feeling bad things."

"No." Boyd grunted, giving her another gentle squeeze. "Instead, you'll share your bad feelings and let people help. Especially me."

“Okay,” Tinker responded quickly, but she didn’t sound or feel like someone who had been chastised. She normally had more to say, though, and when she didn’t speak up, he began to worry that he’d been too harsh.

*‘She is realizing the full extent of what the Bond means now that she is experiencing it.’ Mindy spoke into his mind. ‘When Silvie told her about it she couldn’t really conceptualize it because she’s not very in tune with her emotions. She recognizes you as someone who is emotionally wise and is already starting to wonder about the benefits of having someone like me around. She just chose to trust you, is all. And yes, we should talk about my powers... let’s let everyone eat first, though.’*

Everyone else, even Tinker, had set in to eating. Raev was already a slice deep. Boyd joined in and quickly caught up to Raev, carefully eating off to the side to avoid unfortunate spills onto his lap’s occupant. Of course, continuously glancing down to make sure he hadn’t dribbled on her reminded him of what Tinker was wearing while she sat in his lap. Her skin-tight pink suit’s cleavage window was still undone just beyond halfway down her chest, and he caught himself leaning in to glance at the exposed portion of her perky chest.

Tinker only had a single slice, but he was learning that her appetite was proportionate to her size. She also ate slowly, finishing the slice in the time it took Boyd to finish half of his entire pizza. Of course he didn’t stop there.

The pizza was delicious. The crust was perfect. The cheese just slightly browned and plentiful without being too thick. The sauce had been spread in a perfect layer, slightly sweet but with a solid zest. His pizza was heavy on the meat, meaning the perfect amount. For something made by a machine, the result was spectacular.

Then, he realized he recognized it. Silvie had brought home pizzas like this from this secret little pizza place she’d refused to tell him the name of. The boxes were unmarked, and she never gave him a single hint about where it was from.



About three months back, every Tuesday and Friday she would bring one home. She would ask him how it was and wanted details each time about what wasn't perfect. Every round got a little better, a bit closer to his ideal pizza. Then, after the very last time when he'd declared the pizza perfect, this mystical pizza place had closed. That was two months ago.

“Kuh-he. Someone's in trouble.”

Boyd glared at Silvie.

She glanced up from her second slice of pizza to Mindy across the table and then over to Boyd. Her face cycled through a few emotions that matched the general confused swirl that came down their Bond as she tried to figure out what she'd done. Eventually, she gave up and pouted, “What?”

“Tell me you did not fly out here twice a week to make pizza in the machine.” He let a little playful menace enter his voice, giving Tinker another little squeeze to assure her he wasn't actually mad. “You got it dialed in to be the perfect pizza for me. Then you told me the secret pizza place that was making the best pizza I'd ever had closed, all because you didn't want to come out here anymore.”

A chagrined grin split Silvie's lips. “Okay. But that's not what happened. Davis found out about it and shut me down.” She switched to her best approximation of Davis's voice. “You can't fly back and forth to a secret base all willy nilly... or something like that.”

The ‘willy nilly’ didn't really sound like Davis, but Boyd got the point. He softened his glare—marginally. He had mourned the passing of the secret pizza place in his own way, by trying and failing to recreate the recipe.

“Still mad?” Silvie gave him puppy dog eyes.

“You let me try to figure out this recipe for weeks,” he grumped, taking another slice. “You could have at least hinted that I would have it again one day.”

“This is fantastic. A machine made this?” Raev asked, immediately taking another bite.

Boyd had taken a lead on her, on account of his bigger mouth, but he had paused to chat and Raev started pulling ahead.

“Mhmm. It’s super easy. I’ll show you later,” Silvie chirped, happy to change the topic.

Boyd glowered at her while he ate the next slice, but its sheer deliciousness overwhelmed his already anemic frustration with his lover. She had provided the pizza in the first place, after all. Silvie who giveth, taketh away.

He cleared his throat. “Speaking of later, we are apparently taking a post lunch nap. Sound good?”

“Oh, Mindy told me. And yeah. I understand Tinker will be joining us, if her throne didn’t already make it obvious. I can see why, loving the modifications to your suit.” Raev glanced over at Tinker’s chest. Sitting in Boyd’s lap puts her at about the right height for the table, but he wondered if her height had been accounted for in at least one of the chairs.

Tinker glanced down and, while he couldn’t see her face, Boyd felt a rush of embarrassment run through her, so he was sure she was blushing again. It was adorable how easily she blushed, and he wondered just what shades of pink she’d turn when he claimed her. Boyd once again tried to shut the invasive thought down, but again found his Power non-responsive to his request.

Tinker reached up as if to close the cleavage window, but Raev cut in with “Noooo, leave it. It looks really good, and this will be a good way to build up a little...” Raev’s physical voice muted to a buzz in his ears.

Boyd recognized Mindy’s influence, there. He could still hear Raev and Silvie encouraging Tinker always to wear her suit that way, while Mindy explained what had happened in his head with his Power.

*‘I saw it that time. I can’t be sure, but I think you attached that part of your Power to the other you. Which makes sense, you have always disliked your Mental Domination, mostly because of that childish name. I can’t*

*believe they started telling you to call it that when you were six. Seriously, they should really let kids name their own Powers and should wait until they are older. I digress. You denied that part of your Power so hard that you ceded control of it to your other self.*

*'Now that it can see what is going on out here it denied the use of your Power in this case. It is probably what happened the other time you noticed, too. That thought came from that part of you, so obviously it doesn't want it shoved aside. This is my fault. I am sorry. At the same time, I was going to be working on that terrible habit of yours anyway. Banishing your own thoughts like that is okay as a metaphysical practice, but you are literally shunting them away. You aren't properly processing them or what they mean about who you are, just denying them altogether.'*

He was sure the explanation should probably concern him, but after the day's revelations, it seemed like a small thing. *'You seem to have been in contact with him. I just need to know if he was a danger to anyone here for now.'* Boyd thinks the words in his head, not wanting to interrupt the conversation happening out loud. Boyd felt like the other him was as protective of his lovers as he was, but that could cause harm, too, if taken to extremes.

*'Absolutely not.'* The mental words come firmly. *'Well, he may have already bedded Tinker and I if he had complete control. I agree that postponing a physical relationship will benefit your romantic relationship. It was the opposite with Raev, so I'm glad that worked out. I saw that thought; no, he would not try to use your Power to convince anyone. Tinker would consent if you pushed even a little, and mean it, but that doesn't mean it would be good for her. Consent is just as important to him as you. Everything that is important to you is important to him, other than taking the time to get to know a woman before making her yours. He is fine with letting the Bond, or Devotion, take care of that part.'*

Boyd grunted out loud and it made Tinker jump in place. He gave her another gentle squeeze.

“... and always make sure to stand a little closer to him so he has to look down. Then tilt your head back to clear his view, not all the way though. Keep it so you are still looking up with your eyes, so they’re nice and big,” Silvie finished explaining how to draw Boyd’s eye to Tinker.

He chose not to comment. Boyd knew he’d already opened the door for Tinker; trying to shut it again would be indecisive and cruel.

“Okay,” Tinker replied seriously. “None of that sounds like too much.”

“Good,” Silvie smiled warmly back. “With Boyd, it is honestly the thought that counts. Now that you’ve formed the Bond, most of that advice is to help you get in the mindset of seeking his attention when you want it. If you want his attention, he’ll sense that and give it to you—unless he’s busy with something he can’t abandon, of course. For now, it will only be when you’re actively seeking it, though. Once you’re at the Devotion level he’ll probably sense it before you do, so you won’t even have to try... not that you shouldn’t. Everyone wants to feel wanted.”

Boyd had eaten another slice during Mindy’s explanation and was now eyeing the last one on his tray. Raev was in a similar position, and he felt her notice their matching final slice. Her emerald, oval slit eyes came up to his and he could see the challenge in them.

Boyd knew that it was on, so he leaned forward just a bit, scooching Tinker forward with a little ‘eep!’.

“Ah, what’s happening?” Tinker asked.

“Eating contest,” Mindy explained.

As if her words were the signal to start, they both grabbed their slice at the same time. Raev got her slice up to her mouth quicker and took the first bite, not having to worry about someone in her lap, but Boyd swallowed half of his slice with only two chews. The other half went next while Raev stared, mouth frozen mid chew.

“That can’t be good for you,” Mindy sighed.

Silvie let out a matching sigh. “No... he’s fine. I tried to get a doctor to tell him not to eat that quick when we were kids. Most learn by getting a stomachache, ya’know? Apparently it’s perfectly fine for him. Part of his healing or something. At least he doesn’t do it often.”

After swallowing her bite, Raev let out her own sigh. “Okay, so no speed eating contests with Boyd... got it. Literally not needing to chew counts as an unfair advantage.”

Tinker just let out a giggle as he leaned back in his seat and pulled her against him.

“I expected to be more shy about affection,” she admitted.

He sensed a near giddiness radiating off of their newly formed Bond. She obviously liked being in his lap.

“Me, too,” Boyd agreed—not that he’s complaining. He would have held her there anyway. She needed it.

“You’re both exceptionally stressed,” Mindy inserted. “Both of you are acting differently than normal. Not that I’m discouraging the affection you are showing each other. It’s good for both of you. Of course, I did warn Boyd that now isn’t a good time to be making decisions about who to kiss. Just like with me, there are things you should probably know about Tinker before committing to bringing her into your life.”

“Hey!” Boyd started, his other hand coming up protectively over Tinker.

“No, she’s right,” Tinker said. “There are things you should know about me that I’m not ready to tell you. Silvie said that they won’t phase you, but...” Her voice faded off.

“It really won’t phase him,” Mindy assured her.

The combination of Silvie’s and Mindy’s support confirmed that whatever it was, it wouldn’t be a big deal to Boyd.

“It is something you shouldn’t tell him until you are ready, though,” Mindy continued. “Silvie and I were aware of it before keeping you on the short list, so you don’t have to

worry about our reactions. I think you forget that everyone else at this table has been training to be Heroes since childhood. The ‘danger’...” Mindy uses air-quotes, as well, “that your secret brings really doesn’t qualify as danger in our eyes. I’m sure the same will hold true for Raev.”

“But...” Tinker started to explain, then seemed to think better of speaking, and her voice faded away again.

“It’s okay,” Mindy smiled. “It is a big deal to you. Which is why you should only share it when you are ready. I’m sorry that you didn’t have the opportunity with Silvie or I... but hey, now you can talk to us about it if you want.”

Tinker nodded but was otherwise silent.

“Now,” Mindy squared her shoulders, which automatically drew Boyd’s eyes, “awkward segue time. Is it time to share what we can, or time to nap? I could pass you the information in your sleep, Boyd, if you think that would be easier. I want to remove that compulsion anyway—assuming you don’t mind me joining your nap.”

“I would like to know what you can tell me, then I would like you to join the nap,” Boyd said.

He felt a little anxiety start to build in Tinker. He gave her another reassuring squeeze and just looked at Mindy. She could take his answer from his thoughts—of course he wanted her there. He would be all over her if Tinker didn’t need him right now.

He wanted to cling to her, having just gotten her back after she’d been stolen away. He’d missed her terribly during the years they’d been kept apart. She should probably be grateful that he wasn’t being more insistent about reforming their bond and continuing straight on into turning that bond into devotion.

‘*Oh my!*’ was all Mindy could say.

Boyd lifted the glass of water that he’d been drinking to finish it off. It was important to stay hydrated, after all.

## Chapter 24

“Should we use the big couch or one of Boyd’s beds?” Silvie asked in her bright and cheery way.

Boyd turned his head as he choked, not wanting to spit up on Tinker even more than he hadn’t wanted to drop food on her. After a few coughs, during which Tinker clung to his arm as if worried he might crush her, he gasped out, “One of?!”

“Mhmm. Well, they are all pretty much your beds, but I was talking about the three in your rooms,” Silvie explained as if a single person having three beds was a common occurrence.

“Why?” It was the main question that came to Boyd’s mind.

“You have a small one, for nice intimate one-on-one encounters—for when you want a night or some time with just one of us. That one is about the size of our bed back in Glorith.”

Their bed back in Glorith was big enough for Boyd and at least four Silvie’s. She’d measured it one night. Boyd wasn’t sure that qualified as ‘small’.

“Then there is the medium one. That’ll probably be the main bed we all sleep in. It’s about three times as big as the small one... big enough for all six of us.”

Boyd re-counted real quick to be sure; six didn’t sound right. Silvie and Raev were a given. Of course he should probably start counting Tinker, too. And he had no reason, nor the will, to deny Mindy. Then him.

“Five,” Boyd corrected her.

“Six,” Silvie insisted, meeting his eyes with a challenge.

Boyd glanced around to count again, came up with five, and frowned his confusion at her.

Her challenging eyes narrowed into a glare. “You had better stop forgetting about her.”

Boyd's first thought about who 'her' might be was Daisy, mostly due to proximity. But he'd honestly believed Silvie was at least taking a wait and see approach, there. If it wasn't Daisy, who could it be? He didn't think she'd had her eye set on Laura, already. At the same time, he could feel her getting a little mad at him—which meant that the 'her' he had forgotten was someone important.

It dawned on him, and he felt his heart skip a beat at the prospect. "I know Hopewing..."

"Hope," Silvie interrupted him. "She wants you to go back to calling her Hope."

Boyd swallowed. "I know Hope wants to join us, but didn't you say she's considered vital to her posting? It doesn't seem likely that we'll get a transfer approved with her already being an S-Ranked."

He didn't dare consider even the possibility of actually having Hope, but his other self certainly could. His Changed Mind stirred as Hope entered his thoughts, roiling in protest of what his other self considered an insufficient excuse put forth by Boyd.

Silvie's light pink lower lip stuck out in a pout. "It doesn't even sound like you want her to join us."

"Oh, he does," Mindy defended him. "He really does. There is something... Huh, there are two things holding him back. Which brings us around to something we should have already discussed before I go any further."

She paused to meet everyone's eyes at the table. "Everyone is aware that I will be reading your thoughts, right? Until Boyd Enhances me, I don't have much choice in the matter. I strictly adhere to the Principle of Privacy, though. That is, unless someone gives me permission to share pertinent information at my discretion."

"You have mine," Boyd agreed immediately.

This was one of the reasons he was excited to have Mindy around—another way to balance the Bond and make sure communication stayed open and honest. His Bond told



him feelings and he could often glean some of the meaning behind them, with effort. Reading actual conscious thoughts, though, was a different thing altogether.

Plus, it went both ways. Mindy would be able to tell his women things he wasn't able to put into words, but they should know. Sometimes saying things out loud was a challenge for the person that needed to say it, but a minor thing for the person that needed to hear it. Alternatively, sometimes you really needed to hear something and while the person you needed to hear it from thought it, it didn't occur to them to say it.

Having a mind reader around could tidy that stuff right up.

“Thank you.” Mindy offered Boyd a smile before turning to the others. “Silvie already gave me her permission, too.” She turned to Tinker.

“Tinker, in the interest of honesty, I shared some of what you were thinking with Boyd earlier when he needed to be reassured that you were okay... before you formed the Bond. It's that type of thing that I'm offering. For example, Boyd is looking forward to cuddling with you just as much as anyone.”

“Can you give me an example of something about me you would share if you had my permission?” Raev asked.

Mindy didn't speak out loud, but one of Raev's fox ears twitched as she listened to the thoughts that were being sent to her.

“Oh, stuff like that? Yeah, go for it. Actually, wait. I'll do it myself after this,” Raev said after a moment.

“Not always like that,” Mindy shook her head. “That's just what came to mind because she really needs to hear it. If you give me permission, I will share what I think needs to be said or what needs to be heard. I can't promise you will always want to have the thoughts shared, but I will promise to always tell the truth and only to share your thoughts with good

intentions. I'll also never lie about sharing something. Never deny it if I have."

"Eh," Raev shrugged, "I don't know why I'm bothering to ask questions. If Boyd trusts you, I trust you."

"You asked because you thought someone should." Mindy smiled at her. "All of you should know that Boyd isn't doing well. His other self is using up a lot of his attention continuously blocking the compulsion to turn us all in."

She turned to face Boyd. "You need to nap soon."

He was starting to feel pretty drowsy. The closest approximation he had to the mental strain he felt, was the days he'd spent completing sixteen hours of verbal and written tests. Tinker was nice and warm in his lap, too. Her little body felt good there, so he was content.

Mindy looked at Tinker. "Tinker, I think it would be particularly good for you if you agree."

"Um..." She seemed unsure.

Testing their bond, Boyd found a real mess. The very idea terrified Tinker. He got the impression that she had a lot of thoughts she didn't want to share. While he didn't want her to feel pressured, he wanted her to be supported. Mindy could support as well as she could pamper—which meant second only to him. He might have been her student in the topic once, but he felt he'd mastered both to the point of surpassing her.

He leaned in, folding down over Tinker and raising his knees to lift her up a little. His wings slid forward to cover them and his other arm came up to wrap around her chest. He hugged her firmly, but without squeezing.

Step one, reduce sensory input. On to step two, reducing pressure.

"You don't have to agree," he murmured in her ear. "Mindy will respect your privacy outside of extreme situations."

Now for the nudge.

“That said, she will only share the things that matter... the things that will help us understand you. She’ll bring us closer by making communication easier.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Tinker whispered back.

Boyd could feel the anxiety that was building up start draining away.

“Because it’s not.” Boyd smiled and nudged her head with his cheek. Along with exhaustion, he was feeling fairly affectionate. “As someone who once dated her when I wasn’t interested in dating anyone, I can tell you the level of understanding she’s offering isn’t something to underestimate—just like you said about the Bond. She’s offering to share that understanding with the people around you, including the man who intends to become your lover.”

Tinker let out the cutest little gasp that made him want to push for more. He held back though, surprised when his Changed Mind...

*‘I’m cutting you slack because you are having a day, but OTHER SELF!’* Mindy corrected him again.

Boyd sent her what he hoped was the mental equivalent to a tongue sticking out.

*‘Kuh-he, you little shit. After your nap, I’m not letting that slide.’*

Boyd mentally sighed and picked the thought back up. He was surprised his other self didn’t pitch a fit when he didn’t press for more.

It sent a disappointed thought his way, as if Boyd was the one in the wrong for assuming such a thing about him. It essentially scolded him about it not being the right time. Much like Mindy, the first time around with Tinker needed the appropriate build up. That way, when the time finally came, she would be in just the right mood, and he could take her fully.

Boyd blinked at the thoughts. He’d been assuming that part of him was more interested in instant gratification.

*'He's a part of you, just a little more primal,'* Mindy explained.

Boyd shook the thoughts away and refocused on Tinker. "Yes, I have every intention of becoming your lover... when the time is right. When you're ready. I don't want you to think that's dependent on you letting Mindy share your thoughts, though," he rumbled softly.

Tinker's anxiety had been replaced with a swirl of excitement.

"She really likes helping people," Boyd explained. "She feels it is her responsibility to do so, given her Power."

"O-okay," she breathed.

"Are you sure? You don't have to decide now," Boyd nudged her head with his cheek again. She sort of leaned into this one. He wasn't sure why he was doing it, but she seemed to like it.

"No, um. I'm just worried about... well, a lot of things," Tinker whispered back.

"She won't be sharing your every thought," Boyd rumbled softly into her ear. "Just the important ones. Like, if you don't like something but are too afraid to say so, or you want something but are too nervous to ask for it. She knows everyone's thoughts, so she knows how and when to bring stuff like that up."

"Oh."

Boyd felt her opinion shift. He couldn't be sure, because he hadn't had a lot of time with their Bond yet, but it felt like she had been going to agree just because he wanted her to—which he was *not* okay with. Now, though, it felt like she was beginning to like the idea.

"That actually sounds really nice."

"Mhmm," Boyd murmured. "It's like the Bond, but better in some ways."

"Okay. I'll try it, at least. Will she stop if... oh. Right. Still in my head." Tinker chuckled a little awkwardly. "Yeah,

good idea. Thank you, and yes.”

Tinker nestled back into him while Boyd wondered what that last exchange included. Her mind was rapidly settling down, and he would like to learn that trick.

*‘I just reminded her she can use the tool that blocks me out if she ever feels like she needs some privacy.’* Mindy spoke into his mind to fill him in. *‘I would recommend you keep an eye on that though. Technology like that is controlled for a good reason. Don’t let her use it for more than two hours per day.’*

Boyd kept Tinker within his wings and arms for another minute before easing his knees back down and unfolding from around her.

Silvie was wearing a wide, happy grin. “That was adorable.”

He could feel Tinker’s embarrassment beginning to rise again and decided she’d had a hard enough day, so shifted attention away from her. Jumping on the proverbial grenade, Boyd turned back to Mindy and asked, “So what’s holding me back from accepting Hope?”

“Oh!” Silvie exclaimed, his distraction obviously having worked. “Right,” she asked, tone blending excitement with impatience, “how do we fix that?”

“Oh, right. Hmm... well, this will actually be a good example of what my help looks like.” Mindy looked around the women at the table before her deep purple eyes settled on Boyd. “Ready?”

When he nodded, she continued. “The first is fairly simple. Boyd has put her on a pedestal—which isn’t entirely his fault. He is not the only one with an aura effect, after all.”

This was the first Boyd was hearing anything about that.

“Oh? You never told him?” Mindy asked Silvie with a laugh.

“Uhhh... No, I guess I never did get around to that. Oops!” Silvie laughed while looking anywhere but at him.

He gave her a look for another moment but turned back to Mindy before his silver-haired lover started doing something completely obvious, like whistling tunelessly.

Mindy just curled her dark pouty lips in a smirk and shook her head in amusement before filling him in. “It took a while to figure out because, well... men. But it turns out Hope has a Power similar to Boyd’s aura. It only effects men, but it subtly nudges them to view her without fault—to ignore or explain away anything negative about her. Boyd, do you remember how I told you about Mary Sue characters in the media? That’s an old Earth term, pretty much what Silvie pretends to be for the public.”

Boyd did, vaguely.

“Well, it does that. She could stab a random person in the gut because she was bored and any male near her would find a way to justify it in their head unless they knew to fight it.”

Raev let out a barked laugh, the first he’d heard of the kind. “Oh, wow, the angel girl can literally do no wrong.”

“I know.” Silvie rolled her eyes, folding her arms under her chest. “So not fair. She doesn’t even use it for anything fun.”

“There’s no way that wouldn’t have been detected early.” Boyd frowned.

“Why not?” Mindy raised one of her thin dark eyebrows. “It’s not like she acted out or ever did anything actually wrong. She just wouldn’t get in trouble with the group because pretty much all the disciplinarian Mentors were male. The kids just assumed it was because she was a goodie-two-shoes.”

Mindy snorted. “And she was with you and Silvie. Two A-ranked and an S-ranked group didn’t get picked on or hazed. Whenever there was violence, Boyd always took care

of it while Silvie protected the S-ranked shield generator. He got in all the trouble for the three of you.”

Silvie rolled her eyes at that.

“The only early flags, when they went back to check,” Mindy concluded, “were male superiors changing reports written by female subordinates if they included a flaw or weakness.”

“But...” Boyd started to argue but failed to come up with a point to contest.

It fit. Hope had rarely been denied a meal or suffered any other form of punishment. Of course, watching the other kids suffer was punishment enough for the pure hearted healer—it broke her precious little heart every time.

Boyd even remembered her trying to give her food to others if they lost theirs for a while. She wouldn’t get it trouble, even for that. The Mentors would just wait for her to give it away and then confiscated it before the kid being punished could eat it. Which, of course, broke her heart all over again.

“So that’s part of it... Not sure what we can do about that one, except hope that it doesn’t interfere too much. There is a chance that Boyd could continuously convince himself that she was a pure maiden while he had his dick buried in her guts. He might be a little too distracted to fight the effect.”

Raev snorted and Mindy’s lips quirked in another smirk as she held his eyes. While unnecessarily graphic, the image did illustrate the issue. Then, his other self stirred again. It felt like that side of him was sure it wouldn’t be an issue in the least. If anything, it liked the idea. Also, if it became an issue, he’d just strip her Power when required—like he’d done with Silvie the other night.

“Oh.” Mindy blinked at him. “Never mind, not an issue. The second issue is one we’ll be working on, anyway. Boyd’s self-esteem issues. Part of it comes from the whole ‘she’s perfect’ aura thing, but he just doesn’t feel worthy of

her. He wants to be, because he really wants her, but he doesn't feel like he is worthy."

"Huh?" Tinker joined the conversation for the first time since the little wing-tent break. She had been in a pleasant daze, following along but not feeling the need to participate.

"Boyd has self-esteem issues?" She asks this as if the two things do not belong in the same sentence.

It would seem someone was holding him up on a pedestal, as well. Boyd sighed. It wasn't because of his self-esteem, it was because of his Change. He could go... he tripped over the thought. If Mindy was right, and he trusted that she was, then he wouldn't go Primal.

Well, someone like Hopewing still shouldn't be attached to someone like him. She had a pristine image, putting him anywhere near it would just tarnish it.

"Ahem," Mindy cleared her throat. "Yes, Tinker, Boyd has some deep-seated insecurities, primarily surrounding his Change. He is ultra-aware of his non-human features. Have you noticed how tightly he holds his wings in? It isn't comfortable for him like that. At rest, they should be slightly open. In part, it's to make him appear less large, and in part it's to hide his wings. The night I broke down and talked to him for the first time, was to stop him before he cut off his own horns—even though he knew they would grow back in under a day, and they have nerve bundles in the core. He was willing to do that just to appear more normal for a few hours."

"Is that why he..." Tinker started and stopped, evidently reconsidering how to ask her question. She was also leaning back into him noticeably harder.

Boyd was holding his tongue and starting to feel a little queasy. He'd signed up for this, though. If Mindy thought laying this part of himself bare would be good for him, it probably would. He knew it was the lonely fifteen-year-old in him that was trusting her, but it wasn't like anything she'd said so far wasn't true. She hadn't given him that existed now reason to intercede.



Of course, Tinker thinking about how to ask her question gave Mindy all the information she needed to hear.

“No, actually,” the taller woman responded. “Boyd just has a very different relationship with pain than most people. For one, he has the Power to shut most of it out. He has trained that skill to the point of it being a reflex. He only feels pain for a split second if he knows it’s coming. A second or three if it’s a surprise.”

She pursed her lips. “Then, if he’s in a fight, he can weaponize his own pain against his opponent. To him, pain is a minor annoyance that can be used as a useful tool—at least outside of extreme damage that overwhelms his Power. This is, in part, due to the ‘training’...” she put air quotes around the word, “he received as a child. You and I are in agreement that the practice is barbaric and wrong, but it was effective in Boyd’s case.”

“I don’t care if it was effective...” Tinker started to say.

Mindy cut in. “Boyd believes that it was why he was able to defeat Omega Ray and save Silvie. I understand your feelings, Tinker, but trying to discredit it at this time isn’t the right thing for him. Especially since he is likely right.”

Mindy gave Boyd a sad look before focusing back on the inventor. “You saw the footage. Tell me you didn’t cry. Tell me you didn’t want him to stay down at least twice. You didn’t beg him, at least on the inside. You can’t... not without lying.” She paused.

Boyd was paying attention to his Bond with Tinker, making sure Mindy wasn’t pushing too hard. Her tone wasn’t angry, though. She wasn’t being sharp. She was firm, likely believing that Tinker wouldn’t understand if she wasn’t direct.

When Mindy continued, it was in a slightly gentler tone. “Do you think it was easy to stand up? Do you think it was just a switch he flipped? No, that kind of strength comes from somewhere. In this case it was suffering through a particularly shitty childhood, but we’ll call it his ‘training’, for him.”

Mindy shook her head. “I know it’s terrible, but you are falling in love with a hero. And not the job title, Hero, given by The Authority to anyone with a flashy enough Power to create spectacles while fighting in public. A hero. Lower case. You’ve read the stories about real heroes. All the best ones are born in the fire of suffering. You don’t have to love the fire that forged him, but scorning it hurts and confuses him. So, at least for now, please don’t.”

She blinked. “And no, you don’t have to worry about him passing it down to the next generation. Watch this.”

Mindy looked into Boyd’s eyes. “We’ll use Raev since she put the idea in your dirty little head. Ready to play hypothetical?” she asked, holding out her hand toward him.

Boyd scowled at the gesture; he hated this game—if you could call it a game.

“Come on... for Tinker.” She gave her hand a little shake.

He grumbled, but Mindy’s words have had a major effect on Tinker. Boyd could sense, though he couldn’t begin to identify, the swirl of emotions she was experiencing. He also felt the urge to defend The Authority’s Heroes from Mindy’s harsh words, but the urge was weak in his exhausted state.

He’d experienced before how effective what Mindy called playing hypothetical could be at relieving deeply held concerns. This could only be to do so, now, for Tinker. Mindy knew her ‘game’ wasn’t exactly fun. Ultimately, Boyd knew that it was something that Tinker must need. He’d accepted responsibility for her well-being, so he was in it to the end.

Mindy was on his left, but his left arm was the one wrapped around Tinker’s middle. Instead of removing his arm from Tinker, he raised his tail, hesitating for only a second before placing it in Mindy’s hand.

“Okay,” Mindy began, “Boyd, you and Raev have a beautiful baby boy. He’s getting a little bigger, starting to walk and talk and such. He looks just like his mom but by some

miracle he got some of your Powers. He's strong, tough, and can heal like you. He's already A-Ranked."

And just like that, Boyd believed that he'd had a child with Raev, and he's grown, because Mindy makes him believe it with her Power. Raev's son did look a lot like her, but without the ears or tail. He's still young enough that he hasn't started to fill out. The early signs are there, though. He won't be as big as Boyd, but he's going to be big.

"Ah, who said what now?" He heard Raev ask, distantly. Her voice had an echoey quality to it, as if coming from far away. Boyd thought she must be on her way home, calling the house to let them know she was almost back.

"He's five now," Mindy continued, "and The Authority has recently passed a rule that A-Ranked and above have to be trained in a PAC. He will be trained, just like you. He will go through the same exact training as you—to make him a Hero, just like you. They are sending a team to collect your son. They are at the door. They are going to breach... Here they come."

Boyd let out a yell as every inch of him prepared for the coming fight. They won't fucking touch his child, not a single hair on his head. He'd kill them all first.

## Chapter 25

When Boyd came to, he was standing in an attack posture and Silvie was holding Tinker, who he'd evidently thrown from his lap as he'd leaped back to his feet. At least it looked like Silvie had caught her before she'd hit the table or the floor. His roar echoed back from the distant wall of the massive, open room. And it was certainly a roar, not a yell. At least the echo sounded too animalistic to call it a yell. His fists were up, his wings half extended, his tail coiled and stiff, and his feet planted.

Raev's ears had flattened to her skull, and she was glaring at him. He could feel the pain his roar caused her, which was why he was normally so careful about controlling his voice. Mindy was covering her ears, too, looking surprised. Tinker, also covering her ears, looked at him with wide eyes that blended fear and awe—he'd work hard never to cause the former again. Silvie just looked pleased as punch, smiling warmly at him.

He sensed her pleasure at his reaction flowing down their Bond. Glancing around, Boyd found the chair he'd been sitting in about fifteen feet back, tangled with another chair he'd sent it flying into.

Silvie set Tinker down and she looked around, unsure what to do while Boyd collected his chair and brought it back to the table, feeling more than a little sheepish. By the time he got back, the ringing must have been mostly out of their ears, because Mindy said, "As you can see, Boyd wouldn't wish his training on his own children. I don't think he'd let any child go through something like that... not if he could stop it."

While the experience wasn't exactly pleasant for him, it had been educational. Boyd had no choice but to admit that he had issues with his training if he was prepared to fight and kill, to stop his child from going through it. Of course, he also recognized that the scenario Mindy had used wasn't impartial in the least. She'd set the scenario as them coming to take his child from him forcefully, purposely triggering his instinct to fight.

It might have been different if his child had wanted the training. Although, as he thought about it, Boyd realized he would find them an alternative training to what he went through—especially his daughters. It might not be right, but it had always hurt more to see Silvie go hungry than him or any of the other boys.

Boyd knew himself well enough to realize that he'd be the kind of dad that would break if his daughter got hurt, but would tell his son to walk off any old bump or scrape. He'd learned that lesson in one of Mindy's lovely little hypotheticals, too. But whatever training his kids took, it would definitely start at an older age than he was when he had started—part of a parent's responsibility was making sure a child had a childhood, after all. At least that's how it went in all the happy family stories he'd heard about.

“Ah, progress.” Mindy sounded pleased with herself, and Boyd scowled at her. “Yes, in the future I will make sure no one is in your lap or nearby when triggering your fight response.” She turned to Tinker. “Feel a little better about that stuff?”

Tinker responded after a moment of thought. “Yes, actually. Okay, I get it now. I felt how tense Boyd got when you were talking about some of that. I was starting to feel bad for him. It was clearly not easy for him to talk about—not something he would have talked about on his own. But it is good.”

“Yes. But I'm afraid that was the last straw for Boyd,” Mindy said.

He blinked slowly, barely registering Mindy's words—he really wanted that nap now. While the hypothetical she had put him through wasn't quite enough to trigger an adrenaline rush or the following crash, it was enough to push him over the proverbial edge. It was one trial too many stacked on top of one another.

His childhood friend turned lover was involved in a conspiracy with his teenaged-years ex, against at least part of the organization they all worked for. He'd hypothetically just

had a child with his new lover and then had to defend him within ten seconds. Also, he had decided that not only was he going to take Tinker as his lover, but he was also going to take the aforementioned teenaged-years ex back, as well. Oh, and the girl he'd idolized throughout his formative years would also be joining in soon.

What really made Boyd worry, though, was that he wasn't looking for reasons not to anymore. He was casually planning on taking the free will of three more women as if it were nothing. Why was he suddenly okay with that? He didn't think Mindy would have changed such a core principle of his without at least mentioning it.

Silvie had been saying something encouraging to Tinker that had Mindy's attention, because when she entered his mind it was with a question. *'Hmm?'*

Boyd wondered if she'd even been paying attention to what he'd been thinking.

She responded, *'Oh, of course not. Think about making love with me again, I'll pay attention this time.'*

Boyd snorted. He thought about how he would *probably* take Mindy to bed soon, and waited for Mindy's assessment. After a moment she sighed out loud but spoke into his mind.

*'Give me just a second...'*

Raev had joined in the external conversation. She was telling Tinker that she was proud of her for what she did earlier today and was not mad at her at all. Silvie was assuring her the same—likely on a tip Mindy had provided. Tinker needed to hear that no one thought of her as a traitor.

When Mindy came back in his mind, there was an edge he didn't like to her projected words. *'I don't know if you are going to like this.'*

Boyd didn't want to interrupt what had apparently become a round of mutual reassurance amongst the other three women. Instead, he pressed for more information from Mindy with a thought.

*'Your other self is treating the training regarding free will as a traditionally laid compulsion,' she replied. 'He feels like it was brainwashing so he is countering your trained response to considering doing it. Which is to feel revulsion. He is suppressing the train of thought that normally leads to revulsion at the idea of taking more lovers.'*

Boyd most certainly did not like that. Say what you would about the methods, but that training was important, at the very least. Without it, who knows what he might do... even unintentionally. He might start using his Power to influence people. To make them behave how he thought they should.

*'Isn't that what they did to you?'*

The question came almost casually, but it hit like a brick. Had they?

*'No, I'm sorry. That's for another time. You are exhausted. It's time for a nap. Silvie and Tinker would benefit from a reset as well.'*

Right. Nap. A nap sounded good to Boyd.

The conversation between the other three women came to a convenient lull and Mindy cut in. "So, everyone should probably change if we are going to nap. I'd recommend a bed. The gargantuan couch is nice, but a big open room like this might not feel the most secure."

Which left the question of which of his three beds to use.

Boyd would have to discuss the excess of having three beds with Silvie. Although, looking around the room, extra beds would only be a drop in the bucket. Just who were they working with?

Boyd banished such thoughts in favor of nap. "The medium bed."

"Oh, good!" Silvie cheered. "The small and the medium one are smart beds. The couch is, too, but the big bed is just too big to have justified the expenditure I guess. The big bed isn't really for sleeping, though, so it's okay."

That gave Boyd a hint of the ‘big’ bed’s size. It had to be bigger than the ‘couch’, which would comfortably fit at least twenty people if only a few of them were Boyd sized.

“I don’t really need to change, though,” Silvie floated up and shimmied a bit as if to display her soft shorts and tank top, “so I’ll take Boyd and show him where his clothes are.”

“Right...” Boyd responded, but the idea of being separated from Tinker was bugging him. He was still wearing the slacks and button down, which were now spotted in little dots of his blood from where the hooks of Tinker’s device had sunk into him, so he should probably change.

She was still in her suit, too, which likely wasn’t comfortable enough to sleep in.

“Boyd’s feeling a little overprotective of Tinker right now, likely because she doesn’t really want to be alone.” Mindy once again displayed her value. “Raev, as neither of them doubts you even a little, do you think you could keep her company while she changes? She’d also appreciate some help picking... no, dear, Boyd isn’t going to get sick of all the pink. He thinks how much you like the color is cute.”

“No problem,” Raev replied, strolling up beside Tinker. “Ask any time, I have fun helping you get all pretty for the Big Guy. Plus, you let me braid your hair.”

She looked up to Boyd and said with a not-at-all veiled meaning, “She has such nice, soft, thick hair.”

Boyd could think of a few things Raev could be alluding to too, and smirked while shaking his head.

“Oh, thank you.” Tinker turned a faint pink at the attention, as Raev stroked her brown hair in its simple braid. He didn’t feel any discomfort through the Bond, so casual touching seemed to be okay.

“Okay, let’s go Darling.” Silvie floated up and tucked herself under his right arm as he stood and set Tinker on her feet. “See you all in a moment!” She waved to the others and started guiding him to the stairs.



Boyd really was exhausted—mentally more than physically—but his feet still wanted to drag across the ground.

“Thank you,” Silvie said quietly once they’d taken a few steps.

The others were hanging back, likely to give the two a moment to talk.

“For what?” Boyd asked after thinking back, trying to figure out what he’d done that was worthy of thanks, and coming up empty.

“For not freaking out,” Silvie said.

But he could feel something more on the Bond and gave her another moment to finish her thought.

“For trusting me... even though you’ve been given every reason not to.”

“Oh. Well, I do love you and I can feel your love for me. Makes trust easy,” Boyd rumbled.

It was much more complex than that, but at the same time, it was just that simple. He thought about other things he could say, but it all came back to his love for her and her love for him. If she was leading them into evil, he would lead them back out of it. He knew, deep down, that it wouldn’t matter. He would walk side by side with his Silvie, wherever she needed him to go, for as long as she stayed Silvie.

Because that’s what made it easy. Silvie wasn’t evil. She wasn’t cruel or mean. She rarely wished ill on others, and those she did wish ill deserved it. Boyd had never once been given reason to question her moral compass. He felt confident that if he was on her side, he was on the right side.

He felt a complex blend of emotions spill through Silvie. Relief, exaltation, and love mixed with a little lingering fear. Boyd wrapped his wing up around her and pulled her close, attempting to banish the fear. Warmth joined the blend and weakened the fear, but it was a tough little nugget that wouldn’t be resolved today.

Silvie led him up the stairs to the side of the elevator without saying anything else, evidently satisfied with spending the moment in silent companionship. The doors to Boyd's room—or rooms, rather—slid open as they approached. It seemed his 'room' included a rather massive suite.

They entered a room that looked more like an office than a bedroom. There was a large wooden desk with a Boyd-shaped chair behind it and two more standard chairs on this side that took up the majority of the space to their right as they entered. The rest of the room gave off high class office vibes, as well. Rich wood shelving and warm rich lights. A sitting area with a coffee table stood to the left.

Silvie led him through another set of doors on the opposite wall. This one took them into a sitting room, or maybe a lounge room. The center was taken up by a conversion couch about half the size of the behemoth in the Great Room. This one looked like a lovely little cushioned nest set into the ground to drag a lover or two into.

There were several pieces of lounge furniture scattered about the room, which included a stocked bar along one wall. All told, there were probably seats for fifteen to twenty people. Boyd again wondered about just how big of a family Silvie thought they would be forming.

The sitting room had a door on each wall. After going through the one on the opposite wall, they entered a larger room dominated by a truly massive bed. It was at least fifteen yards wide and ten yards deep. It was covered in burgundy silk sheets and dozens of fluffy pillows.

Blankets and additional sheets lay folded around the edges of the monstrosity, ready to be dragged into use. The massive mattress was on a solid, dark redwood platform with steps at the center of the foot and along both sides that Boyd could see. There was no headboard, and it wasn't clear which end was supposed to be the head or the foot. Then again, once you got to measuring in yards, that probably stopped mattering.

The ceiling was about twelve feet high where it met the walls, but sloped higher in a dome until it was fifteen feet high at the center of the room over the bed. Boyd searched for the sources of dim lighting, but it seemed as if it came from the stone itself—like a torch was burning just beneath the surface of the stone walls and across the ceiling every five or so feet.

There were multiple doors spaced evenly in every wall except the one they entered.

“I figured we would need lots of closet space for this one.” Silvie giggled as she pointed to all the doors. “Like I said, I think this will be our main bedroom, even if it just stays the six of us. I know it’s a little big, but I wanted you to be able to spread your wings. And if not you, then Hope. She likes to spread her wings wide when she cums hard. They shiver and it makes this pretty rustling noise.”

She poked him in the chest. “Stop forgetting about her. I don’t want to lie if she asks if you’ve been thinking about her.”

Boyd snorted. “You keep putting those images in my head to make sure she’s on my mind and you know it. The room is very nice. I love the lighting, how’d you do that?”

Silvie shrugged under his arm. “No idea. They showed me a sample and I liked it. I’m glad it came out like this, though, I was worried it would be too dim. I know your eyes prefer lower light and I wanted this to be a comfortable space for you, so I thought it was worth the risk. For all of us. We all need some comfort.”

“Is that a hint not to scold you about all the excess?” Boyd asked, looking around the room again. It was simple but comfortable looking. Thick beige carpet the color of sand covered the floor, adding to the natural feel.

“I mean, could you not?” she asked, a little hopefully. “I know you prefer simple things, but...”

“It’s okay. I have women with varying taste and a... non-zero chance of taking in more,” Boyd reluctantly admitted.

Following the path before him meant getting more in touch with his Changed... his other self. And his other self seemed very interested in having many women. Ergo, Boyd was doomed.

“Even if I prefer simple things, I want to be able to provide lavish things to those that want it... like you. Don’t pretend you didn’t go a little overboard just because you could,” he rumbled with a chuckle.

“Well, duh!” Silvie giggled. “Just wait until you see the main bath. You’re *so* going to regret agreeing not to scold me.”

“I didn’t...”

“Yes, you did,” Silvie insisted. “You said it was okay; that’s agreeing not to scold me. Remember that when I show you the main bath later. Tinker can wear a swimsuit if she wants, but we are totally doing a team bath. Mindy says skinship is going to be really important in the coming days. Has she told you about skinship? It’s a pretty cool concept.”

Silvie smoothly changed the topic while guiding him towards one of the doors along the left wall from where they’d entered. Once again, the door slid open as they approached, this one just a single pane. Inside was a large walk-in closet, with a wall of drawers directly opposite the door. There were racks for shoes and rails for hanging things lining the other walls, but they were mostly empty.

“We’ll have to flesh out your wardrobe, too. No one will complain about the shorts, but that’s just because you’re so pretty,” she said as she helped him unbutton his shirt.

Boyd grumbled about being called pretty.

“Fine, you’re jaw-dropping, pantie-soaking, wet-dream-invoking, achingly handsome.” She pressed into his back, her firm body against his wings, as her arms came up around his chest. Boyd didn’t feel like the type who blushed easily, but the heat Silvie had put into the words whispered into his ear did the job.

He had a moment to commiserate with Tinker before Silvie giggled. “Awww, poor Darling. I shouldn’t tease you while you’re all worn out. Especially since you, you know, didn’t freak out and fight your way free and ruin everything.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Boyd rumbled and let Silvie help him pull his shirt off. The pants and his underwear soon followed.

Silvie floated her way over to the drawers and opened one to withdraw one of his favorite pair of athletic shorts, this pair a blue so dark it was almost black. He slipped them on, and they kissed before returning to the other room.

Mindy was the first to arrive, not having changed. The dim light combined with her dark hair, makeup, and outfit made her alabaster skin look particularly lovely.

“You two felt ready for me,” she raised her breathy voice to call out as she crossed the large room to where they stood near the foot of the large bed.

“Mhmm.” Silvie smiled. “Figured now’s not the time for anything fun or time consuming.”

Boyd chuckled and held his arms out for a hug as Mindy closed the distance between them. She stepped into it and wrapped her arms around his ribs. Her heels allowed her to get her chin up on his shoulder as she pressed herself against him.

He held her gently, arms around her back. It had been such a day, but he was so glad she was back in his life. So relieved that he hadn’t hurt her like he thought he had. That he hadn’t driven her away.

He felt his eyes begin to burn from the stress. A lot had happened today. A lot of good. A lot of not so good. A lot of scary as fuck. He was trusting people based on his feelings when logic screamed at him not to.

“Oh, shhhh,” Mindy murmured into his shoulder. “We won’t make you regret it. With your permission, I would like to work with the other you while you sleep. I’m hoping to get

him working with you. He resents you right now—you kept him in a pretty cramped box.”

“In for a penny,” Boyd sighed as he mumbled the phrase he’d learned from her. She’d said she read it in a book or something.

“Oh, don’t sound so excited. It’s okay if you don’t want to, but I just thought I might offer you a nice thigh pillow and stroke your hair as you fall asleep,” Mindy offered innocently.

“What I meant to say, was ‘yes please,’” Boyd corrected with a firm nod, eliciting a breathy laugh from Mindy and a bell-like giggle from Silvie.

“Oh good, we’re not late,” Raev’s velvet voice sounded from the door.

Boyd looked up to find Raev and Tinker in nearly matching outfits. Only the colors and accents were different between the two. Both were covered neck-to-wrist and neck-to-toe in snugly fitting soft looking bodysuits. Raev’s was a pale green, while Tinker’s was—of course—pink. Both had zippers running down the majority of the front. Boyd was a little surprised they were both all the way up.

He felt Tinker’s anxiety, though, so it was likely related to that. Boyd watched them close the distance; the suits even covered their feet. The pajamas weren’t overtly sexual, but they didn’t hide the shape of the women’s bodies at all.

Raev’s tails fanned out behind her, their motion drawing attention to the sway of her hips. Tinker was walking much more carefully, obviously trying to not cause her pajamas to jiggle too much.

Boyd would work on her physical self-esteem. He’d have time later, though. Now was time for his much needed and long-anticipated nap.

## Chapter 26

Mindy stepped out of his arms as the other two came to him. Raev stepped forward for a quick hug. Checking in on their Bond revealed her to be content. She was looking forward to the nap and didn't really care much about everything else that was going on. She'd found what she was looking for, and the rest would sort itself out. He kissed the side of her head in thanks, her easy acceptance made it all seem a little less overwhelming.

He bent to scoop up Tinker for a hug then kept her in his arms as he scanned the bed and the women around him. "Alright... so... how is this going to work?" he rumbled.

Boyd felt his brow scrunch as he considered what felt like an impossible choice. His look of consternation triggered a round of giggles from the women.

"Well, my legs will be your pillow, so..." Mindy sat on the end of the bed to remove her heels, settling them neatly to the side. She then crawled out into the center of the bed.

Boyd's lungs stopped functioning while she crawled those ten feet away from him. He was fairly sure he heard Tinker stop breathing, as well. Raev's and Silvie's rapt attention could be felt through the Bond.

"That's... That's just... It isn't fair," Tinker whined.

"Don't let it get to you," Raev muttered. "We all have our things. Hers are just... a lot."

"Thigh highs," Silvie breathed. "I'm making a note to get more short skirts, garters, and thigh highs. I have plenty of the lacey panties."

"It wouldn't be the same without those thighs, though," Tinker let out another whine.

"Ladies," Mindy purred, "always remember the benefits of this relationship. Boyd doesn't have to pick a favorite, and he doesn't even do so internally. I used to be chubby, but he was disappointed when he saw my new figure

because he loved my old one so much. So don't worry about your assets, he truly appreciates all types. With regard to any particular aesthetic, that I can help you with. Once I'm fully a part of the family and team I would happily give any or all of you a goth-over. We could do a theme night, like the costume night, which also has my vote, if Silvie didn't tell you."

"I'd make a hot goth," Raev said with a nod, her tails slowly swaying behind her.

"You'd all make hot goths," Mindy laughed as she settled down, folding her legs under herself while holding her skirt down to avoid flashing them again. "Tinker, sweetie, I'm not sure how you would feel about it... but the best space for you might be literally on top of Boyd—like on his chest."

"That sounds nice but isn't he a little... firm to be laying on." One of her hands pushed at Boyd's chest.

"I told you he turns into a pillow if you lay on him. It's like magic," Raev interjected.

"It's mostly a perception thing. He doesn't actually turn softer, but he feels softer," Silvie explained.

Tinker shrugged. "I'm not opposed to trying."

Mindy beamed. "Good. Alright, Boyd, come here." She beacons him forward then patted her thighs.

Boyd carried Tinker with him, walking across the bed on his knees. He turned around and lifted Tinker up and out away from him as he started to lay down.

"Wait!" Silvie squawked. "Spread your wings out first. The smart bed can adjust to the joints; it will be more comfortable."

Shrugging but not quite believing her, he spread his wings out and then laid back. Lying on his back with his wings extended had never been comfortable.

Mindy guided his head back down onto her thighs, nestling his skull into the divot that formed between them. The pillow she provided him was fantastically soft, just like he remembered, but he could feel a firmer base of muscle under



the splendid cushion that hadn't been there before. Her warmth quickly began to set into his head and neck—specifically where the skirt and stockings did not cover and he felt her smooth skin directly.

His horns curled up over his head, so this position always made him nervous when his head was pointed towards a lover, but there was a little clearance. They weren't sharp enough that her leaning on them would puncture her skin or anything, but if he were to jerk his head up with anything approaching even half of his strength...

*'Hush.'* Mindy wiped the fear away.

Boyd was surprised when the parts of his wings that normally stuck uncomfortably into the mattress whenever he tried to lay on his back with them open just sank deeper into it. The mattress seemed to move out of the way, forming pockets where they were needed and supporting everything else. "Ohhhh..." He let out a groan as he settled into it, shifting up a little to resettle his wings now that he knew about the wonder that was a smart bed.

Once the bed conformed to the shape of his back, he lowered Tinker down onto his chest. She lay with her chest against his upper ribs, her legs trailing down his abdomen and between his legs. She looked up into his face, cheeks pink, and her hazel eyes wide as not-so-little Boyd nestled in the crook formed by her legs.

Boyd got a surprise when a little thrill of excitement and lust flowed up the Bond from her and her lips parted in a cute little 'O'. He'd expected the small woman to be intimidated, not thrilled by her encounter with... well, with him.

*'Oh my, that's rather... no, she wants it to be a surprise. Ignore me; I'm just babbling. I'll wipe this when you sleep.'*

Boyd carefully did not frown at Mindy's mental tease of information. Tinker was still watching his expression, so he smiled instead, letting a little of his own excitement show in his eyes. Her cheeks flushed a shade darker as she settled in.

Folding her arms and resting her cheek on one of them, she perched on his chest comfortably.

She felt splendid there. Her weight registered for him, but not nearly enough to interfere with his breathing. Her presence did make him conscious of taking slow, deep breaths, though. Her slender little body was soft in all the right places. She rose and fell a little with each of his breaths.

He could feel a blend of embarrassment and excitement in her, thrilled and nervous at the same time. Boyd got the feeling this was only happening because she was coming down hard after several hours of escalating anxiety that met with an anti-climactic ending. She wasn't the type to take to cuddling with a guy so soon.

"Okay you two, pick your sides," Mindy said once Tinker was settled in.

Silvie floated up almost immediately, crashing down onto his wing on the left side. They were tough enough for it. He used to catch her with them back when she was learning how to fly in different training scenarios. She shimmied up into his side, tucking right up under his arm and using his shoulder as a pillow, with one arm folded up to rest on him and the other pressing under him. The bed adjusted to it a moment later.

"The smart bed was so worth it," Silvie purred as she nuzzled his arm.

"I will not scold you for the smart bed," Boyd agreed wholeheartedly.

"Beds," Raev corrected him as she crawled up on his right side.

She treated his wing far more gingerly, which he appreciated. The rough treatment didn't hurt, but her careful sliding across it felt rather pleasant.

"Every bed in the place is like this. Except for the big one, I guess—she's being a little cagey about that one, though. Even the big couch-bed monstrosity out in the Great Room is like this," Mindy explained.

Boyd grumbled for a moment, that sounded excessive when regular beds functioned perfectly well.

Silvie came to her own defense. “Yeah, but we got a bulk order discount, and these beds have two-hundred-year life spans with next to no maintenance. It made sense for the bottom line.”

“She’s not wrong,” Tinker murmured a little dreamily. “The technology is actually really simple. It’s filled with... well, this one is probably filled with billions or trillions of tiny foam beads with metal grain centers. The bed detects pressure on the surface and uses a combination of magnetic fields and micro vibrations to shift the beads around until the pressure is equalized. The end result actually turned out more comfortable than the last iteration which used nano machines. Those never quite worked without a full AI behind them and those are strictly controlled. It’s also cheaper and has lower maintenance requirements.”

“Huh, that’s really cool,” Boyd mumbled. His exhausted brain formed a picture of foam sand being shifted by invisible forces to conform perfectly to his back and wings.

Raev had settled in on his right while Tinker was explaining about the bed. One of her arms also wiggled its way under him and found Silvie’s to rest against it. Her three soft and fluffy trails also wrapped around to cover his right leg.

“Okay, I won’t scold you for the smart beds,” he added to Silvie.

“Thank you, sweetie.” Silvie reached out to touch Tinker’s shoulder to make it clear she was the sweetie. It must have been for her benefit because Boyd knew he was Darling.

“Uh, no problem, ah... hun?” Tinker responded, a little uncertain but not uncomfortable.

Boyd could feel that she just wasn’t sure how to respond to the affectionate name—not that it was unwelcome. He did start to feel a little pressure building within the small woman, though—something he would have to watch. This

would probably be the only full group cuddle for a little while, but that was okay. He would make time for her separately.

Silvie giggled her bell like giggle. “Pet names are part of my love language, dear. You don’t have to feel any pressure to use them. You can call me Silvie, or Silver, or Sil... or whatever you want. Speak up if my using them for you makes you uncomfortable, though. If that makes you too nervous, don’t worry, Boyd will.”

“No, it’s okay. I don’t mind them,” Tinker admitted shyly.

“Okay, now that everyone is settled. Boyd?” Mindy directed.

Boyd smiled, knowing exactly what she meant. He curled his wings in at the halfway point, curling them around Raev and Silvie to cross them overtop Tinker. Then, he settled them down to a chorus of murmured and sighed approval.

Both Silvie and Raev were completely covered, but his wings crossed over Tinker’s shoulders, leaving her head exposed. The flexible bones of his wings kept the top open for the others, allowing airflow to avoid them overheating or their air going stale.

“It’s like a velvet lined sleeping bag in here,” Raev murmured, nuzzling into his arm affectionately.

“Heated perfectly to just above body temperature,” Silvie sighed her agreement.

“It’s like being hugged by blankets fresh out of the drier,” Tinker whimpered.

Mindy let out a breathy laugh, “You’re making me a little jealous out here.”

Boyd carefully looked up at her, or he tried too. She had to lean forward a bit for him to catch sight of her amethyst eyes, which were rapidly growing on him. Dark hair, pale skin, and glittering purple eyes—there was a reason she’d planned to have her eyes changed.

Boyd found himself in a very odd moment where everything was wonderful but dangerously complex. For one, having a woman sleep on his chest with his wings crossed over her had been something he'd long wanted to do—but he could never get comfortable with a normal-sized woman. He'd tried and failed with Silvie, so having his mini dream come true with another woman felt strange.

'Yes,' he heard Mindy in his head, *'but Tinker's stature makes it work better. It'll be doable with others on a bed like this and your strange ability to be comfortable, but her small stature helps.'*

Which he could tell was true. Something he chose not to mention at this point in time, though, was that he could feel rather well through his wings. To Tinker, it felt like he'd draped crossing blankets over her, but to him it was like he was gently stroking her from her upper back down to her thighs where they started to fall between his legs. And her cute little bubble butt felt just as good as it looked.

"Ahem," Mindy cleared her throat and something in the tone acted as a warning.

Boyd let out a sigh as she continued.

"Tinker might like the reminder that the inner portions of Boyd's wings are nearly as sensitive as the palms of your hands. He's actually getting a rather nice feel of your, and I quote his thought 'cute little bubble butt.'"

Said butt tensed and Boyd lifted his wings a couple inches off of her. "Oh, um, i-is it nice?" Tinker stuttered.

Boyd felt curiosity, embarrassment, and another little thrill run through her. She was getting very sleepy, finding his chest surprisingly comfortably, so the emotions were muted. Not sensing anything that would indicate he shouldn't, he lowered his wings back into place.

"It's *very* nice." He kept his answer simple and honest.

"Oh, good." She settled back in, shimmying said cute little bubble butt against his wings as she did.

"Told ya," Raev muttered.

She was getting sleepy, too, so he curled his arm down around her to hold her close in her little wing tent. His wings spanned fifteen feet in either direction, so there was room to spare.

“Goodnight Darling... everyone,” Silvie sighed, kissing his chest where she was settled against it.

Surprisingly, she felt the most tired. While today had introduced extreme stress that would remain unsettled for Boyd, it had settled a years-long-stress for her. She was now confident she wouldn't lose him when he found out about the rest of it. He wouldn't turn on her. She knew he wasn't completely on board, but for now she was letting herself be relieved.

Silvie triggered a chorus of replies, this time it was variations of goodnight to the different people. Raev and Tinker soon joined Silvie at the very cusp of sleep, but Boyd could tell his mind was going to fight him on this. The rational part of his brain was screaming at him to stay awake. Only a fucking moron would go to sleep, knowing that Mindy—a Mind Powered who was against The Authority in some way—was right there.

Mindy's fingers began working at his scalp, her well maintained and functionally long nails scratching his head. His rational mind wouldn't be so easily subdued, though. That may have felt fucking fantastic, but Boyd was a creature of principles. A simple scalp scratch wouldn't be enough to...

Mindy shifted those magical nails to the skin just around his horns. It was a secret weakness he had—one he hadn't revealed to anyone else, even to Silvie.

*'I'll stop if they open their eyes,'* she sent.

Boyd groaned in satisfaction, long and slow on an exhale. It was a secret, because the skin there was almost always a little itchy, and because he refused to scratch it when anyone could see him. He never wanted to bring extra attention to his horns, so he just pretended they didn't itch. He'd learned to ignore it—to the point of no longer noticing it.

Mindy had noticed, though, as she noted the act of ignoring the nearly constant minor annoyance in his head. She'd gone ahead and scratched it for him without thinking one night and discovered the trick.

“What are you doing to him?” Silvie asked from inside her personal wing tent.

“A secret I'll respect for now,” Mindy said softly.

“He's vibrating again,” Tinker said in a happy slur. “Like one of those massage beds.”

“Mhmm. Now hush and let it lull you to sleep.” Mindy shushed everyone and began humming a little tune she seemed to be making up as she went.

The tune gently fell and rose, likely based on what one of them needed at the moment to get them closer to sleep. She kept gently scratching around the base of Boyd's horns, pulling contented rumbles from him with each exhale. Soon, it lulled him down into a deep and luxurious sleep.

He dreamed interesting dreams, doomed to be forgotten but pleasant while they lasted. In them he spent time with Mindy: relaxing, some careful horseplay, cooking and reading, but mostly just living. They passed—as dreams do—from moment to moment, only slowing for the important parts. It was all easy things that anybody did in their day-to-day life.

These were gentling experiences, shared with a part of him that had only even known pain, fighting, surviving, and the strength that those things brought. It was a part of him that previously had only fed on the darker emotions the conscious Boyd had shunted his away. It was an education in the peaceful things in life.

## Chapter 27

Boyd woke up hours later, and not of his own volition. Raev was trying to crawl out from under his wing as carefully as she could. But because it was both under her and curled over her, that was practically impossible. He could sense her desire not to wake him.

“It’s alright,” he murmured as softly as he could manage, lifting the wing a bit on that side to let her out without lifting it off Tinker. “I feel rested.”

The small inventor was still sleeping soundly on his chest, her arms folded under the side of her head. Silvie was still out cold, nestled into his side. He also noticed that he had her firm, round, perfect ass cupped firmly in his hand. He was convinced that she was the one behind his hand’s positioning. He was just reacting to her desires across the Bond in his sleep. That said, with his wing covering the evidence, he was in no hurry to remove it. Instead, he gave her butt an appreciative squeeze.

“Kuh-he.”

Right... he rolled his eyes. Not all witnesses required line of sight.

It was only then that he realized that Mindy would be a perpetual voyeur for anything one of his lovers and he got up too. Then, he remembered that he was able to block her out... which caused him to remember the rest of today’s events.

First, there was the fact that Silvie and Mindy were attached to something that had them opposed to at least part of The Authority—that ‘part’ bit mattered quite a bit to Boyd. Then, there was the manipulation of his memories related to Mindy’s departure and how she’d been kept away from him. It was clear that there were some parts of The Authority that needed to be opposed.

The worst thing was the awful lie that they’d made Boyd believe—a clear violation of his right to free will. It was one thing to remove a memory. It was another altogether, to



make someone believe a lie about themselves by implanting a false memory in its place. It was something that would be addressed when the time was right. If his loves were in hiding, then he'd have to remain patient.

Raev finished crawling out, leaned down and gave Boyd a quick peck on the lips, and then backed away. Her bright emerald eyes were sleepy but also hinted at her stress. Boyd could tell she had to pee, badly.

“Sorry!” she whispered before scurrying away.

Mindy stroked his hair, reminding him of her presence and her return to his life. He felt his lips split into a wide smile.

“Good morning, Sunshine.” She said this softly.

His smile split into a grin at her use of the old, somewhat ironic, pet name.

“You seem to be much better,” she whispered.

“I feel much better,” he replied.

She leaned forward to look down at him over her breasts. He looked into her amethyst eyes, finding the woman he once knew was still within them.

“I’m so happy you’re back, Mindy. How are you? It’s weird not feeling your emotions, when can we...”

She covered his mouth with the fingers of one hand and put the finger of another over her lips to shush him. *‘I know you try, but your voice resonates and was going to wake Tinker. I am overjoyed to be back with you. I’ve been looking forward to this for years. It’s only been a real possibility for a full year, and then a certainty for months. So, yes, I’ve enjoyed sitting here and stroking your hair while you’ve slept. I was not bored at all, so banish that thought.*

*‘When you should Enhance me is something to be discussed. You should know that Tinker is incredibly intimidated by me. If you rush to be intimate with me while waiting with her you may do some damage to her self-esteem. I’ve seen that it’s something you are already working on.’*

Boyd frowned; it was stuff like this that he'd been worried about in the first place. If his intimacy with one lover caused issues with another, should he have either?

Mindy rolled her physical eyes at him but also sent the sensation through to his mind with her Power. *'The short answer is yes, as long as you remain aware of everyone's needs. Luckily, you have me now. We can wait a little while before enjoying each other, and I can help keep you aware of any concerns with Silvie's potential recruits that you want to bring into the family. The Bond will take care of everyone already in the family. As far as the base Bond, I'm actually holding it back, for now. A lot happened earlier but it would seem whatever the requirements are, they've been met. I was doing it on instinct at first, and only noticed I was holding it back during the nap. It's a pretty gentle expression of your Power.'*

Boyd wondered why she was holding it back, a little offended until he heard the explanation.

*'Oh, please, it's just because a lot happened today—A lot of a lot. You should get used to Tinker's bond for a little, first. At least through your date. Don't worry about me having to wait on intimacy. Things like this will tide me over for a long while. You know I don't have the strongest libido.'*

What Boyd knew, was that her statement was bullshit—she had as healthy a libido as the next girl, she just had a bigger thing for cuddling and petting.

“Kuh-he.” She laughed out loud before continuing in his mind. *'Okay, maybe you're on to me. I'll be perfectly content with a little heavy petting for a while. The benefit is that, unlike last time, you won't have to relieve yourself back in your room alone.'*

He knew she'd peeked in on him back then, and he glared up at her now that she'd admitted it. She'd promised to give him his privacy, after he'd gotten up the courage to ask her for some space after their evenings together. He'd known he was being obvious, which had made it twice as awkward a thing to ask.

*'You already have two women who will happily help you with that this time around. Also,'* Mindy said, *'don't feel like you have to block me from people's minds during the act for my benefit.'*

Which confirmed her intent to peek in on his lovers' minds, so that she would be able to experience him vicariously. He didn't think that sounded like a fair bargain—especially not since she put all that work in to improve her physique... and not if she was going to dress like that all the time.

*'I'll dress a bit more comfortably most days.'* She smirked. *'Just like most days you won't wear a shirt, Mister Ripply Muscles. You can't complain about me putting a little effort into my figure. You truly have no idea how tempting you are.'*

Okay, that was fair, because he was starting to get some idea just how attractive his women found him.

*'More progress, good. Of course, you're still labeling it as objectively attractive. It implies that we don't like what we find once we get past appearances, which isn't true in the least. Or do you really think that Tinker is falling less in love with you the more she gets to know you? Can't blame your Power for her building feelings. Nor my love, if you remember. I made you work to get in my pants the first time around.'*

He didn't remember thinking his attractiveness was objective, but he'd just been scolded for it. It wasn't fair.

Mindy bopped his nose with a finger. *'You know that's how you think about it. It doesn't matter. You're already figuring it out. You are loveable. You are worthy.'*

Boyd's throat tightened at the simple, but powerful words.

*'That is nothing but the truth. If it wasn't so damaging I would just make you believe it.'*

Raev returned then, walking across the bed this time. She lay down and slid her lower body up to her ribs smoothly back into the tunnel made by his looped wing. Keeping her

shoulders and chest out, she propped herself up on her elbow, facing Boyd and Mindy.

“Am I interrupting?” she whispered.

Mindy held one hand out to Raev, who took it after a moment of confusion.

*‘Uh... hi?’* Raev’s voice sounded in Boyd’s head, turning it into a three-way call of sorts.

*‘Hello Raev,’* Mindy’s voice answered, *‘you are welcome to join us. We were just discussing how attractive Boyd is.’*

Boyd’s eyes widened in horror as he looked up at Mindy. Glee entered her bright purple eyes as she smirked at him.

*‘Oh, I love this topic.’* Raev’s velvet voice filled with cheer. *‘His eyes, they like sort of look through you but at you at the same time, and you can tell that he likes what he sees. Of course, his build is just crazy hot. All those muscles without being too big. Looks like he can throw you around but can talk about something other than his gains. The shorts he wears don’t exactly...’* for some reason Raev’s mental voice gets fuzzy for a moment. Like part of her thoughts were censored from his perception before finishing, *‘Oh, and his smile. When he smiles at you the way he does... phew.’*

*‘What was that?’* Boyd asked, referring to the fuzzy moment. It had never happened before, and it wasn’t like they were using radio frequencies here.

*‘What was what?’* Mindy asked, innocently. *‘Oh, Raev, you don’t have to feel any pressure about the kid thing.’* She drastically changed the topic, ensuring Boyd couldn’t ask any follow up questions.

*‘Sorry,’* Mindy continued, *‘I know that hypothetical made you wonder if Boyd is thinking about kids soon, he’s not. You just put the idea in his head, he hasn’t fully processed when or if he’ll want kids.’*

Boyd felt his Changed Mind correct the ‘if’ part of that statement. He wanted kids, but only when he was sure it was

safe for them.

*'Oh... never mind. It'll definitely be a 'when' he'll want kids, not an 'if'. You have time to decide if you really want to be a mother, though, so don't worry. I know you don't want to let him down, but it'll be okay. Another benefit of this relationship is that if a woman doesn't want kids, the family can still have them through another that does. I'm not sure where I fall on it myself yet.'*

Boyd brought his arm down around Raev and pulled her into his chest. *'Of course I won't be disappointed if you decide you don't want kids. Silly little vixen. Things mentioned in the heat of passion aren't promises.'*

Raev blinked a few times, eyes watering a little. *'Right. I supposed I agreed to stuff like this happening.'*

Boyd felt her emotions on their Bond. There'd been a sickly, nasty feeling when kids were being discussed, but instant relief when the issue was so promptly handled. Then, he felt her decide that she didn't like being kept on her off foot like this.

*'You're hot,'* Raev said.

Boyd could tell that this comment was directed at Mindy.

*'Are you also into girls?'*

"Kuh-he." Mindy let out another quiet but audible laugh before continuing in their minds. *'The answer is a little more complex than it should be, but something that should be brought up eventually. No time like the present, especially since Boyd is all calm and has reason to remain so with two of his women sleeping on him.'*

She started stroking his hair with her free hand. Soothing him in advance couldn't be a good sign.

*'Currently,'* Mindy explained, *'I believe that I will only develop romantic love for Boyd. I do find women physically attractive and while I haven't experimented with any, I am not disinterested. I just don't think I would fall in love with a woman. Knowing someone's thoughts makes everything so*

*complex. I believe getting to know Boyd has ruined me for other men, I haven't met one that measures up.'*

She paused, and Boyd sensed the 'but' coming.

## Chapter 28

*'That said, once I've been Enhanced,'* Mindy explained, *'I'm hoping Boyd will let me set a permanent anchor in his mind. One I could use to block out other people's thoughts without having to be in contact with him. The problem is that I will always be in his head. Between that and the Bond, I won't be surprised if I end up feeling the same love he does for all of his women.'*

Boyd frowned, trying to decide if he was okay with that. It wasn't that he would mind her being in his head. He never wanted her so far away that she couldn't hear him again, anyway. By that logic, she could be in his head at any moment from here on—this would just make it a certainty. He wouldn't really be that concerned about his own privacy, but his other lovers might not like the idea of her always watching through his eyes.

*'I would still be able to look away or not pay attention,'* Mindy offered.

Which meant that it was up to her; Boyd had no problem as long as she would respect his other lover's desire for privacy. He would like a way to enforce it, if possible—just in case one of his lovers didn't trust her word.

*'That easy?'* Mindy asked, sounding surprised.

He didn't see why not.

*'You aren't worried about me losing the ability to choose who I love? Losing my free will?'*

Boyd hesitated. Should he be? He felt like he should, but only faintly. He recognized that he would have earlier this morning, which was a little disconcerting. To the him of now, though, it just sounded like she was making the choice upfront to love any woman he did. Her free will was preserved.

His Changed Mind added its two cents, letting Boyd know it didn't think love had anything to do with free will—No one got to choose who they loved. It just happened.

Boyd blinked. That hadn't felt derisive at all. If anything, Boyd felt like the other him was trying to gently teach him a valuable life lesson.

*'Okay, is it always going to be like that?'* Boyd asked.

*'What did I miss?'* Raev asked, curiously.

*'The other Boyd communicated with conscious Boyd. It's not really a full personality, just part of him that's held separate. You had something like it, but you absorbed yours naturally. It's just a part of you now. It got a little feisty when I dulled those memories we talked about.'*

That made Boyd curious, what memory or habit had his lover wanted to change?

*'No, it isn't something you need to know about,'* Mindy told him. *'I just censored a few unpleasant memories from her time in her PAC. Now isn't the time to discuss them, nor is it something she needs to process further. She was through the worst of it, I just fast forwarded the healing process a few years.'*

*'Thanks for that, by the way,'* Raev added gratefully. *'You talking about it just now made me remember a few things. They are less upsetting now. Don't be upset with her, Big Guy, I jumped at the chance to ask for it. I've been waiting for a mind Powered I could trust.'*

*'Of course.'* Mindy smiled. *'Think nothing of it, I was happy to.'*

Boyd doesn't need the Bond to know how happy being trusted would make Mindy. He wondered briefly just why Raev so completely trusted the woman she had only met hours before.

*'She trusts me because you clearly trust me. It really is that simple for her. Just like it's that simple for you to trust Silvie or me. Raev, since you're wondering about your other you, it took on the form of a giant fox with nine tails. Sound familiar? It might have appeared in dreams or been an imaginary friend.'*



*'I had some dreams with her in my early teens for a bit after my Change,' Raev confirmed. 'She was gorgeous and really nice. I liked her. We ran, played, and did all sorts of stuff with each other in dreams for a few weeks.'*

Mindy nodded, *'That was probably it, or her, since you've gendered her. All Changed have something like her. They are sometimes called gestalts, although it's not completely accurate. The thought is that they form during a Change to help the Changed with learning to control their new bodies, but that's just a theory without any evidence to support it. Most Changed absorb them once they get used to controlling their new limbs or bodies. Sometimes they end up like Boyd, though, and those are the ones at risk of what The Authority calls going Primal.'*

*'What happened to him?'* Raev asked, turning concerned green eyes on Boyd.

He wanted to know, too.

*'In part, his training took.'* Mindy shrugged. *'He was so dead set on suppressing negative emotions to be the perfect little Hero that he was unconsciously using his Power to do so. It might have happened without the emotion suppressing training, but that guaranteed it. The general cause is pretty simple, but not a guarantee. You said you liked your gestalt, your other you. What do you think would have happened if you didn't? What if she was scary instead of gorgeous? Maybe she had big sharp teeth and was a little grumpy isn't of being nice?'*

*'I mean, I was pretty young. I guess those dreams would have been more like nightmares.'* Raev wasn't sure how to answer, but she tried.

*'You might even find yourself running away from part of yourself.'* Mindy took over, having a point to make. *'Pushing it away. Fighting it. Especially if you'd been trained to fight for as long as you could remember. If you were particularly strong willed or had a Power that let you, you might even put it in a little box and lock it away.'*

*'Well... shit.'* Raev voiced Boyd's own thoughts rather succinctly. *'That doesn't sound good for you.'*

*'No, it certainly is not.'* Mindy's tone was grave. *'Boyd is strong willed, no doubt about that. While his Power isn't suited to building complex mental constructs like a prison, it helped. After locking this part of himself away, he kept shunting his negative emotions away, too, trying to be a good little Hero, not thinking about where they were going. Every time he got mad or wanted to hurt someone. Anytime he experienced jealousy or greed. Lustful thoughts inspired when a young woman drew his eye. The times he needed a day off but thought he was being lazy, so forced himself to train anyway.'*

*'Double shit.'* Raev once again successfully voiced his own thoughts. He wasn't sure if they had melded because of Mindy's Power, or they just thought alike. *'So, now what?'*

Mindy smiled warmly. *'Well, Boyd just has to accept that he is a human being that experiences those emotions. Then we can slowly and carefully reintroduce his gestalt to him.'*

*'That'll change him, won't it?'* Raev asked.

Boyd remembered this part of the conversation from earlier, but Raev deserved to be part of it. It cycled through in much the same way. *'Ultimately yes, but only a little. Boyd will still be Boyd; he'll just be his complete self. More him.'*

Raev agreed that it didn't sound so bad, and he got the distinct impression he was kept out of part of the conversation, based on the arousal he felt rising in Raev. As if on que, while he was feeling Raev's rising arousal, Tinker made a little sleepy sound that blended a sigh with a moan. It somehow combined adorable innocence with a sexy little rising tone. As she made this new and interesting noise, she shifted around and woke, shimmying a little in place.

Boyd had been proud of the fact that he hadn't woke stiff as a board, given the circumstances in which he'd slept. His shorts offered next to no barrier. Tinker's snuggly fitted body suit was soft, but not very thick, either, and his cock was

nestled between her thighs, at its typical size. The combination of the unexpected sexy sound and the friction generated by her firm thighs shimmying around caused him to stiffen quickly.

“Hmm?” Tinker murmured curiously at the sudden movement beneath her. Boyd could feel that she was still half asleep through their Bond, not conscious of what she was doing when one of her hands reached down to investigate the bulge pressing between her knees.

“Tink, wait...” Boyd groaned as her little hand wrapped as far as it could around his girth, giving it a questioning squeeze. This, of course, caused him to go from roughly half mast to ready and raring to go. He was fairly sure it lifted her lower half up off him a little, but that may have been his ego sensing what it wanted to do.

Her hand didn’t release him immediately, either, giving him a short little pump before her senses awakened enough for realization to hit—which was followed by full wakefulness and a gasp from Tinker. “Oh no!” she squeaked, snatching her hand away as if it was wrapped around a hot coal. “I’m so sorry!”

Raev snorted, evidently putting together one plus one and realizing what had happened. Silvie began to wake, trying to tuck into Boyd’s side and fall back asleep for a little longer. Tinker, however, was trying to figure out how to get away from him, and he felt panic rising in her.

He decided to hold her in place. It was a gamble, given the fact that his hard on wouldn’t fade immediately. “Hey, hey, hey,” He rumbled softly. “It was an honest mistake. I’m sorry for not being able to control myself. I started it.”

Tinker pushed against him weakly, but he didn’t sense revulsion from her, just embarrassment at the situation. “It’s natural for men to wake up like that. I’m the one who just grabbed it without asking.”

“It wasn’t a pleasant dream that caused it,” Mindy laughed softly. “It will be good for her to hear this, sorry Sunshine. Tinker, it was that sexy little noise you made when you were waking and your thighs rubbing against him that did

it. He's very attracted to you—you and only you caused that erection.”

Boyd sighed softly, but if it helped, it helped.

“Oh.” Tinker stopped pushing away. “Really?” She didn't sound like she believed it but let her thighs rest against him again. Her hazel eyes found his, apprehension making them wide.

Boyd nodded and admitted with a weak smile, “Yes, the noise and shifting got me halfway, then you touching it finished the job.”

“R-really?” Tinker's eyes got a little wider.

It was almost too much to handle when combined with the topic and her doll like face. “Yes,” Boyd confirmed. He chose not to mention that it was in part because he was feeling Raev's rising arousal at the time, as well.

“Oh my!” She buried her face in his chest.

He could feel the heat her cheeks gave off with her blush, but it might have been his imagination. There was an equal amount of excitement balancing her embarrassment on their Bond.

Silvie was still half asleep but had heard enough that he could feel happiness and amusement from her. Raev shared the general sentiment, although she also had a little pride mixed in, too. Whether it was for Tinker or for him, Boyd couldn't be sure.

After a moment Tinker asked, “Uh... now what?”

“You caused it, it's yours to take care of if you'd like.” Raev offered up his dick as if it just made sense.

“Oh!” Tinker gasped, tensing on top of him.

Boyd could feel the excitement spike on their Bond, but trepidation swirled up along with it. She wasn't ready for this... not yet.

“Tinker, she was kidding, weren't you Raev?” Boyd asked pointedly.

“Mostly,” Raev admitted. “I didn’t think she’d want to, but that feels like a good rule to set. You get first dibs on any boners you trigger.”

“Absolutely not,” Boyd ended that idea before it got off the ground. “Too many ways to abuse it. Plus, please don’t treat me like something to pass from bed to bed.” He sighed.

“Awww, Big Guy,” Raev snuggled into him, “I didn’t mean it like that. You, of course, have final say over who gets the D. I’m just saying, if a girl goes through the trouble…”

“So, let’s say I have a night planned with you, but Silvie comes along just before it starts and gets me up. Now she’s got dibs?” Boyd grumped, pointing out the first simple way a rule like that could be taken advantage of.

“Oh, no, that would be bitchy as fuck.” Raev settled back on her elbow. “Okay, I see your point. Unwritten rule, then?”

“I expect if someone is seeking his attention because they actually need it, he’ll sense that and give it to them,” Mindy inserted herself. “And if he senses they are attempting to interfere with another of his women’s plans, I expect he’ll react differently.”

Boyd hoped he never had to deal with things like that.

“Fair point. Gotcha. No need for a boner resolution rule,” Raev agreed.

“Um?” Tinker rolled onto her side and pointed, bringing their attention back to her unanswered question.

Boyd chuckled. “Just because I get a hard-on doesn’t mean something needs to be done about it. It’ll go down on its own. Not every erection needs to be addressed.”

“This one does,” Silvie inserted herself into the conversation. With those words came a surge of her need for him through their Bond. It was strong as he’d ever felt it.

“But, if you wouldn’t mind giving us some privacy…” Boyd trailed off, hoping that Tinker would understand.

“Right! Of course. Um, I should go check something in the lab, anyway. Um, what time is it? Daisy said dinner was at six, right? She seemed pretty firm on that.”

As Tinker talked she started pulling away. This time it felt important to her to leave, so Boyd let her crawl back off of him. It wasn't about embarrassment or anything negative, she legitimately wanted to get out of the way as soon as possible so that 'her' erection could be taken care of.

The concept was a little strange to him, but also sweet in its way.

“Um, see you later?” she asked shyly as she stood up on the bed near his feet. Her eyes weren't on Boyd's face, though.

“Of course.” Boyd chuckled again. It was like she was hypnotized; he was tempted to swing it back and forth to see if her eyes would follow it.

He felt a spike of amusement and boldness on their bond, as Tinker glanced up to his face, grinned, and said, “Oh, I was talking to him.” She nodded towards his dick, winked, turned red as a tomato, and then spun around to hop to the floor.

Boyd started it, letting out an honest laugh after a moment of surprise, but everyone joined in the laughter. He was mindful this time not to let his voice reach ear-splitting decibels.

Tinker leaped from the foot of the bed, sprinting as fast as she could for the door, but he sensed her joy at getting everyone to laugh. She could tell they were all laughing with her, that they all liked her flirty little joke.

Boyd managed to control his laughter just enough to call “You sure will!” before she got to the door, and he felt the thrill it caused her.

He may have formed their Bond during a stressful misunderstanding, but he was already glad that he had. Not only had it seemed to boost her confidence more than anything else that he'd tried, but he also liked having a sense of the

lovely inventor. She deserved nice things, and he would make sure she got them.

“I’m so proud,” Raev wheezed once her laughter died down enough. “I know I like just took her under my wing, but she’s grown so quickly.”

“The real Tinker is going to be so awesome,” Boyd confirmed.

“Just like the real you,” Silvie sighed, rolling on top of him in Tinker’s place.

“You think?” Boyd asked. He was still nervous about that situation, but Mindy had made it sound both good and necessary.

“Mhmm. Like I said, I’ve seen him a few times.” Silvie settled on him much the same way Tinker had been, but her more average height made the contact different. She reached down between them and into his shorts, taking him in a much more purposeful grip. Working her hand up and down, she continued, “I lured him out the other night.”

“Oh?” Boyd groaned, flexing under her fingers.

“Mhmm. That was him. When you came to save me, both times, him,” she said, beginning to work his hard-on in earnest. “Mindy says it was the only way you could break the compulsion on you to follow orders.”

Boyd blinked, not having considered that yet. He realized that if there had been a compulsion on him to report suspicious actions or behaviors that might indicate someone was against The Authority, then another to follow orders only made sense. Why take half measures if you were already crossing the line and leaving your morals behind? His concern became just how many Heroes they had done this too.

“They lay compulsions like yours only on PAC raised kids, mostly early on and they normally remove them at age sixteen when they start interacting with the general public,” Mindy answers his unasked questions out loud. “They justify it as being necessary to control all those Powered children in one location. They know it wouldn’t hold up in the public’s

eye, though, which is why they remove them before the public can notice. It's part of why the PAC training is so classified. They decided not to remove yours because of your Power."

"That has to stop," Boyd growled.

Things were getting very confusing for him. Silvie was shifting and grinding against him while her hand worked at his manhood. At the same time, Mindy was revealing a deep seed of corruption within The Authority which supposedly held free will above all else.

"And just like that, we're on the same side," Silvie purred before leaning in to kiss him tenderly. The way her hand worked at him intensified, making it harder to think about anything but the attention she was giving him.

"Okay." Mindy patted his shoulders. "Let me up so you three can... catch up. We can talk about the rest of this stuff over dinner." She was smirking down at him.

Raev felt a little uneasy next to him, though, drawing his eye. She looked amused, but all he sensed from her was concerned uneasiness—that, and the little bit of arousal that had built up earlier. Apparently it didn't even fade in her sleep.

She must have seen the concern in his eyes because she gave him a weak smile. "Sorry, just ah, remembered something a little upsetting. Let the not-so-little sexy goth up so you can help me forget."

He leaned up so that Mindy could extract her legs from beneath his head. Not liking the way Raev was feeling, but having already been told how to fix it, he rolled towards her—at least as far as Silvie pinning his other wing allowed.

Finding her lips with his, he pulled Raev to him, kissing her deeply until the uneasy feeling was replaced by building lust. Silvie was also full of need for him, so he switched to her once Raev was feeling well enough.

Mindy quietly extracted herself as the three began to move together. Boyd was half tempted to tell her to stay—she'd likely experience it through one or all of their minds, anyway. He wasn't sure she was ready for something like that,



though, and didn't want to make her think he wanted her to if she didn't want it, too. Plus, her words about how Tinker would take it had stuck with him.

He comforted himself with the knowledge that if she were interested, she would have picked up his thoughts and said something.

*'Thank you for the consideration, and I'm not disinterested, but this is time for you three to reconnect. I'll entertain myself elsewhere.'* She put the thought of her pleasuring herself while watching through the eyes of one of his lovers into his head.

He groaned at a combination of the strangely arousing thought and Silvie working her soft little hand against him. Dating a telepath would certainly make his time spent with other women interesting.

## Chapter 29

Silvie still enjoyed being in control. She reveled in things like taking a fistful of Raev's hair and controlling her head through a messy blow job while she made out with Boyd. Raev ate it up, too, guiding his tail to her slit and cumming all over it while Silvie guided her to use her mouth to please him.

Silvie had also taken to egging Boyd on until he'd control her in similar ways. She even used some of the 'breed me' language she'd heard Raev used to drive him wild during one of the more intense moments. The idea that Mindy might be watching it all through any of their thoughts excited him.

Needless to say, things had gotten... sticky. Now it was almost time for dinner, and everyone agreed that it would be better not to be late, or to arrive sticky. A quick shower was in order.

Only problem was, when they went through the door Silvie had said led to the bath, Boyd found something closer to a luxury locker room on the other side than a bathroom. There were no lockers, but it was the function Boyd knew to associate with the room. This one was mostly done in lightly stained, highly polished wood and beige fabric surfaces.

Everything looked clean and was well-lit, but comfortable and soft.

The room was longer than it was wide and had four distinct areas or stations as you walked along. First, there were walls of shelves to either side with just way too many kinds of towels stacked on them. It was enough to give anyone decision anxiety. Boyd didn't know towels came in so many sizes or fabrics.

They were all shades of white and off white, though—so at least he didn't have to pick a color. Boyd figured he couldn't go wrong with a simple large cotton towel, but he stood corrected. He had to pick out a thickness and weave type. There were convenient informational placards that listed each fabric, its thickness, and the towel's dimensions.

During his search, Boyd noticed an additional detail on the thinner towels. It was apparently an acronym, but not one he recognizes off the top of his head—at least not in relation to towels. Off-World Systems came to mind, but that made no sense. The acronym, ‘OWS’, was followed by a percentage as low as one percent, but no higher than ninety five percent where it was listed.

“What is OWS?” he asked after finding a decently large cotton towel without the designation.

Silvie seemed to be helping Raev pick her towel, apparently having become an expert in the task when he wasn’t looking. “Opacity When Saturated,” Silvie said as she floated over. Raev glided across the hardwood floors behind her on bare feet.

Boyd had to go over the words again in his head before what that meant for a towel clicked. He only had to imagine what 1% opacity would look like when wet. If Silvie wrapped his lovers up in one of those and took them into a sauna, got it nice and steamy, and...

He leveled a look at the woman in question. “You will not trick anyone into wearing one of the one percent towels into the sauna or steam room or bath instead of a swimsuit or something.” He spoke firmly, having decided that he needed to be more proactive when it came to curtailing some of Silvie’s plotting.

She rolled her gorgeous blue eyes at him beneath her slightly darker silver eyebrows and pouted. “Those ones are so thin that it’s pretty obvious what will happen when they get wet. Seriously, I’ve got panties thicker than that. You can almost see through them even when they’re dry. Anyone I ‘trick’...” Air quotes were quickly becoming a thing for their team, it seemed. “...into wearing one of those, is just looking for the excuse.”

“Silvie!” Boyd rumbled, adding a little warning. Just because she’d built a swanky luxury base for them didn’t mean she got to act like a spoiled rich kid—or use their justifications.

Another eye roll was followed by a dramatic sigh. “Fine. I promise only to ‘trick’ girls into wearing the five percenters for my Darling’s viewing pleasure.” She finished with a bell like giggle.

“No,” Boyd grumped.

“Ten?” She started pushing him down to the next section. “Is it a taste thing? I know you like it when I wear sheer lingerie.”

“It’s a ‘don’t trick people into exposing themselves to me’, thing,” Boyd rumbled, letting himself be pushed on to the next station.

The walls here were lined with more shelves, but these contained bottles, jars, and other containers of soaps, shampoos, conditioners, and other more specialty products. Again, there were enough options to inflict even the most savvy consumer with decision anxiety. This time, he was saved by the fact that there was a section labeled with his name.

“Fine, I won’t go lower than seventy-five without explaining what it means, I promise,” Silvie said in her most sincere voice as she guided him deeper into the hall-like room.

Boyd considered accepting the terms to prevent her trying to find a way to circumvent him but decided against it. He came to a stop and Silvie didn’t shove. “Silvie, my love, I don’t want to feel like I have to protect people from you.” He said it seriously because it was serious.

It was all fun and games until she read someone wrong and created a victim.

She instantly pressed herself into his back, tucking her face into his neck. “I don’t want that either, Darling.”

“You know why these things are important to me?” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes, Darling.” She nodded against his neck.

“We have Mindy, now,” he rumbled. “You can go as low as seventy-five percent without warning them only with

her sign-off. I know I would be the real target of these pranks, anyways, so I would prefer any woman involved be in on it. That is much more to my taste.”

“Yes, Darling,” Silvie nodded again.

Boyd was paying attention to his Bonds. Silvie was conflicted—both upset and excited at the same time. Examining the emotions left him with the impression that she was upset he felt the need to say something like that, but also excited that he’d been firm with her.

He was a little worried that Raev would react poorly to seeing another minor conflict between Silvie and him. Instead, he felt a sense of approval from her. She either liked the way he’d handled the situation, or it was just another effect of her overnight revelations. His Bond with Tinker was still new and not stable enough to tell him how she was feeling at the moment, given their distance—other than she was not in distress.

“Good. I love you, always. I’m just...” Boyd let it trail off.

“I understand, Darling,” Silvie responded softly. “I’ll be careful to make sure you never have to associate me with that type of thing. I know you know I would never purposefully hurt someone... and you’re right, using Mindy to make sure I’m not misreading someone is a good idea. Besides, under these rules I can just tell them about the lower percentage ones and let them decide how daring to be.”

Boyd snorted. If that was her incentive for seeking consent before having a woman wander into a bath with him in a towel that would all but disappear when it got wet, he’d accept it. How many women could that really include?

Boyd’s other self stirred, projecting a vague amusement and smugness. It dragged forward memories that reminded him of at least twenty women that Silvie had interacted with—some of which she’d likely selected for their propensity to do things just like that. Then, he remembered a more recent conversation about forming a continental defense

team, which—at a minimum—would include at least twelve field members.

*'Kuh-heh.'*

Mindy's laugh echoed in his head and Boyd swallowed, discarding the question for now. That was a problem for future Boyd, and he would much rather focus on the women currently in his life.

He glanced around the new section. The shelves were labeled with handwritten placards, and Boyd recognized Mindy's fancy script. She'd spent a lot of time practicing it. Sometimes, she used to do it with her nails on his chest, back, or even his wings—tracing words and messages before asking him to guess what they were by feel.

The two shelves labeled with his name contained more products than he'd ever used before. He spotted something labeled 'wing wax' and picked it up. It said it was to be applied to leathery wing surfaces in a thin layer using a soft bristle brush in a circular motion. It promised more supple and flexible skin and helped protect one's wings from exposure to the elements.

Boyd put it back down with a shrug. He supposed that someone without Powered healing like him might benefit from something like that, but his wings stayed functional and presentable with minimal effort. He spotted metal wire baskets lining the bottom shelf and grabbed one to pop his basic shampoo, conditioner, and soap into.

Raev was oohing and aahing over a much larger selection of products that spanned several shelves labeled with her name, evidently having already forgotten all about the spas she gave up back in the city.

He smiled as he watched her fluffy tails sway back and forth as she opened one bottle after another to sniff the contents. Her ears twitched differently depending on her opinion. He was learning what meant good or bad pretty quickly. The hints the Bond continuously supplied him with certainly helped with learning such things. Looking around, he

noticed a lot of empty shelves with blank placards and others that seemed to contain products for guests or visitors.

He spotted a section for Tinker, but it stood empty. When he asked Silvie about it, as she was gathering her own selections, she said that Tinker made her own hair and skin care products and hadn't brought them in yet. Then he noticed a section labeled with Hope's name.

He found his feet taking him to stand in front of her shelves. She had several products there waiting for her. There were multiple options for hair and body wash, as well as products for her feathers. He picked up a spray bottle labeled Feather Glistener. It said to spray on feathers after drying to give them 'that extra glistening shine'. Boyd didn't know what that meant, but he wanted to find out.

"Going to stop forgetting her?" Silvie asked in his ear, having floated up silently behind him.

Boyd had felt her mischievous intent and expected it, so didn't startle... this time. She settled herself against his back and wings, still naked as the day she'd been born as they hadn't bothered to dress since making love.

Boyd's Changed Mind made an 'ahem' sound, a throat clearing, in his mind. Boyd's other self stirred, insisting that they would not forget about Hope ever again. Carefully placing the spray bottle back in its proper place, he responded, "I won't forget her. I assume you have a plan?"

"Of course," Silvie giggled, guiding him back from Hope's shelves and down towards the next section. "Don't get too excited, though, it will take a little time. She's pretty ingrained with her team and popular in New Eden. She wants the transfer, though... has filed for it every way she can. We'll have to get her, but we have to build our own team up a bit, first. That'll make it an easier sell. I'm working on ways for you to meet in the meantime, though. If we get a few public dates and then people see how the two of you are together, we can start getting the citizens to push for her reassignment."

"Won't that cause..." Boyd started to say.

“I don’t want to try hiding the nature of our relationship,” Silvie cut in. “It sounds like more trouble than it is worth. I’ve talked to Raev and Mindy about it, in detail, and they both agree with me. Tinker didn’t care one way or the other, she just wants to stay out of the public eye as much as possible. Besides, being upfront allows us to lean into the image you’ve started cultivating.”

“What image is that?” Boyd wasn’t conscious of a particular image he was going for.



## Chapter 30

“Don’t mess with the Devil’s women!” Silvie said it dramatically. “If you do, he’ll show up, and you won’t like what happens next.”

“Okay.” Boyd could appreciate where this was going and could work with it. “We appease the higher-ups by keeping me in a primarily support role. They appease me by letting me enter the field if any of you are in danger. I’d probably patrol with the team from time to time in displays of strength.”

“Oh, no, you’re always going to be with us. None of that from time-to-time bullshit,” Silvie added vehemently. “You’ve shown you are a heavy hitter, so there is no reason to hold you back. You’ve always shined brightest when in command from a combat support position, though—able to observe and to issue commands or to step in where needed.”

That did fit with how he preferred to operate.

“So,” Silvie continued, “I was thinking you might like that position... Captain, but as combat support. If anyone gets close to hurting one of us, you’ll step in to chastise them. After a few times, word will get out—Don’t mess with the Devil’s women. Better to surrender if you can’t run.”

She wasn’t wrong, Boyd did very well in that role. He also had no issue with sending that kind of message. It was a way to protect his lovers with his reputation alone, while still allowing them to be the ones who shined. It spoke to his other self particularly strongly, who rumbled his support of the idea.

He would make them more Powerful, polish them up and watch them sparkle in the public’s eyes.

“Okay.” Boyd nodded. “That’s my role, then. Regarding the public dating... if it’s what everyone wants, I won’t force anyone to hide it... once I’m allowed back in public, that is.”

“Funny you should say that,” Silvie grinned her wicked grin and Boyd realizes he’d fallen right into her trap. “Director

Davis believes it would be beneficial for you to appear in a couple of cities next week—Not as a Hero, just as a visitor. Let you be seen in other places, so they think you are either being moved regularly, or at least aren't this close to Glorith.”

“So, the logical thing to do is take you ladies out on dates.” Boyd smiled.

“Mhmm,” Silvie hummed. “I couldn't get clearance for New Eden when I tried. It would be a terrible city to go on a date in, anyway. I reserved a table for Mindy, Raev, you and me for next Friday at a lovely little restaurant with a dance floor in Grandeur City. It's a spot frequented by visiting Heroes that has a press section. We can add Tinker without any trouble, but I doubt she will be interested; she wants to avoid the press. I know you like to pretend to hate dancing, but you really shouldn't bother. The only time I saw you smiling towards the end of training at the PAC was during dance practice.”

That didn't have much to do with dancing, other than you were supposed to smile during most of them. Dancing wasn't so bad, though, and learning the steps wasn't all that different from learning a new set of forms. His size complicated things with most of his partners, and his wings often got in the way, but otherwise it had never been a real issue.

Tripping in dance class was a little embarrassing. Tripping in a fight tended to hurt and had the potential to be *very* embarrassing.

“Okay. Raev, I know you'll want to dance.” He'd been her when they'd joined, so he knew she'd always enjoyed dancing. “Should I be learning any new steps? I know most of the basic ballroom stuff.”

“Welllll...” She drew the word out, her interest piqued, tails and ears stiffening. “Silvie said you had the Rumba and Salsa down pretty well, but if you're offering to learn something new...” She still hesitated to tell him what she wanted.

He could tell she didn't believe his offer was genuine and that he was just being polite.

"Anything I can pick up in a few days is fine," Boyd confirmed his sincerity. "I'll be spending some time brushing up anyway if you would like to join me. It's been a few years since I've done anything more than a basic slow dance in the kitchen with Silvie." He coughed into his hand. "And those never lasted that long."

"He's a quick study, though," Silvie offered. "What did you have in mind?"

Silvie was interested as well. She liked any of the dances that put them close to each other. Quick or slow didn't matter, but she was also partial to spins and twirls.

"It's pretty rare these days, but it's in the same family as the Rumba." Raev was still being cautious, which just told him more and more how important this was to her. She always thought she'd settled down with someone she could dance with, but that had happened rarely with the men she'd dated, if at all.

"It's called the Bachata. We'd have to work with your height, though, since we're supposed to be face to face for most of it."

"One of the benefits of Powered strength, my knees don't give out easily," Boyd rumbled. "Want to start tonight? We should probably get as much practice in as we can."

"Marry me?" Raev purred in her velvet voice.

Boyd almost chuckled at the standard little joke but decided to go in a different direction. "Okay, when did you have in mind?"

"Hey!" Silvie pouted while Raev sputtered. "Marriage should be a group discussion, at the very least."

Boyd got the impression that Silvie was just upset because Raev had beat her to it.

"Uh-huh," Boyd chuckled as they moved into the next section. Its shelves were filled with every personal hygiene

implement Boyd could imagine and some he wouldn't begin to understand how to use. He grabbed a simple washcloth.

“A lot of things should have been group discussions.” He indicated the shelves, covered in a truly excessive amount of personal cleaning tools, most of which had several copies in stock. They could open a shop if they were so inclined.

“That's different,” Silvie pouted, as she floated over to grab a fluffy pink poof thing she used to wash her body.

Boyd liked watching her use it.

Raev grabbed a light green one of her own. They didn't have time for the fancier implements and both seemed satisfied with their selections, so they moved on. The last section of the prep area consisted of a host of shelves filled with folded robes. An example of each hung on one end of the shelf. There were nearly as many robe options as there were towels.

Further down were baskets to put dirty clothes in and a bench you could use to disrobe before moving on into the bathing chamber beyond. All three of them were already nude and the base's System—which had the same voice and interface as the one they'd used back in their suite in the Tower—informed them that the bath was currently empty.

As they moved through the end of the section, Silvie harrumphed, “And you promised not to scold me.”

“I did no such thing,” Boyd rumbled, moving towards the door he assumed would lead to an extravagant bath. Instead, he found the bath to be the equivalent of a small water park in a room about half the size of the Great Room. It even had multiple tiers, although it wasn't shaped like an amphitheater.

What looked like holes that led outside let in natural light. Looking closely up one of the holes confirmed it was artificial, an effect that was very convincing unless you looked up right underneath one of them. Even then, you had to more than just glance, as it seemed the back of the holes were coated in some light blue material and the lighting elements

themselves were tucked out of sight. They cast pools of brighter light that left the rest of the room comfortably dim.

They entered an upraised tier that ran the entire length of one wall, with a wide staircase that led down to the lowest, central area. That was taken up by a truly ridiculously sized pool, shaped like a ‘†’. The water had a thick layer of steam rising from it, making its heat obvious. There was one other tier at their level, off against the right wall, with what looked like an alternative entrance to the massive bath.

There were several smaller platforms carved into the sides of the two tallest staircases, descending towards the bottom level with the massive pool. There were more against the other two walls as well, creating dozens of small to medium sized areas. Some had pools or what looked like water features that might double as showers in them. Others had little gardens with flowering plants.

A few even had equipment Boyd had seen in various depictions of high-end spas. He spotted a duplicate of the chair Mindy had used to give him a massage, earlier. And there were a lot of ferns and other large leafy plants used to block lines of sight on some of the areas, granting some privacy in the otherwise open room.

“Don’t look around too much!” Silvie dropped her stuff and threw her hands over Boyd’s eyes. “Not until we have time for a proper tour. We only have like twenty minutes until six and I know Mindy wants to show you the big one. I really should have brought you to one of the smaller bathrooms.”

Silvie guided him with her hands over his eyes off to the left. He wasn’t about to complain with her body pressed against his back like this, so he moved with her. Plus, he didn’t sense any of her wicked intent that would have warned of an oncoming trap.

“I can show you this one, though. It was my idea,” she added cheerily, then she called over her shoulder, “Babe, could you grab my... oh, thanks, love!”

“No problem,” Raev’s velvet tone called back brightly, and continued with more amusement, “although I’m pretty sure you’re just trying to put off being scolded because you saw his face.”

“Hush, you,” Silvie giggled. “I’ll get him to promise not to scold me before it becomes an issue.”

“I’m right here...” Boyd sighed.

“Mhmm, and I’ll only need a few minutes of your time to extract a short-term promise.” Silvie cooed in his ear. “I’ll let Mindy take care of the rest, later. Okay, stand here and face this way. Good.” She turned him to face the way they had entered before removing her hands from his eyes and floating away from his back to circle around to his front.

He was facing a molded stone wall.

“Wings out!” Silvie put her arms out like they were wings.

Boyd glanced over to Raev who was watching with some interest from the side. Seeing she was clear, though, he extended his wings in both directions with a sharp snap.

“Good!” Silvie clapped, going from arms wide to clapping while nude and floating in front of him was more than a little distracting. “Oh!”

She spotted the basket still in his hand and took it from him, setting it on the ground nearby. “Towels, please.” She took the towels from Raev and floated down a little ways to hang them on racks set into the wall.

She floated back and landed directly in front of him, barely avoiding contact. “Come here!” she waved Raev over.

The redhead set the baskets she was carrying down near where Silvie had put Boyd’s and strutted over in front of Boyd. “Now, Shower on,” Silvie said clearly.

A moment later, warm water started spraying in streams and ribbons from just about everywhere. Even the floor had little jets that shot water up in little arches all over the place. Raev let out a squeal as she was suddenly soaked.

Boyd flinched in surprise at the sheer amount of water involved, while Silvie let out a joy filled giggle. The blast of water only lasted for a second before easing back to something more manageable and comfortable.

Jets in the walls and ceiling continued to spew water in large amounts but it was targeted now. It dropped like rain onto their shoulders and heads and sprayed onto their torsos and below from the sides in gentle ribbons. This included the entirety of Boyd's wings, which felt pretty nice.

“Okay, gotta be quick!” Silvie shot over and returned with their baskets. She passed out soap first and urged the others to scrub fast. He noted the jets of water adjusted to avoid her face, despite how fast she was moving.

Boyd had figured out quick showers when he was six. In less than a minute, he'd hit his entire body with soap that was quickly rinsed away by the water. His skin was less porous than standard and came clean fairly easily. Silvie was fast, and her energy-based resistance meant that her skin was about as porous as a good dry erase board. The same applied to her hair. She only used shampoo and conditioner because washing her hair felt so nice. She even had to use a special perfume if she wanted to smell like anything other than her light and pleasant natural scent.

Raev finished up with a quick rinse down not long after Boyd. Silvie rushed the pair of them through shampooing their hair, electing to help Raev instead of doing her own. She obviously had something planned and wanted as much time as she could get for it.

Boyd stepped in and helped Raev with her tails, since his own short hair didn't take that much time. He was probably due for a haircut, a complication for the coming date night. Normally he would just buzz it, but Silvie said it made him look 'too regimented' and they were trying to soften his image.

Raev's tails took time and effort. She had a new special shampoo and conditioner for them—one she'd been wanting to try but couldn't find, apparently. It smelled like something

sweet baking as he lathered her tails up. He swore her tails drank both water and cleaning products. It took several minutes, but with three sets of hands that only let themselves get a little distracted, Raev was quickly cleaned and conditioned to the nines.

Most of the distraction came when they were letting the conditioner sit and Silvie paused the water.

After they rinsed the conditioner out of Raev's tails, Silvie popped down to her knees in front of him. She told him to close his eyes and enjoy. The water hitting his wings, back, and raining down on him was wonderful, but Silvie's skill with her fingers and mouth was magical. Raev commented about it being a good thing that he didn't have much of a refractory period before joining in. She helped her lover extract a promise not to scold Silvie about the bath until Mindy had her say.

Boyd didn't have any complaints.

Then, Silvie had one more feature of the shower to display—hidden blowers that quickly dried his wings with comfortably hot air. It was meant to be Boyd's quick shower option, Silvie explaining he wasn't to neglect his wings any longer. Normally, he kept them folded tight in his quick showers, to keep as much water away from the inner lining that tended to soak it up, so he could just let the leathery portions drip dry. He was fortunate in that they didn't drag across the ground and so didn't get all that dirty, but Silvie was insistent that he start washing them properly.

Satisfied, clean, and still feeling that pleasant warm fuzzy feeling from their group nap, Boyd only needed a full stomach to be perfectly content. A hearty pasta and poultry meal should certainly do the job.



# Chapter 31

The three of them walked into the dining area of the Great Room wearing smiles at 5:59 pm and some seconds, but they weren't late. Tinker and Mindy were already there and seated at the largest table, engaged in conversation. They were seated across from each other, leaving a place between them and the head of the table where Boyd sat for Silvie and Raev.

Boyd noted that Tinker's chair had a higher seat, allowing her to sit comfortable at a table built for someone of Boyd's height. Silvie and Raev each took a seat and Boyd briefly considered reclaiming Tinker for his lap, but she seemed content and engaged in a conversation, one that paused with their approach.

"I was just telling Tinker a little about our time together." Mindy smiled as Boyd settled into his seat. "We were just getting to 'The Witch and The Demon' phase."

Boyd chuckled ruefully. While it had been fun, he wasn't the proudest of those few weeks.

"I absolutely love that story," Silvie said cheerfully.

"Would you like to tell it?" Mindy asked. "An outsider's perspective might actually be better."

"Sure!" Silvie chirped before turning to Tinker. Silvie sat next to Mindy, so she was across from Tinker.

"So, everyone was talking about how Boyd was disappearing into Mindy's room for hours and hours for about two months at this point. The two of them didn't really talk or interact during the day, but Boyd would disappear into her room in the evening instead of doing four extra training sessions, like he normally would. So everyone knew something was going on, right?"

"It sounds pretty obvious, yes," Tinker confirmed.

"Right, but they were both loners by then," Silvie continued. "Boyd would still speak up during lessons and team training or whatever, but nobody felt like they could talk to

him outside of that stuff. Well, except for me, but he just mumbled excuses and avoided me back then.”

She turned and gave Boyd a glare before resuming her story.

“Oh! You also have to know about the tournaments. We had tournaments every week. All kinds with rewards like extra desserts or extra hours with one of the entertainment viewscreens and stuff. Well, Mindy never ever participated in any of the optional tournaments and Boyd stopped participating after his Change. He was being a big lug, probably thought he might go Primal at any moment and hurt someone.”

Boyd shrugged one shoulder in assent when pairs of silver-blue, bright-emerald, darker-amethyst, and light-hazel eyes settled on him.

“Yeah, I figured.” Silvie shook her head with a small smile.

Boyd got the impression she wanted to mock him a little for it, but chose not to.

“Anyway, the rumored couple shows up one week and totally dominates the doubles tournament out of nowhere. They just walked in all calm as can be, Mindy put her hand on Boyd’s shoulder and he raised his hand towards one of their opponents, and WHAM!” She clapped her hands together for effect.

“They laid a psychic smack down on them. Most of their opponents just dropped unconscious. Some tried to fight but would be so focused on the mental battle with Mindy that Boyd just walked up and tossed them out of bounds. Nobody had a mental defense strong enough to block the two of them.”

“It was all Boyd’s force and range combined with my precision and control,” Mindy explained. “I was able to piggyback off the connection he established with his Power. Then he would essentially hit them with me instead of one of his sensations or emotions like he normally would. It allowed me to work at range once Boyd shunted me in. Once I was in,

only the strongest could resist me—and because Boyd punched me through their main defenses, that was all they could do.”

“Mhmm, anyway,” Silvie continued, evidently thinking the how of it didn’t matter to the story, “the first week they just won every fight clean and easy. It seemed almost like a practice run.”

It was, Boyd thought to himself.

“Then, the next week came around and Mindy’s was wearing that choker and a sexy black outfit instead of the standard athletic uniforms. Boyd was in black shorts because they matched, I’m sure.”

She was right.

“I could tell right away that Mindy was there to send a message and Boyd was playing along.”

Silvie was spot on.

“I did have some lessons to teach,” Mindy admitted with a little embarrassment in her tone.

“And boy, did she ever.” Silvie giggled. “So, it went pretty much like last time, except this time Mindy was leaning back into Boyd with her arms up around his neck all sexy like. She was a little thicker back then and looked positively delicious all pressed into Boyd who was just a little smaller than he is now. I think it was the contrast, or maybe it was because it was so obvious that Boyd was crazy into her. The hot guy effect.... Ya’know? When a girl just looks hotter because a hot guy is into her?”

“Sure,” Raev confirmed the existence of a known condition that Boyd had never heard of before.

“Um... thanks?” Mindy asked uncertainly.

“Is that a thing?” Tinker asked, with what Boyd decided was a hopeful tone.

“Of course,” Silvie chirped and moved on, it wasn’t even clear who she was answering. “So there she was, pretty much grinding on Boyd. This time, instead of just knocking

people out they went full puppet master, walking their opponents out of the ring. He'd point to one opponent and then the other, and they just spun in place and walked out of bounds. Boyd didn't have to throw anyone out this time—they all just turned around and silently walked out while these two smirked at them.

“Except for a few... the ones that Mindy was after. They suffered much more embarrassing defeats—like being beaten on for a little bit by their own team member. One did the chicken dance while calling himself a ‘small dicked braggart who couldn't please a woman with step-by-step instructions’ before pantsing himself to confirm his claim. A couple literally got spanked by their partners.

“That's the night they earned the title ‘The Witch and The Demon.’ They only showed up one more week after that for a repeat performance, though. Half the contestants dropped out as soon as they showed up. Mindy successfully used Boyd to cow the entire training group.”

She turned to Mindy. “What did they do to you, anyway?”

“Oh, it wasn't just what they did to me—or only the things they did to me. Some of them just thought very unkindly of others. The ‘small dick’ guy tried to rape a girl, got fought off, but managed to talk his way out of it. I put together a little list of the worst of them.” Mindy turned to Tinker. “It was petty, cheap, and probably wasn't a very moral use of our Power... but Boyd humored me.

“It felt really good, but we decided to stop after that. We were separated not long afterwards, so that decision was never tested. I think we both learned what we needed to from the experience and were done, though.” She said the last to Boyd.

Boyd agreed, petty revenge like that felt good, but didn't get you anywhere—like junk food, you should only indulge responsibly.

Mindy turned to Silvie before accusing, “Besides, you're one to talk, little miss ‘sticks and stones’.”

“Huh, what are you talking about?” Silvie asked innocently then waved towards the kitchen area. “Oh look, the food is here!”

Boyd followed the motion to see Daisy flying over, trailing little colorful motes of light from her wings, almost like tiny glowing soap bubbles. Plates and other things floated through the air behind her, bobbing slightly to match the young woman’s flight.

“How is everyone this evening?” Daisy asked with a bright, friendly tone. Her smile looked real enough, even changing the shape of her large iridescent eyes.

Boyd was fairly sure it was at least as practiced as his own.

She didn’t wait for a reply as the plates floated out in front of everyone, settling down to the table. Everyone murmured something polite as a plate of pasta in a white sauce with pre-sliced grilled and seasoned chicken laid across it placed itself in front of them. It was followed by a side salad and two glasses, one prefilled with ice water.

As Daisy set everything out, Boyd wondered where Laura was. Their nurse had disappeared into the clinic and hadn’t been seen since. At lunch, she’d supposedly been inventorying the clinic. Boyd hoped she wasn’t avoiding them.

“Before we start,” Boyd said, turning in his chair to face Daisy and then looking at everyone else, “has anyone seen Laura?”

Mindy nodded. “She came out about ten minutes before you did, talked to Daisy, grabbed a plate, and then headed back to her rooms. That’s where she is now.”

“She said she didn’t want to interfere with your team bonding,” Daisy explained, then shrugged.

“Well, you both should know you are invited to eat with us—the two of you are part of the team, too,” Boyd grumped.

“Though it would probably be best if we started that after this evening,” Silvie smoothly inserted.

“Good. I’ll pass that on,” Daisy replied, then squared her shoulders. “So, tonight we have linguine in a creamy garlic sauce with herb crusted chicken and a side salad. I thought a nice light vinaigrette would be best, but I brought some other options.” Several bottles of various salad dressings settled within reach. “What would everyone like to drink?”

The table went around with their orders. Silvie, Mindy, and Raev all requested red wine, each receiving small bottles with, at most, two servings apiece. Boyd decided to stick with water and received a pitcher. Tinker asked for a canned drink Boyd had seen advertisements for, it was supposed to give you the energy to outlast an S-Ranked Powered’s endurance. Boyd was skeptical after looking at the ingredients—a caffeine and sugar high followed by a crash seemed more likely.

While ordering drinks, he remembered Silvie mentioning Raev wasn’t supposed to have grains. The pasta on her plate looked like the standard grain-heavy stuff. He hadn’t had a chance to look into grain-free alternatives but assumed it would look different. The thought also made him remember that the pizza crust from earlier today had been made from flour dough.

Boyd frowned at his oversight. Daisy had no idea what she was doing, she’d just been dumped into this situation with zero training. Nobody had showed her how to pull up nutritional profiles. He was probably the only one who could have. Not wanting to embarrass Daisy, he decided to wait for her to leave after delivering the drinks to address the problem.

“Raev, I’m sorry. I didn’t even think to tell Daisy about you not being able to have grains. I should have caught it with the pizza earlier. Are you feeling alright? Here.” He snagged her plate and transferred his chicken to her plate and her pasta to his.

Raev smiled at him sweetly but had a little amusement in her eyes. “I’m not a huge fan of garlic sauce, so thanks, but I take a pill so I can have all the grains I want. Which is great because I fucking love them—so don’t you dare tell Daisy I can’t have them. You should probably forget I shouldn’t have them, too. Mindy, can you do me a favor and... no?”

Raev asked it as a joke, which was clear, but her choice of humor still earned her a glare from Mindy. “Right. Sorry about that. Even joking about wiping my fiancé’s memories isn’t good. Got it.”

“Fiancé?” Tinker and Mindy asked together.

Silvie’s fork scraped across her plate with a screech that made Raev’s ears go flat and caused everyone to make disgruntled noises.

Raev laughed and shook her head at Silvie before continuing. “It was half a joke. I asked Boyd to marry me in a kidding way because he was onboard with dance practice. I’ve never had a guy that actually seemed into dancing enough to willingly practice with me. But when I asked, he was all like ‘Okay, when did you have in mind?’...” she did this last bit in a Boyd voice.

“Then,” Raev continued, “Silvie got all upset and said marriage should be a group discussion, but as far as I’m concerned, we’re engaged.” She shrugged at the end and popped a piece of chicken in her mouth as if the conversation was over.

Mindy chuckled, shaking her head and giving Boyd a look that clearly said he was a little shit. Then her mental voice carried the words with a laugh into his mind.

Tinker was gaping, looking back and forth from Raev beside her to Boyd, but Silvie had her arms crossed under her chest. She’d opted to put on a knee length dress for dancing after dinner. She leveled an expectant glare aimed straight at Boyd.

Boyd smirked back at Silvie. “I assumed you’d want the whole shebang... fancy dinner, some dancing, maybe a show, and a nice romantic scene that ended with me on one knee and a big ring. If you want something quick and dirty, I could just...” He played at rising from his seat to kneel beside her.

“Wait!” Silvie puts both hands, palm out, to stop him. “You’re right. I want all that, Darling. Still... it sucks! How

could you be so casual about it?” She pouted at him.

“I believe I’ve explained that I look at the Devotion as marriage.” Boyd shrugged and showed her his warmest smile. “We’re together forever. You’re mine; I’m yours. Unlike a legal marriage, there is no breaking it. That’s the one thing that matters to me. I’ll be happy to do whatever you want, with regard to a legal marriage, or marriages.”

He’d glanced through the plethora of options the night before when he couldn’t sleep. He’d confirmed they had options, and then moved on. “I was casual with Raev because that’s how she feels about it. I strongly doubted she was actually going to push to register our marriage until you were ready. She knows that would hurt you.”

“Yup,” Raev confirmed, wearing a much more serious expression. “I probably should have realized it might be a touchy subject for you and not even joked. Sorry, Babe.”

“She’s earned a little turnabout,” Boyd assured Raev. “I wouldn’t have agreed if it would actually have hurt her. I just wanted her to know what it felt like to have your marriage plans turned on their head.”

He smirked at Silvie who still glared back at him. “Still worried that I got engaged with another woman before you?”

“I know I have like zero right because I literally threw her at you, but yes!” She re-folded her arms and the pout returned.

“Mindy,” Boyd chuckled, “anything you’d like to contribute to this conversation?”

“Uh... no?” She kept her eyes on her plate, carefully cutting a piece of chicken into a smaller piece. *‘You are such a little shit.’* She hissed into his mind.

“What?!” Silvie spun to Mindy so quickly her chair almost toppled over.

Mindy kept her eyes down, pretending not to have heard anything.



Silvie glowered at her for a moment before grumbling, “Only freaking dated for like three months. Older girl taking advantage of a younger boy like that. Sex was one thing, but an engagement? It should be a crime.”

Boyd just chuckled and shook his head. There was a two-year age difference between him and Mindy. No crime had been committed under The Authority’s laws. The engagement wouldn’t have been considered binding and they couldn’t wed for a few years, back when he’d first proposed. Nobody had been taken advantage of at all, things had developed organically. He trusted Mindy not to have messed with his head in that way. She only messed with you for your benefit, not hers.

“Wait! Neither count without a ring!” Silvie insisted after a moment. “There’s gotta be a ring. That’s the rules!”

“What if you don’t like wearing rings?” Mindy asked. “Risky business in our line of work to wear a ring. Punch a bad guy, and you might destroy it.”

Boyd saw where Mindy was going with this and checked his Bond with Silvie. While she was legitimately upset about Boyd being engaged to someone else before her, she also felt silly about it. He decided to handle it in a way that would let Mindy have her fun and probably make Silvie feel pretty good about herself, too.

*‘That’s good... better even than what I had planned,’* Mindy commented in his mind, to which he sent a mental thanks.

“That’s a good point. I’m not sure even the really tough ones will work for my punches anymore.” Silvie put her chin in her hand as she contemplated the situation.

Boyd felt Tinker cycle through something like excitement, then concern. He took it to mean that she’d thought of something but wasn’t sure if she should mention it. He looked her way, caught her hazel eye and shook his head slightly.

She nodded just before Silvie thought of something. “I still want a ring for special occasions, but maybe we should make necklaces for daily wear? They might still get broken, but we could wear them inside our suits so it should be pretty safe.”

“Oh, then mine counts,” Mindy said smugly as she flicked the obsidian charm hanging from her choker.

## Chapter 32

“I’ve been meaning to ask about that,” Raev entered the conversation.

Sha and Boyd had cleared half their plates already. The pasta was good but was definitely meant to accompany the chicken. It didn’t have a very strong flavor on its own. The double portion of carbs would fill him up, though, that was for sure.

“Is that obsidian?” the kitsune asked.

“It is,” Mindy said, lifting her chin to display her neck, which wasn’t distracting to Boyd. Not at all. He certainly didn’t almost choke on a mouthful of linguine.

“Boyd made it for me for my birthday,” Mindy explained, “but he gave it to me with a promise that we would wed one day. I think he only did it because I mentioned only wanting to sleep with the man I would marry because I thought it would be special, but still. He did promise to marry me when we could, as he gave it to me. He knew I didn’t like rings. I’ve only taken it off a few times when I was forced to since he presented it to me. I even sleep in it.”

“Isn’t that leather? It’s pretty thin, I’m surprised it hasn’t worn out,” Raev’s head tilted to the side and Boyd swore he saw her nose flex a little as she sniffed the air. “No, not leather...”

Mindy reached behind her neck and unclasped it, removing the choker from her neck. She rubbed her uncovered skin with a strange smile. “I literally only take it off to clean and oil it, I even shower in it. Please be careful.”

She rose from her seat to pass it over to Raev, leaning over the table to do so. Which also wasn’t distracting to Boyd. It did take Raev a moment to react, though, as if she might have been distracted by Mindy’s assets leaning over the table like that. Not Boyd, though. Nope.

Raev eventually took the choker gingerly, holding it up and turning it over in her hands. She ran her fingers gently

over the crimson interior and he sensed the moment of realization over their Bond.

“That is so fucking hardcore,” she breathed, then her emerald eyes jumped to Boyd. “I want... no, I need one! Pendant optional, whatever you want. You pick the details. Just one of these as soon as you can.” She carefully passed the choker back to Mindy who took it back almost reverently.

Boyd nodded as he started to contemplate a style that would suit his fiery lover. Mindy’s choker was a bit on the thicker side, at an inch. He figured he would likely make Raev’s a bit thinner, maybe half-an-inch. He’d also attach the stones to it directly as opposed to a hanging pendant.

Boyd liked the heart he’d made for Mindy for the symbolism but had been told some women didn’t like them. Maybe just some basic cut stones?

*‘That is typically more related to who it is from than the shape itself, I think what you have in mind would be lovely,’* Mindy assured him in his head.

“Is that...from Boyd?” Tinker asked, looking on. She seemed to have already eaten her fill.

“Yes, it’s made from Boyd’s wing,” Mindy answered. “He figured out how to treat and preserve it.”

It really just had to be dried.

“He also carved the pendant by hand. Literally using his fingernails to chip excess material away. I watched him practice, but he was a sneaky little shit and managed to hide why he was doing it from me. He made himself believe it was just something to keep his hands occupied while he was around me.”

“But...” Tinker said, concern in her voice. “Raev, would it be okay if he used something I made instead? I could make it just like his wing leather—down to the cellular level. Just like the new suit I make from your hair. Heck, I can even make it fresh so Boyd can treat it the same way. He just wouldn’t have to cut off a piece of his wing to make it.”

“I mean... I guess,” Raev said with a shrug, but Boyd could tell it would lose some of its significance if he let Tinker do that.

“Tinker, thank you for your concern,” Boyd rumbled after waiting a moment to see if Mindy would take care of it again. He received a vague thought that she didn’t want to get in the habit of solving everything and making everyone dependent on her.

So, he continued, “I would personally prefer to cut a small section away from my wing. I promise you it doesn’t really hurt. I’m not sure what the equivalent would be for you...” Boyd pondered what sorts of pain someone like Tinker would likely be familiar with. “Oh, you’ve probably gotten shots before, right? It hurts me exactly as much as when you get a shot.”

Tinker frowned sternly at him. He sensed mostly concern on their freshly formed Bond, but also a little anger. Part of him wished the Bond was deeper already so he would better understand how to assuage her concerns. He tried to quiet that part of her concerns but found it too difficult. And his other self didn’t want to cooperate on this, either, it seemed. It felt like his other self was insisting that it would be good for her to deal with it on her own, and that Boyd’s delaying deepening their Bond was what was provoking her needless distress.

Boyd was frustrated by his other self because Tinker had clearly stated she wanted to take things a little slower.

“I can help,” Mindy stepped in and said out loud. “Assuming Tinker doesn’t mind me touching both of you at once, I could share Boyd’s memory of the time he made this one,” she held up her choker before putting it back on. “I made him show me because I initially had similar concerns. It’s actually less pain than I personally experience from shots. Like I said, he has a very different relationship with pain than most of us. It’ll be easier to show you than to explain it.”

Tinker peered at Mindy for a moment, making a judgment call.

Boyd felt quite a bit of trepidation coming from her. He knew the two hadn't gotten off on the best foot but hoped that Tinker would come around to trusting Mindy soon. He knew having a Mind Powered around could be disconcerting, but thinking that she was somehow out to get them was a little paranoid.

Although, he reminded himself that Tinker was being much more of a professional about it than him. A Hero was supposed to be cautious for signs of dissension, even among their own team members—especially amongst their own team. He should be a lot more cautious of Mindy himself, but he just didn't want to let himself think of her as a potential enemy. Not after he just got her back.

Instead, he was trusting that her side was the right side.

“Okay,” Tinker said after a moment, thankfully coming down on the side of trust.

The process was quick. Mindy asked Boyd to come around to Tinker's seat with her, then took his hand and put her other hand on Tinker's shoulder. Tinker made a small hiss then paused as Mindy removed her hand before asking, “That's it?”

“That's it,” Mindy said, returning to her seat.

Boyd stayed behind Tinker and very carefully started rubbing her shoulders. She was feeling a little insecure about the conversation. Like everyone was against her—which he needed to rectify because it just wasn't true.

“That's not so bad,” Tinker responded thoughtfully.

“Yes,” Mindy agreed. “I wouldn't let Boyd hurt himself without cause. To me, something symbolic like this is the same as a piercing or a tattoo. The ends justify a little suffering. Raev is like me, wearing a part of Boyd like this has a powerful meaning to me. It's worth it,” Mindy promised while gently touching the choker secured around her neck.

“Okay. I get it,” Tinker slumped in her seat, but she wasn't feeling quite as uncomfortable.

Wanting to reassure her, Boyd continued to rub her shoulders. He could tell she was a little taken aback but also appreciated the gesture of support.

“I’ll try not to be so touchy about this stuff,” she finally admitted. “I just had a friend in school who would hurt herself and I guess it’s a tender subject.”

“It’s okay to be concerned about me,” Boyd rumbled with a gentle chuckle. “I’m a worrier, so I won’t judge you. I’m already thinking about how to make sure you get enough rest. I know keeping you out of your lab will be a challenge.”

The other women giggled.

“But this is something that you don’t have to be concerned about. It’s a couple hours of slightly annoying itching at worst... and Raev gets something lasting with meaning for her. Speaking of, I think I’ve left Silvie to stew for long enough.”

The woman in question was quietly fuming in outraged frustration. She’d known about the choker, he could sense that, and was angry with herself for walking into Mindy’s trap. Silvie wasn’t mad at Mindy, or him, as far as he could detect, just that now two people had somehow beaten her to a promise of marriage with Boyd.

He was honestly surprised with her. At his words, her eyes tracked up to him, some of the frustration fading immediately. He sensed her trust in him to fix the problem through their Bond and it made a smile split his lips.

“Have you really forgotten?” he asked warmly. He saw her mind go to work, searching her memories.

It didn’t take long before her brow rose a little in realization. “The bracelet?” She asked it first as a question, still pondering the validity of her memory. Then, she must have remembered the promises they’d exchanged to stay with each other forever—a promise sealed with simple bracelets, woven by three children from stems and sticks on one of their first outdoor excursions.

“The bracelet!” Silvie cheered, beaming at him. “I was first!”

“Yes, you were,” Boyd replied, letting his smile spread to match hers. “And I bet if you ask Tinker nicely, she probably has a way to make it more durable so you could wear it. It should still fit.”

They’d all come out too big for them to wear as kids—not that they would have been allowed to do so in the PAC. Silvie had kept them in a box for safekeeping. She’d showed them to him shortly after moving to their suite in the Tower when she was going through her stuff.

“Bracelet?” Tinker asked curiously.

Boyd figured Tinker would be looking for chances to prove her value to everyone, not just him. This felt like a simple way for that to happen, even if he knew she didn’t actually have to. Sometimes letting someone do something they didn’t need to made them feel better about themselves. Boyd saw no reason to try to correct the behavior.

“Mhmm!” Silvie nodded rapidly, floating up in her seat as excitement filled her and her voice rose. “Darling made it for me when we were like... what, seven? Eight?”

She turned to look at him as she asked this, but moved on before he could answer. Which was good, because he couldn’t remember the exact details, just the moment itself.

“We made them from flower stems and thin sticks and other bendy plant stuff. I made one for Hope, Hope made one for Darling, and Darling made one for me. They were given with a promise to always stay together and that we would look out for each other.”

She turned to him, and her voice took on a more dangerous tone. “Speaking of...”

“Yes, I...” Boyd was going to say that he’d broken his promise, but he didn’t. It hadn’t been deliberate, or it hadn’t been his choice, at least. He’d always looked out for Hope and Silvie, even if he hadn’t allowed them to maintain a personal connection in his teenaged years.



Until the day they decided he was eighteen, he'd tried to stay away from everyone—especially after what he'd thought had happened with Mindy. He didn't have a known date of birth, so they went off the age of his tissue. His understanding was that there was less than a two percent deviation in the method used, so at worst the date they'd picked was only three months or so off. They seemed to think it was important that he understood that before they did what they'd done to him. After that, things had just... happened.

Shaking the thoughts of the past away and getting back to the current topic at hand, he said, "Wait a minute, I didn't have a choice in the matter."

Silvie's face dropped, and his eyes flicked to Mindy beside her who averted her eyes from his. She must have said something to Silvie. It would take a little getting used to, having Mindy share his thoughts like that.

"Of course, Darling. Sorry. I was just going to use it to remind you she's waiting for you, but that was insensitive of me."

"Incoming call from: Royce," the base's vaguely feminine automated voice boomed through the entirety of the Great Room.

Everyone reacted to the decidedly unpleasant intrusion in their own way. Boyd's arms raised half-way to a defensive position around Tinker while his wings begin to spread to cover the others. Raev ducked, her ears going flat to her hair. Mindy and Tinker both flinched and glanced around. Silvie blurred about ten feet into the air over the table, her hands and eyes glowing with silver energy.

From the distant kitchen area, Boyd heard a still somehow vaguely musical voice yell in distress, "What the heck was that?!"

Everyone glanced around the group with expressions that ran from embarrassed to amused.

Raev broke the silence. "Yeah, we're going to have to fix that."

“Tinker?” Boyd asked, hopefully. He didn’t want to answer the call until the volume of the speaker had been fixed. He didn’t want any of them to experience Royce’s voice being projected into their home like that.

“Uh... give me a minute?” She glanced around, evidently at a loss.

“Mindy? Silvie?” They both seemed to have some knowledge of the base’s functions.

Silvie just shook her head as she returned to her seat. She looked like someone already resigned to a terrible fate.

Mindy just shrugged, looking mildly amused. “I pretty much stayed in my rooms with... never mind.” She shifted her gaze away from him and he swore he saw her pale cheeks pink a little. A rarity to be sure.

Boyd had always had issues with jealousy. It was something he struggled with but had more or less accepted about himself. It reared its ugly head in that moment. Just who was she in her rooms with?

His other self very much wanted to know, too. Before he could either stuff the jealous thoughts and questions into a box or let them spew from his fool mouth, Royce got impatient.

“Caller: Royce forcing voice only communication,” the electronic voice boomed.

“What the fuck, kid?” Royce’s voice boomed through the room. “They’re running me ragged covering for your ass and you’re gonna ignore my calls? That’s fucked up.”

“Ahhhhh!” A small voice screamed from the direction of the clinic.

“Who’s that?” Royce sounded surprised and confused.

Boyd had never been in a situation like this. He wasn’t sure how he should respond—like literally, how? Did he call out towards the ceiling like he was addressing a voice from the sky or use a normal speaking voice? He decided to test the latter first. It was better to build up than to have to back off.

“Hey Royce. Please keep your answer simple, but can you hear me?”

“Uh, yeah?” His unsure response rolled over them.

Boyd sighed. “Okay, you caught us during dinner, sorry for the wait. Don’t talk, just give us a minute. We’re having a system issue.”

“Look kid, I don’t got time for this,” Royce’s grumpy voice thundered. “I just needed to make sure you’ve all settled in safe and secure, nobody’s killing anyone, and you’re gonna start working on that Changed Mind shit before you crack.”

“Make it stop,” Raev whimpered.

“What was that?” Royce grouched.

Boyd stepped over and puts his hands over Raev’s ears, which were pressing down flat to try to block out the sound. Her three tails were laying down flat in distress. Boyd noted the back of her chair was only supported on one side, the single post on one side allowing her tails to slide in unencumbered from the other side.

“Safe and secure. No killing. Mindy’s poking at my head.” Boyd decided the best way through it was to get through it as quickly and efficiently as possible.

“Good. Don’t know if you’ve noticed, but you’re on a media black-out,” Royce’s voice boomed. “Got some shit going on, but it’s being taken care of. No, I can’t tell you more. No, you don’t need to know more. Your current assignment is to address your Changed Mind. Mind Witch, or Mindy, or whatever, she’s your expert. Follow her training. Hopefully she’ll get you put together quick.”

Boyd would very much have liked to ask questions about the media blackout. He’d never experienced one before, but knew they were used if something was in the news circuit that would jeopardize a Hero’s ability to do their job. Reading between the lines, Boyd took it to mean that they were concerned about the Hero in question’s reaction doing more harm than good. So, he would like to know what was

happening that he would react poorly to, out of general principle.

At the same time, he desperately wanted Royce to stop talking. “Understood.” He responded.

“Huh,” Royce sounded taken aback. “Just like that? Are you sure it was dinner I interrupted and not...”

“Royce,” Silvie interrupted. “Don’t be crude while we are at the dinner table. Your voice is currently on a loudspeaker of some kind in the Great Room, and it is very loud. It is hurting Raev’s ears, so each time you talk makes Boyd a little angrier. We’ll figure out how to adjust those settings shortly, but for now, if there is nothing else, good night.”

“Ah... right then. Night.” Royce finished and a second later the outrageously loud electronic voice informed them the call had ended.

## Chapter 33

Boyd dropped his hands to Raev's shoulder's and gently rubbed them as he turned to Silvie and asked, "Media blackout?"

"Another Hero is trying to trash your name because they are jealous," Silvie said with a small shrug. "I don't think you need the blackout, but orders are orders."

"Is that all?" Boyd's brow furrowed.

Such things were to be expected. An unfortunate number of Heroes got into it for fame and glory. Anyone that had boasted about being able to take on Omega Ray pretty much had to switch to him now that he'd taken Omega Ray down.

"Yep," Silvie said, but her eyes shifted away, and he sensed there was something she was withholding from him.

He watched her take another bite of food, chew, and swallow, her bright eyes shifting uncomfortably to and away from him throughout. She gathered another bite on her fork but then let out a frustrated sigh as he continued to watch her.

"Okay, so I lied. I agree with the blackout, but only because Mindy needs your mind clear. Give her a few days, then we'll fill you in."

That was a much more acceptable answer. It also served to distract him. "What kind of training am I in for?" He turned to Mindy as he asked this.

"Well, tomorrow I'd like you and Raev to go out and hunt something in the Wild Lands." Mindy answered, pushing her mostly cleared plate away. "It should be a challenge, but not too much. I'm sure you two can find something appropriate nearby. The goal of this exercise is to enjoy the experience. Take your time with it."

"Okay." Boyd could guess the purpose. He'd likely attached any thoughts related to enjoying hunting to his Changed... to his other self.

“Yes, but so the others understand, too, I’ll explain it out loud,” Mindy said, most likely for Tinker’s benefit, since she turned to face the smaller woman. “We will be working towards carefully integrating the part of Boyd’s mind that his training split from his conscious mind. You may have heard of such things referred to as Changed Minds and going Primal. It’s an inaccurate description and the issue does not occur naturally.”

“Yeah, I never got that,” Raev interjected. “I never felt like there was another mind in my head trying to make me do stuff I wouldn’t normally want to do.”

“That’s because you integrated with your gestalt so quickly,” Mindy explained. “So, using standard vernacular of The Authority, you went Primal before they could train you to hold that part of yourself at bay. I’m sure you were intensely bored during the training they forced on all Changed—that was because it couldn’t work for you.”

Mindy’s sad gaze turned to the head of the table. “Boyd wasn’t so lucky. They already do a lot of related training for people with mind-based Powers, so it was more effective for him than most.

“Boyd’s dedication to his training made matters worse, and he’s kept it going all this time. He ended up with something close to a second personality made from all the thoughts and emotions he was trained to view as negative—he just kept shoving them in the same box. Now, our goal is to safely integrate the two personalities back together. Each of us will play a role now that you are here. It’ll be more efficient and the safest way to do it. I’ll fill you in on anything you need to know, don’t worry.” She said the last to Tinker, likely addressing her thoughts.

“I have a question,” Boyd rumbled, still absently rubbing Raev’s shoulders, using her as something of a fidget toy. She wasn’t complaining, leaning back into his touch.

“Civilians go Primal, it’s a known threat, not something limited to Changed like me who went through Hero training or were raised in a PAC. The training I received was

pretty intensive. I doubt they were teaching Changed kids the same techniques. They wouldn't have the groundwork. So, why do people go Primal if it's the training that causes it?"

"They do, in fact, teach all Changed children simpler but similar techniques," Mindy responded with a pout, exaggerated by her plumper lower lip and the dark purple lip paint. "Or they used to. The civilian education systems are shifting towards much healthier methods for coping with any abnormal or amplified drives a Changed experiences. For the most part, simple anger management techniques do the job—for those that need even that much. Most end up like Raev, with a few personality quirks but otherwise functioning members of society."

"Are you saying I'm quirky?" Raev asked, her tone exceptionally relaxed and completely unable to summon the false indignation Boyd could sense she intended to put into the words.

He then realizes that his absent-minded massaging had naturally sought out the perfect location, angle, and pressure in several tight spots. This, of course, had relaxed and completely distracted her from the pain in her ears. Boyd silently congratulated himself.

"Kuh-he. Only in the best of ways, love." Mindy shook her head. "I'll happily flirt when Boyd isn't turning you into a puddle." She paused, then added, "Oh no, dear." Boyd sensed a slight souring in Raev's mood on their Bond. "Everyone loves your flirting, even Tinker."

"Um..." Tinker started to say, but Mindy smiled and raised her hand to stop her.

"In a platonic sense; she understands. It's totally normal that her flirting makes you feel good, even though you don't find her sexually attractive, by the way." Mindy said all this with a tone meant to convey acceptance and openness.

"Enjoying sleeping together was also completely normal... not being ready to do it again right away is totally fine, and no you don't have to worry about Boyd springing asking about it on you. Yes, there is a good chance he will

sense when you are ready to try again.” Mindy snorted softly. “Okay, I’m going to stop now, you think very quickly.”

Mindy shook her head with a rueful smile and little laugh.

“Sorry...” Tinker blushed and sank lower in her seat.

“Don’t be, dear.” Mindy curled her dark lips into a gentle smile. “First, because I’m fairly sure it’s related to your Power, and secondly because I’m the one intruding on your thoughts.”

“It’s actually nice, because I definitely wouldn’t have asked any of those questions, but having the answers to them is great,” Tinker responded rapidly. “It’s worth having you peeking at my thoughts if it means getting rid of miscommunications and all the anxiety that comes with them.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment and thank you.” Mindy’s smile split to reveal teeth made brighter by the dark border of her painted lips. “I can’t promise one hundred percent success, but I do try to settle such things before they become issues. I do have my own... let’s say quirks, to use established terminology. For a long time, my help was rarely welcomed and often rejected. I’ve since learned to better judge when to insert myself. Being part of a family like this one, helping it come together and being welcomed for it, is something of an ideal situation for me.”

“A lot of that going around,” Raev murmured.

Boyd saw no reason not to keep rubbing her back, neck, and shoulders. Her tails had started slowly swaying back and forth between his feet, brushing his bare calves.

“It’s almost as if someone planned it all in advanced.” Boyd chuckled and shifted his gaze from Mindy to Silvie.

“Who would do such a thing?” Silvie asked, filling her voice with false innocence.

“What could they possibly have to gain?” Mindy asked with a more convincing, but still clearly faked, confusion. Then she smiled and turned to Tinker as she let out another little laugh, “Kuh-he. I feel the same way, obviously.”



Tinker's blush deepened and she sank a little lower into her seat. "Right, there's a downside, too."

"Someone's thinking naughty thoughts," Silvie giggled.

"I feel like we've strayed far enough from the topic," Boyd cut in, rescuing Tinker in response to a spike in her emotions. "We were talking about training."

"Oh, right. We're going hunting tomorrow. Yay," Raev replied from her relaxed stupor.

Boyd had sensed her following along with the conversation, as well as her rising interest in the training. The idea of hunting something sounded like a good time to her.

"Yes. I'll give you both instructions before you leave. I see your thoughts related to training hunts and a few missions. The goal is to have as much fun as you usually do. It'll be easy for you." Mindy then turned her deep amethyst gaze on Boyd. "You are going to have a hard time relaxing."

"Well... yes, the Wild Lands are a dangerous place," Boyd rumbled his response. He was already planning to remain on constant alert so Raev could have a good time.

"That is the opposite of the purpose of the exercise," Mindy smiled weakly and shook her head at him. "I need you to cut lose a little. Raev will help you get into the right mindset, but you need to be willing. We chose these mountains because there are a lot of secluded valleys and very few high Ranked creatures. It's relatively safe and Raev knows what she's doing out there."

Mindy paused, glancing at one of the walls. "We also have two Powered's who are familiar with the area patrolling regularly. They've been tasked with keeping anything strong enough to threaten our home away. We'll also have Tinker on overwatch with a drone or three and Silvie will only be a couple minutes away."

"I don't particularly like the Wild Lands," Raev said. "I'm a city girl at heart. My senses come in handy out here, though. My illusions make me really good at running away or

hiding, too... and that was before you Enhanced me. Don't worry, Big Guy, we'll be safe and have fun."

Raev wrapped a tail around each of his legs and the third tilted up to brush his own tail. "Just stick with me. We'll try to find something in the pig family so we can roast it up nice."

"So greasy," Mindy sighed.

"If your man hunts something, you eat it," Silvie said firmly, but after a moment she added, "a little, at least."

"Is that a rule?" Tinker asked.

"It should be, so yes it is," Silvie stayed firm.

"What about vegetarians?" Tinker wasn't trying to be difficult; she was just honestly curious.

Silvie pressed a finger to her pink lips and her eyes moved to the ceiling as she pondered the question. Then she smiled and let out one of her bell like giggles before she answered. "Boyd would find some nice wild fruits and veggies, if one of his women was a vegetarian."

"Oh, right." Tinker accepted the answer without question.

Which, upon thinking about it, Boyd knew to be true. He accepted the fact that he liked providing food for his lovers. Not cooking tonight had felt odd. The meal wasn't bad or anything, and probably would have been even better with the chicken. The fact that he wasn't involved in putting it on the table irked him, though. Hunting a big boar and roasting it so they could all eat their fill sounded nearly divine.

He could almost picture it, flying back home with a few-hundred-pound boar dangling from his tail, Raev all curled up in his arms enjoying a sleepy flight home after a good hunt. How excited Silvie would be to see it. She would undoubtedly fawn over him, and he would be allowed to unabashedly soak it up a little because he'd done something good.

*'That's the emotion I want you chasing tomorrow,'*  
Mindy spoke into his mind.

It was then that he realized that it had come from his other self. It was certainly something Boyd could support. Which made him realize that he disagreed with his other self on very little—mostly just on how they should pursue women.

His other self made him aware that Boyd was wrong about that as soon as he thought it. Boyd's other self agreed that each woman should be pursued differently. He just thought Boyd was an idiot for believing he should not be pursuing other women. He should be, actively. The two that he hadn't fully claimed at the table were a good place to start. Now that Boyd had accepted that they, and Hope Wing, were his to pursue, they disagreed about nothing. That would change, though, his other self was sure of it.

It was a very strange way to converse, in ideas and thoughts more than a train of thought. Some of his communication with Mindy had predisposed him to it, making it a little simpler. Still, he wasn't sure how to ask his other self questions, so it made conversing difficult. He would like to ask what they would disagree about. If he was supposed to integrate with his other self, disagreeing about things seemed counterproductive.

*'He's likely referring to the inevitable situation where a woman not on your short list catches your attention and you try to deny that she has,'* Mindy stepped in to help.

His other self didn't feel the need to correct her, so it was likely the case. Boyd frowned, not liking the implications.

"Would anyone here consider Boyd scouting for potential members of our family as infidelity, or him having a wandering eye?" Mindy asked out loud.

Right, having Mindy around meant having his concerns addressed—whether he liked it or not.

## Chapter 34

“Of course not,” Silvie was the first to respond, but she needn’t have bothered.

“Nope,” Raev sighed contentedly.

“I knew I wouldn’t be joining a monogamous relationship.” Tinker shrugged.

“And I’ve always wanted a big family,” Mindy finished. “So get to work! No, sorry, that joke was in poor taste. Move at your own pace, but don’t hold yourself back. I think now would be a good time to discuss a training schedule. Boyd’s the Captain, what do you have for us?” She focused her amethyst eyes on Boyd.

“I’m working on it,” Boyd rumbled.

He stopped absently rubbing Raev’s shoulders and returned to his seat. “Well, Silvie is on light training. Voluntary and general maintenance only. Raev, when was your last vacation?”

“Not long ago. I’m good for a full schedule,” Raev replied with a smile.

“Mindy, have you been training in any combat, self-defense at least?” Boyd asked.

“A little,” she admitted. “I know you’re going to make me start taking it more seriously, but I’m not a...”

“You’ll be training in evasion and grappling. I know you’re not a striker,” Boyd cut in. Hurting someone was pretty much equivalent to hurting herself, for Mindy. “Raev, would you mind helping figure out a style that works for her?”

“Sure, but...” Raev’s brow furrowed in confusion and she trailed off.

“I’m sure I’ll be getting involved because I’m overprotective and Mindy is squishy, yes,” Boyd confirmed. “You are best suited to helping her figure out what works for her, though. I’ve trained to use my size, reach, strength, and extra limbs. Silvie is an energy manipulator and has trained to

fight with that her whole life. She's a bruiser, like me she always had at least A-ranked strength. Sure, there were people stronger than us, but we were mostly trained to avoid S-Rankers until a Triad showed up. You have physical Powers, but not nearly to the same extent. You've clearly trained to deal with people stronger and faster than you, and well at that."

"So, you want me to help because I've received training similar to how someone without physical Powers fights and would be best suited to pass that on. Gotcha," Raev said with a smile and sat back in her seat.

Her tails fanned out behind her, and Boyd sensed pride across their Bond. Examining the feeling, he knew that him trusting her to train Mindy—who he obviously cared for—meant a lot.

Boyd turned to his tiny inventor, barely stumbling over the realization that he already thought of all four women at the table with him as his. "Tinker, I'm going to require that you complete at least the standard cardio training. If we don't have one, we will also be setting up an obstacle course you will have to run a few times a week."

Tinker looked up at him from her spot down the table, mouth agape. "But, but, but!" She exclaimed the three words as if they were sentences.

Boyd got the feeling that each 'but' did have a complete sentence attached to it, but her mind ran through them each too quickly for her mouth to follow.

Tinker took a breath before trying again. "But I'm Base Support. There are no physical requirements!"

"There are not," Boyd agreed. "These are personal requirements I am setting because I want you to stay alive. You won't have to learn to fight, just train how to run away in various environments. With that in mind, if you make any equipment that you can keep on your person at all times, you can use it in your training as it would be something you could use in any given emergency."

“Oh, so a grav belt would be fine?” Tinker asked.

“If you either wear it all the time or keep it nearby, sure.” Boyd nodded. “We’ll call it cardio training, but its real purpose is getting you away from danger. I don’t care what you use to do it, as long as you are able to.”

“That’s not so bad.” Tinker settled and Boyd felt her mind start to whirl through ideas. “I’ve got a couple ideas.”

“Just remember that includes having it nearby and usable even when in the bath or sleeping,” Boyd added. “I’ll put together a schedule as soon as I get in front of the system. Raev, I’m know it’s going to eat up some of your time helping with Mindy’s training, but I’ll also need your help with my training, too.”

“With yours?” Raev asked. Her head tilted to the side, causing her hair to shift and catch his eyes.

“He’ll be starting a heavy anti-porter training cycle. I imagine he wants to use your illusions for it,” Silvie answered for him.

“Oh, like what we did today?” Raev asked. “I actually helped him with that this morning.”

“I should have known he would have already started,” Silvie giggled and turned to Boyd. “You never did take a loss lying down. The general-purpose room has several obstacle course configurations, since you brought that up earlier, as well as hologram technology. I have it preloaded with a bunch of training cycles—it doesn’t have all of them, but I made sure every level of anti-porter training is ready to go.”

“Thank you.” Boyd nodded. “I’m not sure it will be able to match Raev, though. I got a lot better training in when she took over this morning.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Silvie chirped brightly. “I just brought it up in case you don’t want to eat up too much of Raev’s time with your training.”

“Which I don’t,” Boyd confirmed. “I’ll probably split it up between the two. I feel like I should find out what we are training for before I start scheduling, though. How much time

do we have to be ready... for what? So..." Boyd let the question hang and shifted his gaze between Silvie and Mindy.

The atmosphere around the table changed. Boyd could tell that even Raev's laid back attitude had shifted smoothly into business mode. Mindy and Silvie exchanged looks and Mindy gave a single nod.

"Daisy cannot currently hear us," she said, "and Laura is back in her room."

"Okay." Silvie turned back to Boyd. "We can't tell you much about the organization we are part of because we do not know all that much... by design. I will tell you my part first, then Mindy will tell you hers. For me, it started after those Changed tried to take Hope and me—the ones you stopped. They were targeting Hope and it just didn't make any sense. Why kidnap a Hero at all? And if you are going to do that, why a healer with support Powers?"

Boyd had wondered about that himself, back then. The answer was simple, of course. You should never try to figure out why Powered Criminals did what they did. There often wasn't any logic behind their actions, and trying to figure it out would just lead Heroes astray. You had to become mad to understand madness, so why even try?

"So I started trying to figure it out," Silvie continued, causing Boyd to frown. "That's when Mindy approached me. She knew why. Darling, I'm going to remind you that you are the good guy... even in this story. They weren't there to kidnap Hope. They were there to rescue her from the PAC and The Authority."

This caused Boyd's frown to deepen.

"They were part of a different organization, but one connected to the one Mindy and I are a part of."

"We are a part of," Boyd corrected her, getting it out of the way.

If Silvie and Mindy were a part of it, so was Boyd. At least until Boyd decided they shouldn't be, at which point they would all stay or leave together. His simple statement brought

a massive smile to Silvie's lips, and he sensed warmth boil up in her through their Bond. She had honestly been concerned that he would reject her, which seemed silly to him.

“He's a part of it until he decides if they are the good guys. If he decides he doesn't like any aspect of our organization, he plans to pull us out,” Mindy said with a slight frown and a pout. “It isn't quite the complete trust you think it is.”

Silvie scoffed, then giggled, turning to Mindy. “Shows what you know, mind reader.” She then turned back to Boyd with a beaming smile. “It's complete trust in us—he's just accounting for the possibility that we are being misled.”

Mindy studied him for a moment, and he felt the telltale mental brush against his mind as she rummaged through his thoughts. Then a smile split her lips as well. “Oh, so it is.”

She seemed vaguely confused. “This doesn't match my expectations at all, especially since you were thrown into the deep end, instead of eased into things, as planned.”

“Sorry...” Tinker muttered.

“Don't be,” Boyd rumbled with a smile for the small genius. “You being vigilant makes me more comfortable with trusting them. Just like Raev's laid back approach makes it easier to roll with it. Both of your perspectives help and bring me comfort.”

“I can't say with any certainty that the planned way would have been better,” Mindy added to Tinker. “I will confirm that he feels better knowing that you are here and analyzing the situation from an oppositional viewpoint. That wasn't part of the plan, so in that way it's better already. Since I know that you will come down on our side in the end, I think it will work out better than my original intentions.”

Mindy's smile included Tinker in the group. “It is even allowing him to trust us more... because he's trusting you to catch him if that trust is misplaced. The Bond carries much more meaning than anticipated.”



“If you are done trying to figure out why I’m not freaking out, can we return to the topic of why I should be?” Boyd asked good naturedly. He wasn’t in a bad mood, and had stayed reasonably calm, but he wanted answers.

“Of course, sorry.” Mindy turned back to Silvie so she could continue.

“Where was I, oh, that’s right, the start.” Silvie sighed before she continued. “It’s not a very long story. Mindy found me because I wasn’t letting the Mentors stop me from asking questions. She told me she was part of an organization that was trying to free the Changed, to end their mistreatment and segregation where it applied, and to lift the stricter laws they have to deal with in some cities... to make them equal.”

“Why would that require... all this?” Boyd indicated the room but meant the situation in general.

“I’ll let Mindy explain that bit when it’s her turn,” Silvie said with a sweet smile. “I only know my part. At first, I was supposed to stay close to Hope, to keep an eye on her and protect her. They always planned to pull her out and wanted to limit The Authority’s influence on her as much as they could.”

“Why is she so important?” Boyd wondered. He had several hundred questions already but was trying to contain himself.

“That’s another Mindy part, Darling. Let me finish, please,” Silvie said sadly. “Hiding this from you has been terrible and now that I’ve started, I just want to get it all out.”

Boyd leaned back in his chair and nodded for her to continue.

“Then Mindy found out who you are—the next Enhancer, the one she was looking for. But with the fiasco surrounding that discovery, she was sent away. So, my job switched from staying close to Hope, to staying close to you.”

She frowned at him. “Something you made absolutely impossible. The cold shoulder hurt, you know?” Silvie pursed her lips and glared at him, before starting and glancing guiltily at Mindy.

“No, sorry, this is not the time for that. Then, the testing started. They helped me get selected as a volunteer. This part... I don’t know if...”

He felt turmoil run through his lover once more as the words seemed to catch in her throat. It reminded him of the odd sensations of uncertainty she’d been experiencing earlier. This time it seems to swirl around one singularly ugly emotion: Guilt.

“Now is not the time,” Mindy cut in. “It will side-track the conversation.” She stared at the silver-haired woman, who refused to meet her gaze. “Silvie is going to stop here, for now.”

“I am?” Silvie asked, lifting her head.

“Yes, we’ll circle back to that at the end. That way, he can comfort you... because we both know he will. Then, you three can go practice dancing to blow off some steam and settle down,” Mindy said with confidence, believing it to be the best path.

She sat up straighter in her chair. “So, I suppose it’s time to tell my story.”

## Chapter 35

Everyone watched Mindy with varying degrees of interest.

Silvie was still a whirl of emotions and seemed to be dreading the end of her story. Boyd slipped his tail over to wrap around her thigh and stroked it gently, trying to bring her comfort while taking it in return. Raev was just generally curious. Tinker felt like she was trying to be as analytical as she could be, looking for inconsistencies anywhere she could spot them.

“I should begin from the start, I suppose,” Mindy began. “I was not born as a citizen of The Authority. I was born in a community that exists outside of its control.”

That was quite the inconsistency to start with. There were no communities outside of The Authority’s oversight, it was the world’s government, after all.

“There are many like it,” she continued, “scattered throughout the Wild Lands... in hiding.”

“That can’t be true,” Boyd insisted immediately. “Powered Criminal groups set up temporary settlements in the Wild Lands, but outside of that there aren’t any communities—certainly nowhere stable enough to have or raise children.”

“It could be true,” Tinker of all people confirmed. “I’m not supposed to know about them but...” Her voice faded away as all eyes turned to her.

She continued after it became clear that everyone was waiting for her to continue and not attempting to silence her with a look. “Um, I saw some communication logs that could only be explained by there being small mobile groups living in the Wild Lands... groups not attached to The Authority. Groups that The Authority is hunting.”

“Not all of them are small and mobile, but any that you would see communications about would be,” Mindy confirmed. “The Authority hunts them like you said, so the larger settlements have to stay better hidden, but they exist.

That is literally all I know about them. No locations, no numbers, no ways to get in contact from my side. If I don't know anything, The Authority can't take the information from me."

"That would make sense." Boyd nodded.

He figured she would leave him with questions, but he hoped she had more answers than she's given them thus far. The fact that he had been lied to about his own free will made accepting that he had been lied to about other things easier to accept. Having Tinker corroborate the first fact that seemed out of place confirmed Mindy's story, as far as Boyd was concerned, meant that it was likely all true.

People lived in the Wild Lands, outside of The Authority's control. What else had they lied about?

"What I can tell you, is my mission... or our mission, now. That will take a little getting used to." Mindy smiled weakly, but her eyes contained hope.

Boyd didn't have a Bond with Mindy yet to lean on, but he guessed that it had to have been a very lonely mission. Boyd's ready acceptance was making her hopeful that the loneliness was about to end. Then, he realized that he wasn't just guessing—Mindy was letting a little of the Bond they did have slip through whatever she was doing to limit it. He sensed as she tapered it down then closed it back off before continuing.

"I was inserted at age four because they couldn't get adults into the PACs," Mindy continued. "They have people almost everywhere else, but the PACs are heavily protected. They used a Powered to temporarily age me and a few others so that we could volunteer with adult cognition. They made sure we fully understood what being a child spy would entail. It wasn't perfect, but it was the most moral way they could think of to handle the situation. They'd tried de-aging adults to send them into a PAC, but they always got caught.

"They needed people in the PACs, though, so they didn't have a better choice. I wouldn't remember volunteering until much later, but I eventually did. My mission was to help

any Changed I could, gather information, and to look for you.” She turned to Boyd. “They knew you were coming and roughly when, but they didn’t know exactly where you would be found. All they knew was that you would be raised to be exceptionally loyal to The Authority, so they suspected the PACs.”

“How?” Boyd asked. He was asking about multiple things, really, but knew he would only receive the answer to part of it.

She’d left out how she was contacted and how she received her orders. Also how she got past the very invasive mind probing they’d all received multiple times in the PAC—especially in the Mind Powered training group. How had she passed information back to this group? She couldn’t answer any of those questions, though, and he knew it.

“I didn’t know the details,” Mindy responded. “I didn’t even have any details to search with other than male, Changed, and Enhancer. I think I was only allowed those details because our adversaries within The Authority were also looking for you with the same description. Do you remember when they made you try to buff a bunch of Powereds after your Change, using any method they could think of?”

“I do.” Boyd hadn’t thought much of it at the time.

They’d occasionally tested their Powers for new applications after certain milestones. They just asked him to do things like push his Black Flame into other people. It didn’t work, of course, doing nothing to some and causing pain or damage to others. Although... now that he was looking back with hindsight, that had been the last time they tested him that way—until Mindy discovered his Power the old-fashioned way.

“Every male Changed within The Authority underwent that testing shortly after their Change for about twenty years before we discovered your Power. I’d already ruled you out, by the way. It was by pure coincidence that I happened upon the one everyone was looking for,” Mindy explained. “You

can imagine my frustration at being pulled away from you right after finding you.”

Boyd found that his perspective made her frustration seem a minor, piddling thing, but chose not to say anything about it.

She blushed, ducking her head. “You’re right of course,” Mindy responded, having heard his thoughts, anyway. “That was inconsiderate of me. Well, the nature of my mission changed at that point—it became about getting back to you. Which matched my personal desires, at least. Fortunately, I already had an established ally in Silvie. She kept me up to date on you, so that helped and brought me some comfort. You know the rest, really.”

“No, I don’t,” Boyd insisted. “You say you’ve been working with Silvie for years. What did you do to her? And why, now that you two are openly working together, does she feel more uncertain and conflicted than I’ve ever felt her before?”

Silvie buried her face in her hands and Boyd felt a tsunami of guilt rise up inside her for some reason.

Boyd knew Mindy had something to do with it, that it was likely due to whatever she had done to Silvie when they’d been out here by themselves last night, when he’d felt... something. Whatever it was had changed his Silvie, and not in a good way, apparently. Without realizing it, Boyd started to growl.

*‘I didn’t do anything that she didn’t ask me to,’* Mindy explained. *‘Last night I actually removed something I did at her request years ago.’*

Knowing that Mindy had changed Silvie before they’d come together, whether she’d asked for it or not, was too much. Boyd half rose from his seat, glaring at his ex.

“Stop!” Silvie cried, suddenly up out of her seat and hovering before Boyd. “Years ago, before they helped me get selected as a volunteer, Mindy put some...” Silvie faltered.

“Emotional supports?” Mindy offered.

“Yes, she put some emotional supports in place so that I could do what needed to be done... so that I would have the confidence to see through everything that became,” she gestured to the room, “all this.”

Boyd could understand that. It couldn't have been easy being what was effectively a double agent. But that didn't explain why she felt so bad about it now.

“I made it easier for her to be selfish,” Mindy explained, “to mute her guilt over...” Their newest team member sat up straighter in her chair and fixed Boyd with a determined look. “I muted her guilt over what she needed to do to manipulate you.”

Before Boyd could say anything, Silvie was right up in his face, holding his cheeks between her hands as she held his gaze with her softly glowing blue eyes. “The guilt I feel now... all the uncertainty you've sensed in me today is the regret I feel for what had to be done.” She clung to Boyd. “I couldn't have done what had to be done without her help and support. Please don't be mad at her, Darling. I asked her to.”

Boyd held Silvie close. He didn't like that all the Silvie-ness that drove him mad—but that had also made it possible for him to get through this past year—might have been faked.

*‘Not faked,’ Mindy interjected. ‘What I did only reinforced what was already there. Silvie believed, and believes, what happened was for your own good. She just has some regrets now that we didn't bring you in on it sooner—so that there wouldn't have needed to be as much manipulation.’*

Boyd was not pleased about what Mindy had done; what they had done. But he knew from the bond that the last thing Silvie needed right now was to remind her of that. He ended up doing just what Mindy had said he would do—he comforted Silvie, murmuring words of encouragement and forgiveness in her ear. Eventually, she settled down and went back to her seat and Boyd sat back in his chair.

“What else did you do?” he asked Mindy in a much calmer tone.

“I helped get this all set up and I searched for Raev, whose original role was a little different,” Mindy replied.

She smiled at Raev, likely reacting to something in her thoughts. “Kuh-he.” The little laugh Mindy let loose more or less confirmed it. “Not *that* different. Honestly, your primary role hasn’t even come into play yet. You got right through his defenses like I knew you would, but that was just the start.”

“Oh?” Raev asked, one fox-ear perked up while the other remained cocked in a display of inquisitiveness.

“Oh, it’s not a surprise, Silvie already explained most of it... but left off half-way to avoid upsetting Boyd about how much of a role I played behind the scenes,” Mindy explained, laying one hand on Silvie’s arm. “The original plan was for me to help Boyd with the unnatural causes behind his resistance to using his Power. We knew he still loved me...” the look she gave him sought confirmation that she could have gotten from his thoughts but didn’t.

He nodded slowly, and Mindy visibly relaxed, letting go of Sylvie’s arm.

“He just didn’t know I still loved him,” she continued. “We assumed once the compulsion they accidentally laid with their training to not use his Power was cleared up, he would accept me readily enough.

“We also knew that finding the right third woman would be vital, because if we messed it up we would have a much harder time convincing him to take any more—mostly, because of Silvie being the first and me not being romantically interested in women as his second woman. As much as Silvie wants Boyd to take other women, she doesn’t like sleeping without him. Or eating without him. Or bathing without him. Or really doing anything without him. We knew Boyd would sense that, which would give him a reason to avoid spending time with other women.”

“So I’m Silvie’s surrogate for Boyd when he is with other women?” Raev asked.



Boyd sensed that she didn't really mind, but it irked him. Raev was so much more than a stand in for anybody.

"Nothing so simple," Mindy responded promptly, likely paying close attention to his thoughts again. "We needed someone both Silvie and Boyd would fall in love with and who would love them back—a simple surrogate for his company wouldn't work. I could do that. The only way Boyd would leave Silvie to do almost anything without him would be if it was with someone who loved and was loved by her as much as he loved her."

"Oh." Raev blinked her big emerald eyes twice while a wide smile split her lips, exposing her elongated and sharp looking canines. "Well, I do love you both. If I haven't said it out loud..." Then her smile faded, just a little. "Which is strange. Are we sure..."

"It is possible that his Power makes you love his other women at the Devotion level, yes." Mindy cut in cautiously, likely thinking she would put it better than however Raev was about to. "However, as far as I can tell, that isn't what happened. I think it's more in line with what you believe happened—which would be better for you to share, if you are comfortable with it. It would be good for both of them to hear it from you."

Raev nodded and her smile returned to full brightness as she turned to Silvie and Boyd. "I'm glad Mindy agrees with me. I didn't want to share it because I wasn't sure yet. I only can say I am sure, now, because last night it fully set in."

"Exactly." Mindy inserted. "I think it would have... sorry, continue." She cut herself off, letting Raev explain herself.

"Right." The kitsune turned to Boyd. "I think it was your Power, but not in the sense that it made me love Silvie."

She turned back to face everyone else. "Boyd showed me what true love is. How warm and wonderful it is to let yourself feel that for someone... to let myself get attached. Then, I applied those feelings to Silvie on my own. I don't think you made me feel them for her."

Raev gave Silvie a shy grin. “It wasn’t until I missed her so terribly last night, that the feelings solidified. I think it would have set in quicker if it was your Power.”

“Awww, I love you, too.” Silvie cooed.

“Of course you know I love you.” Boyd smiled. “I am very glad that we are having this conversation and that your love for Silvie is natural, but...” he let himself fade off.

Boyd could feel an excited contentment within her and inferred that her acceptance of her love for Silvie had played a role in settling her rejection anxieties. He really didn’t want to dissuade this type of communication between any of his lovers. That said, Mindy had been on a rather important topic before they darted down this rabbit-hole.

“Right.” Raev nodded and schooled her smile to a more serious mask as she turned back to Mindy. “Back to it. You’ve told us your part, but what are your organization’s goals? What do they want from us, or more specifically Boyd?”

“Honestly, there isn’t a lot to tell.” Mindy shrugged. “My mission from here on out is to support Boyd, to help him remove the controls placed on him—which is going a lot better than expected already. I underestimated how much his gestalt would assist in the process. Once that’s done, I’m supposed to help him find the right women to build a strong team around him.”

“What’s the larger goal for us? Why break me free from the controls if they are part of, or at least control parts of, The Authority?” Boyd asked.

“We are just supposed to do the job.” Mindy shrugged one of her shoulders. “My understanding is they want to hold you up as a shining example of a Changed Hero. I am supposed to encourage you to gather more Changed for the team than not, but honestly three already tips the scale fairly significantly.”

Boyd assumed she was already counting Hope, keeping his cognition on that path. “That’s it?” He paused.

“Why go to all these lengths? Why get me out of the city before telling me all this?”

“There are forces within The Authority who will fight that every step of the way,” Mindy explained. “They are the same ones who have been trying to keep you hidden. Why do you think they haven’t just placed their strongest around you as bodyguards and announced the next Enhancer to the world? It would be huge news. The fact that you are Changed causes issues with the narrative they have built up. They need to keep you out of sight. They will be looking for any excuse to keep you out of the field and will not like that we have broken the compulsions on you.”

“Yeah, well I’m not exactly pleased that they put them on me,” Boyd snapped.

“And you should allow yourself to experience that anger, but now is not the time to act on it. We will change things, and see that justice is done when we can.” Mindy’s voice was calm, knowing that Boyd wasn’t the type to fly off the handle.

“We are hoping to get more of the public behind you before they discover that the compulsions are missing. It will be harder for a Mind Powered they control to randomly scan you if they don’t know where you are. That’s why we had to get you away from any of the cities.

“Defeating Omega Ray was a massive achievement, but we need to prove it wasn’t a fluke to win over the public. Once we have the public on our side, they will have to be a lot more careful with how they handle you. They are already cautious. If we time our re-entry into the public eye well, we might be able to make you untouchable. From there, we can try to move on to become a Regional or Continental Response center.”

“I take it, with the base already being built and everything, that we are aiming for those things?” Boyd rumbled.

“Yes,” Mindy answered simply. “All the better to show that Changed aren’t dangerous to be around. The more people

we protect and save, the better.”

“I know your dream was for us to be assigned to a small town...” Silvie started to say, but Boyd held up a hand to forestall her. He appreciated the effort, but the excitement rising inside of him made it a moot point.

Boyd was quickly realizing something about himself. The childhood dreams he’d set had been curtailed to fit reality. He’d already been told that as an A-Ranked, his choices were either to be a primary hero in a small town or a support in a city. Boyd liked to take charge and was in it to help people; he chose the option that let him do those things.

This path that was being laid before him was very different. He wondered if someone hadn’t phrased it to him that Enhancing women would open up the possibility of him leading a Global Response Team, if he would have fought taking on more lovers a lot less.

“Kuh-he.” Mindy’s eyes crinkled at the sides with her honest smile.

“Silvie, my love.” He smiled at her, “The ‘childhood dreams’ I shared with you were more like realistic expectations. It was the only way I could think of to keep us together—which I think was my real goal, even then. I abandoned those dreams as impossible when you insisted we stay with Hope. They would have never allowed her to be assigned to a small team in a small town. That wasn’t even a ‘dream’...” now Boyd was the one doing air quotes, “and was taken away by my Change like the others. I am more than okay with adjusting to these new goals.”

“Really?” Silvie asked, excitement building on their Bond. “I knew it! Okay, I didn’t know, but I hoped.”

“Yes, really,” Boyd chuckled. “I hope you haven’t been letting the fact that this plan won’t let me be a small-town Hero bother you.”

“Maybe a little.” Silvie sighed and shook her head, “It was more that it felt like I was taking everything away from you one step at a time... No monogamous relationship. You’re

not the stronger one anymore. No small quiet town where we get to know everyone we protect. It was just another thing, you know?”

Boyd chuckled and once again shook his head. “Silvie, I...” His voice faded into silence as he tried to figure out how best to respond. She wasn’t wrong, each of those things had been important to him at one point in his life. None of them mattered in the least, anymore, though. Which made his response relatively simple.

“Those things mattered to a child. A child who was more focused on keeping us together than doing the most good... A child who was worried you would go on to do bigger and better things without him because your Powers were cooler, even if we were roughly as strong as each other. It was a child’s selfishness. Now that us staying together is guaranteed, I can refocus on doing the most good.”

“Aww, Darling, I love you so much,” Silvie cooed at him.

Mindy made a hissing sound with a sharp intake of breath, sensing the direction Boyd’s thoughts had taken. Something Mindy had indirectly admitted had just clicked, and he’d realized the implications.

“Explain,” Boyd growled, turning a glare on his former lover who may not be as innocent as her story made her sound. Her group had been involved in getting him out of Glorith City and into hiding.

That had involved the murder of four Heroes and the deaths of eleven civilians.

## Chapter 36

Mindy flinched from Boyd's gaze, unable to meet his eye. "There is a second organization. A branch... actually, it's more accurate to say that my group is a branch of their organization. Mine wishes to change The Authority from within, to take the steps needed to remove the bad and to preserve the good. As such, we have focused on infiltration and conversion efforts. The other group, while willing to work with us, wishes to destroy The Authority."

She took a breath before continuing. "They have the fighters, so they were the ones who launched the attacks. Now, you should know that the only the first group who were supposed to take Silvie out of action without seriously harming her, the group that attacked The Bionics, and Omega Ray's attacks were planned. I don't know why the Diamond Claws were sent, or why the porter tried to take you."

"That still leaves you connected to the deaths of four Heroes," Boyd growled, "and sending Omega Ray to destroy a city and kill millions."

"They were no Heroes," Tinker whispered. "All four of them were monsters... I suspected when it was them and not the others who were killed, but... if you want to blame someone for their deaths, blame me."

Boyd sensed her turmoil over their fledgling Bond, but it had an undeniable core of satisfaction, as well. He looked at her in confusion.

"They were being targeted long before you leaked the information on their crimes." Mindy smiled reassuringly at Tinker.

It was a gentle smile Boyd was familiar with, from back when she'd helped him with his self-recrimination as a teen. She single-handedly got him to stop blaming himself for going through his Change, and that smile was partially responsible for it.

“Heavy Step, Thumbelina, Steel Sentinel, and She-Sparks were all transferred to Glorith City, where they met up with you. We had every intent of killing them that night,” Mindy continued in a gentle tone. “Each of them had a history of abusing their Powers and position as Heroes in various ways. So, while your report on them put you on Silvie’s and my radar and included information we did not previously have, it did not get them killed.”

“R-really?” Tinker stuttered, blinking back tears Boyd could tell she didn’t fully understand the source of. Their Bond was too new and unstable for him to begin to identify the complex stream of emotions coming down it.

“Yes,” Mindy assured her. “It was all planned before you met them; before you noticed the things that were wrong with them. How they treated you because they were convinced you were Changed, even though you don’t meet the requirements to be considered one. You do not need to feel any guilt for their deaths. We didn’t have anything to do with you being put on their team, though. I’m sorry that those plans put you in danger.”

Mindy turned to Boyd before continuing, “To catch you up, they were Fundamentalist Extremists. They killed every Changed they encountered as Heroes—often when capturing was deemed both possible and simple. The Fundamentalists controlled their city, though, so they got away with it. If that isn’t bad enough, they had monthly ‘parties’ with Changed ‘entertainment’. By which, I mean they would hire or kidnap a Changed no one would miss and tortured them to death.”

“What the fuck...” Raev breathed, emulating Boyd’s thoughts fairly well.

“They knew,” Tinker whispered, her voice quivering. “The Authority knew about the parties. They didn’t stop them. So... I leaked the records I could find to an organization that said they were trying to keep The Authority in check. I thought they would use the information to have them arrested and call for reforms in The Authority. I didn’t...”

“Tinker, it truly had nothing to do with your report. They were targeted for death before you reported them because they were monsters,” Mindy responded. “Worse, in Selma, where they committed those crimes, they weren’t even considered crimes. They couldn’t be charged with a crime there if it involved a Changed. Destroyed publicly, yes, but that city never amended or removed the old laws that allow the indiscriminate murder of Changed.”

Boyd knew some cities still had such laws on the books. None of them were as blatant ‘go ahead and murder any Changed you want’ as they were in Selma. There, the laws were veiled behind self-defense rights and similar things. Most cities made being Powered equivalent to constantly being armed with a lethal weapon, and all Changed were Powered.

You also couldn’t prove if a Changed went Primal and became unstable in a postmortem examination. Some cities had clauses that allowed any citizen to decide whether or not a Changed had gone Primal and had become a danger to others. It made charging someone with murder against a Changed nearly impossible. Preemptive self-defense was a ridiculous concept allowed only for the Changed because you could identify by appearance that they were Powered.

“Tinker. Their deaths were not your fault.” Boyd decided to start with what mattered most. “Even if they were targeted because of your reports, and it sounds like their termination had already been decided, you chose to supply truthful information—you did not choose to murder anyone. Besides, if what you’ve said is true, that wasn’t murder; it was justice.”

Boyd sighed, leaning back in his chair as the weight of the situation hit him. They were Heroes, and Heroes saved lives. Period. Heroes had one singular job above all others. And to end a sentient life for fun or sport instantly disqualified you from the position.

The Authority’s laws were clear on that. Taking a life was the one thing that invalidated a citizen’s Right to Rehabilitation, and that included Heroes. If you intentionally took a life and it wasn’t in self-defense, then the punishment



was life in prison or death. In Glorith, their actions would have resulted in a death sentence.

There were exceptions, of course—especially for Heroes and non-powered officers (NPOs) in the field. There were not as many as you might expect, though. Intentionally killing a low Ranked Powered Criminal would be a quick way for Boyd to end up in a bunker, for example. He doubted they would waste his Power in a prison.

Accidentally killing a low Ranked Powered Criminal would cause a review and bring a lot of public scrutiny on him. He'd be reasonably protected from accidentally killing a criminal his rank or higher, though, as that could be justified as self-defense. Then, there were intentional kills like Omega Ray.

He was a known city killer with an open kill on sight order. Boyd only had to worry about some potentially negative views as a result of that one. He doubted it would be all that bad. It had been a classic 'kill one person to save a few million' scenario.

"I'm guessing you can't show me the proof of their actions," Boyd rumbled.

If Mindy could show him solid evidence that The Authority was knowingly allowing its Heroes to murder people because they were Changed, he'd have no further reason to doubt the validity of her cause or her mission. Unfortunately, he doubted she could.

"You guess correctly, because I don't have access to it, for obvious reasons," Mindy responded, but the smile she wore didn't fit her words. He knew she was in his thoughts, so why would she smile over missing a chance to completely prove herself?

"We've hit you with too much already today. This was planned to be a much slower process. You are trying to process what I've been saying while still listening, and you're beginning to fail at both."

Boyd ran back through the conversation in his head and turned to Tinker. “Do you still have access to the report you sent and the information you uncovered?”

“I do, but you don’t want to see it.” Tinker studied her plate. “It’s true, though, they were monsters.”

“I appreciate you trying to protect me, and it’s not that I don’t believe you, but I’ll need to see it,” Boyd rumbled.

Even a single piece of tangible evidence to support Mindy’s story would go a long way right now.

“I’ll show you the files,” Tinker agreed, then she sighed.

“Thank you.” Boyd nodded to her before turning back to Mindy with a growl, “Omega Ray.”

“Was supposed to show up, rough Silvie up a little, engage with you, and then retreat after suffering an injury at your hands.” Mindy had a hard time meeting Boyd’s gaze. “We were going to use it to hold you up as someone who could drive him away. That way, people would definitely want you around. With him dead, though, we can’t play you up as a deterrent to future attacks. I haven’t gotten an explanation for what went wrong.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “My guess is that the controls they had over him weren’t as complete as they thought. He wasn’t their agent, but they had been holding him prisoner and asserted they had sufficient control over him for the mission.”

“The mysterious ‘She’...” Boyd rumbled and felt a spike of concern on his Bond with Silvie.

“Yes,” Mindy confirmed. “She is someone I cannot tell you much about. Once you know enough about her, supposedly she will be able to use some of her Power on you. All I can tell you is that she leads the group that would prefer The Authority be completely destroyed.”

Silvie’s concern had grown to a nebulous fear that Boyd recognized from the day before. “Why is Silvie so afraid of this woman?” he asked.

“She is someone worth fearing.” Mindy shrugged a single shoulder again. “She was able to hold Omega Ray prisoner and command him, after all. She’s not an enemy, but I would hesitate to call her an ally.”

“She’s leaving a very important part out,” Silvie floated up out of her seat and over to Boyd. She lifted his arm and slid under it, draping his arm over her shoulders and clinging to his side.

Boyd lifted his wing to complete the side hug.

“She’s obsessed with you,” Silvie admitted. “She might try to take you away.”

“As I’ve told Silvie, while she might take you, she won’t keep us from you,” Mindy assured him as Silvie buried her face in his side. “If she does take you, I doubt she will let you be a Hero though. She will try to convert you—and us, through you—to the ‘burn it all down’ side. I don’t know the full extent of her Power, but I know her names are feared. And yes, she has several names... depending on who is talking about her.”

Boyd rubbed Silvie’s side to comfort her while contemplating Mindy’s statement. With unknown Powers and in command of others with significant Powers, there was no guarantee that this person couldn’t convert him. He would love to say something cool like ‘that could never happen’, but he knew it would be empty bravado.

Boyd had only just discovered that he’d been subject to one set of compulsions he hadn’t known were there, after all.

“What’s our leverage with her?” Boyd asked. “Why hasn’t she just taken me, if she’s so strong?”

A weak smile came to Mindy’s lips. “My understanding is that she’s following a prophecy... or at least she thinks she is. She’s made it clear she knew more about you than either my group or The Authority did. Part of that prophecy has you going to her when the time is right—she liked to boast about it. Silvie is right to describe her as obsessed with you. I don’t know if she will wait forever for

you to go to her, but she has so far. Part of the reason we are out here is an attempt to hide from her, just in case.”

Boyd sighed. “So, to make sure I understand, there are three main factions at play here. The majority of The Authority is on one side. The organization you have connected us to exists partially within but also separate from The Authority. Then there is this third group that is controlled by this woman who is directly opposed to The Authority.”

“And who sounds more than a little bit crazy,” Raev added, helpfully voicing a thought Boyd wouldn’t have.

“It is much more complex than that, with a lot of moving parts and smaller groups within those factions, but that is the basics of it, yes,” Mindy confirmed. “For example, The Authority’s government is a mess. The Directors of most cities would have no issue with implementing the changes we are seeking. Their citizens would probably even celebrate them for it. Many of them bow to pressure from other Directors that oppose our changes, though.”

“Alright,” Boyd nodded. “Do you have any information gathered for that side of things?”

“Yes, that is fairly well tracked by Director Davis’s people. I can get you access to those reports.” Mindy smiled gently, following his thoughts.

“Get me everything you can. I’m going to ask Tinker to show me her information. Raev, you seemed interested.” Boyd turned to his lover, having sensed that she also wanted to see the files across their Bond.

“I would like to see them, too,” Raev nodded with a frown. “I’ve heard some rumors and been told not to go to certain cities, but that’s just... I need to see it.”

“I understand,” Boyd agreed. “Afterwards, we’ll practice dancing for a little while. Something fun to take our minds off it.”

“That sounds nice,” the kitsune murmured.

He sensed that it left her with a separate concern. Instead of dealing with it, he turned to Tinker. “Do you have

any interest in dance practice?”

“Um... what?” Tinker was confused by the sudden topic change.

“Would you like to join us for dance practice?” Boyd asked her directly. “Neither Raev nor I think you should be alone, so I’m inviting you to join us.”

“I’ve never...” Tinker started to say.

“It’ll be fun,” Raev cut in. “Don’t worry, you don’t have to know how to dance. That’s why you practice.”

“But...” Tinker tried again.

“The height difference just means that we would dance differently,” Boyd cut off her next objection.

He decided to address a few other concerns while he was at it. “I have to modify pretty much any structured dance to account for my height, anyway. Everyone looks silly when they dance. If you take it out of context, it’s just a series of weird or random movements. You laugh at yourself during practice so that other people will ‘ooh’ and ‘ahh’ under the correct context.”

“Huh... no one has ever put it like that,” Tinker replied.

Boyd smiled, choosing not to reveal that it was Royce who had passed him that little nugget of wisdom.

“I guess I’ll try.”

“It’ll be fun,” Raev promised. “Plus, I bet we could get it to count as your half hour of cardio if it becomes a regular thing.”

Boyd shrugged as Tinker’s hazel eyes turned to him. “Dancing can be great exercise; it helps with coordination and improves spatial awareness. Learning how to move around people can help you learn to avoid them. I have no issue with it counting as cardio training if you are actively practicing.”

“Then okay, I guess,” Tinker responded shyly.

“Um, Darling, am I invited?” Silvie asked from where she was still pressed into his side. Clinging to him in a half-possessive, half-insecure way.

“Oh course, my love.” He smiled and rubbed her arm. “For the dancing, at least. I do need a moment to review Tinker’s files and her report. And to be able to think, I’ll need to be away from you.”

“That’s more than fair,” Silvie responded with a tone that mixed excitement with understanding.

Boyd had meant for dancing practice to be a special Raev thing, and promised he would make sure to have a night like that soon. Currently, though, there were too many draws on his attention. Fortunately, his Bond with Raev revealed no disappointment as more people got invited. She either had no expectations of being alone with him, or truly didn’t mind.

“Would you like to join us?” he asked Mindy.

“Honestly, I would. But Silvie kept me up all night, and I didn’t nap during ‘the nap’.”

What was it with all these air quotes, Boyd wondered.

“Add in a heavy pasta dish on top of that, and I think I’m going to bed.” Mindy smiled warmly at Boyd.

His other self stirred, rising up to remind Boyd of something he’d forgotten to follow up on. “Who’s in your room?” he asked. He could hear the obvious jealousy in his tone and regretted it. “I meant, is there someone else out here?” He tried again, but it sounded lame, even to him.

Silvie let out a little giggle into his side, “Aww, jealous Darling is cute.”

“I have a pet I’m a little embarrassed about,” Mindy said shyly. “I’ll introduce you to them tomorrow. It’s okay, I appreciate your jealousy in this case, but it isn’t a person.”

“Sorry,” Boyd sighed, embarrassed by his childish concern.

Mindy had gone through a lot to get back to him, if her story was true. He was choosing to accept it until he found

evidence that contradicted it. Being jealous of a pet she got during those years they'd been apart was foolish.

“Like I said, it’s okay,” Mindy reiterated gently. “Your emotions don’t make you weak or foolish. That’s enough psychotherapy for tonight, though. Take some time to think things through. Me and Silvie will tidy up the table. Take Raev and go review those files and Tinker’s report, then take some time to clear your mind for the rest of the night.”

## Chapter 37

Boyd woke the next morning feeling refreshed. Silvie and Raev were still sleeping soundly curled up under his wing. All three of them were naked once again—dancing had gotten both of the women a little worked up. Raev was the middle spoon, Silvie the little, and Boyd the big, wrapped around them both.

He felt good, better than he had in a long time. Maybe better than he had ever felt. He felt settled; things were... right. The little inconsistencies that he noticed but couldn't explain or investigate had all fallen into place. Everything made sense.

Well, most things.

Tinker showed him the files he needed to see to confirm that four monsters instead of four Heroes had died the other night. He would have killed them himself, after seeing some of the videos they had so joyously captured. The one with the freshly Changed child particularly got to him. The way the child had cried and begged would stay with Boyd forever, and the captured audio wasn't even all that clear.

It wasn't limited to the four deceased not-Heroes either, though. They'd had guests—some of whom he recognized as Heroes, and others he didn't know. Tinker had files on all of them, but Boyd hadn't dug into those just yet. It became a list of problems to take care of when he had the means. One of the questions that remained, though, was how Tinker had gotten the data. Most of it, including the videos, would have been highly protected. Boyd decided not to press on that issue yet, either.

Silvie also had Davis grant him access to what he called his Influence Board. It was a complex chart that Boyd would have to spend some time studying to understand. Supposedly, it showed which Directors fell on which side, and who they influenced most in this little shadow war. Boyd had seen enough to understand that they had about a third of The Authority with them, and fifty to sixty percent against them.



Everything matched what his former and current lover asserted; he would accept their story for the time being. He would also do what was asked, mostly because he had no reason not to. Becoming a better Hero and setting an example wasn't a very big ask, not for him at least.

After he and Raev had reviewed the files, they blew off some steam with some dance practice. It had been a good time filled with laughter and joy. Tinker took a little time to unwind, but soon was twirling around him and letting herself be lifted and spun about. She was in it for fun, so they didn't bother learning any particular steps, just laughed and smiled openly.

Silvie enjoyed herself in a similar fashion, though she did insist on at least beginning to put together a routine for their first opportunity to dance in public. Mostly, she was just overjoyed that Boyd had not rejected her after she'd revealed her status as a double agent. The fact that he still wanted to dance with her was a massive relief.

He'd spent the most time with Raev, though, beginning to learn the steps for the Bachata. She had video tutorials all ready for him and everything. It would take some work for him to adjust to the way he would have to hold himself and move on account of the difference in their size, but he was confident he would get there—or at least close enough to capture the essence of his lover's favorite dance.

Lying in bed now, reviewing the events from the day before, Boyd realized that things were still being kept from him. There was something more happening, and pieces that still didn't fit. The communities in the Wild Lands were part of it. How did they exist? The cities and towns of The Authority were always at risk of falling, how could smaller communities survive?

Almost all of the fauna and a good portion of the flora in the Wild Lands was Powered. Even most of the plant had defensive or movement-based powers, with only a few being passive and good for resource gathering. The predators were the biggest issue, though. Smaller towns got away with two or three A-Ranked Heroes with support to keep them at bay.

Without them, however, the lower ranked Powerededs and civilians would either be picked off slowly or wiped out all at once.

Even with two or three A-Ranked Heroes, the smaller towns often relied on support from regional and global response teams to deal with threats they couldn't handle. This arrangement meant that the small towns needed the larger, dense population centers of the cities simply to exist. You couldn't get enough A-Ranked or S-Ranked Powerededs without them.

That was because only one in five hundred thousand people were born with A-Ranked Powers and one in three million were S-Ranked. A town would have to be massive to support the numbers needed to ensure you had enough high ranked Powerededs born each generation. Or, he supposed, you could just make people have lots of kids.

So where were these smaller communities getting the Powerededs they needed to keep themselves sustainable? More importantly, why did The Authority hunt them? That was the word his women had used.

The Authority wasn't searching for them. They weren't seeking them out for trade partnerships or offering to bring them under The Authority's protection. They were hunting them. Boyd tripped over the realization that it was Tinker and Mindy who had made the statements about hunting.

Once again, he was forced to accept that he had categorized them as 'his women'. He should probably watch that possessiveness, thinking of them as 'his' was a dangerous mindset. After a little thought and enjoying the intermingled scents of his lovers, he decided to accept that thought process as long as he didn't let it lessen them. They were his; he was theirs. They were equal and bound. Devoted.

He smiled into the back of Raev's head, at peace for the first time in a long time. Some might be daunted by the prospect of going against The Authority, changing the thousand-year-old organization and their Heroes. They had trained him well, though. That training included being

mentally capable of facing insurmountable odds and remaining calm and collected.

To be honest, they had a lot going for them. A full third of the organization they were attempting to change was already on their side. They had funding and support. So much so, that even while they were essentially hiding in the Wild Lands, they were in the luxury penthouse version of a secret base.

Boyd wasn't sure how to feel about the outside organization, the one led by the mysterious woman who was obsessed with him due to a prophecy. Killing the evil members of Tinker's team had been acceptable. The civilians' deaths were not. Having their support was good, but they would need to be changed, just like The Authority.

That was a problem for later, though. He needed to train and settle his relationships, first. Today that meant hunting with Raev in the morning, completing some anti-porter training in the afternoon, and then preparing for his date with Tinker in the evening.

She'd tried to cancel their date, given all that had transpired, but Boyd quickly put an end to that. Sure, there was a lot going on, but it sounded like that would be the case from here on out. He'd just been handed a very large mission, one that he could always be doing something towards. Taking time out for his lovers was going to be vital.

On that note, he very much wanted to make them breakfast before they woke. Fortunately, he'd thought ahead last night. His loves were only under his wing, and he'd dragged a blanket close enough to grab before they'd laid down to rest.

He lifted his wing just enough to get the blanket under it, working the cover up and over his loves with his tail and one arm. Once they were covered, he carefully slid back and away. Each stirred a little, but then Raev pulled Silvie a little closer to her front and nuzzled into the back of her neck and hair. Boyd watched them for a moment, taking in the lovely scene.

He carefully moved off the ridiculously sized bed—fortunately its construction meant that even his massive form moving across it didn't disturb its other occupants. He made his way over to his large closet and gathered up a pair of shorts. Then, it was over to the much more reasonable, if still lavish, bathroom attached directly to the bedroom that they'd showed him last night to do his morning ablutions.

Boyd checked back in to make sure Silvie and Raev were still sleeping before heading towards the Great Room and the kitchen. He sensed that Tinker was already awake and working on something. He'd asked if she could make him a spear similar to his sword for today's hunt the night before. He'd then had to make sure she fell asleep before he let himself do the same—because otherwise he knew she'd have been up all night working on it.

She must have gotten up and decided to get an early start. Just to see if he could, he tried to send her warm feelings down their bond the same way he'd done yesterday with Silvie. Unfortunately, he could feel that it hadn't worked. It likely required the more stable Devotion level of a bond.

As Boyd walked through his little office, he hoped Daisy wasn't in the kitchen already. He wasn't ready for an early morning encounter with the young woman. Fortunately, the Great Room was empty, although morning bird song played softly on speakers from somewhere. The lighting was a little different, too, as if adjusting to fit the time of day. It was a lovely open space and Boyd could tell Silvie had put a lot of thought into it.

The kitchen area was also empty, and easy to figure out. One section had clearly been designed with Boyd in mind and had all his basics. The counters were a little higher, along with larger cabinets and appliances. He even spotted his favorite cast iron skillet hanging in a prominent position.

The inventory system was accessible through a well-placed viewscreen, and he quickly tracked down everything he needed: a bag of potatoes, a few dozen eggs, some fresh garlic gloves, onions, peppers, mushrooms, spinach, sausage, bacon, and a shredded cheddar cheese blend. He set to making some

breakfast casseroles, chopping potatoes, mincing garlic, and dicing the onions and other vegetables.

*‘You should probably admit that you enjoy cooking, at least to yourself,’* Mindy’s voice entered his mind.

That wasn’t entirely true, he didn’t really enjoy cooking... but he did enjoy feeding his lovers. In response, Boyd let his mind wander to how happy he was that Mindy was back in his life as he cooked.

*‘Kuh-he. Okay... just, okay. I’ll be out in a little while.’*

“What are you doing?” A high, musical voice called out from behind Boyd, making him start and spin around. Daisy was floating towards him on fluttering wings, little glowing soap bubbles trailing behind her.

Boyd grumbled internally at Mindy for not warning him.

“Making breakfast,” he rumbled back, pouring the egg mixture over three different casseroles he was making—one each for bacon and sausage, and a vegetarian one for those who preferred it.

“Isn’t that literally my job?” she asked with a skeptical tone.

“About that...” Boyd sighed. He decided he had to give it one more try, now that he had a better understanding of the situation.

“Don’t bother.” The fairy woman sighed as well. “Silvie and Mindy filled me in. I’m even less likely to leave now that I know you all are trying to improve things for Changed like me. I appreciate that you are concerned for my safety, but you really don’t need to be.”

“What about Connor?” Boyd asked as he returned to his prep work.

“The school they are sending him to is one they use for their own people,” Daisy replied. “From what they said, they have an S-Ranked reality bender on staff. He’s safer there than he has ever been. I guess the kids literally can’t die while on

campus, and the campus itself is in a pocket dimension or something.”

Boyd didn't have any other tools to use to dissuade her. “It is your decision of course,” he said. “I just don't think you fully understand the danger we are in, or how much more we will face in the future.”

Daisy sighed again. “You aren't going to get that I'm more than tough enough to take care of myself without a demonstration, are you?”

“It isn't about your Power,” Boyd rumbled back. “I'm perfectly willing to believe you are strong—stronger even than Silvie. I have a way to compare how strong people are with my Black Flame Vision... so, no, I don't need a demonstration to believe that you can defend yourself. We are going against The Authority, though, and you are a civilian. I'm supposed to protect people like you, not expose them to that kind of danger.”

“That's very noble of you,” Daisy responded with a slight edge of sarcasm. “I am aware of the danger that I am exposing myself to. I have also considered what it means for Connor, and as his guardian, I accept the consequences for both of us. *You* aren't exposing me to anything. This is my choice.”

Boyd glanced up from his breakfast prep to confirm that she was watching him sternly, arms crossed over her chest. Daisy was wearing black slacks and a white blouse again. He'd appreciated the professional clothing the morning before, but now it felt out of place. Her multi-colored hair was pulled back in a simple ponytail.

“Understood.” Boyd sighed.

He couldn't claim to respect free will if he tried to repress it. If she was making an informed decision, he had no right to question it. “I will continue to make you aware of dangers as we face them so you can continue to make informed decisions. If you change your mind, I'll help find you an out. For example, were you aware that the person who may try to capture me had the Power to control Omega Ray?”

“Yes,” Daisy confirmed. “As well as the fact that she is very unlikely to hurt a woman in your sphere of influence to avoid pissing you off. Apparently, I count.”

“Okay,” Boyd accepted this with a nod and went back to preparing his breakfast casseroles.

He liked to pre-fry the potatoes a little before baking the casserole. It was the best way he’d found to get them to pick up some flavor. There was nothing worse than bland potatoes in an otherwise flavorful dish.

He thought of that instead of the woman who was obsessed with him. Based on Mindy’s warning, he would avoid finding things out about her for now. Supposedly learning too much about her could make her aware of you.

“Good. Now, why are you doing my job?” Daisy pressed.

“I will likely cook from time to time. Turns out I started liking cooking for Silvie, and preparing food for Raev is even more fun. I can’t wait to see how she responds to a couple of these,” Boyd admitted. “I also wanted to free up a little of your time so we could go over a few things. If you would like to prepare some sides and drinks while I finish up here, that would be great. These will go in the oven in a few minutes.”

“Oh, well... okay then, I guess they weren’t lying.” Daisy seemed taken aback. “What kinds of sides?”

“We won’t need much to go with these, it’s supposed to be a single dish breakfast, after all,” Boyd rumbled in response. “Some fruit might be nice, though. Put out some bagels or bread for toast. Juice and coffee for the drinks.”

“Okay,” Daisy responded and fluttered away, leaving Boyd to his work.

He ended up making seven breakfast casseroles in total. There were two extra heavy on the meat for him and Raev, then four assorted with options that should please various tastes. The seventh he’d made with egg whites and

veggies for those without improved metabolisms or the will to put extra time into working off a heavy meal.

“This isn’t because dinner wasn’t very good, is it?” Daisy asked after a few minutes.

Boyd glanced over to find her washing some berries.

“That wasn’t my best effort, but I’ve never worked in a kitchen like this.”

“Dinner was good.” Boyd replied.

It hadn’t been the best, but it was edible and had flavor, with no crunchy or mushy noodles. Boyd hadn’t tried the chicken, but Raev ate it readily enough. He didn’t remember anyone complimenting it, though. Oops.

“No it wasn’t,” the small woman sighed.

Her wings were keeping her aloft in front of the sink. They didn’t flap nearly rapidly enough to allow the steady hover she maintained, but that wasn’t uncommon for Powereders. Boyd couldn’t hover like that—but if only physics were at play, he was far too heavy for wings the size of his to lift or keep himself aloft. Add on his ability to carry several tons in flight, and physics went right out the window.

“At least not compared to what you would have made,” she said. “That’s obvious now.”

“What do you mean?” Boyd asked, returning to sauteing mushrooms and spinach to make sure they picked up the flavor from the seasoning he was using for the health-conscious option. It would be silly to over season that one by boosting the sodium content, so he had to do other things to boost the dish’s flavor.

“You’re over there mincing fresh garlic and slicing mushrooms.” Daisy sighed. “The sauce was from a jar, and I used a spice mix for the chicken. That’s how I learned to cook. I’ll admit right now that I was wrong about my cooking being better than yours. So, if you are trying to get rid of me because you don’t think I’m good at it, just say so. My contract gives me time to improve, and I will.”



## Chapter 38

Boyd glanced Daisy's way to find her watching him with defiance in her iridescent eyes. The kitchen area was large, and she was a ways away from him, but her eyes were large and rather expressive.

"I am sorry no one complimented your cooking last night," Boyd began, addressing the real root of the problem. It had been impolite, even if the food hadn't been fantastic. "It *was* good. But it was also a taxing day and I personally overlooked expressing that to you. I'm sure that was the case for the others, as well."

Daisy's lips dropped into a slight frown, "That's not..."

Boyd held up a hand to forestall her. "That said, I know you aren't fishing for compliments right now. If you want to get better at cooking, do so. As one of the people who will be eating your cooking, I encourage it. Dinner last night was good, but it could have been better. Using fresh ingredients does go a long way. I'll show you the tutorial database I used when I was learning to cook with the other stuff I want to show you in a minute."

"Oh. Okay. Thanks," Daisy responded before going back to washing and slicing some fruit.

Boyd finished up with the casseroles and got them in the oven. Daisy was still working on a couple things when he finished up, so he tidied up his station and set up one of the view screens in the kitchen to walk her through a few things.

Daisy came floating over. "Okay, so what did you want to show me?"

He nodded at the view screen. "How to access the team's profiles for dietary requirements and health tracking. First, let it register you as a user."

Her access would be very different from Boyd's. He was already listed as the team's Captain and would have to get used to his new menus and options. Daisy didn't need to deal

with all the sub-options he would have to go through to get to the same data.

She floated up and the viewscreen switched over to her much simpler display. She had options for inventory, messaging, tasks, and team profiles. It was meant to be simple to use and showing her how to access the information she needed to do her job was relatively quick and painless.

“You weigh four hundred and seventy-eight pounds?!” she gasped, her shock plainly evident upon getting to that portion of his profile.

Boyd had used his profile as an example. The figure made him glance down at his waist; he’d gained a few pounds since the last time he’d checked. They’d likely weighed him when he was in the hospital and updated his profile automatically. He didn’t see any chub or anything forming, but his weight didn’t fluctuate by much, so he was concerned. While exercise slowly made him stronger, his muscle mass didn’t increase. Not normally, at least.

*‘You are so not getting fat,’ Mindy sighed into his mind. ‘If I had to guess, it is related to your increase in Power after Raev.’*

Boyd wondered when his thought voyeur was going to join them.

*‘Some of us need a little time to get presentable in the morning,’ she responded. ‘Besides, this exchange has been good for both you and for Daisy. Sorry for distracting you.’*

“Yes, I am denser than a human my size would be,” Boyd responded.

“But it says your minimal caloric intake is only six hundred calories, with a recommended intake of six thousand calories.” Daisy studied the screen.

“Yeah, I don’t technically need to eat at all. The six hundred calories are only required to avoid any psychological ill effects,” Boyd explained the discrepancy.

“The note makes it sound like you just get grumpy,” Daisy responded.

“Which is a psychological effect.” Boyd smirked at the small woman.

They were maintaining personal space but working on the same viewscreen put them in close proximity for the first time. It also made her fresh floral scent and frankly absurdly pretty features hard to ignore, but Boyd remained resolute in his intent to ignore such things—only to be frustrated when his attempt to use his Power to suppress him noticing such things with an act of will failed once more.

“Pssht,” the fairy like woman made an amused snorting sound. “Alright, fair enough. Okay... and it says that your optimal diet leans heavily towards meat and proteins.”

“You can click in here to see more detailed recommendations like this,” Boyd showed her by clicking the ‘details’ button. “It uses the most recent data available to calculate anything missing from our diets and what we might have too much of. It’s not really applicable to me, though, my Power heals the negative effects of a poor diet. There is a connection to protein and the strength I have gained through training, though.”

“Okay, and everyone has something like this?” Daisy asked as she read through the details page attentively.

“Yes. Don’t worry too much, though, there is a meal planning tool that will help so you don’t have to do all the math or cook individual meals,” Boyd explained. “I’ll show you that next.”

From there, Boyd spent about ten minutes showing her the very basics of the system and where to find remote training materials. In that, he included the recipe and video tutorial database he’d found easiest to search and use when he was learning how to cook. “...and of course, feel free to find me for any questions. Or send me a message if you prefer,” he finished.

“I will and thank you.” Daisy smiled politely up at him. “I meant to ask if you could get in touch with Connor.”

“Is something wrong?” Boyd asked, concerned for the boy whose life had just been flipped upside down.

“Not at all.” Daisy shook her head, causing her hair to swirl with iridescent color. “He’s living it up, actually. They put him in a really nice hotel while he waits to transfer to his new school. He ordered room service five times yesterday and would have eaten himself sick, if not for the temporary caretaker assigned to him... some really nice older lady. Seems like a doting grandma type. He’s loving it.”

“Oh, good, I’m glad Mrs. Daddow is working out,” Silvie said from behind them, causing Boyd to jump. Daisy didn’t react, making him believe that she’d sensed the silently floating woman’s approach.

“Let us know if she gives you any trouble,” Silvie continued. “We are paying her a lot, so I expect Poppins’ level of care.”

“Poppins?” Daisy asked.

“Oh, she’s from an Old Earth vid called Mary Poppins. She was like the best nanny ever.” Silvie giggled. “I’m unclear on if she was supposed to have Powers, or if it was an imaginary thing. Old Earth media gets weird on that.”

“Huh,” Daisy responded. “I’d have to watch it to tell you, but Mrs. Daddow has been wonderful. Wait... *you* are paying her?”

“Mhmm. Davis didn’t have any caretakers he trusted available, so we went with a civilian agency,” Silvie explained. “We didn’t want to bring attention to Connor, so we are paying for the hotel as well—through an anonymous account, of course. We didn’t want him in The Tower because other Directors have eyes there.”

She turned to Boyd and added, “I set it up out of our joint account. I figured you would want to contribute.”

“Thank you,” Boyd nodded as he walked over to his lover to pull her into a hug and give her a good morning kiss. She was dressed conservatively—for Silvie. She was wearing another light blue silk nightgown, but this one covered her to

the knee. The top still displayed some cleavage, but nowhere near what Boyd would have considered approaching indecency.

“Raev’s brushing her tails, she will be right out,” Silvie whispered in his ear, answering his unasked question.

“But...” Daisy seemed to be at a loss. Apparently, the fact that they were personally paying for her brother’s room, board, and care was an issue for her.

“Don’t let yourself be troubled,” Mindy’s voice joined the conversation before she came into sight. “Heroes are well paid, and neither of these two ever spent much. What they’ve invested in your brother and you so far barely amounts to a week of their combined pay.”

“Still, Connor could stay in a standard hotel room, or heck, even back at our apartment. I’m still renting it. All he really needs is someone to make sure he’s eating, and washing, I suppose. He’s only there for a few days,” Daisy responded.

Mindy came into sight with a gentle smile on her already darkly painted lips. She was wearing a voluminous garment that shrouded her splendid body much better than the black dress with its small skirt that she’d worn the day before. It was, of course, black with some dark purple swooping embroidery near the neck and on the sleeves.

The piece of clothing covered her completely and was not snugly fit at all, but as she moved, it pulled against her curves to show them off. Boyd couldn’t tell if it was meant to show off her body, or to hide it.

*‘It’s called a kaftan, and this one is supposed to be a bit of a tease. I’ve discovered a fondness for them. I hope you do, too. They are excellent for cuddling.’*

Boyd found he certainly liked this one.

Out loud, Mindy replied, “Yes, I’m sure he would be fine with less luxury. Moving him out of the apartment was a safety measure, though, and choosing a nice hotel was to take advantage of their security. The same with the expensive

nanny. Plus, luxury conditions have been shown to assist with separation anxiety.”

Boyd could tell by her height that Mindy was either wearing more comfortable shoes or going barefoot as she approached.

“We want to make sure his transition is as smooth and enjoyable as possible. The school he is going too is inclusive, but having a taste of ‘the good life’ will probably help him understand some of his peers a little better. Besides, both of you have struggled and worked hard enough to deserve some good things going your way.”

Daisy blinked at Boyd’s former and future lover. “Arguing with you is impossible, isn’t it?” the smaller woman with iridescent hair asked his tallest and darkest love.

“It does help that I can address your thoughts before they solidify into full-fledged objections, yes.” Mindy smiled warmly.

She closed in and Boyd pulled her into a hug, during which he realized that kaftans were truly wondrous pieces of clothing. Mindy felt warm and soft against him, the loose-fitting garment made it feel like only a thin sheet separated them. It took an act of will to keep the gesture to a simple, brief hug of greeting.

*‘We’ll get some more cuddling in tomorrow.’*

Boyd sighed internally at the delay.

“Fine, I won’t complain and will instead say thank you very much,” Daisy responded.

“Of course, it’s the least we could do after scooping you up like this,” Silvie said. “Thanks for dinner last night, it was very good.”

Boyd smiled at Silvie, pleased that she’d remembered her manners better than he had done.

“It will get better, and you’ll be pleased to know Boyd made most of today’s breakfast,” Daisy responded with more

seriousness than Boyd thought the situation required. “He showed me how he learned to cook, so I’ll figure it out.”

“What you made really was fine, but I won’t discourage you from getting better.” Silvie giggled.

“Something smells delicious!” Laura’s voice called out, the nurse resurfacing from her clinic.

Boyd wondered just how well equipped they were for her inventory to have taken so long. He also made a note to follow up on any inventory requirements he had as the team’s Captain.

Laura was dressed casually in blue jeans and a comfortable looking but fitted burgundy sweater. The outfit was modest, but displayed the pleasantly built body her scrubs had hid from him in their initial encounters. She smiled brightly as she came into sight, climbing the nearest staircase.

“Good morning every-one!” she called in a sing-song tone. Apparently, Laura was a morning person.

“Good morning, Laura!” Silvie chirped back. Boyd wouldn’t describe Silvie as being a morning person, but she was capable of bright cheer as long as she was conscious.

“Good morning,” Boyd rumbled back, letting his voice carry to her.

“Good. I’m not late. That smells freaking delicious. Good morning,” Raev’s voice entered the conversation and Boyd chuckled.

A few short days ago he only exchanged morning greetings with Silvie. He turned to find Raev descending the stairs wearing black yoga pants and a deep green tank top. They came together for a hug and a brief kiss of greeting.

“That leaves Tinker.” Silvie had apparently taken a headcount.

Boyd felt for her over their Bond and sensed that she was focused on something. “She’s in her lab,” he guessed. “I’ll go get her. Daisy...”

“Let me,” Raev cut in before he could ask the fledgling cook to check the casseroles when the timer went off. It would be easy enough.

“I can do it,” Boyd objected. He wanted to greet his tiny inventor.

“You could, but I have my reasons and she will be thankful it is me, if I am right,” Raev explained and tapped him on his nose. “Finish up breakfast, I’ll be right back.”

Boyd assumed Raev was concerned that Tinker may not be looking her best first thing in the morning, so let it go. He might not care, but her self-esteem was still fragile, so protecting it seemed like a good idea.

“Okay, we have some time. The casseroles still have a few minutes more to bake and will need to cool.”

“I’ll get her back shortly,” Raev said with a smile, pulling herself up for another quick kiss. She dropped back down and brushed his chest with her soft tails as she turned to head to Tinker’s lab.

Laura was standing off to the side, smirking with an expression Boyd could not otherwise identify. “How’s the clinic?” he asked as he turned to check the casseroles. He found them done, with two minutes still to go on the timer. These ovens must need calibration, otherwise the new dishes would require either lower temperatures or shorter cooking times.

“Oh, it’s quite nice,” she replied warmly. “Has that new equipment smell and... Hey! Watch it!” she shouted the last in shock.

Boyd had reached into the oven to pull out the casserole dishes and move them to a cooling rack but stopped to blink at her, the first hot dish already in hand.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, confused, but also oddly calm given the panic in the nurse’s voice.

“Oh.” She sighed, putting one hand over her chest and letting out a soft laugh. “Sorry, I forgot you can grab things



from the oven without giving yourself second or third-degree burns.”

Boyd chuckled and went back to pulling the remaining six dishes from his large new oven. “Sorry for the fright.” He used a fork to check to make sure the eggs were nice and fluffy, and the potatoes were soft. He judged it to be satisfactory.

Steam billowed off of the casseroles. “These need to cool,” he announced to the room. “Daisy, please put out some things to snack on for any that can’t wait.”

“I’d normally try to be patient but those really do smell very good. You have my stomach complaining about having to wait.” Laura laughed and moved to grab a plate and a cup of coffee.

Daisy had taken to pouring the coffee and seemed to be discussing something with Mindy as the taller woman sipped at a cup.

Boyd smiled at the scene—people happily chatting as they waited for breakfast, unconcerned with the fact that they’d all sided against The Authority itself. He hadn’t needed to ask to confirm Laura’s involvement; she was listed on Davis’s chart near his name. The nurse frequently traveled for medical conferences and gathered information using sources she contacted there. She was an exceptionally qualified nurse and spy... quite the combo.

He discarded the thought for the time being, choosing to enjoy a peaceful breakfast.

## Chapter 39

Everyone ate together, successfully breaking any lines between the Heroes and their support staff. That was something Boyd wanted to squash before it even became a thing on his team, especially given what they would be facing together. They all had to work with one purpose.

They stayed away from any heavy topics, mostly sticking to features of the base that they liked most so far. Mindy, Silvie, and Raev were most excited about the massive bath. Tinker, of course, was most excited about her lab.

Laura surprised Boyd by saying the gym, although she commented that maybe that was simply because she hadn't seen the bath yet, given the others' replies. Daisy seemed thrilled to have her own room and he learned for the first time that she'd shared a bedroom with Connor for several years.

Boyd hadn't seen the gym yet, so he said he liked the design of The Great Room. When pressed for what he liked about it, he'd said how it was obviously meant to create a sense of community. Silvie seemed pleased with his answer.

After breakfast, for which he was heavily complimented by all parties, the group split up to handle their various tasks. Laura still had a lot of work to do in her clinic. Everything required a calibration or maintenance cycle to make sure it was ready, if needed. Tinker went off to finish the equipment Boyd and Raev had requested for their hunt in the Wild Lands. Daisy stayed in the kitchen to finish cleaning up and to begin practicing her cooking skills.

Boyd, Mindy, Raev, and Silvie went to his office for a pre-mission briefing. They spent an hour going over the maps they had of their valley. The mountain range they were in included massive peaks, their tops capped by snow year-round. Their valley was deep, with somewhat of a 'V' shape, the result of a three peak chain set in a rough triangle.

The base of the valley was set into the eastern and largest peak. Two other peaks were set to the northwest and southwest of the base. The largest of these mountains dropped

into cliffs with a series of snowmelt waterfalls along the entire eastern wall of the valley. These pools fed into several streams, which led to a lovely looking lake. At the open end of the valley, a river carried overflow from the lake west out of the valley.

The mouth of the valley was narrow with cliffs to either side, the swiftly flowing river in the center. It didn't allow larger creatures to enter easily. There were plenty of dangerous smaller creatures, though, and they'd confirmed the presence of both A-ranked and S-ranked threats. Fortunately, these were low in number. Their guards were tracking them, and so far they hadn't reacted to their presence or the base's construction, even the surface elements.

The guards had also been kind enough to mark the location of Boyd's first target—a Crevice Boar. Crevice Boars were A-Ranked creatures known for their propensity to ram into cliff faces to form crevices in which they made their homes. They preferred the open air and refused to use caves for whatever reason. Their strength and resilience were both A-ranked, and they had B-ranked speed in a charge.

Normally, Boyd would have preferred to tackle the threat with three A-Ranked heroes, but they had a solid plan that Boyd agreed mitigated most of the risk. Crevice Boars didn't have energy based resistance, so Boyd didn't have an advantage with his Black Flame, though he was strong enough to pierce its tough hide.

They'd planned a quick trip out, running along a forested ridge that should be free of major threats. From there, they would drop down into the clearing in front of the boar's crevice. Raev would then draw it out with an illusion—she was confident she had one that would work. Finally, Boyd would launch himself at the beast, attacking from ambush with the spear Tinker was making him.

It turned out Tinker had made a couple improvements to his suit, as well. The crown, which he decided to redub a circlet because it sounded less pompous to him, now captured video. She'd also tweaked the propulsion pack a bit. Boyd's

pauldrons were the same, but now there were two more sleek black containers attached to the straps that crossed his chest.

The blanket dispensers had also been replaced, since there was no real need for fluffy blankets out here in the Wild Lands. The little genius had thought of a new application of his Black Flame now that they'd demonstrated it could last on obsidian outside of physical contact.

Tinker wanted him to throw stuff. In this case, she'd filled the two black cases on the back of his belt with several three-inch sized obsidian balls. The two black cases attached to the belt across his chest each had a hundred quarter-inch obsidian ball bearings. They were a little chunky, but the idea was sound.

The black cases would dispense twenty obsidian ball bearing into his hand each time he placed it against the case the way she showed him. With Boyd's A-Ranked strength, the obsidian beads would behave like buck shot. It was a solid deterrent for larger threats with energy resistance and would be good for targets that might be difficult to hit with a single thrown object.

Tinker, as was becoming her habit, stated that this was just a prototype and once she had more time, the complete system would be much better. Boyd believed her. Then, there was the spear.

It was mostly made of the same shining metal as his pauldrons and other pieces of armor. The blade was leaf shaped and about twelve inches long—at his request. He wanted to be able to use it to slash with, as well as to stab. Black obsidian lined the blade and came to the surface of the shining shaft in a decorative scrollwork that also provided Boyd a decent grip. It was a beautiful weapon, despite being put together so quickly based off a simple sketch he'd drawn for her.

Tinker also made him a machete, similar in construction to his sword. The machete had its own strap, which hung from his left hip, opposite the sword on his right. Boyd was starting to look like an armory. He had a long

dagger in his boot, a blade on each hip, his shield on his back, and a spear in his hand. Boyd was ready to face the Wild Lands.

“You two be careful out there,” Silvie half coed, half whined. She’d seemed fine with the idea of them going out into the Wild Lands right up until it was time for her lovers to do so. Now, she was a bundle of worry. “Watch out for each other.”

“Of course, my love.” Boyd smiled and pulled his silver-haired woman into a tight hug.

Tinker was a bundle of worry, as well. In contrast, Raev was calm as can be.

“We’ll be fine. The Big Guy just needs to keep up with me,” their fox featured lover assured her. “I’ve been in areas like—oof!” She was cut off by both Silvie and Boyd deciding to pull her into the middle of their embrace.

Raev let out a velvet laugh as her two much stronger lovers carefully squeezed her between them. “Alright, alright... I’ll be careful.”

“Don’t forget these.” Tinker poked what looked like a rack of pink dinner plates in a metal case. They were drones she’d made to accompany them and keep an eye on their blind spots. Today she was wearing black yoga pants and a pink tee-shirt, with her hair in a different style of braids, apparently trying some options out.

Boyd had made sure to comment on how much he liked this hairstyle during breakfast. He broke the hug to approach the rack and Tinker. It contained ten of the dinner-plate sized drones and would have been fairly heavy for a normal person to lift. He was told to set it down once they were outside; Tinker would take over from there.

“And be very careful, please,” Tinker added once he had a hand on the rack. “I’ll be keeping an eye on you... but still.”

“We will be careful,” Boyd promised, squatting down as low as the shield and his blades allowed to hug his short

inventor. "I'll appreciate having your eyes out there, too."

Tinker wrapped her arms around him tightly, letting out a letting a cute little grunt of effort. "Hrrmph! I set out eye drops. I don't think I'll let myself blink much."

Boyd chuckled. "Let yourself blink a healthy amount."

Tinker was the most anxious of all his women. His Bond with her showed it clearly during their embrace. "We'll be fine. I've been going into the Wild Lands since I was nine..."

"Eight," Silvie corrected him.

"Eight," Boyd agreed. It wasn't like they'd celebrated his estimated birthday; he hadn't really tracked the ages they'd done things. "Just think of it like I'm going to go get some bacon for tomorrow's breakfast."

Reassuring his tiny special friend was giving him confidence, too. "Oh, wait," Boyd rumbled, "I use pancetta for linguine carbonara. I bet I could substitute something from a Crevice Boar."

"Sinoe did say they are very tasty," Mindy said from where she waited off to the side.

They were gathered outside of the elevator in the Great Room. Apparently, they had a multi car, multi directional elevator system that could take them all over the mountain base. The hangar was actually well off to one side of the base, instead of directly below them.

"Sinoe?" Boyd asked, giving Tinker one last gentle squeeze before straightening.

"Oh, she's one of the guards. She's nice, if a little... terse," Mindy replied. "She'll stay out of your way this time, but she won't be far off. She asked that you only take what we'll use from the boar, and she will deal with the remains."

"We can use pretty much everything from the boar," Boyd rumbled back.

"And you'll be hunting other things," Mindy smiled at him, "If you fill the storage with boar, we won't have room for

anything else. I don't want to be stuck eating pork for the next month because we have a surplus. Take what you want, but it's not like we could eat an eight-thousand-pound pig in a reasonably quick length of time."

"Alright," Boyd chuckled and closed the distance to pull Mindy into a last hug of farewell. "I won't force feed everyone boar for a month. As long as this Sinoe is going to use all of it, I don't mind." Leaving a rotting corpse that size in their valley would be a bad idea.

"She will." Mindy confirmed, pulling him in for another full body hug. The kaftan she was wearing really did nothing to hide the feel of her body beneath it against his. It may not be the most visually stimulating garment his lovers had worn, but it was quickly growing on him.

"I should probably grab a bag or container for the meat, and maybe something better suited for butchering," Boyd responded. A machete or sword might be more useful than they normally would be, given the size of their prey, but neither would be ideal.

"I've got us covered." Raev turned and showed him a small pack on her back. "I've got an eight-inch vibro-blade and some large self-sealing bags. Oh, and one of those indestructible tarp things that folds up real small for if we want to bright back anything too large for the bags."

"We'll need cables and mounting," Boyd pointed out.

"Not my first time out, Big Guy." Raev grinned at him. "Tinker gave me a fancy winch rig that we can hook up to the cliff. I've even got a small folding shovel to dig a pit. You'll have to make the bleed cut with one of your blades, but I have everything else we'll need."

"Okay, it's not that I don't trust you," Boyd explained.

"I get it." Her grin remained and reached her eyes. He could sense that her mirth was genuine. "It's always a wild ride. Trust me, you don't want to get out there and realize you forgot something you need."

“Why do they have to do this?” Tinker half-whined and half-asked Mindy.

“There are many reasons,” Mindy explained, sighing. Her face was currently being held in the familiar emotionless mask Boyd recognized from the PAC.

He didn’t like seeing it again, and assumed it meant she was more worried than she wanted to let on. “It will help Boyd get more in touch with himself—that’s the most important reason. Second is establishing our presence in the valley. Once the creatures get used to us being here, it will be safer for us to spend time outside.”

“Which brings us to my special instructions...” Mindy turned to Boyd. “Once the fight starts, be loud. Don’t hold back. Make a ruckus. Announce to the valley the presence of a new apex predator.”

“Wouldn’t Silvie be better suited for that?” Tinker asked.

“Silvie is flashy,” Boyd responded, “but she isn’t really loud. My voice will reach creatures that won’t have line of sight on the fight. The Crevice Boar is likely at the higher end of the hierarchy established in the valley, so most things would know what it sounded like.

“Silvie could draw the fight out and throw it about to get it screaming,” Raev said, “but the other creatures wouldn’t know to associate that with something new. They would probably assume two Crevice Boars were fighting over territory.”

“Well, shouldn’t Silvie at least go with you? You could be both loud and flashy,” Tinker pressed.

“Raev and I can take care of ourselves.” Boyd smiled at her reassuringly.

He checked the FDU on his wrist to confirm the tactical map with their planned route was displayed properly on it. Flying would be a very bad idea until they had a better understanding of what was in their valley.



“Silvie will be on call, just in case. If it comes down to it, she could just fly through the side of the mountain and get to us in under thirty seconds. Her being next to us wouldn’t make that much of a difference... not unless there’s something that could take us out so quickly that her getting to us and then back to the clinic within a minute wouldn’t save us, that is.”

“Well...” Tinker started to say but failed to come up with another reason for Silvie to go instead of Boyd.

He felt the roiling concern boiling within her.

Changing tact, she decided to ask a different question. “Couldn’t you be a little more worried, at least?”

“He is very worried,” Mindy answered for him. “Boyd has just learned to use the worry instead of letting it show. Everyone but Raev is more worried than they appear. Which brings us to my second set of special instruction. Raev has a decent amount of experience in terrain similar to this. You would trust her to guide you, correct?”

It was a question she didn’t need to ask, but likely wanted him to answer for Raev’s benefit. “Of course. I can sense her confidence and I know she’s not foolish. It’s not bravado, but a comfort level gained through experience,” Boyd responded to Mindy, keeping the ‘for Raev’s benefit’ aspect of the conversation private. “I wouldn’t be willing to do this, if it wasn’t for her coming with me.”

“Good.” Mindy’s emotionless mask slipped for just a moment to reveal a sweet, little smile. “Then on the way out to the hunting site, she’s your prey. Raev’s not guiding you, you’re chasing her. Can you get in that mindset?”

Boyd decided it wouldn’t be all that different from just following her. He would still have to maintain situational awareness to make sure his prey didn’t become prey to a bigger predator. “I can.” Boyd confirmed.

“Okay, good. Then that’s all,” Mindy stated and waved them towards the open elevator.

## Chapter 40

“That’s it?” Boyd asked. He’d thought there would be more to the exercise.

“Chasing an A-Ranked across the side of a mountain and then taking on another A-Ranked isn’t enough for this first exercise?” Mindy arched a black eyebrow at him.

Boyd shrugged one shoulder. “Well... no, that seems like a fair first run. I’m just not clear on how it will help me get in touch with my other self.”

“You let me worry about that part,” Mindy replied, somewhat cryptically. “This is just to get you outside and breathing some fresh air. Thinking about it too much will defeat the purpose. Chase your pretty vixen and then fight the giant pig, that’s all there is to it.”

“Okay, fair enough,” Boyd replied. He collected the rack of drones and looked around the group of women one more time. “Anything else?”

“Be careful, but not too careful,” Silvie added.

“We will,” Boyd replied simply, stepping into the elevator with Raev. The instruction sounded pointless, but he didn’t point that out because it was a display of concern, not actual advice.

“I love you.” Silvie floated in the air, shifting back and forth. She didn’t bother hiding her worried expression. It showed in her bright blue eyes and the little pout on her lips.

“I love you too,” Boyd and Raev responded together, then looked at each other with matching grins.

Tinker just let out a sad sounding whine. Based on how she held herself, Boyd assumed she was fighting the urge to bounce from foot to foot. He could sense a whirl of anxious emotion across the Bond they shared. He took it as a sign of her trying to come up with reasons for them not to do this.

“Tink,” Boyd said softly, drawing her attention back to him and breaking her train of thought. “We are going to be

fine. We won't be gone long. I have to make it back quickly so I can prepare for our date. Have you picked out a movie?"

Tinker blinked as her mind tried to switch gears to the new topic. "Um... no, but I've narrowed it down to a couple options. Raev said she would help me pick once I narrowed it down to a few."

"Good," Boyd smiled at her reassuringly. "Raev can help you pick when we get back."

"Okay everyone, love ya, we'll be safe, have fun, see you later," Raev said before tapping a button on her FDU that caused the elevator doors rapidly to slide closed.

"That was just going to keep going in circles," she grumbled once it was just the two of them.

Boyd chuckled, "You're probably right."

"Before we get on comms, I wanted to check in with you about Tinker. You have a Bond with her now, right?" Raev asked quickly. The elevator was fast, they didn't have much time before it opened at their exit point.

"Yeah, what's up?" Boyd asked, instantly concerned after sensing Raev's worry about the tiny inventor.

"She was a little awkward with me this morning. When I went to get her for breakfast, it was different than before. She seemed uncomfortable at first. It faded pretty quick, though, and she was fine with me doing her hair and everything. But still... did I overstep somewhere or something?"

"Oh," Boyd sighed, knowing what that was likely about. "It was the nap yesterday... so nothing you did. I just pushed a little too hard while she was emotionally vulnerable. She probably expected you to act differently because you'd shared a bed together. It's not a stretch to assume that Tinker overthinks... everything. Acting normally should be enough to fix it. I'm guessing that's what you did, which is why her discomfort faded."

"Oh, yeah, that tracks." Raev nodded, her tails swaying behind her. She was wearing her new suit which contrasted nicely with the fiery red of her tails. "Thanks."

*'Very astute.'* Mindy commented in his mind, *'you picked some things up in my absence. When did my little shit become so emotionally wise?'*

Boyd personally believed it was her influence that started his interest in emotional wisdom. Once she'd been taken from him, he'd picked up extra voluntary training on things like gauging emotions in both opponents and civilians. Correctly judging the emotions of those around you had all sorts of purposes for a Hero, plus it was one of the few ways he'd had to feel closer to her.

*'Aww, that's sweet.'* Mindy cooed into his mind. *'Okay, I'll be busy with helping to put your Silvie right. I won't be listening for the most part.'*

Boyd very much approved of getting Silvie back to normal.

*'It will take time, because we are doing it naturally,'* Mindy explained.

Boyd approved of that, too. They'd all probably had enough mind fuckery for a lifetime—at least the heavy stuff. Mindy's pushes and prods would probably help expedite undoing some of the damage.

*'That's the plan.'*

Raev glanced at her FDU then up to Boyd. "Let me know when you're done with your mind talk. We're here."

"We're done," Boyd chuckled, "sorry about that."

"Eh, don't worry about it." Raev smiled. "It's all part and parcel of having her around, and it's not like she interrupted our conversation. Ready?"

Raev lifted her FDU towards the door to indicate opening it. Boyd nodded his confirmation. She pressed the button and the door slid open.

He scanned the small room beyond. It was essentially an airlock, designed so only one door could open at a time. They moved into the next section after deciding it looked

clear, shutting the large door behind them. Raev tapped her FDU to open the second door.

This door exited into a small cave on the side of their mountain. It was a ways from the base, and only a few hundred feet above the valley floor. The cave was also empty of life. The mouth of the cave opened on a ridge that ran in either direction. The ridgeline was barely wide enough for Boyd to feel comfortable running along it.

He moved into the cave first, cautiously scanning the area and making sure to check the corners and the ceiling of the cave. When nothing invisible pounced on him, he waved Raev forward. She smirked at him as she strode forward, completely at ease—though Boyd noted that her ears were twitching about, listening for threats instead of looking. They moved towards the mouth of the cave together in silence, stepping out onto the ledge.

Trees hid the ridge from the valley, but he had a decent view of it between them. Like on Old Earth, the sun rose in the east and set in the west. Their tall mountain cast a long shadow over the valley during the morning hours, but it was still a sight to behold. The valley was gorgeous.

The trees were green and full of life. Splotches of color broke up the greenery a little more than what Boyd had seen in pictures of similar landscapes from Old Earth. Large bright flowers bloomed in the canopy, while fluorescent birds flitted from tree to tree.

Morning bird song and animal calls reach them faintly, carried by the gentle wind that started out at sea beyond Glorith City to their west. The lake was clean, still, and longer than it was wide. Boyd could see movement around the edges. His eyes zoomed in, adapted for flight. He made out several creatures he recognized, low ranked and reasonably docile.

The river that flowed from the lake's western end wasn't all that wide or quick, meandering through the lower end of valley, mostly hidden by the trees. Wide rocks were scattered throughout it and along the banks that he could see. The whole scene could only be described as picturesque.

“Woah,” Raev said, once again eloquently voicing Boyd’s thoughts.

It brought a smile to his lips. The two paused for a moment to take it all in while they were relatively safe. Boyd set down the rack of drones and hit the button to deploy them.

“Okay, you ready?” his lover asked once she was satisfied.

“A test, first,” Boyd rumbled back as he glanced around for what he needed.

He found a reasonably flat stone about two feet across. It wasn’t round but would serve as an impromptu discus. Boyd picked it up and moved a bit down the ridge, not wanting to bring attention to the cave’s entrance.

After finding a decent gap in the trees, he wound up and threw the stone out over the valley. His strength propelled it far, despite its aerodynamics being off. Boyd followed it with his eyes as it descended towards the valley floor.

Once it reached about a hundred feet above the canopy, the rock was destroyed. It didn’t just crumble to dust or anything. Multiple streams of energy, fluids, and a range of solid matter shot up from the trees to intercept it. Boyd judged that if he had to fly, he would need to stay at least a hundred feet above the trees to avoid a similar fate.

“Right, flier...” Raev commented from the side. “You all always do that test?”

“It’s a good test.” Boyd shrugged.

Different areas had creatures that reacted differently to flying creatures. The fluorescent birds were likely established and non-predatory, and creatures knew not to bother defending against them. An unknown flying object, though, would typically be considered a threat. If a squirrel could project lasers from its tail, why wouldn’t it attack anything it didn’t recognize?

Boyd activated his comms and asked, “Tinker, are the drones set?”

“I have two assigned to each of you, with two heading to the Crevice Boar’s... huff, crevice. Did they have to be so obvious when naming everything?” Tinker sighed. “Anyway, the other four are going to fly your projected path to scan for threats. I’m detecting mostly low ranked smaller fauna on the ridge. Don’t step in any holes. The flora in this area is mostly docile. Clear for mission.”

“Alright, deploying.” Boyd left his comms open as he turned to his foxy love. He tried to summon the mindset that he was chasing her, not following her. “Good to go.”

She gave him a devilish grin, then vanished into midair. Boyd blinked in surprise, until he spotted the real Raev already fifty yards down the ridge wearing a similar grin and waving at him. Then, she turned, and dashed away.

Raev’s acceleration was no joke, her long powerful legs allowing her to spring forward. Her three fox tails streamed behind her as she leaned low and sprinted from rock to rock along the ridge. Boyd leaped after her, but the narrow ridge prevented him from using his wings to generate extra speed like he normally would. Instead, he tried something new.

He thought about his propulsion pack giving him little boosts and leaned a bit further forward to capitalize on it. It was moderately effective, allowing him to match Raev’s speed but not to close the gap between them. He could tell he could improve... with training.

He watched as Raev twirled out of something’s path ahead of him, an inefficient movement born out of necessity. A small furry creature had jumped out from between some boulders at her, too quick to make out any details. She continued on without incident, avoiding the creature who was likely just protecting its home.

Boyd was prepared when he reached the same spot, reversing his hold on his aura. He let it flow, hoping to scare the creature off. It must have worked, because the critter didn’t make an attempt at him and he closed a little on his fleeing lover.

Getting into the chase mentality had been simple, when the time came. It wasn't about hunting her for food, but for fun. It was a game he regularly played with Silvie. Not being limited to the admittedly large confines of the suite made it much more enjoyable, though.

The somewhat cool and damp early morning air rushed past his face and over his slightly extended wings, refreshing him. Fresh, clean, natural smells filled his nose with each steady breath. The bare bottoms of his feet pounded against the stone of the ridge, solid enough for him to put his full force into each step. It was relaxing not having to fret about—literally—impacting his environment. Boyd often worried about cracking the tiles of the suite's floors.

His lover looked good sprinting ahead of him, bouncing from rock to rock, sometimes leaping up the side of the ridge. She took long but rapid strides, her tails streaming behind her. Boyd's strides were slower but ate up more distance due to his A-Ranked strength being behind each push-off from the ground. The result was that they traveled the ridge at a similar pace.

That is, except for when Raev occasionally had to flip or spin out of the way of aggressive small creatures—which Boyd's aura seemed to keep at bay. It was either that, or the seven-and-a-half-foot, nearly five-hundred-pound demon with big ass wings was just perceived as something they'd do well to hide from instead of attempt to drive away. Raev's just shy of six foot, athletically slender frame was probably less threatening, with or without the aura.

Each time she had to avoid a leaping creature or something one of them shot at her, Boyd reduced the distance between—if only just a little. There was also a segment along their path where the ridge opened up enough for him to make use of his wings and where he got better use from his propulsion pack.

When he'd reduced too much of the distance between them for Raev's liking, she took action. Two clones of her start running ahead of her, leading her by about fifteen feet. Most of



the aggressive critter's attacks started going for the illusions, allowing her to run much more smoothly.

The real Raev still had to dodge the occasional stream of potentially deadly fluid or leaping large insect, but her clones just let them pass harmlessly through them. Boyd kept pounding along, putting as much force into his forward momentum as possible. His aura had always been effective at suppressing low-ranked threats in high-speed movement scenarios.

They transitioned to a second ridge along the north mountain. The peaks connect about a third of the way up, hundreds of feet above them. The second ridge was about forty feet below their first.

Raev bounced down the mountain from one rock ledge to another, finding footing with her tiny feet where Boyd could not. Instead, Boyd just jumped, using a partial extension of his wings to glide down the ridge, shaving a corner off as well as a good chunk of the distance between them.

Raev was only about twenty feet ahead of him now as they ran along the second ridge. This one was a little wider, too, Boyd could easily use his wings to close the remaining distance if he wished. Chasing her was fun, though, and catching her now would have been pointless. They'd also started having to leap the occasional crevice, signs of their prey's presence.

Boyd could sense when his aura reached Raev. It added a separate kind of excitement to what she'd been feeling throughout the spirited run. He eased back on his aura, not wanting to distract her in the dangerous, if manageable, situation.

They reached the crevice the boar had been seen going into this morning within ten minutes of leaving the safety of the base. Neither was out of breath but they both took a moment to gather themselves on the ridge over the clearing where it opened out. Boyd could see the rubble the boar had pushed out to make its home, confirming they were in the right

place. He could also smell the beast's not-distant-enough recent droppings.

They had chosen their target because it was big, loud, smelly, obnoxious, and served no unique purpose in the ecosystem. Everything in the valley knew it was there, and likely disliked it. It wasn't something you wanted to share a valley with. Its absence would be noted, though, especially when another didn't replace it.

"I had one of the drones confirm it is inside and sleeping," Tinker's voice came over their comms.

Boyd scanned around and saw all ten of the bright pink drones floating nearby. They had not been harassed by anything, likely confused for the local fluorescent-colored birds. If they were the ones Boyd was familiar with, they exploded when attacked. It was a surprisingly valid survival tactic.

Boyd turned to Raev. She had said she would draw the boar out for him. "Alright, so what's the plan?"

# Chapter 41

“I’ll give it something to attack,” Raev explained. “Let me know when you are in position, and I’ll get it moving. Where do you want it to end up?”

Boyd scanned the clearing. He didn’t have a bad angle from where he was, if he could get it to turn. Otherwise, his best options were at ground level or out by the trees. Without knowing what was down there, though, it wasn’t a risk he would take. Standing on an anthill had different consequences when the ants in question could chew through a steel beam in minutes.

“Can you get it to come out then turn it so that I have an angle on it?” Boyd asked. He tossed and caught his spear a few times, getting a feel for the balance in preparation for a throw. He would prefer to deal critical damage before closing the distance and getting into melee.

“Easily,” Raev responded after scanning the clearing.

Boyd moved down the ridge, just in case the Crevice Boar was quicker to react than he anticipated. He didn’t want it to charge the cliff and drop Raev into a crevice while trying to get at him.

“Tinker, how are we looking?” he murmured into his comms.

“No signs of any additional threats,” Tinker reported.

Her drones scattered, spreading out and scanning the wider area. After another moment, Tinker added, “Nothing on the way in, either. Conditions are clear, go ahead when ready.”

“Ready when you are,” Boyd said, letting the comms carry his voice to Raev.

He watched as Raev focused on the edge of the forest where it met the clearing. What came lumbering out made Boyd’s heart sink for a moment before he realized it was one of her illusions. A two-thousand-pound bear with fur as black as coal snuffled the air from the wood line. This one appeared

only to be an adolescent—the adults were much larger. Its eyes were burning pits of crimson fire. Flickering flames also rose from its back along the ridge of its wide spine. It was a young Cinder Bear.

It was genius on Raev's part, really. Everything hated Cinder Bears for the same reason the illusion became obvious to Boyd so quickly. They burned hot—hot enough that the forest around it would ignite when it passed. The flames didn't need to touch the trees or brush, the bear only had to pass within a few yards of flammable material to ignite it.

A young Cinder Bear could wander into a forest like this one and set it ablaze. They subsisted on and made their homes among the cinders that were left behind. Something like an adult Crevice Boar would absolutely try to kill it before the Cinder Bear could destroy its home.

The Cinder Bear gave off a ragged roar of challenge towards the crevice where the boar had holed up. Boyd heard the rubble shift within the crevice as the boar awoke and shifted to see what was going on. Boyd readied himself as the illusionary bear gave off another challenge.

The boar came thundering out of the crevice. Eight thousand pounds of pissed off muscle and fat screamed out of the split in the sheer face of the ridge right at the flaming bear. Something that size didn't squeal, even if the sound might be similar.

Its hide was a deep russet brown, though broken up by tough, stone-like dirty gray armored plates. Massive tusks of the same color curved up from its lower jaw, razor sharp and strong enough to break stone. Its massive two-toed hooves shredded the ground as it put all its force into the charge.

The Cinder Bear threw itself to the side just before the boar closed on it. The larger animal slammed its feet into the hard ground to come to a skidding halt and wheeled around to face the bear again. Boyd saw his chance and took it, throwing the spear with every ounce of strength he could.

Boyd's dumbbells that he curled were measured in tons; he could put a lot of force into the throw. The spear

blurred as it left his hand, clearing the distance at speeds once limited to things like bullets. His aim was true, and the spear slammed home right between two plates where they separated between the boar's shoulder and its ribs.

There was enough power behind the throw to pitch the creature onto its side with a panicked, rising scream. Boyd heard the slight gurgle that confirmed he'd punctured at least one lung, as intended. The beast scrambled about, thumping its feet and squealing its pain and fear to the whole valley.

After a moment, it rose to its feet. Boyd couldn't tell if it knew it was dying and wanted revenge or was just in denial. Either way, Boyd's task was only partially complete. Besides, the last foot of his new spear was sticking out of the boar's side, and he wanted it back.

He fastened his shield to his arm before drawing his sword. Then, with a mighty roar of his own he dove from the ridge, gliding on his wings directly at the massive beast. The boar turned towards him and snorted its rage, preparing to intercept his flight with its huge tusks.

With a flap of his wings Boyd changed his trajectory at the last moment, lifting himself up just out of the boar's reach. It made the attempt anyway, rising up on its hind legs to slash at him. Boyd's sword flashed down, nicking its snout for its trouble. The boar let out another scream of pain as his blade parted the tender flesh like butter.

Boyd landed behind the boar, spun in place, then threw himself back towards it with another flap of his wings and a surge from his strong legs. The boar was still wheeling around to face him when Boyd drove a hard kick into the stone like armor plate over the creature's ribs. The plate cracked under the force he put into the kick, and the massive boar was sent back to the ground on its side with a crash.

The boar screamed its anger and pain once more and Boyd matched the sound with a roar of his own. The beast scrambled back to its hooves and turned on Boyd with its snout lowered, intending to gore him with a sweep of its razor-

sharp tusks. Boyd caught and deflected its natural weapons with his shield.

Crevice Boars were strong, but their Power was momentum based. In a stationary contest like the one they were now engaged in, Boyd was notably stronger. The boar squealed in surprise as Boyd pushed its head up and to the side; that squeal turned from surprise to pain when he stuck his sword into its throat.

The boar scrambled back away from him, trying to create some distance to make use of its Power. Boyd let it, having decided he needed to make some more noise to complete the mission.

“Second pass, he’ll hit the ridge... watch your footing,” Boyd warned Raev over their comms.

“Gotcha. Looking good, Big Guy,” Raev replied.

Boyd could feel the fighting grin that found its way to his lips. He was enjoying himself, likely more that he should let himself do in the Wild Lands. It was part of his mission, though, so he didn’t chastise himself too much for enjoying the exhilaration of a good fight.

The boar charged him, and Boyd leaped backwards with a flap of his wings to lead it towards the trees that surrounded the clearing. Once he reached the tree line and the boar had committed to a charge, he flapped down hard with his wings to throw himself into the air and over the creature’s back.

Charging under him, the boar created quite a ruckus as it crashed into the trees, continuing on for a while into the dense foliage. It flattened a swath of forest, causing other animals to shriek in dismay as they fled. At least one defensive plant tried to wrap the intruding boar up in thorny vines, but it pulled itself free.

Splashes of energy and liquid hit the sides of the boar as it turned back towards Boyd, doing no notable damage and only pissing it off even more. Turning back to face him, it lowered its head and prepared to charge again. Boyd leaped

into the air, his wings pulling him back once more to put more distance between him and the boar. This also lined it up with the cliff near the crevice it had made its home in.

The boar charged again, screaming a ragged cry with its one functional lung. It must have known it was dying by then and had decided to take Boyd with it. It seemed prepared for him to leap over it again, so Boyd dodged to the right with a boost from his propulsion pack, instead.

The boar crashed into the cliff at the base of the ridge, a few yards off from its original crevice. The impact shook the ground and produced a thunderous noise. That part of the ridge broke loose, rubble crashing down into and doubling the thickness of the gap of its home. The falling rock partially buried the boar who had tried to stop and avoid hitting the rock wall. With a shake, the boar quickly pulled itself free.

In the time it took to do so, however, Boyd was able to leap forward and deliver a powerful slash to its right hind leg with his sword, severing the hamstring and crippling that limb. Boyd then leaped back, preparing for what he expected would be an exchange. He could have just waited it out at that point, but now that it was done for, he had a responsibility to finish the creature off quickly. He had no reason to let it suffer.

The Crevice Boar let out another shrill cry at the crippling of its leg. Dragging itself around to face him, it supported its bulk on its three remaining legs and wheezed ragged, wet breaths. Boyd could see bloody froth on its lips and knew the creature's time was almost up. Of course, that made it more dangerous than ever.

The boar glared at Boyd, then let out another scream of rage as it lunged forward to close the distance and swing its tusks at him once more. Again, Boyd caught the slashing tusks on his shield and pushed the beast's head up and to the side. This time, when Boyd drove his sword home into the boar's throat, he twisted the blade before dragging it to the side.

Thick crimson blood spurted from the massive creature's neck, hot as it flowed over Boyd's arms and chest. He leaped back out of the deluge as the boar attempted and

failed to give one last scream before its life blood drained away. Boyd watched it for a moment before leaping into the air and returning to the safety of the ridge.

“Oh, wow... blood shower,” Raev commented once she got a good look at him, an amused expression on her face.

Boyd wrinkled his nose as he looked down at himself. He reeked of the pungent smell of copper. “Do we have a hose or something at the entrance?” he asked over comms as he watched the death twitches of the boar in the clearing below them. He didn’t want to drip this stuff all over the base.

“Umm...” Tinker’s voice came back, uncertain as she apparently checked to see what was available. “No, but I do have a sprayer drone, for small fires in the lab. I’ll load it with water and send it out to... Oh, wait! The entrance room has a decontamination shower that should do the job.”

“That will work,” Boyd rumbled back, hoping to get to it before the blood dried. He’d figured he would get bloody when butchering the massive hog, but this was ridiculous.

“I should probably talk to someone about why you being covered in blood makes me all hot and bothered, huh?” Raev asked with a velvet chuckle.

“I mean... I don’t know if it’s an issue,” Boyd shrugged. “It doesn’t gross me out or anything. I just know it will get uncomfortable if it dries on me like this.”

“Oh, yeah, that would suck,” Raev replied. She nodded down at the still twitching crevice boar. “Good job. You made it look easy.”

Boyd shrugged again, easy might be a bit of a stretch, but it hadn’t been much of a challenge. Still, one misstep could have led to his death. It paid to temper one’s confidence.

“It was fun,” he replied.

“You think that was fun?” Tinker asked over comms. “That was terrifying, and I’m safe back in my lab watching everything on a viewscreen.”



Boyd chuckled and checked to confirm the boar had stopped moving. It was still, but Boyd didn't trust it not to be playing dead. He would give it a few more minutes before descending to attach the winch to its legs and haul it halfway up the ridge to finish draining it.

"We fought an Alpha Boar when we were like... twelve, I think. It was not long before my Change. Hope had her wings, so yeah, I had to be almost thirteen. Compared to that, this was nothing. So yes, I had fun."

Alpha Boars were about half the size of Crevice Boars but were more Powerful in every way. They were S-Ranked threats with regeneration, strength, and speed that put a Crevice Boar to shame. It had been harder to damage because of its rapid healing and faster attacks, without needing to charge to overpower Boyd. It had taken Hope, Silvie, him, and two other high-Ranked teammates to take it on. Of course, Silvie could handle one all by herself after he'd Enhanced her.

"Well, the mission was a success," Tinker replied. "The drones were able to detect the audio signature of your voice echoing off the south mountain. Everything in the valley now knows that some apex predator just took on that Crevice Boar."

Raev let out another velvet chuckle. "Yeah. I should have brought ear protection."

"Did I hurt you?" Boyd asked, instantly concerned. He knew her ears were sensitive and should have been more careful.

"It was a joke, Big Guy." Raev smiled at him.

He tested his Bonds, checking on them now that the fight was over. He sensed ebbing excitement and more than a little arousal from Raev. She hadn't been kidding, the blood must actually turn her on. That, or it was just watching him fight. He could live with either reason.

Silvie felt... odd, again. The best way he could describe it was that their Bond felt muted and somehow itched. He took that to mean that Mindy was working on something in

her mind. Tinker was a bundle of fading worry, she'd likely been nearly in a panic as she watched the fight through her drones.

“We’re okay, Tinker,” Boyd assured her one more time. “We’ll be back soon, just have to get my spear back and harvest some meat.”

She didn’t respond, but he felt some embarrassment through their Bond, so he added, “It is also okay to worry about us, just not too much.”

“O-okay...” she stammered, then Tinker sighed.

## Chapter 42

Boyd took his shield off his arm and checked it. He expected the obsidian surface to be cracked, but it had held firm. “Everything you’ve made me has worked wonderfully, by the way,” he commented, taking another opportunity to build Tinker’s confidence. “I have no idea how you got obsidian to stand up to those forces but consider me impressed.”

“Oh, um, it’s just the weave and the reinforcement layers. It’s nothing fancy,” Tinker replied, sounding shy.

“Nothing fancy to you maybe,” Boyd rumbled back. “It’s very impressive to me. Your gear allowed me to fight that boar much more comfortably. I doubt I would have had any fun if I was still fighting bare handed. Speaking of which, let’s go get that spear back. Raev, do you want to come down here or stay up there on lookout?”

“I’ll come down. Let’s set the winch first, though,” Raev replied as she unslung the small pack she wore. She opened it and reached inside, coming out with a fist-sized metal box and a controller. She approached the lip of the ridge and set the box on a sturdy looking portion of the ledge.

She pressed a button on the controller and the box gave off a *hiss-thud* as it drove an anchor deep into the ground. A light on the controller showed green, confirming a solid connection. Boyd was familiar with the design and knew it to be rated to handle more weight than they would need, despite its compact design.

That done, Raev pressed another button and a thin cable extended from the side of the box. Raev grabbed it, looked Boyd up and down, then shook her head with a grin. Boyd looked down at himself and realized he was covered in blood. It was still dripping from him starting at his pauldrons. At least he’d managed to keep his head out of the spray.

“I’ll take this down,” she said.

With that, she leaped from the ledge, using the winch's cable to repel down the cliff. Boyd followed her, extending his wings to slow his fall—though he still landed with a thud.

Boyd walked over to the boar's corpse, intent on recovering his spear. Fortunately, the boar had fallen with that side up. He picked up a stone as he walked up and pelted the boar's head with the fist-sized stone to make sure it was dead. When it didn't respond, Boyd leaped up onto its side to grasp the foot or so of the spear that stuck out of its side, near the shoulder joint.

The spear refused to budge, stuck between or embedded in a bone somewhere. But Boyd was strong. With a grunt at the effort, he broke it free, ripping the spear from the massive beast.

“Alright,” Boyd said as he hopped back to the ground, “let's get its legs tied up so we can lift and drain it.”

“Right,” Raev agreed as she walked towards the boar's hind legs with the cable in hand.

Just then, a familiar feeling of dread hit him. One of his lovers was in danger, but this time it was Raev. Boyd barely controlled his panic as he scanned the area and called out to his lover, “Look out!”

To Raev's credit, she responded immediately, dropping the cable and diving to the side. It saved her life as a cascade of blue-white energy washed down from above through the spot where she'd been standing a moment before. Raev kept moving, getting well away from it as the wash of energy swept towards Boyd.

What looked like a beam of energy was about as thick as his thigh. It was hot, even at a distance. Boyd dove away, getting away from the corpse and the descending beam of energy. His eyes tracked upwards, following the bright shaft to its source.

“Fuck!” The curse slipped out of him, followed by a command that didn't disguise the lance of fear that shot through him: “Run!”

“I’m sending Silvie!” Tinker cried over their comms.

“No!” Boyd called back, pulling his shield from his back and reseating it on his arm. The beam was tracking him, so he leaped back into the tree line to break their attacker’s line of sight. “Raev, get clear,” he rumbled as the beam cut off once he was out of sight.

They were dealing with a dragon. There should only be one remaining member of that species, because nothing Heroes had tried in the last thousand years could kill it. The rest of them had been hunted by the legends of the past. The one who remained was considered both immortal and unkillable—the ultimate Code Black. If it headed towards a city, you abandoned the city.

But that one should be much larger than what Boyd saw now. This dragon’s wings didn’t look much larger than Boyd’s own wings. Or maybe it was just really high up. That didn’t explain the beam, though. The Last Dragon’s energy breath weapon—for that’s what it was called—would have washed away the whole clearing he had been standing in, in a storm of actinic light.

“Tinker, do you have eyes on it?” Boyd asked, keeping his voice low.

“Y-yes,” she stuttered slightly. “It’s circling the clearing. I think it wants the boar. It’s leaving my drones alone. I thought there was only one dragon, though.”

”This one is too small to be the Last Dragon,” he grunted.

“So, it is small then?”

“Yes, AHH!” Boyd heard the hum the beam made again. The energy so powerful it registered as sound; there was a reason only legends hunted dragons. The Last Dragon’s breath could burn right through even S-Ranked energy resistance. Not even Silvie could take such a concentrated attack.

“It’s shooting at Raev!”

Boyd leaped into the clearing, pushed his Black Flame onto his spear as he scanned the sky and then threw the spear as quick as he could. His aim wasn't perfect, but the spear pierced one of the dragon's wide wings, punching a hole right through it.

The dragon cried out and the beam cut off.

"Raev?!" Boyd cried into his comm.

"I'm good," Raev called back, somewhat breathlessly. Even her confidence had a breaking point, it seemed.

Boyd then had to dive to the side as the beam once again descended toward him. The dragon was a good hundred and fifty feet up. He had no way of reaching it without being cut out of the sky and the small hole his spear had left in the creature's wing wasn't enough to ground it. He darted in an arching path across the clearing, staying visible to keep its attention on him and away from Raev.

He was glad he'd tested the release mechanism for the larger obsidian balls Tinker made for him. Those were reloadable, so testing them didn't waste any ammo, and Boyd could reload them himself. Tinker had to load the smaller ones at the base.

He palmed one of the bigger obsidian balls and pushed his Black Flame into the sphere, watching and waiting for an opportunity. The damn beast had to inhale at some point.

The beam dug a furrow into the ground behind him, charring the dirt and producing an ugly smell. Molten stone puddled in the trenches the beam left behind. It cut off after about thirty seconds of Boyd desperately dodging and outrunning it. He spun as soon as it did, quickly aimed, and threw the obsidian orb charged with his Power.

He felt his eyes widen as the beam descended on him quicker than he'd anticipated. Blue-white light swallowed the darkly burning black ball as it ascended. The beast was smart, its pause had been intentional. It had baited him into pausing in place. Boyd pushed Black Flame onto his shield and raised it, unable to get out of the way and certain he was about to die.

The shield took the beam though, his black flame absorbing the energy. A second after the beam impacted his shield, it cut off. Boyd peered over the lip of his shield to see the dragon was apparently coughing, or maybe it was choking.

Boyd realized the obsidian orb must have survived the energy and struck true, flying directly into the dragon's open maw. Apparently it wasn't enough to pierce the back of the dragon's skull or to reach its brain, but he would take what he could get. He had time to act and used it to do two things.

First, he reached out with his Mental Domination. It worked on the more intelligent beasts he'd faced in training, but not all. Fortunately, he felt the tethers connect. Boyd bundled all the anxiety and fear he felt facing a dragon with his lover in the field with him and shoved it down the temporary connection.

While doing that, he quickly drew a handful of the smaller obsidian pellets and filled them with his Power. Boyd wound up and threw the twenty small obsidian pellets with all his might, hoping to punch holes in the membrane of the dragon's wings and ground the beast, or at least drive it away. Killing the small dragon before it grew would be ideal, but survival was the current mission.

Boyd couldn't see the impact or any resulting holes, but the dragon's left wing was jerked in as it let out a coughing cry of pain. It dropped a dozen or so yards before it managed to extend both wings again and stabilize its flight. Then, it turned towards the northeast and started flapping away, still making occasional barking coughs.

Boyd let out a sigh of relief, his heart pounding in his chest. They'd been attacked by a fucking dragon. Its appearance matched descriptions he'd read about the Last Dragon, just in a more compact size than he'd expected from that immortal beast. Metallic scales coated the creature, bright and shiny, even in the shadow of their mountain. It had the same steel gray wing membranes, and that destructive actinic breath weapon.

The small dragon must have coughed up the obsidian ball, because it let out a distressed cry that echoed off the mountains. Boyd's heart seized when a second much larger roar answered but a moment later. He could feel the vibration of the call through his feet.

It sounded pissed. Somehow the Last Dragon had a baby—a baby which Boyd had just assaulted.

“Where's Raev?” Boyd asked softly into his comms.

“A hundred yards east, at the base of the ridge,” Tinker murmured back.

“Get to me, Big Guy. I'll hide us,” Raev hissed.

He considered running away from her, but something about his sense of her over their Bond at that moment told him she would chase after him. That would make them both obvious targets for a pissed off mama dragon.

Boyd dashed in her direction, glancing down at his FDU to find her on the map after remembering it. He crashed through the trees and brush, not caring about the feelings of any lesser plant or animal that might take offense to his passage. Either they attacked him, and he didn't notice because they'd missed, or everything in the area was scared into hiding by that roar.

He reached Raev quickly, finding her huddled in the midst of a cluster of boulders at the base of the ridge they'd run along to reach the boar. Boyd slid in next to her, wrapped his wing around her, and thought hopeful thoughts. Raev raised an illusion of a larger boulder around them, dimming the world beyond it.

“Darling, I'm on comms,” Silvie's voice whispered in his ear. “We've got it on sensors... it's coming this way. I can't get to you in time.”

“Stay put,” Boyd growled quietly, already pissed that Raev was in this situation with him.

The entire valley had gone eerily quiet at the Last Dragon's approach. In the silence, Boyd heard the *whump* of its massive wings getting closer and closer. Then, it came into



view, arching between the northern and eastern mountains to enter their valley. Its wingspan had been estimated to be over three hundred feet, ten times as big as Boyd's. It was over two hundred feet long from snout to tip of its tail.

Its scales had been likened to the armored plates on old earth naval warships—they even appeared to be metallic. The Last Dragon's head was huge, with a maw that could swallow Boyd whole. Horns lined the ridge on the top of its head. Boyd, thankfully, couldn't see its eyes, but he knew they glowed with blue-white energy.

It arched overhead and Boyd could feel the gust its wing strokes generated from hundreds of feet above the ground. Boyd held his breath. The myths about this creature were wide and varied. If some could be believed, the massive beast might hear his heartbeat from the sky, so he took every precaution he could.

It made multiple passes, looping back and forth through the valley. Boyd didn't see the smaller dragon and worried where it might have gone. On one of the Last Dragon's passes, curiosity got the better of Boyd. He pushed his Black Flame to his eyes. In his Black Flame sight, the dragon was a wondrous beauty.

The distance made details hard to parse, the air between them being filled with a kaleidoscope of colored lights that pierced the mountain as easily as they pierced the walls of the suite back in Glorith. The Last Dragon was brighter than anything he'd ever seen in his Black Flame sight, putting even Daisy to shame.

It was made up of bright blue orbs—at least he assumed it was. He couldn't see the orbs themselves, but the overall effect was a blue light so bright that the dragon almost looked white. Boyd also noticed a strange phenomenon. Its wings cast a shadow.

It took him a moment to put together that its wings didn't actually cast a shadow. Instead, they absorbed every orb of light that contacted them. None made it through, the resulting absence of orbs effectively created the image of a

shadow in the air. Boyd blinked his vision back to normal as the dragon winged away.

Boyd couldn't tell you how long they waited there to be swallowed by a deluge of semi-solid energy during one of the dragon's passes. He was certain that on one of those passes, it would sense them. It felt like they huddled together for hours in absolute terror, though it could only have been a few minutes. The Last Dragon circled the valley, apparently searching for the being foolish enough to harm its child.

That being was thankful to successfully control his bowels.

Eventually, the thunderous *whump* of its wings faded, muted by mountains between it and him. Boyd sucked in a gasping breath, as Raev did the same. She clutched at him, not caring about the blood that still coated Boyd. He held her close, enclosed within his wings. Raev left the illusion up and Boyd almost missed the silver blur that streaked past them.

"Silvie," Boyd called softly, but she was well out of hearing range by the time the words left his mouth. "You passed us," he added for her benefit over their comms.

The silver blur streaked back towards them and Raev dropped the illusion. Then everything became a blur for both of them as Silvie scooped Raev and him up and carried them away. Boyd couldn't really call it flying, because the word didn't do the way they moved justice. For about five seconds all was a blur, but then Boyd suddenly found himself in the cave entrance to their base.

Raev was still in his arms, cradled by his wings, but now Silvie was wrapped around Raev, clutching onto Boyd over his wings. Two sets of eyes peered up at him, wide from the adrenaline they still had flowing through them. One pair was bright blue though they glowed a dim silver, teary and angry. The other pair was emerald with an ovoid pupil, coming down from the terror that had been their entire existence for however long they had hidden under her illusion from the Last Dragon.

Boyd couldn't see the camouflaged door to the base, but it slid open. He shuffled everyone inside, wanting at least one wall between his lovers and the rest of the world at that moment. Encounters like that were enough to induce agoraphobia.

He let out a sigh as the door hissed closed behind them.

## Chapter 43

The decontamination shower wasn't bad, but it left them dripping wet and stinking of chemicals. The elevator ride back to the Great Room passed in silence. When the doors of the elevator slid open, a pink blur crashed into Boyd. Petite arms wrapped around his waist and small hands clutched at him.

Boyd peeled Tinker off just enough to drop to his knees and pull her into a proper hug. She was calming rapidly, but needed the reassurance of physical contact after such a close call.

"This is why I said Silvie should be out there with you," she murmured into his shoulder.

He shook his head. "Silvie couldn't fight the Last Dragon. I looked at it with my Black Flame Vision." He used the name Tinker had given it. "It is the most powerful thing I've seen. She would only have been in just as much danger as we were."

Boyd replied gently, to make sure it didn't come off as a rebuke. He looked up to see Mindy standing nearby, her emotionless mask firmly in place. "Going out with Raev was the right call. Her Power let us hide when we couldn't fight."

"Still..." Tinker sighed. "She could have zipped you all back to the base."

"And we would have run the risk of being blasted from the sky together. Or it might have tracked us back here and then we would have gotten everyone killed," Boyd responded. "We can talk about this more later, we have responsibilities left to fulfill."

He released Tinker and stood, crossing over to Mindy and giving her a shorter hug. "Has Davis been notified?"

"Not yet," Silvie replied.

"Let's do it in the office," Boyd responded. He started guiding the group to the office between the medium-sized

bedroom and the Great Room.

On the way there, Mindy said, “We should inform Davis, but he won’t want to tell the others. He’s been hiding that he has any resources in these mountains. He would have to reveal the existence of this base to report our encounter.”

“Everyone has to know the Last Dragon is awake... he’ll figure out a way to get the word out,” Boyd rumbled back.

The feared beast slept for long periods of time—decades, at least. It had appeared a few times over the course of their history on this world. Every time it appeared, they had lost an entire city, along with any Heroes who tried to defend it.

“Is it still on sensors?” Boyd asked.

“It passed beyond our sensors’ range a moment ago,” Tinker answered from behind him.

Boyd glanced over his shoulder to see she had a handheld tablet she was likely using to check the sensor data.

“How much warning will we have if it comes back this way?” Boyd asked.

“The first time it must have been on the ground nearby,” Tinker replied. “We had next to no warning. At its top documented flight speed, we should have just shy of four minutes warning from the time it enters our current sensor range.”

“Can you extend that?” Boyd rumbled back, pausing outside the office door.

“Yes, should I start doing that now?” Tinker asked.

“Please.” Boyd nodded. “Do you need any assistance?”

“No. I’ll have the weaver print up sensor drones and deploy them. I planned to do it... eventually. I just wasn’t sure if there was a reason not to,” Tinker answered. “I’ll start in the northeast sector where it disappeared. Would ten minutes warning be enough?”

“Yes, I just want to make sure we have enough time to reach the ship and get the fuck out of here if it comes back,” Boyd growled. “We can’t be sure it didn’t detect the base. It might be escorting its child to safety before it comes back to kill us.”

The color drained from Tinker’s face at that thought. “Um, yeah... good idea.”

“Don’t worry too much.” Boyd showed her his reassuring smile. “The ship warmed up quick, four minutes will be plenty of warning while we’re on alert like this. I want the additional six minute’s buffer in case it comes back while we are asleep.”

“Oh.” Tinker swallowed. “Yeah, but just to be safe I’m going to set the ship to standby mode. It won’t hurt anything.”

“Good idea,” Boyd agreed. “If it can be left in standby mode for the next twenty-four hours, I would be more comfortable. If it doesn’t come back in that time, I think we’ll be in the clear.”

“The ship can stay in standby for seventy-two hours before it needs to shut down for automated maintenance on some of its parts, which takes two hours. They stuck to my specifications on that,” Tinker explained. She took a deep breath and then blew it all out at once. “I’m going to go get to work.”

“How long do you need for the sensors?” Boyd asked.

“Um, I have a design that should work. At ten minutes out...” Tinker’s voice faded, and Boyd could almost see the thoughts storming through her head. “Um, it will take a while for full coverage, but I’ll start in the northeast. I’ll have that sector covered in maybe four to six hours. Full coverage may take as much as twenty-four hours. I’m going to go program the weaver now.”

“Thank you,” Boyd said to her back as she turned and jogged towards her lab. If Boyd had to guess, the ship could be put into standby mode remotely.

He turned to Silvie. “Please go inform the others that they need to be prepared to run to the ship at a moment’s notice. Let Mindy explain the nature of the threat. I don’t know either Laura or Daisy well enough to assume their reactions will be positive.”

“Okay, Darling,” Silvie replied before blurring away.

Boyd, Raev and Mindy turned to enter the office. There, Boyd found a large view screen likely meant for calls that included a group on this end. “Call Director Davis,” Boyd called out to the voice controls in the room. It worked—partially.

After a moment, a duplicate of the synthetic voice from their suite in Glorith responded “Director Davis is unavailable at this time, would you like to leave a message?”

“Emergency override,” Boyd commanded. The Last Dragon was within three hundred miles of Glorith City, that qualified as an emergency.

After another moment, Director Davis’s voice responded, but the screen showed this was an audio only message. “Devil, what’s the situation?”

Boyd was glad to see that Davis wasn’t the type to scold or question his use of the emergency override without first finding out why he’d done so. “The Last Dragon is awake and active. It has found a way to reproduce and is no longer the last of its kind. We were attacked by a dragon roughly one tenth the size of what reports state the Last Dragon should be. After we drove it away, it called out and the Last Dragon answered. Tinker will send you available footage shortly.”

There was stunned silence for a long moment before Davis came back. “You obviously survived. Are you or your team in active danger?”

“It has not attacked the base. Raev and I were able to hide from the Last Dragon in the field using her illusions. I am operating under the belief that it did not detect us. It departed our sensor range several minutes ago. Just to be safe, we are

deploying an expanded sensor net and are prepared to evacuate.”

Boyd heard a low exhalation of relief over the line. “Which direction was it going?”

“We last detected it moving to the northeast, but it was not moving in a straight line,” Mindy responded, likely having seen the sensor data, which Boyd and Raev had not seen. “It left our sensor range on a heading of roughly thirty-three degrees.”

“Good, there’s nothing but Wild Lands in that direction.” Davis let out a sigh. “Of course, that creates problems of its own.”

“I understand we are in hiding but we cannot conceal this information,” Boyd grumbled.

“Of course not.” Davis’s reply sounded like the weight of a mountain had settled on his shoulders. “I’m considering options but hiding that the Last Dragon is active isn’t one of them.”

It was at that moment that something clicked for Boyd. He’d often wondered why The Authority never used satellites to monitor the Wild Lands. Getting equipment into orbit wouldn’t be a problem. Someone like Silvie could just fly a satellite with its payload up into a low orbit. High ranked Porters could get it done even easier.

There being a group—or groups—that opposed The Authority who made their homes in the Wild Lands explained the inconsistency. They would have people who could take any satellites The Authority deployed out of the sky. It also explained why Sky Watch was more like an orbital fortress than an observation platform, and why it stayed in a geosynchronous orbit, positioned between five cities that it supported. Fortress or not, it was better to avoid giving your enemies a reason to destroy the incredibly expensive and relatively vulnerable station.

“I’ve got it from here, unless you have anything else to report,” Davis said, interrupting Boyd’s train of thought.



“Nothing, Sir,” Boyd responded after glancing at the others.

Both Mindy and Raev shook their heads.

“Good job surviving and reporting, goodbye.” With that, the line disconnected.

Boyd let out a long breath, his official responsibility complete. The cities had to have time to prepare. At the very least, they would run evacuation drills with the Last Dragon active. It always destroyed one city shortly after a sighting—no more, no less. They didn’t know why this was the case, or if they did know, they weren’t telling Boyd.

Mindy’s hand settled on Boyd’s arm and a wave of calm passed through him. She didn’t shut anything off, just removed the lingering effects of the adrenaline still in his system.

Boyd took a deep breath, filling his lungs and letting it out slowly to recenter himself. “Thank you for the save back there, Raev.” That seemed like the next most important thing to do, recognizing his love and that their survival had been all because of her illusion.

“Thank you for whatever you did to get the small one to stop attacking me,” Raev replied. “It came close to zapping me before you did whatever you did.”

“Spear throw,” Boyd rumbled. He turned to her before pulling Raev into another hug. Then he sighed. “Which I just realized I left out there somewhere. I wonder if Tinker built a tracker into it.”

“Probably,” Raev responded as she melted into his hug. “She had one on your sword. A drone picked it up, remember?”

“Oh... right. I’ll check with her once the sensors are up.” Boyd looked over at Mindy and decided that standing on formality was dumb.

He reached out with his tail and dragged her into the hug. Raev shifted over to make room. Raev’s and his suits

weren't ideal for cuddling, which created a wonderful contrast with Mindy in her supremely soft kaftan.

“Oh, hi there,” Raev purred as she wrapped one arm around Mindy, having kept the other around Boyd.

“Kuh-he.” Mindy's emotionless mask slipped, replaced by a warm and more than pleased smile. “I think you are very beautiful as well. Now isn't the time for me, though. It wouldn't be right. I understand. That little quirk of yours is more inconvenient than it sounded when you explained it to me. I get it, now. Once Boyd is assured that I'm alive and not going anywhere, I'm sure he will happily take you somewhere and help you with it.”

Curious about the one-sided conversation, Boyd paid attention to the Bond he had with Raev. It only took him a moment to figure out the nature of Raev's thoughts that Mindy had responded to. It seemed the moderate level of arousal that had built in her watching Boyd fight the boar before the dragon attack was still present.

Raev not coming down from arousal now included high-stakes or near-death encounters—which would be inconvenient, to say the least. Boyd couldn't imagine what it must have been like to huddle in his arms between those boulders, waiting for a dragon to disintegrate you, while still being horny.

“We need a shower,” Boyd declared.

The decontamination shower had gotten the blood off of them but left behind a chemical stink. Boyd didn't want to consider what the harsh chemicals might do to his lover's fluffy tails if left in for too long.

“Are you okay to be alone?” he asked Mindy, not wishing to abandon her. Yet again he wished he had a Bond with her to tell him how she was doing and what she needed.

“Yes.” She smiled warmly. “I have to work with Silvie a bit more, anyway. We were pulled away at an inopportune time—nothing damaging,” she clarified, obviously responding

to the spike of worry that flared up in his mind, “but I’d like to finish up.”

Silvie had also been doused in the chemical cleaning agent, but her resistance would protect her hair and skin. At best, she simply needed to change her suit.

“As long as you keep the four-minute evacuation in mind,” Boyd rumbled in reply, reluctantly releasing his black-haired love from the hug.

Mindy stepped back. “Of course, and I’ll be with Silvie. She can get me to the ship as fast as the elevator will let her.”

“Faster,” Boyd chuckled. “If the Last Dragon comes back, Silvie will likely punch holes through everything getting everyone onto the ship.”

Mindy nodded, then tilted her head to one side. “She definitely would. Now go take care of Raev.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” Boyd scooped up Raev and turned towards the door that led deeper into his suite.

Raev let out a velvet chuckle and reached out to wave around Boyd’s bulk before she called out, “Thanks for being a great wingwoman. I’ll return the favor someday.”

“No problem,” Mindy laughed as she headed towards the other door.

## Chapter 44

Boyd decided to take Raev to the smaller bathroom attached to his medium bedroom, as opposed to the massive bathing chamber further back. The shower there was more than big enough for two, or likely even four. Silvie would take care of warning Laura and Daisy to be prepared to evacuate and everyone else had their assigned tasks. He could afford the distraction but planned to be quick.

He also decided to test using his Power with Raev the same way he'd done to Silvie the day before. That connection, the one that sent his affection to Silvie on a constant drip, had faded in their sleep and they'd decided not to reestablish it right away. This was partially because it hadn't been tested, and he and Raev were going out into the Wild Lands.

But it was also because Mindy was going to be working with Silvie while they hunted. She would be settling some of the issues Silvie had been experiencing since Mindy lifted the modifications she'd made years ago to Silvie's thinking. He hoped it helped relieve the guilt that plagued her—he certainly didn't hold it against her.

Boyd remembered how to establish the connection and began the drip feed of his love and affection to his foxy lover.

“Ohh,” Raev sighed, “that’s nice. Is this what you did with Silvie?”

“It is,” Boyd confirmed as they entered the bathroom.

He didn't have to question if she actually liked it, sensing a spike of gratitude and love across their Bond. It felt deep and meaningful to her and completely wiped out any lingering concerns for their safety she might have had. It replaced that anxiety with calm contentment.

“This is what you feel for me?” she asked as he set her down. “All warm, fuzzy, and a little possessive?”

That was as good a description of what he felt for his lover as any. “That sounds about right,” he rumbled.

Raev reached up and activated the hidden seam splitting her suit down the side. She slowly peeled it open. “Hmmm,” she hummed, “it’s... wonderful. I see why Silvie wanted you to leave it on constantly.”

Boyd began shedding his weapons, setting them carefully on the counter. “I think I’ll be able to maintain it all the time, with some practice.”

“Please do,” Raev purred as she pulled her suit down and off her legs, leaving herself gloriously naked. “I don’t want to stop feeling this.”

Boyd paused for a moment to admire her long, *long*, perfectly toned and shapely legs as she did. He smiled at his lover as he began unfastening his own suit. She stepped forward to assist him and soon they were both naked. Her emerald eyes smoldered in anticipation when they met his.

He guided her into the shower and started the water. It wasn’t as all-encompassing as the shower Silvie had shown him in what he’d started thinking of as the ‘Spa Room’, but it still had several luxury features. Boyd set it to rain mode to start, rinsing away any lingering chemicals in a steady fall of pleasantly hot water. Then he set it to a normal directional spray from three different shower heads for washing, and what would come after.

Neither were willing to be very patient about getting to the ‘after’ part. They washed each other quickly, although Boyd did make sure to lather Raev’s tails in a damage-preventing conditioner she had brought with her. Once they’d rinsed the product out of her fluffy tails, the little bit of patience she’d had was exhausted.

Boyd left the water running but moved them out of the stream before lifting Raev up by the hips. His understanding was that normally people wanted to like shower sex—it was a common fantasy—but had all sorts of difficulties with the reality. Boyd had no such issues.

He used a trick he had thought up a while ago but had never had cause to use with Silvie because of her Power. His tail was long, just shy of seven feet, very flexible, and as

strong as he was. Boyd wrapped it around in front of him and formed a U-shaped bend in it. With it so formed, he now had a makeshift platform to lay Raev back onto.

“Oh, this has possibilities,” she cooed at him.

He adjusted his tail slightly, setting the bend so that it supported her neck and shoulders. His goal was to let her hang her head back if she wished to. At the same time, though, he hoped to support her head if she wanted to look at him. The tip of his tail curled down her side and then up around the outside of her hip. It provided a little stability, but he mostly did it because he thought Raev would like it.

She wrapped her legs loosely around his waist, held too far back to grip him with her thighs—for now. Her flame red hair looked crimson as it dangled behind her. Her emerald eyes glistened with anticipation and need burned down the Bond to Boyd. Raev’s lips curled in an expectant smile and she parted them just a little as her pink tongue teasingly traced her upper lip before she took her lower lip between her teeth.

Boyd lined himself up and pressed the tip of his manhood into her just a little.

“Mmm,” Raev purred, “that’s right, Big Guy, fill me up.”

So, he did. His cock disappeared between her wet and ready netherlips. Not too slowly though, Boyd went just slow enough to enjoy the way she trembled as each inch disappeared inside her.

“Ughh,” Raev let out a pleasure filled groan when he bottomed out. “So good!”

He had sized himself down a little for her, which she did not seem to notice. He wasn’t about to mention it. He didn’t want to let her pride make the experience even a little less enjoyable for her, and it made no difference to the sensations he felt.

Boyd started rocking into her slowly to warm her up, but that wasn’t what either of them were looking for. He quickly built the pace until he was pistoning into his love.

“Oh, yes!” she cried out as her hands began to roam her own body.

One hand found its way to her perky breasts, massaging them and tweaking her own nipples. The other moved to her lower abdomen and pressed down. Boyd sensed what she was looking for. She was enthralled by the ability to feel him inside her from the outside.

He lifted her hips a bit more, while using his tail to drop her shoulders, seeking the perfect angle. The new angle allowed her to feel him as her toned abs bulged slightly every time he bottomed out. He thrust into her like that for a few moments.

“Yes, Big Guy, harder! More!” she cried.

Boyd complied, going just a little harder. Now that she'd been Enhanced, her resistances were likely higher than before, and he might be able to be rougher. But her new durability hadn't been tested, and he was unwilling to risk it.

Raev's emerald eyes locked onto his for a moment before sliding out of focus. She let her head drop back, exposing her long and slender throat, as she screamed her pleasure. The way the pose made her perky chest stick up and angled her sex around him was maddening. Every sleek muscle of her abdomen flexed, and her thighs gripped his hips as her long legs wrapped around his waist. She pulled him to herself with each thrust.

“Ummn... cum in me,” she panted. “Fill me up. Put a kit in me. Knock me up. Oh, please!”

She lifted her head to find his eyes. The need in her burning emerald orbs sent him over the edge, though he hadn't thought he was terribly close to orgasming. He also wasn't responding to her desire for him to climax inside her; it was the sheer animal intensity of her gaze that had him suddenly at the height of pleasure.

Boyd let out a rumbling groan as he buried himself as deep as he could inside his lover. She trembled around him, muscles flexing and relaxing in waves that intensified his own

pleasure. Raev let out a low moan of her own, smooth and incredibly sexy.

As they came down from their orgasmic highs, Boyd used his tail to lift his lover to him. Her arms wrapped around his neck and her breasts pressed into his upper chest. Their lips met and they tried to devour each other. Neither was quick to separate from the other. In fact, Raev decided to take advantage of one of Boyd's quirks.

Unlike most men, he lacked a refractory period, meaning he didn't need any time between rounds. He was ready to go again immediately after his release. She began to use her arms to lift and let herself fall on him, rolling her hips to drag her clit against his length on the upstroke and then ensure he hit the best angle on the downstroke.

Boyd felt when something shifted in their Bond. His prior encounters with her had been hot and heavy, which he knew to be her preference. She wanted... no, she needed another round, but wanted it slower and more passionate this time.

Raev loved to fuck, but now she needed him to make love to her.

Boyd groaned into their kiss, loving the idea. He wrapped his wings up around her, leaving her head clear but covering her from the shoulder down. Even her currently soaked tails were enclosed. His Tail came up to coil under her butt, giving her a platform to support her weight and freeing his hands.

Those, he let wander her splendid body as he began slowly rocking up into her. Standing in a shower was not the ideal place to make love, but Boyd would make do. Their kiss only broke for them to take a gasping breath and let out pleased sighs. This round lasted much longer than the first, and he could feel his lover reveling in the sensuality of it.

She loved the way his wings felt around her. The velvet interior caressed her back like the most luxurious blanket, yet they made her feel safe at the same time. The slower movement wasn't as intense as she normally preferred, but it



felt wonderfully soothing and built her up in a way she hadn't experienced before. Boyd loved it because it allowed him to experience his lover's sex in greater detail. He felt each fold and every clenching muscle.

Raev broke their kiss to pant, "I love you so much."

"I love you too," Boyd rumbled back.

Then their lips sealed together once more, and their tongues writhed around one another. This extended session lasted a long while as steam from the shower billowed around them. Raev had several smaller orgasms along the way, but they only ratcheted things up another notch instead of providing a release. Boyd felt a big one building inside her. He got just a little rougher in the final moments, thrusting a little more firmly into her.

Raev let out sexy little cries into the kiss with each thrust, driving him to deliver the next. They climaxed together, hard, shuddering in one another's arms. Boyd was flooded with so much pleasure that his vision went white for a moment. Raev came apart around and against him, the fox ears atop her head seizing at odd angles as her tails stiffened and batted against his wings.

"Oh, wow!" Raev panted a moment after finally catching her breath. "Okay, the whole thing with me getting a steady dose of your love is dangerous during sex."

"Oh?" Boyd asked. "Should I remove it for sex?"

He didn't really want to. That was why he'd set it up before they had sex in the first place. He would still stop it, though, if it made her too uncomfortable.

"Absolutely not!" Raev shook her head violently, still in his arms with him still inside her. "I just think it might get addictive, is all. That second round was... wow. What was that?"

"What do you mean?" Boyd asked as he studied her beautiful green eyes once more. He loved the natural black rim around them, eyeliner no shower could ever wash away.

“It got really intense. It felt... different.” Raev let out a velvet chuckle. “If I knew how to describe it, I wouldn’t have to ask.”

Boyd searched their Bond to figure out what it was that she didn’t understand. It didn’t help much, but he was able to figure it out anyway. “Have you never made love before?”

“Of course I have,” Raev scoffed. “I was told it wouldn’t be good to go into my sexual history with you, but I have one.”

Boyd chuckled. “First, while I admit I have issues with jealousy and little will to do anything about it, I knew you had a sexual history. A girl doesn’t get skills like yours without one. While I wouldn’t appreciate hearing any details, if there is anything you need to talk to me about in that history, you can. Okay?”

“Okay.” Raev nodded with a smile. “There’s nothing harrowing I could drag up... I would have more funny stories to share than anything.”

“That’s good to know.”

Of course, Boyd knew someone had to have hurt her at some point in the past. Her issues with rejection had to have come from somewhere. It likely wasn’t connected directly to sex and could even stem from her family. She still had contact with her family, though, so that didn’t quite fit. He shook the thought away after a moment.

“Second,” he continued, “having a sexual history doesn’t mean you’ve ever made love. Was it always like the other times? Energetic, rough, with lots of position changing and so on?”

Raev pondered his words for a moment before nodding, “Yeah, pretty much.”

“Yeah, that’s just sex... fucking.” Boyd chuckled good naturedly.

He wasn’t mocking his lover but did find it a little amusing. He then adopted a more serious expression, meeting her eyes before he continued. “Besides, you said you’ve never

been in love. You can't *make* love if you aren't *in* love. Making love is different from sex—both are great, but in very different ways.”

“That’s so corny.” Raev sighed, slumping against him as she tried to look aloof. The wide grin she couldn’t seem to keep from her lips spoiled the effect.

“Ugghh!” she groaned after failing to contain her smile. “What are you doing to me?”

Boyd shrugged. “You were warned you would fall in love. It’s too late to go back now.” Fortunately, he could feel that she wasn’t upset by this development in the least. “That’s the thing about falling in love. No matter how lame or corny you think people who are in love are before you experience it yourself, those *corny* things become wondrous.”

“I don’t ever want to go back,” Raev responded before pulling herself up for another kiss, this one long and slow. When their lips broke apart, she said, “Okay, Big Guy, put me down. Let’s wash up and get back to the others.”

## Chapter 45

Raev and Boyd made their way back to the Great Room after finding more comfortable clothes. Raev grabbed a pair of yoga pants and a green tank top, while Boyd went with his standard athletic shorts. He carefully stored the pieces of his suit on a rack for it in his office, which was on the way back out to the Great Room. It was a good central location if he needed to get to it quickly.

Raev draped her suit over the rack. She had multiple copies of her original unarmored, mostly red suit strategically placed around the base. As soon as Tinker finalized the design for Boyd's suit, he would have copies made and strategically placed around the base, as well.

They found Laura, Silvie, and Mindy sitting together on the middle level of the Great Room. Silvie was facing away from them as they approached but turned to give them a beaming smile. "Are you two feeling better?"

"Much." Raev grinned.

"Yes," Boyd smiled. "Any updates?"

"Tinker already has drones deploying, so our sensor net is growing," Silvie answered him. "No signs of the Last Dragon, though. Daisy is repacking the stuff she unpacked just to be safe. Laura is also ready to evacuate, as you can see."

"Good." Boyd sat down next to Silvie and pulled her into his side before asking, "Are you feeling better?"

"Mindy said she's done what she can, and the rest I'll have to resolve the old-fashioned way," Silvie replied as she nestled into his side. "It's just a little guilt. Mindy promised that realizing I was manipulating you all this time didn't even phase you, which helps."

Boyd shrugged. "It really didn't. I'm not sure if that's because a part of me knew it was happening, or just a result of my Power telling me that what you did, you did out of love. Either way, it doesn't matter. I do prefer being on the same page with you, of course."

Boyd considered his next words for a moment before saying them. He wasn't sure they were necessary, as Mindy would already know, but he had learned that sometimes saying something out loud just made things easier. "I am aware there is more that I haven't been told... but that there are reasons for that. I'm continuing to choose to trust you."

For one thing, there were those other faces in the videos of the four deceased members of the Bionics' parties—faces that wouldn't be there if the problem wasn't bigger than implied. It wasn't only entertainment for a sick and twisted few. That had been a sizable group with representation from multiple cities, Heroes and others that took joy in torturing and murdering people because they were in the unfortunate minority of Powered who became Changed.

Oddly, despite such dark thoughts, Boyd found that his anger did not rise. A sense of calm had been draped over him that seemed to smother his anger. Boyd eyed Mindy but it didn't feel like an expression of her Power. Boyd chalked it up to a combination of the recent love making and having bigger problems with the Last Dragon active in the world.

Raev sat down on his other side and leaned into him. Boyd wrapped his arms around both women who'd snuggled into him and pulled them closer. Mindy and Laura sat across from them, both with knowing smiles on their faces.

He judged Laura to be unconcerned by such a display of affection. To be fair, she'd already seen Raev and him in bed together. And she knew about his Power. It had even seemed like she might be interested in him, herself.

"Thank you for understanding," Mindy replied to his statement. "Although the only other information we are hiding from you is what we know of the third organization—which isn't much, and we are withholding for your own protection. Tinker has access to more information than either Silvie or me on the topic you were thinking about."

"I'll have to ask her for what she has," Boyd replied, a bit of a growl entering his voice.

If his new mission was to change The Authority from within, removing the worst of the apple's seemed a good place to start. He would have to see what information was available before he could judge what was actionable. He couldn't just go around murdering Heroes because he knew they were evil. They lived in a society of law and order, after all.

"I worry that you will find those laws are not in our favor," Mindy sighed. "Which is why our mission is to set you up as an example of what Changed really are. If a hero who looks and should act like a demon, according to common biases, can lead a team of Heroes who all love and are loved by him, it might help change that common bias. If you can change common biases, we can change the laws."

Boyd nodded his agreement. "I understand the laws and our goal, but that doesn't mean I'll abandon trying to ensure those who deserve justice receive it along the way. I also understand that this is a war of public opinion, and that I will have to pursue such justice carefully."

"Good." Mindy nodded, arching her sculpted brows at him and effectively shutting down any further discussion on that topic.

But corrupt heroes and the biased laws of The Authority weren't the only threats they were facing. Boyd wondered if anyone else had considered the possibility that the encounter earlier had opened. If he were to be honest, he had not brought it up because what it would entail scared him. It scared him the appropriate amount that such things should—meaning it terrified him.

Mindy's eyes widened as she listened to his thoughts on this new topic. "Absolutely not. It is far too dangerous, and we have no guarantees."

"It would accomplish the mission," Boyd rumbled back.

He didn't even particularly like the idea but being told no like that made him want to defend it. It was just something about Mindy; Boyd couldn't help it. He blamed it on the fact that she often shot down ideas that he hadn't even voiced yet.

“No, it would get you killed. Which would be a mission failure,” Mindy stated and crossed her arms under her chest. Even in the billowy kaftan the gesture of firm denial drew Boyd’s attention to her prodigious chest. Boyd didn’t let it distract him.

“Or it could save a city and end a threat humanity would worry about as long as we want to stay on this planet,” he growled back.

“Okay, fill the rest of us in,” Raev said from beside him. “What are you talking about?”

“He thinks because he hurt the baby dragon, he might be able to kill the Last Dragon,” Mindy responded.

“The earliest contact with the Last Dragon was during the Dragon War seven hundred years ago, and it was a third the size it was today,” Boyd explained his reasoning. “Nothing we had hurt it back then. Assuming that the baby has the same Power, its age shouldn’t matter. It certainly had the same breath weapon.”

“You’re making a lot of assumptions and the cost of being wrong is being disintegrated, crushed into paste, or eaten,” Mindy responded with a scowl on her dramatically painted face.

“Darling, that crosses the line between bravery and stupidity in the wrong direction.” Silvie sighed, burying her face in the side of his chest.

“You are really bad at the whole ‘being careful’ thing, aren’t you?” Laura added her two cents.

Boyd grumbled a wordless complaint before he responded. “I didn’t even voice the thought, I just wondered if anyone else realized it might be possible.”

“I did,” Raev responded. “While we were out there. I probably didn’t shit myself only because I realized if the Last Dragon did attack, Boyd would be able to drive it off.”

“The sensor readings from my drones indicate that the baby dragon’s breath had the same intensity as the Last Dragon’s—more than ten times Omega Ray’s output,”

Tinker's voice said from behind Boyd. She walked up and hopped up to sit on the couch on Mindy's free side.

"Boyd's shield took its beam without an issue," Tinker continued. "It didn't even leave a scorch mark. While its resistance can't be confirmed with external readings, the spear and the three smaller spheres that hit its wings pierced them like paper. A dozen of the smaller spheres also hit its torso but bounced off. The idea is not without merit, but I also agree that it's too dangerous."

"Thank you for the support," Boyd replied with a smile for the tiny inventor and his foxy lover. "But like I said, I'm not sure I would even have brought it up."

"You would have," Mindy sighed. "It just wouldn't have been until after you found out that there are sixteen cities within its historical range... including Glorith and New Eden."

"Ah..." Boyd sighed. That would do it. One was his home city and the other was where Hope lived.

"I thought New Eden was..." Laura started to ask something, but Mindy cut her off.

"Hopewing is in New Eden." Their resident mind-reader pressed two fingers on each hand to her temples. "Boyd was even more protective of Hopewing than he was of Silvie when they were children."

"I suppose if he would attack Omega Ray to save Silvie, then he would certainly attack the Last Dragon to save Hopewing." Laura nodded her understanding.

Silvie cuddled into Boyd a little more firmly at her words. Boyd felt approval across their Bond. Out loud, Silvie said, "It is a good thing the Last Dragon is predictable and reasonably slow, then. Once it starts flying straight at a city, it doesn't change course."

"The last time it appeared, its top flight speed was measured at thirty-five miles an hour and it rested for one hour in five. It only cleared a hundred and forty miles every five hours. They got most people out of GeoCrush City in the twelve hours they had for warning, knowing it was the target



of the pending attack. If it goes for New Eden, Hope will have plenty of time to get out of the way. If it goes for Glorith, they'll have at least eight hours to evacuate."

"Yes, that is a good thing," Boyd agreed then turned to Tinker. "How are the sensors coming?"

Ultimately, they couldn't do anything until they had more information. They knew the Last Dragon was reasonably slow, but they always lost a city within a month of a sighting. They'd usually only detected it several hours before it zeroed in on a city. Having early warning of where it would attack would be key, and for that they needed sensors.

"Good," Tinker chirped. "We had a stock of drones here that I've deployed as a temporary measure. We have coverage to the northeast at the ten-minute mark. I'll be replacing the drones stocked here with my own as they finish weaving. These drones require charging after a hundred and seventy hours of use, mine will last five years with onboard power generation."

Boyd blinked. "Impressive."

"Thanks." She smiled shyly at him. "We also have two more advanced stealth drones. I've deployed those further afield in a search pattern to try to find the Last Dragon and its baby. I hope that wasn't overreaching..."

"No, thank you," Boyd rumbled back. "That was good thinking. If you can send more, please do. You'll need to take a break for our date, though."

Tinker blinked her big hazel eyes at him several times before she stuttered, "Th-that's still ha-happening?"

"Of course," Boyd responded with a smile, "No reason to cancel our date unless the dragon comes back. We can evacuate from a date just as quickly as we could doing anything else."

"B-but..." Tinker started to say, but her words faded away.

"Do you not want to have a date with me?" Boyd asked, tilting his head an inch to the side and putting a pout in

his tone. He wanted to tug at her heartstrings a little.

“No!” Tinker blurted, eyes opening wide in shock and concern. “Of course I do! I mean, or course I want to have the date.”

“Then it’s settled.” Boyd grinned while the other four women present laughed, giggled, or chuckled depending on their inclination. He checked the time and saw it was about time for lunch. “Does six hours give you enough time to find a place to pause the drone production and get ready?”

“Oh, um, the drones will take care of themselves,” Tinker replied.

Boyd could feel the mix of excitement and anxiety that he heard in her voice over their Bond. “The weaver will print them, upload the programing, and then they’ll deploy automatically. That’s why I came out here.”

“Oh? Perfect then.” Boyd nodded. “I planned to do some training for a few hours with Raev, but does anyone else need me for anything?”

“Hellllloooo!” a gruff, masculine voice called loudly into the Great Room, causing everyone to jump in place. “Where’d y’all get off too?”

At the same time as he heard the voice, a strange, warm sensation settled over Boyd. Raev and Silvie started to smell really good, while another floral smell filled his nose. His other self perked up and Boyd subconsciously released his normally tight hold on his aura.

“Over here,” Mindy called back before she explained things to the group. “That is Silas, and his *wife* Sinoe is with him.” She emphasized the word ‘wife’ and made eye contact with Boyd as she did.

Boyd frowned, unsure why she felt the need to highlight this, and was slightly offended that she had done so.

Mindy rolled her eyes. “You’ll see.”

Boyd heard the clicking of high heels on the hardwood floors as two figures approached on the upper level. They must

have entered through the elevator. He stood, both to be polite while greeting guests, but also because they were unknowns—it had been a long week.

Silas came into view first. He was on the shorter side, at around four and a half feet tall with tangled curly brown hair and a scruffy beard. Corded muscles lined his bare chest and his arms. He was tanned and looked rather rugged, obviously having been exposed almost constantly to the elements. A bow and quiver were slung over his shoulders.

He was a Changed, large horns protruded from his head to curl around the sides. If Boyd assigned them to an animal, it would be a goat. The man's digitigrade legs were covered in coarse brown fur and ended in black hooves. Other than the bow and quiver, he wore only a leather loincloth. As he came into view, he glanced over his shoulder nervously.

Boyd's breath caught in his throat at the vision that came into view. The man's wife was gorgeous and was also clearly a Changed. Her chestnut hair contained a plethora of bright yellow flowers Boyd could somehow tell grew from it. Her skin was not quite a natural tone, though it looked to be bronzed, it was closer in shade to that of clay or a tan stone. It certainly looked soft and supple.

Her ears were long and pointed, sticking up at an angle out of her long floral hair. The Changed woman's eyes, which resembled cut garnet gemstones, locked onto Boyd. Her face could only be described as beautiful, and her figure was superb. She appeared to be completely naked, except for a few vines that wrapped themselves strategically around her lithe figure.

The way the woman moved enticed Boyd, and he knew the floral scent that filled him with warmth came from her. It filled him with the desire to taste this woman—marital status be damned. Boyd knew he should care, but he couldn't seem to take such concerns seriously in the face of this glorious being.

Boyd shook his head in an attempt to dispel such thoughts and move his eyes to anywhere else. While scanning

her long, wonderfully shaped legs, he noted she was barefoot and realized the clicking noise he'd heard was the man's hooves. He tried but failed to keep his eyes from slowly moving back up the nearly nude woman. When his eyes met those glittering garnets once more, she scowled at him.

"Hello Silas, Sinoe. What can we do for you?" Mindy said as she stepped up next to Boyd, laying a hand on his arm.

*'Pull your aura into yourself as tightly as you can,'* Mindy cautioned him. *'You relaxed your control on it when she came in, and it is making things difficult for Sinoe. I've asked her to do the same.'*

He felt her Power pulse into him and every one of his senses felt like it had been muted, even as the floral smell that had so enchanted him diminished sharply. This made it easier for him to remove his eyes from where they kept getting stuck on the various delicious parts of Sinoe. Boyd managed to drag his eyes to Silas as the shorter man replied to Mindy's question.

"Well," the goat man said, "we came to see what the plan was now that the Last Dragon is in the area." He eyed Boyd the way one might a wild animal they were unsure of before glancing back at his wife, whose eyes remain locked on Boyd. She stopped five yards away from them.

"How're you holding up?" Silas asked her quietly.

"It is... manageable," Sinoe replied. Her voice matched her beautiful appearance, and it forced Boyd's eyes back to her face. She licked her lips as her eyes dipped to take Boyd in. Suddenly, she shook herself before scowling at Boyd once more before spinning around to stare at the back wall.

"Alright, dear, why don't you just stay here, then, and I'll go talk to the Heroes." Silas responded with careful gentleness in his gruff voice.

"That..." She took a deep breath, but Boyd's eyes remained glued to her perfectly sculpted and barely covered ass. "Might be best."

“Right,” Silas looked between Boyd and his wife one more time before clumping over to stand within conversation range. “Well, I’m Silas... good to meet you. You must be Boyd, Silver, Kitsune, Tinker, and ahh, Lauren was it?”

“A pleasure to meet you,” Boyd rumbled, stepping forward and extending a hand to shake. Mindy shuffled forward with him to keep her hand on his arm. “It’s Laura, though.”

“Right, sorry.” Silas eyed Boyd’s hand. “It really is you, huh? Crimson and everything...” A bemused expression came to Silas’s face as he stepped forward to shake Boyd’s hand firmly.

“Uh, what?” Boyd asked.

“Don’t worry about it.” Silas shook his head as he stepped back. “I’d rather keep this quick for... reasons. So, dragon plan?”

“Nothing has changed on our end,” Mindy answered. “We are setting up an extended sensor array to give us more of a warning and are prepared to evacuate at a moment’s notice, but we will remain on location—for now. The base appears to have escaped the Last Dragon’s detection; you two would be welcome to stay here, if you think it will be safer.”

Boyd wasn’t sure how he felt about the couple staying in the base. He didn’t know or trust them, and for some reason the beautiful woman had proved to be a serious temptation for Boyd—despite her being a married woman. It spelled trouble.

“Right,” Silas agreed but then shook his head. “Our home is just as secure, if not as nice.” He glanced around the place. “We’ll be fine out there. We just wanted to check in. Now, though, I’m going to get my wife out of here. C’ya later. Get in touch if you need us.”

Silas seemed to be in a hurry to leave, and Boyd had no reason or desire to keep him here. His wife could stay, though, if she wished. Boyd shook the thought away, disappointed in himself. His other self must be behind it.

*‘No,’ Mindy explained, ‘we suspected something like this might happen. It isn’t your fault.’*

Silas clomped back over to his wife and took her by the hand. In the end, as her husband led her away, she turned to look at Boyd over her shoulder. Her eyes remained locked on him as she was led away until they were out of sight.

“Drool much, Big Guy?” Raev quipped with one of her velvet chuckles.

“It wasn’t his fault.” Mindy sighed. “Sinoe’s Power set has some similarities to Boyd’s. She draws men to her but has a hard time controlling it, mostly because she never bothered to learn how.”

“It looked like she was being drawn to my Darling just as much.” Silvie giggled. “I thought he might be using his aura for a minute.”

“I wasn’t,” Boyd defended himself promptly, “at least not after Mindy warned me to pull it back in.”

“I know dear.” Silvie giggled. “We felt when you did so.”

“Sinoe is also drawn to fertile males,” Mindy explained. “The more virile the male, the harder she finds them to resist. Based on her thoughts, Boyd is even more fertile than her husband. It would probably be best if we never leave them alone together.”

“Yes!” Boyd quickly rumbled his agreement.

He didn’t want to steal a wife away from a husband who cared for her. With his Power, a mistake driven by her Power would not be reversible. He decided the best path would be to get his thoughts off of the entrancing woman. Training had always worked for such things in the past.

“Raev, would you mind spending some time training with me?” he asked.

“Sure, Big Guy,” Raev chuckled, “let’s burn off some of that energy.”

## Chapter 46

Boyd's training had gone well. Their training room was frankly everything he could hope for. The staircase from the Great Room led to an area with an observation platform, from which elevators dropped you into the actual training room. There were no windows in the heavily reinforced and shielded room, as that would weaken the facility.

Instead, several large viewscreens were positioned around the observation platform that constantly streamed live feeds of the room from various angles. Otherwise, there were several workstations, including one sized for Boyd and another for Tinker, already in place. They would be perfect for reviewing training footage.

The training room itself was square, a hundred yards on a side, with a ceiling fifty yards high. It could even be used for close range aerial training. Though it took time to transition, which they hadn't tested yet, the room could be reconfigured for various training scenarios. Small buildings or room clearing training would be a must. The multiple obstacle course layouts would be helpful, as well.

Boyd spent about an hour running through anti-porter drills with Raev before switching over to the hologram system. Both types of training had their advantages. The system, for example, could be programmed to run the attack patterns of various active or historical porters.

It had a learning mode, as well, but with AI tech being carefully monitored and controlled, Raev was better at adapting to Boyd's defense than any program. Which was good at keeping Boyd from falling into patterns himself. The system kept him honest, being especially good at keeping Boyd from forming any bad habits.

In total, he spent three hours on anti-porter training and another two in the fitness gym. That gym was a scaled-up version of the one they had back at their suite in the tower. It had every piece of equipment he could hope for, in duplicate.

There were even different versions to account for people of differing sizes.

After a full five hours training, he spent about an hour in preparation for his date with Tinker after quickly cleaning up. Boyd decided to try a new, more involved recipe for Tinker's favorite dish. His original recipe was fairly basic, and like most things, putting more effort into cooking typically yielded better results. If this was her favorite dish, he wanted to figure out how to make Carbonara better than anyone.

Tonight would be his first attempt. He mourned the loss of the Crevice Boar as he cooked, but it hadn't been worth the risk of retrieving. Nothing was more likely to capture the attention of something big—perhaps not as bad as the Last Dragon, but certainly bigger than he wanted to deal with—than a massive, rotting corpse.

Besides, the pre-smoked slab of bacon he had was enough to make his mouth water as he cut it up. The actual cooking wouldn't take long, and he'd decided to cook it right in front of her. Partly this was an excuse for Boyd to show off, but he also hungered for her company. He could talk and cook at the same time.

The dish wouldn't last long under the warmers in the smaller but still luxurious kitchen he had in his rooms. It turned out the smaller bedroom, the one intended for more private one-on-one encounters, came with its own kitchen, living area, dining area, and yet another bathroom. The entire suite was decorated so as to create a sense of intimacy, with area lighting instead of room lighting, and everything done in warm, intimate colors.

The living area came with a view screen perfect for watching whichever movie Tinker had picked out. There was a Boyd sized comfortable looking leather chair and a fabric couch that was picked to match it. Both were overstuffed and looked perfect for napping—which also made them perfect for cuddling.

After Boyd was done with the prep work, he donned a pair of black slacks and a crimson silk button-down long-



sleeved shirt that Mindy had tipped him off Tinker would like to see on him. He wasn't quite sure how she knew this, but he trusted her judgment. Perhaps his little inventor had pondered exactly what she would like to see him in for their date. Or maybe she just asked.

He wasn't sure what to expect Tinker to be wearing as he went to pick her up. His understanding was that preparing her for the date had become something of a group project. He wasn't sure if Daisy got involved, but everyone else did—even Laura. It seemed rather excessive to Boyd, but his sense of Tinker on their still somewhat weak Bond indicated she appreciated the help.

As he made his way down the hall to her room, he sensed a blend of nervousness and anticipation across their Bond. When he checked his other Bonds, Raev and Silvie both felt proud, with his silver haired lover being almost giddy. Boyd took it to mean that they had performed something of a makeover on Tinker.

Boyd stepped up to the door which did not open. When locked like this, the doors would inform the person inside if someone stepped up and let them decide if they wanted to open the door or not.

“J-just a moment,” Tinker’s voice came to him over speakers hidden somewhere in the doorframe.

Boyd took a step back so as not to be right in front of the door when it opened and waited. A moment later, the door opened to reveal his date. Tinker looked so radiant he wondered if he'd underdressed. Boyd had put a little effort into styling his longer than usual hair, but she—or more likely his other lovers—had obviously pulled out all the stops.

Tinker’s hair had several small braids woven into it that held the rest of it in an intricate style. The updo kept her hair out of her face while framing her doll like features perfectly. Someone had applied a light dusting of makeup to her cheeks and around her eyes. There was nothing excessive; it was just enough to accentuate her naturally pretty features.

Tinker was also in the first dress he'd seen her wear. It was, of course, pink—this time a gentle pale tone that worked well with her skin and hair coloring. Soft looking fabric covered her shoulders, but it had a sweetheart neckline that was tasteful but still a little showy. The waist was fitted, and it draped over her hips. One leg was displayed from the mid-thigh down but the other was covered to the ankle by an asymmetrical skirt.

She'd accessorized a little, with a simple silver chain that sparkled around her neck and silver earrings. Looking closer, he noted they were pink gemstone studs with thin silver chains dangling from them. Spiked open toe heels a pink a few shades darker than her dress graced Tinker's feet. Her lips and nails were painted pink, as well—a shade of pink somewhere between the dress and the heels.

“Good evening, Tinker, you look beautiful.” Boyd smiled warmly once he had taken her in.

“It's not too much, is it?” Tinker asked, looking down at herself and picking at the skirt, before looking back up at him shyly.

“No, you look amazing, but I hope you are comfortable,” Boyd responded, hoping to thread the needle with the reply.

They were effectively staying home for a date, so dressing up was really optional in his opinion. At the same time, he understood the concept of placing value in your own physical appearance and the confidence that could be built through it. Dressing up would boost Tinker's confidence and how she felt about herself.

“I wouldn't want to go on a hike in these heels, but the dress is surprisingly comfortable,” Tinker replied, swishing said dress back and forth. “But... you like it? Really?”

“I do,” Boyd assured her with a smile. “Shall we?” He offered her his arm, keeping it mostly extended so she wouldn't have to reach up. He could sense Silvie and Raev's reactions to their conversation although he could not see them

in the room beyond. He assumed the others were back there too, somewhere.

Tinker stepped up and fiddled with various grips until she found a comfortable way to take his arm. Her arm wrapped under the end of his forearm and her hand rested on his wrist. Pleasantly warm fingers sent little tingles up Boyd's arm as they shifted slightly. He turned to guide her back to his room where dinner was prepared to be cooked.

"I still have to cook dinner, but it shouldn't take long if you are hungry," Boyd explained as he took carefully measured steps to match her pace.

"Oh, good. I'm a little too nervous to eat right away," Tinker said with a slightly awkward laugh.

"You have nothing to be nervous about," Boyd assured her. "I'm sure me saying so doesn't help, though. So I'll also say that you don't have to worry about saying or doing the wrong thing and scaring me off."

"No, I know." Tinker sighed. "I've seen your profile, remember? I get that you are like perfect and so non-judgmental and so many other things that mean I shouldn't be nervous... but all that makes me even more nervous, you know?"

Tinker frowned, before shaking her head. "No, of course you don't know because you're so confident you probably never get nervous for no good reason."

Boyd chuckled, thinking back to the day before. "I should face this alone," he quoted himself dramatically.

"What?" Tinker gasped, which made Boyd consider what he had said and the context he was in.

"Oh, no," he said quickly. "Sorry. That was terrible, and also proof that I am nowhere remotely close to perfect."

He chuckled good naturedly. "Yesterday, before I met with Mindy, I was incredibly nervous. I didn't really have a good reason to be. She was obviously meeting with me willingly, and Silvie wouldn't let me face something terrible

without a warning. I was still so scared that when Silvie offered to go in with me, that was my reply.”

“Really?” Tinker’s reply contained more skepticism than a single word should be able to convey.

“I mean, can you really blame me?” Boyd chuckled.

It was funny in hindsight, but at the time it had been a nightmare scenario he didn’t fully understand. He’d been missing quite a bit of information. And to be honest, he was holding the slightest bit of a grudge against Silvie for not preparing him better. He should probably let it go.

*‘Oh, hush, you...’* Mindy sent. *‘Such a little shit.’*

Boyd couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped, but it fit with what he was about to say so he didn’t feel a need to apologize—to Tinker, or to Mindy.

“Mindy can do a lot to someone’s head,” he explained, “and I had a false memory of the last time we’d been together of her telling me I’d violated her. Even if she wasn’t pissed enough to mess with my mind, it would have been an awkward encounter.”

“See? You weren’t needlessly worried like I am, then,” Tinker pointed out as they entered the first of his rooms. They weren’t walking quickly as neither of them were in a hurry.

Boyd wondered if some wine might help settle Tinker’s nerves. “I suppose I had a valid reason to be nervous, but it was because I was misinformed... which is probably the case with you, too.” Boyd smiled down at his diminutive companion.

“What do you mean?” Tinker’s lips quivered into a small smile, seemingly in response to his own.

“You are likely under the impression that I might still reject you if the date doesn’t go well, that I’ll push you into the friend zone or send you away,” Boyd responded carefully. He found it best to be prudent when you were voicing other people’s fears.

Tinker nodded her response, her small smile fading into a little frown.

“Then you are the one who is misinformed,” Boyd said. “Well, mistaken is probably a better word.”

“What do you mean?” Tinker asked as they entered the smaller living area meant for when Boyd wished to be alone with someone for a time.

It was just off of the larger living area in the suite Silvie called his ‘medium bedroom’—the one with the sunken couch and bar. A short hall separated the larger from the smaller living areas in Boyd’s private rooms.

He’d taken the time to set out some long burning candles and a variety of snacks. He planned to bring the drinks and hot snacks out at the appropriate time. There was a fireplace with ever-burning logs which would burn without smoke until extinguished; one of the planet’s gifts to humanity.

Tinker took a moment to survey the room as they entered. Boyd had set out some blankets and small pillows to ensure they could get comfortable during the movie. She was intelligent enough to understand that he’d put thought and effort into the date, but not quite socially aware enough to put together what it meant in this scenario—or maybe she just thought he was the type to go through the motions, even if he wasn’t interested.

Boyd continued to guide her to the kitchen and its attached dining area, where he had wine chilling and a small antipasto platter set out for an appetizer while he cooked. He went with Pinot Noir because something fruity was recommended with the recipe he was using. He was paying close attention to their young Bond, so he noticed the strange fluttery sensation of excitement that went through her as she took in the set up.

“Oh... that’s what you mean.” She almost breathed the simple word before muttering the rest of the sentence to herself.

“There you go,” Boyd responded as he guided her over to the table, pulling out her chair for her. He’d adjusted it ahead of time and was pleased to find his estimate to be correct as he slid her into place.

“You thought I might send you away,” he rumbled softly as he poured her a glass of wine, “but the reality is that I am going to do everything I have to in order to pull you in closer.”

“Why?” she asked just as softly as her ‘oh’. “What changed in... two days? Initially you hesitated even to accept the date.”

“A lot of things.” Boyd decided to sit with her for a moment before beginning to cook. This wasn’t a conversation where he should be distracted from focusing exclusively on his date.

After pouring himself a glass and taking a sip, he continued, “The false memory they gave me about Mindy’s rejection was partially responsible for my aversion to Enhancing women. With that gone, it is easier to consider. I’m less emotionally invested in the possibility of my Power forcing a reaction that isn’t a true reflection of how any woman I am interested in might feel, so it is easier to be logical.

“I was also under something like a compulsion that made the interfering with free will aspect of my Power revolting to me.” He paused, coughing awkwardly into his hand. “That is still an issue for me, I never want to Enhance a woman who doesn’t fully understand the implications. I expect I may still hesitate when the time comes, but I cannot accept that refusing a woman completely doesn’t likewise deny a woman her free will.”

Boyd took another sip of his wine. He had no intention of getting either one of them drunk, but Tinker would have a better time if she relaxed a little.

“So... you weren’t interested because The Authority had messed with your head?” Tinker asked in the moment he paused to take a sip.

“I was never *not* interested,” Boyd chuckled. “I was interested in you the moment we met. It wasn’t what I would call a romantic interest, at first, although I will admit there was a great deal of physical attraction from the very beginning. As much as you say I could fall for any woman and don’t really have a type, that simply isn’t true. You’re the one who helped me learn that I have at least one condition.”

Boyd paused for effect, taking another sip. He had her rapt attention, and now that he was ensuring he put his all into wooing her, he knew how to capitalize on it.

“What’s your one condition?” she asked when her curiosity finally got the better of her.

“They have to be fighters,” Boyd replied with a smile and a one shoulder shrug. He knew he was displaying confidence and leading the conversation because she preferred it that way. “Once you showed me you are a fighter, I became very interested, very quickly.”

“But...” Tinker pouted, and while it looked a little sad it was also very fetching. “I’m not a fighter. I’m a coward and have no instincts for it. I hate fighting. If that’s your condition, then I’m a terrible match. Oh no, wait, this doesn’t...”

Boyd held up a hand to gently cut her off, knowing that continuing the thought did her no good. “A fighter isn’t someone who enjoys or has to be good at combat. It’s just someone who is willing to fight when they need to—when they have a good enough reason to fight.”

“But that’s still not me,” Tinker cut in.

“What are you talking about?” Boyd gave her a gentle smile, “You proved you’re a fighter yesterday, and that I’m someone you think is worth fighting for. You tried to take on Silvie, one of the most powerful S-ranked heroes, of all people. Silvie, who is now as Powerful as freaking Omega Ray. You did the tests that demonstrated that yourself.”

“Yeah,” Tinker murmured softly, “I did those tests.”

“It would have been easy to run away, to get to safety and then send some help. But you stayed and you fought to

free me. From your perspective, you were going into the same level of a fight that I did when I was saving Silvie from Omega Ray. That meant a lot—enough that I very much want to make you mine.”

He stopped and gestured to all the preparations he’d made for their date. “It’s now my goal to make you sure that you want to be mine.”

“Re-really?” Tinker asked as her fragile smile came back. “This is a real, romantic date and not just a team member date?”

“Yes, this is a real date,” Boyd confirmed with a nod and smile. “I would like to get to know you and to confirm that we are compatible, but I have a very real interest in you as a potential lover and a strong physical attraction to your beautiful self.”

“Oh... okay. Well, what would you like to know? I feel like I have an unfair advantage because I read the fairly exhaustive profile Silvie gave me several times,” Tinker replied. Her fragile smile became much steadier, blooming into an ecstatic expression that transformed her doll-like features into something breathtaking.

“Let me start cooking,” Boyd replied, “and we’ll talk. It will take a little time and I’m sure the smell will wake up your appetite.”

After she’d settled a bit, he figured he could multitask. The recipe wasn’t all that complex and most of the involved parts had been taken care of in prepping the meal. He just needed to make sure he occasionally made eye contact and was an active listener.

“Let’s start with any friends you might want to tell me about,” Boyd said.

“Oh, there is one I’ve stayed in touch with...” Tinker began to tell Boyd a little more about herself.



## Chapter 47

Dinner had gone splendidly. Either Tinker was being exceedingly complimentary, or the bar on the best Carbonara she'd had previously was pretty low. She insisted that his was already the best she could imagine. Boyd decided to take it as a challenge to do better next time, but at least he had a new base recipe.

If he was being honest, it was much better than his previous renditions. He'd added Pecorino Romano to his usual Parmesan, which was an improvement. The thick cubes of the bacon were better than the crumbled pre-sliced bacon he normally used. This recipe also called for an egg yolk to whole egg ratio of three to one and a dash of heavy cream to make it just a little richer. It was certainly a good starting point.

Boyd had served her a smaller portion than he'd initially planned, now that he'd observed her eating less than average to match her size. While he previously didn't want to assume, he knew people regularly preferred to clear their plates and some even found being served portions too large to eat intimidating. There was a side of grilled zucchini that came out okay. It wasn't a meal to his preferences, but it was quite good.

He'd topped it off with fudgy cookies he'd found a recipe for when looking up something to do with the egg whites the Carbonara recipe left behind. It was simple, which was good because he rarely baked. He'd correctly predicted that Tinker wouldn't want dessert right after dinner, anyway, and thought the cookies were a good idea because they could be picked at while they watched the movie.

"So, what are we going to be watching?" Boyd asked as he collected the plates from dinner.

Tinker had relaxed quite a bit over the course of the meal, partially thanks to the wine and partially because Boyd had cheated, using their Bond to learn which topics to ask further about and which to shift away from.

She'd opened up about her interests and experiences. Tinker had never had a lot of friends, but there was a girl she knew from her schooling she still exchanged messages with. She had, of course, done extremely well in school, but apparently people with mental Powers were discounted in academia and she'd run into some push back from both her teachers and her peers. Tinker was also regularly mistaken for a Changed and had some problems there, too.

Tinker shied away from topics about family, and it didn't feel like a place Boyd should push—at least not now. Her interests ran along the lines of her profession. She liked inventing things and staying up to date on the most recent developments in science and technology.

Her preference in entertainment was science fiction, although she said that all the good stuff was from Old Earth. Apparently traveling the stars and having Powers had stunted the creation of new material once vids had started being produced again.

“Well, Raev recommended one, but now that I'm here and with how the night has gone, I think I've changed my mind,” Tinker responded, shifting in her seat as Boyd felt a spike of nervousness run through her across their Bond. “The one I'm thinking of now is one of my favorites, but it was considered older... even by Old Earth standards.”

“If you like it, I'm sure it's good... regardless of its age. What is it?” Boyd rumbled as he finished putting the dishes into the dishwasher. He also judged that Tinker wouldn't be hungry for a while, so decided against bringing out the warm snacks. They would just get cold, and frankly, he had probably gone overboard as it was.

“It's called Star Wars,” Tinker said, her rapid, staccato way of talking when she was nervous making a reappearance. “Specifically, A New Hope. It's a story about a boy who goes on an adventure in space to fight an evil empire. It has coming of age elements and all the classic hero stuff. He becomes a space knight with a laser sword called a lightsaber.

“I’ve tried to figure out how to make one a few times, but I can’t get the power supply right. The movie is really good, but it was made before they really figured out computers, so the special effects are limited—but that’s part of why it’s so good. I want to show it to you, but I’m worried you aren’t going to like it, so I was going to wait until later. But after tonight... I don’t know, it just feels right.”

She ended her long explanation with a gasp for breath, having somehow gotten through her explanation without inhaling once. Boyd made sure he caught and understood the rather passionate explanation before responding. This had the benefit of allowing Tinker to take a moment to catch her breath.

“Well, it certainly sounds interesting, and I’m of the opinion that a good story is more important than special effects. Let’s watch it. I’m sure I’ll like it,” Boyd replied as he approached and helped her down from her seat and escorted her to the couch, making a second trip for their glasses and bottle of wine. They were still on the first bottle.

He gave Tinker the handheld tablet that was integrated with the entertainment system to pull the movie up on the big screen set over the fireplace. The couch was centered on it, with the chair off at an angle. Boyd went around to light the candles before turning off the lights.

“Oh, this is nice,” Tinker said as the warm, flickering light from the fire and the candles filled the room.

Boyd took his seat next to her, leaving enough space between them that their legs weren’t touching—but not by much. “I thought it would be good for movie watching. Enough light to see the snacks, but not enough to interfere with the screen.”

“Yeah, um. It’s nice... really nice,” Tinker breathed, her tone bringing a smile to Boyd’s lips.

Once, such a grin might have been described as devilish—as much as he tried to avoid any association with that particular adjective. He’d set it up beforehand because he knew the movie they’d be watching would be important to her.

Boyd might have gone a different way had he known what movie they'd be watching, but it seemed wasteful not to use the candles after he'd set them up.

"I'm glad you like it. Can I get you anything before we start? A drink or a snack you don't see here?" He indicated the assortment he'd put out to cover the basic salty or sweet cravings people got during movies.

"No, the wine is good. It is sweet and tastier than expected," Tinker replied, taking another sip before setting her glass down and settling back into the couch. "Ready?" she asked, still nervous but also excited.

He'd make it a point to like the movie, or at least convincingly pretend he did.

"Go ahead," Boyd rumbled as he settled back into the couch and enjoyed the ambience of the firelight. Ever-burning logs didn't snap and pop like other logs, only giving off the quiet underlying crackle of flames, it was perfect for movie watching.

A little more than two hours later, Boyd asked as the closing credits rolled, "Is there more?"

Tinker laughed from where she had ended up nestled under his arm. While he'd made it a point to pay close attention to the very enjoyable movie, he'd also paid attention to their Bond. Not far into the movie, he could tell that she was thrilled at his reactions. He'd apparently laughed, oohed and ahed at all the right times up to that point, and it made her want to be closer to him. At that point, he'd pulled her closer to him.

They'd watched the movie together and he could tell she was enraptured by the experience. He had to admit he'd liked it even more than she'd hoped he would, and he could tell that him asking about more was simply a cherry on top of the sundae.

"Did you really like it that much?" Tinker asked with a pleased grin.

“What’s not to like?” Boyd smiled down at her where she had her chin propped on his chest to look up at him. She’d spent a fair amount of the time during the movie watching him like that, but he could sense it wasn’t because she wanted his attention. She wanted to see his reactions to certain parts of her favorite movie, and he had not disappointed.

“It was predictable in the best ways, a classic told in a different and imaginative way. It was an excellent piece of science fiction,” Boyd continued. “So, is there a sequel and can we watch it? Darth Vader didn’t die, and he’s got a boss, so the Empire wasn’t defeated with the loss of the Death Star. There has to be more.”

“There are more movies in the series, two more great ones made to follow this original then a bunch of others that come either before those three or many years after the end of the third movie in the original trilogy. They are okay, but don’t have the same feel as the original trilogy,” Tinker responded.

“One of the better ones is a side story that happens just before A New Hope. It would be another two hours, but we can watch Empire Strikes Back if you want too, it’s the one that comes next.”

Boyd checked the time and found it was just after nine in the evening, that was a little later than he’d originally planned for their date, but he’d built in time for at least a three-hour movie just to be safe. He was sure the others wouldn’t mind if he ran a little late, and he knew that Mindy was checking in on them and could inform Silvie and Raev of the change in plans.

“Let’s do it,” Boyd grinned. “But first let me make some popcorn. The bathroom is just through there.” He pointed to the appropriate door.

After a short break, they reconvened on the couch and started the second movie. This time the snacks, which got very little attention during the first movie, were enjoyed by both of them. Boyd was pleased to see that Tinker was comfortable enough with him to lean against him on her own, only sitting up to grab a snack or a drink before nestling back into his side.

She also quoted a few of her favorite lines as they were said, which Boyd made sure to take note of.

As the credits on another excellent science fiction movie rolled, Boyd sighed. “Now I just want to watch the next one, but that would be too much.”

Tinker was leaning against him with a hand over his abdomen in a partial hug. That hand had wandered around a little through the last half of the movie—not that he minded. Boyd could sense the arousal that had built up in her, as she enjoyed the feel of his muscles.

He might have flexed a little for her enjoyment, but who could say?

Part of why he wanted to watch another movie was simply because he wanted to continue to enjoy her company. Watching the movie with her had been a very different experience than when he watched a film with Silvie. It was much more interactive, closer to how it had been with Mindy. He only had the one experience with Raev to go by, and he wasn't sure that counted. Boyd was the only one who had sat down with the intent to actually watch a movie that night.

“Umm...” Tinker muttered, looking up at him then away shyly. “Well, there is something else I would like to do before we go to bed, if it would be okay. I think you might say no, but Raev made me promise to at least ask once I told her I thought I might want to.”

“Oh, what's that?” Boyd asked, paying close attention to their Bond and finding her filled with a storm of anxiety related to whatever she wanted to ask him.

That anxiety made her next move all the more surprising to Boyd. She slid over into Boyd's lap, straddling him and pulling her dress to the side to expose her one leg almost all the way to the hip. His hands instinctively went to her hips, to support her more than anything. Her hazel eyes were big and bright in the dim candlelight as she looked up into his face.

“I want to give you a b-blowjob,” she stated with more firmness than was appropriate for the statement.

Boyd nearly choked, caught off guard by the sudden turn in the evening. “I thought you said you weren’t a first date kind of girl?” he asked, keeping any indication of either a positive or negative opinion on the topic close to his vest.

“I’m not, but this also isn’t really our first date. Not really,” Tinker stated.

“What do you mean?” Boyd felt like he would have remembered taking her on other dates, but he couldn’t be sure given recent revelations.

“Well, I’m joining a relationship, not starting one,” Tinker said seriously. “So, dates with the others count, too—at least I think they should. The other night we had dinner together and then we all hung out in and around the hot tub for hours. That sounds like a date to me... you even flirted with me a little. Then, we had dinner again last night and then you danced with me, which was definitely a date. That means tonight would be our third date, so... yeah.”

“Third date means you want to give me a blowjob?” Boyd asked, mostly to buy himself a little more time. He hadn’t considered that he might have to face affecting Tinker’s free will tonight. He’d assumed it would come soon but had expected that he would have a little more time.

“Mhmm,” Tinker nodded, looking far more hopeful than someone offering to perform oral should. “I don’t think we’re ready for the real thing, but I want to do this for a bunch of reasons. Mostly, I can’t think of a reason to delay it. It’s safe to say I already have a really big crush on you, so why not benefit from the Enhancement, right? I’m already experiencing the feelings the first level of the cost entails anyway—and was doing so before we established a Bond with yesterday’s kiss.

“Plus, I’m a little worried about it, so it might be good to test things. Sometimes the higher Ranked versions of mind Powers like mine come with side effects that might make it infeasible for you to keep me Enhanced. I’d sorta like to find

that out—sooner rather than later. That way, I don't fall in love with you naturally only to discover that we can't be together because the Enhancement makes me insane or something.” She ended up gasping for air as she'd somehow managed to get all that out without pausing to take a breath.

Boyd considered her argument while she caught her breath. He couldn't find fault in her logic, and it passed his new test of confirming her awareness of the potential consequences before initiating an Enhancement. If anything, denying her would be going against the spirit of that new test, given her argument.

“Okay, but I'll want to reciprocate,” Boyd replied.

Tinker shook her head. “Not tonight. I have my reasons, but tonight I just to focus on you.”

Boyd frowned, but the complex feelings he got across their Bond led him to decide it would be best not to push. Her hopeful expression made his frown slip into a smile, anyway. “Okay,” he chuckled, “you can give me a blowjob.”

“R-really?” Excitement and more anxiety flowed across their Bond.

“Yes,” Boyd confirmed.

“Okay, then,” she stated, then her hands went to his pants and started to undo them.

Her hands shook a little, which he could tell annoyed her. She was nervous and didn't want to be, so Boyd decided to help. He reached up to take her chin with gentle fingers and tilted it upwards as he leaned down to take her lips with his.

Tinker gave off a surprised moan into his mouth as he did. He quickly deepened the kiss before her anxiety transferred to it, slipping his reduced size tongue into her mouth and carefully exploring it. She gave off another pleased sound and her hands paused in their attempts to free his manhood. He began rhythmically gripping her hip with one hand while with the other he traced his fingertips up her neck, along her jaw, behind her ear, and into her hair.



His attention had the desired effect, easing Tinker's anxiety as she was overwhelmed with arousal and excitement. Her hands moved to his shirt instead, first untucking it and then unbuttoning it. Once it was undone, she pushed it open and let her hands roam over the muscles of his chest and abdomen for a time. He started to run his hand up her hip and along her side while the other stroked the bare parts of her shoulders.

After a long period of kissing and petting, her hands found their way back to the button of his pants. This time, she easily managed to unfasten the button and work the zipper down. She reached in to find his length and he felt the thrill that ran through her as he heard her matching gasp.

Tinker was not a large woman, and he was a very large man. He'd wondered how this part would go.

She worked him out of his pants with a little assistance. He had to lift his hips so she would work his pants down a little at the end. Then, she worked his length with both hands in steady pumps until he was fully hard. At that point, she broke their kiss to look down at his manhood.

"Oh, wow," she breathed, "it's just like Silvie described."

Surprisingly, this brought Boyd a strange moment of comfort. He'd half expected to discover that Silvie had supplied pictures or worse to the applicants on her short list.

"It can shrink down when needed," Boyd reminded her, worried that she might be intimidated. He needn't have worried.

"I know, but I don't want it to—not for this, at least." She looked back up to him with an expression of awe. Then she scooted forward until he rested against her stomach.

"It reaches my ribs!" she half gasped, half cheered. She didn't seem intimidated in the least. Quite the opposite in fact. She slid back and began working him with both hands—one wasn't quite enough to fully encircle him in his natural state.

When Tinker looked back up to him, Boyd could tell she wanted him to kiss her again. So, he did. Tinker began adding more technique to her ministrations, twisting her hands around his girth, running her palms over his crown, and stroking with feathery touches under the rim of his head. Eventually, she got him worked up to the point where he was groaning into the long, breathless kiss.

He could sense she was eating this up, loving the fact that she was able to get him to react like this. Eventually, she decided it was time to move on to the next stage and slid back off his legs. She pushed his knees open and dropped down onto her own knees between them. Boyd slid forward, reclining more to give her easier access.

Tinker continued to work his length with her hands but leaned in close, almost as if she were examining him. Her warm breath teased him, causing his cock to jump in her hands, and making him yearn for what he knew was coming. She started working in flicks of her tongue, starting at the base and working her way around and up his rigid length. Then, she did the same thing—except she did it with her lips, kissing and suckling at him at random, paying close attention to his reactions.

“Does it feel good?” she asked after eliciting more than one twitch or low groan from him that should have made his pleasure obvious.

“Wonderful,” Boyd groaned.

Tinker made a happy sound and giggled before returning to searching for more of his buttons to push. “Are you close?” she asked after a few more minutes.

“Mhmm,” Boyd murmured, in an odd almost-there state. It felt like this could go on for hours, but also that he could cum at any moment.

“Hurry, then, I want to taste you,” Tinker half-cooed, half-whined before wrapping her lips around his head and pulling it into her mouth while redoubling her efforts with her hands. Her big hazel eyes looked up into his as she sucked and licked at his glans between her lips, begging for his release.

“Oh... fuck!” Boyd groaned, finding himself peaking more quickly than he’d thought he would. “I’m there!” Then he was cumming, hard.

He heard Tinker make a pleased “Hrrm... Mph!” sound around him as the first jet of his seed shot into her mouth and she began swallowing. Then, his Power activated, and everything grew a little fuzzy as his energy flowed into her.

“Hrr-ohhhhhh!” she moaned around his girth as the orgasmic sensation of being Enhanced the first time hit her and her eyes rolled back into her head.

Once again, Boyd’s Black Flame Vision activated on its own. He watched as the black motes of his energy flowed directly into her head and set to work. The pool of copper orbs there grew brighter, and he saw other changes taking place amongst the orbs in her head that existed outside of that pool, as well. He could see some of them dip lower, presumably into her other pools, or other parts of her body.

Then, the Bond took full effect and for a few brief moments he was Tinker and Tinker was Boyd. They were one. Both Silvie and Raev were there with them, too, excited by the unexpected development. Silvie conveyed a sense of welcome to Tinker in their joint mind while Raev added pride. Tinker felt both proud and a little chagrined by the situation. Then, they both came down together.

Tinker pulled back off of him, holding a hand under her chin to catch some of his seed that spilled from her lips. Either he simply came too much, or the orgasm she probably wasn’t expecting had distracted her from swallowing all of it. Fortunately, that didn’t matter to the Enhancement.

Boyd watched, enthralled, as she collected his seed that had overflowed her lips and licked it from her fingers. “You actually taste good... not just not bad, but actually good,” she explained after seeing that he was watching her.

“I wasn’t complaining,” Boyd smiled languidly, completely blissed out. He examined her for signs of physical

changes and spotted additional copper highlights in her light brown hair. “You have more copper in your hair?”

“I do?” She pulled a loose braid forward to examine it. “That’s nice.” She sounded a little distracted.

“I’m just glad not to have gone insane, but I did have an idea... Oh, and another. Oh, that’s good. That’s even better... Oh my! Oh, wow, thank you. That was bugging me so much, but now it seems so obvious. I have to go to my lab.”

Tinker started to rise from her spot between his knees, but Boyd scooped her up into his arms before she could get far. “Not tonight. Tonight, we cuddle and then we sleep together. Tomorrow you can spend all day in the lab.” He stood, not bothering to redo his pants as he carried her towards the smallest of his beds. He was tired enough to worry about her outlasting him, so planned to use his Mental Domination to ensure she got some sleep.

“But...” Tinker whined.

“You don’t want to cuddle with me?” Boyd pouted down at her.

Her eyes widened dramatically, and he could feel the desired guilt hit through their more stable Bond. “No, that’s not it!” she said quickly. “I’ve just got so many ideas.”

“They will still be there in the morning,” he promised.

Boyd suddenly realized that he would have to keep an even closer eye on her work habits from then on. He had planned to return to Raev and Silvie to get some sleep, but Tinker needed him—and he wouldn’t rest tonight if he went to them while his Bond with Tinker told him he was needed here.

His other lovers would understand, and Mindy could fill them in. He was sure she was still listening in.

## Chapter 48

Friday morning, Boyd woke up and started his new routine. He found it hard to believe how fast the two days since he'd woke curled around Tinker had gone. Surprisingly, they'd both slept soundly. The little inventor had snuggled onto his chest, he'd covered her with his wings, and they'd both fallen asleep.

She'd still been in the same position eight hours later when he woke up. He lay there like that for nearly another hour, stroking her hair before Tinker blinked sleepy eyes up at him. Realizing where she was and what they'd done at the end of their date, her cheeks turned a brilliant pink—though Boyd felt an immense sense of satisfaction across their bond when he'd leaned down and given her a gentle kiss.

They'd snuggled for a few minutes more before Tinker remembered one of the ideas she'd had the night before. Then, not even Boyd could hold her back or keep her from her lab. She'd run halfway to the doorway wearing just the shirt off Boyd's back from last night that she'd used for a nightgown and her underwear before she'd turned around, sprinted back to Boyd to give him another kiss, and then was off again. That had been the last bit of relaxation he'd had.

He woke up in bed with Raev and Silvie after little more than four hours of sleep—and since he needed less sleep than the girls, he regularly got up before them. After going through his dailies, he'd spend some time in his office reviewing files supplied by Davis' people and getting a feel for the conflict with The Authority. It amounted to a shadow war, and Boyd did not like the looks of any of it.

He'd seen that he had his work cut out for him. His side controlled few Heroes but included about a quarter of the support staff—including many of the Powered with mental abilities that worked behind the scenes. That quarter controlled or had a strong influence over some more, leaving about a third of the staff connected to their efforts. They had little combat ability, though, which was likely why their side focused on PR and information warfare.

Outside of that, Boyd was secretly reviewing footage and documentation of attempts to hunt and kill or defend against the Last Dragon. He had not floated the idea of challenging the great beast to any of his lovers—not after their response to his unvoiced idea that Mindy immediately shot down. He saw an opportunity here, though, one that would go a long way to furthering all of their goals.

Boyd had hurt the baby dragon, and creatures from the Wild Lands typically passed their Power sets down to their progeny, unlike Powered or Changed humans. It tracked that the baby's resistance would be the same as its mother's. Ergo, if Boyd could hurt the baby, he could hurt the mother.

And if he could hurt it, he could kill it. He'd battled with and ultimately killed Omega Ray, which had proved that. Earning a title like the Last Dragon Slayer would certainly prove his worth to the world at large.

Much of history had been lost, but the estimated fatalities attributed to the Last Dragon was between two and four hundred million over humanity's history on their new planet. It was a threat everyone simply accepted would always be there at this point. Losing a city to the Last Dragon every few decades was practically a given—maybe having a lucky century here and there.

Compared to Omega Ray's just over fifty million murders and presumably human life span, it was a much bigger feather to stick in any Hero's cap. Plus, Boyd had the Power to do something that might prevent the deaths of hundreds of millions or more. If he could, he had a duty to try, no matter the risk. It really was that simple for him, although he understood why his lovers wouldn't see it that way.

Because killing the Last Dragon would be anything but simple.

The footage he reviewed supported that. That devastating energy beam breath attack wasn't its only weapon, just the most dangerous one to cities and structures, especially since it could launch such attacks from the horizon. Its tail, teeth, and claws were all used to terrifying effect. It wasn't

blindingly fast by any means, but its size made its speed deceptive. He'd watched more than one Hero of Silvie's caliber reduced to paste by a flick of its massive tail. Indestructible juggernauts were crushed between its jaws or were splattered by slashes from its huge claws.

Boyd still saw opportunities here and there in the footage, though, and he gamed scenarios on how he would do it. He'd need the help of his entire team, but he thought they might just be able to get the impossible done. It would mean endangering some of his lovers, though, especially Silvie.

Things might be different if they had Hope. He'd determined that the risk was too high and the chance of success too low to justify the attempt with only the resources they currently had available to them—not that it had stopped him from gathering every piece of information he could.

His Changed Mind agreed with his assessment as well as his decision to hide it from his lovers. Boyd's other self would keep it from Mindy. After reviewing dailies and other footage, he moved through the kitchen on the way to the training rooms to get them configured for the day's training.

“Good morning, Daisy,” Boyd nodded politely to the fairy woman who was preparing their breakfast.

She had come a long way, proving to be a natural talent when it came to cooking—she'd just never had the opportunity to learn or experiment with proper tools. She'd been a waitress, delivering food to her customers at work, and had stuck to simple and cheap ingredients for the cooking she'd done for herself and Connor, stretching her limited credits. Or that was the backstory Boyd assigned to her. She was still much too defensive around Boyd and the others to open up about such things.

So, he made some assumptions based on his observation about her quickly improving skills in the kitchen. Boyd had hoped to speak to Connor at some point, but apparently that would have risked his ongoing media blackout, so wasn't permitted. Boyd thought about simply asking Daisy about her past at that point but had too many other tasks to

worry about to spend much time focusing on the pretty young Changed.

The media blackout was an irritation, but Boyd wasn't a PR specialist. While he wanted to know why it was considered necessary, he would let the people with the skills handle whatever that problem was. Sooner rather than later, though, he'd press Silvie for some real answers.

"Good morning. I'm trying waffles this morning," Daisy replied, not turning to face him.

She'd continued to wear slacks and a nice blouse each day. Boyd assumed it was part of keeping her defenses up. He didn't mind, already getting a bunch of attention and constantly being surrounded by eye candy.

"Sounds delicious," Boyd rumbled.

"I'll try my best," she responded.

"I'm sure they will turn out great, everything you've tried has been delicious," Boyd assured her, and chose to leave it at that.

He'd learned that any attempts to engage with the young woman beyond simple exchanges only resulted in her becoming less responsive and raising her defenses. "I'll look forward to it," he said. "I'll be in the training room if you need me."

"Thanks," Daisy said as Boyd walked away.

He took that as a victory. While he didn't mind her disinterest, his other self perked up any time she was near. Boyd had been careful not to express or outwardly give any indication of a romantic interest in her himself, but her defensiveness was not ideal. Professionalism was all well and good, but being on friendly terms was important to the team functioning optimally.

Boyd reached the training room and started to transition it to a new obstacle course for Tinker's and the others' training. He made sure to leave enough space open for his anti-porter training. He'd start that before he drove the others through the obstacle course.



This would be Tinker's second round, and she had not enjoyed the first. Mindy also had been less than thrilled by the training but did not complain. She'd done it through her heavier phase, after all, and now that she was in better shape it was easier for her, if still not much fun.

Silvie and Raev each had fun with it, the former even doing it voluntarily. Of course, her gravitic Power and her strength when she ran it without flying made it more like a playground than an obstacle course. Once that was set up, Boyd checked the morning update that came in from Silas and Sinoe.

Davis had asked them to search for the Last Dragon outside of their sensor grid. Apparently, they were confident they could locate it while escaping its detection, although Boyd wasn't sure why they would take the risk.

They suspected it had made its home somewhere in the northern end of the mountain range their base was tucked into and were searching there. They had yet to locate it, although they thought they'd heard wings the day before, according to their evening report.

Silas had sent an audio recording that came in a few minutes before Boyd sat down at one of the stations of the observation deck. "Mornin'," started the satyr's gruff voice—for such was the goat man's Change called, according to Mindy. "We survived the night, obviously. Beaut' of a morning, today. Heading further north to check the next sector. Stay safe."

That was the extent of Silas' message. It was not the most detailed of reports, but Boyd supposed it got the job done. That done, he returned to the kitchen for a team breakfast.

They'd taken to sitting at a counter in the kitchen with stools for their morning meal, mostly because Daisy typically cooked eggs and meat to order. Everyone was sitting at the counter when Boyd approached, so he went down the line kissing the tops of heads and wishing everyone a good morning—Laura only getting a smile and the well wishes.

Then, he took his seat they'd reserved for him at the center of the counter. Today he had Raev on one side and Mindy on the other. They'd set up a rotation without his input. Laura excluded, he had a different combination of women sitting next to him each morning. They spent some time chatting about miscellaneous topics before Boyd focused them on today's training schedule.

"Okay, so today Raev will focus on flight training for the ship after the obstacle course," Boyd instructed, entering leader mode instead of lover mode. Raev had taken to piloting like a duck to water, just as Boyd had expected.

"After the obstacle course, I'll spend some time with Tinker in the lab going over designs." He planned to carefully get her working on a few items he thought should help against the Last Dragon, just in case.

"Sounds good," Raev nodded, cutting into a big piece of breakfast ham.

"Yaaay..." Tinker said a little sleepily over her cup of coffee.

"Mindy, you'll practice some of what Raev has shown you so far." He turned to his silver-haired lover. "Silvie, could you act as her training partner?" Silvie was still in vacation mode but would likely volunteer if he asked.

"Of course, Darling," Silvie chirped, "She's focused mostly on grappling right? Should be fun."

Boyd would very much enjoy grappling practice with the very curvy Mindy, as well, but knew she would be better off training against a standard-sized opponent to lay her foundation.

"Okay," Mindy said, but she sounded uncertain to Boyd. "I think I have it down enough to practice without Raev."

Raev must have picked up on it, too, because she said, "I'll spend a little time with you making sure you have your forms down before heading to the simulator."

"Thank you." Mindy smiled at Raev.

“Once I’m done with Tinker, you can poke at my brain again, probably after lunch,” he said to Mindy.

She still had work to do getting Boyd and his other self on the same page. It would be their third session, if he included the one from their reunion. If it went like the second one had, it should be an enjoyable experience.

She’d had him lay back with his head on her crossed calves then spent a while relaxing him by tracing the pads of her fingers across his face and scratching her nails through his hair. Then she brought him to his memory of the time he’d nearly killed Silvie in training. After he experienced it again, which was unpleasant, she somewhat forcefully made him accept that it had not been his fault.

She’d pressed him until he’d agreed that children made mistakes and that it was their guardians’ responsibility to protect them from those mistakes. Silvie’s injury was the fault of their Mentors, not the child Boyd who was still learning how to use his Powers. Then, she made him tell that to a construct of the child version of Boyd and provide the boy comfort as he cried in relief at being released from that responsibility.

Okay, maybe it hadn’t exactly been an enjoyable experience, but Boyd felt about a thousand pounds lighter for a few hours afterwards. The result was worth the wringer she’d put him through.

“Do you have to phrase it like that, little shit?” Mindy smiled at him.

Boyd saw Silvie glance at Mindy with a scowl on her face; she didn’t much care for Mindy’s pet name for him.

“How should I phrase it?” Boyd asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Recalibrating your cognition,” Mindy stated with a smile.

“That’s too much of a mouthful.” Boyd rolled his eyes. “Poking at my brain flows off the tongue so much easier.”

Raev let out one of her velvet chuckles, so he turned to give her a wink.

Mindy let out a dramatic sigh. “Fine, I’ll look forward to poking at your brain, then. Maybe I’ll poke the part that manages your bladder control.”

“I didn’t think you were into that type of thing,” Boyd stated wryly, then inserted skepticism into his tone before he continued. “I mean, I’m willing to try anything at least once, I just didn’t think I’d ever cross that bridge with you. I guess it’s always the quiet ones.”

This caused Raev’s chuckle to descend into an honest laugh, Silvie joined in with a snort and then a giggle. Boyd sensed Tinker’s amusement on their stabilized Bond, but she was a mix of too sleepy and too polite to laugh.

Mindy snorted, then let out her patented ‘Kuh-he’. She pursed her lips before saying, “I’m not sure it’s a good idea to bait you further. I’d run the risk of putting ideas in your head.”

Boyd chuckled before continuing, “Then, after you’re done poking at my brain and potentially cleaning up afterwards, I guess, I’ll run some more anti-porter drills. Raev, I’d appreciate some assistance with that.”

“Sure thing, Big Guy,” Raev said with some laughter still in her voice.

After breakfast, they moved down to the obstacle course.

“I’m almost looking forward to it this time,” Tinker said as she departed the elevator set into a recessed alcove in the massive training room. She wasn’t wearing a suit, per Boyd’s requirement that she only use things she could have available at all times. Boyd spotted a pair of thick bracelets—pink, of course—fastened around her wrists.

She noticed Boyd noticing and rewarded him with a bright grin that made her whole face light up. “Wanna see?” she asked, thrilled whenever he expressed interest in anything she’d made.

“Of course, you make the coolest stuff,” Boyd grinned back, sensing the warmth that filled her across their bond.

“Here, watch.” She demonstrated how each bracelet had a barrette built into it that she could slide out and clip into place at the sides of her head when she needed to make use of them. They looked nice, the tone of pink working well with the noticeably enhanced bronze highlights in her hair. “This wouldn’t be possible without your Enhancement, so thank you. Here we go.”

With that, she floated into the air in a somewhat awkward impression of Silvie, hovering about three feet in the air at Boyd’s eye level. Boyd could tell that she was supporting her weight on her arms which were held down by her sides. She would have to practice balancing in a hover like this, as she looked a little wobbly. But still, she was floating.

“That will definitely come in handy.” Boyd grinned.

Tinker dropped to the ground smoothly before saying. “In addition to improving my cognitive capability, you also multiplied my mental processing speed which is what matters for these babies. It allows me to interface with the small, and therefore limited, units in the bracelets and control the onboard gravitic generators more precisely and rapidly. The reason I was limited to straight line acceleration for your propulsion pack is simply because you don’t have the processing speed required to reliably handle more than that in high stress situations like a fight.”

“That makes sense.” Boyd didn’t let himself be insulted, because she clearly hadn’t meant the words in a derogatory manner.

Tinker glanced around and found some water bottles Boyd had set out. “And watch this!”

She then held her hands up, pointing them towards the water bottles. One of the bottles began to float up into the air, then exploded into a fine mist and bits of plastic. “Oh... Oops! That will need some calibration. But I should be able to use these to mimic D-Rank telekinesis once I get the kinks worked out.”

D-Ranked meant that she'd be able to imitate the ability to lift single objects at least two but no more than fifteen pounds between ten to a hundred feet away. Some lower ranked telekinetics could do multiple objects of lighter weights, others couldn't.

"That's awesome, Tinker!" Boyd cheered. But then he continued more carefully, "But, maybe don't use them on organics for now. At least organics you don't want to kill."

"Oh, no, that would be baaaad." Tinker shook her head rapidly. "Even if I didn't pop them or something, it would mess up all sorts of stuff at a microscopic level. Hmm, I'd have to wear an additional pack or something, but maybe I should build in an additional computer with safety programing that prevents me from targeting organics."

"I wouldn't recommend it," Boyd rumbled. "If you need to use it on an organic, you'll really need to use it on an organic. If you have to deactivate a safety before you can, it might cost you your life. Better to train yourself, in this case. I'll build some weapon safety obstacles into the course next time I reconfigure it."

"Oh, okay." Tinker smiled shyly up at him. "You don't have to change the whole course for me, though."

"I want to." Boyd smiled with a nod, choosing not to bring up the fact that the current course was designed for her. It wouldn't have been as big a priority, if he hadn't been training her up.

Tinker surprised him by floating up to peck her lips against his, much like Silvie did. He saw the blush forming on her cheeks as she darted away.

"I'm going to get started!" she called out behind her.

She'd recently been more accepting of his displays of affection, but that was the first time she'd initiated such herself. He smiled after her, watching as she ran the course.

Using her bracelets, she was able to get much closer to Boyd's standard for running the course. From here, she just needed some more practice. His other lovers filtered in, taking

turns running the course and chatting between rounds. Silvie quickly noticed that Tinker's new movement was close to how she had moved before being Enhanced and stepped in with some advice.

While Boyd insisted on everyone running the obstacle course for completely valid reasons grounded in being prepared for evasion situations, he enjoyed the hell out of some fringe benefits—mostly seeing his lovers in their activewear.

Silvie preferred painted on leggings and tank tops in light colors, while Raev favored skintight shorts and sports bras, largely in shades of green. Tinker stuck with black yoga pants and baggy, pink short-sleeved shirts. Boyd had overheard her and Raev talking about ordering an updated wardrobe with their next delivery.

Mindy was, of course, in black yoga pants and a variety of black athletic wear tops. Along with the color being a constant, each outfit included at least some portion made from a netting of differing thicknesses. Her nearly white skin almost glowed through the netting, drawing his eye to wherever she wanted it that day without fail.

To be fair, he didn't have a reason not to look. Her interest was clear, and she was just building up until the time was right. He knew she got a thrill each time she made him desire her. Boyd could tolerate a little forbidden temptation for her sake, for a little while, at least.

Each of them was different from the others, filling out their clothes in different ways. Each was perfect in their own way. Running the obstacle course put his current and soon to be lovers in all sorts of positions that resulted in very tantalizing views. Boyd had no need for it, but the footage from the obstacle course sessions would have made excellent soft-core porn.

Other than Tinker's notable improvements, today's session passed without issue. Mindy did a little better, becoming more familiar with the course. Which, of course, meant he would have to change it up soon, even if he didn't

think they were ready for him to add weapon safety segments. Running the course by rote memory would not be effective evasion training.

Tinker had been pleased when Boyd had proposed some ideas during their lab session and didn't ask many questions. That made it easy to get her started on the items he thought he might need if he ever had to face the Last Dragon. As fate would have it, he was a day late in deciding to bring the ideas to his soon-to-be lover.

It was when he went to find Mindy for his cognitive recalibration that the call came in. He'd just found her sitting with Silvie on the massive couch-bed in the Great Room when the base AI's synthetic voice called out at a much more reasonable volume: "Incoming Emergency call from Silas, to any available."

"Answer," Boyd called out, his heart sinking.

"Fuck... fuck... fuck!" Silas's gruff voice came over the line, along with his panted breaths. "I'm sorry babe. You were right, never should have taken this job."

"That hardly... ARRGH!" Sinoe's sweet voice was cut off by a noise of effort, followed by what sounded like a rockslide, and then an explosion, "... matters now!" Her voice came back in a yell over the ongoing rumbling in the background.

"Silas! Boyd here, what's happening?" Boyd called out loudly, knowing neither realized the line had already connected.

"Found the dragon!" Boyd could hear the exertion in Silas's voice. "Was a cave in the biggest mountain eight miles east and nineteen miles north of the base."

"NO-AARGH!" Sinoe's voice cut back in with a yell. Her shout was followed by more rock-on-rock sounds and another loud explosion.

"Then the dragon found us... this is our final report," Silas said, and Boyd could hear the resignation in his voice. "Go on and change the world for us, Crimson Paw, goodbye."



With that the line disconnected and silence fell over the Great Room.

## Chapter 49

Boyd stood stunned for a moment as he processed the information. His other self roiled within him, insisting that he go save those assigned to guard him. They may not be part of his team or even his friends, but they were *his* guards. The dragon had no right to take them away. Also, Sinoe was very beautiful, even if she was off limits.

At the same time, Boyd knew he would have to endanger Silvie in order to attempt to do anything about it. He wasn't fast enough to get there in time on his own. He looked to where she sat on the couch bed with Mindy. Previously, she'd been completely relaxed but she now sat stiff with tension, watching Boyd closely.

Mindy was next to her, just as stiff and giving Boyd a disapproving look. She likely sensed the nature of his thoughts. In the end, her disapproval did not change his decision. He was a Hero and would not let fear, or risk, or even putting his love in danger change that. If a Hero could save someone, they did.

"Silvie, suit up and grab a tether, we're going," Boyd stated and turned to run towards his rooms where his suit and weapons waited for him.

"Wait!" Mindy hissed.

"We can't, Darling!" Silvie insisted, blurring into his path before he could get far. "It's too dangerous."

Boyd regarded his lover, her big blue eyes were filled with worry and regret, but her stance was firm, and her arms were out to block him. She didn't want to abandon the couple but did not believe they could make a difference. Instead of pushing past her, Boyd tried something new.

He hadn't figured out how to keep the drip version of his Mental Domination going in his sleep, but he had taken to reasserting it whenever he woke in the morning before leaving the bed. That way, his lovers would feel his presence even after he left the bed. He hadn't tested the tether this created yet

because there was too much going on already, but he had some ideas of other uses for the steady connection.

Boyd collected his certainty that together, with Silvie at his side, they could make a difference. Together, as a team, they could save the couple who had risked their lives to get them vital information. He took that feeling and poured it down their connection, letting it flow smoothly instead of either the drip he constantly maintained or the surge he'd learned to use in combat.

Silvie's eyes widened as the sense of his certainty hit her. It was not a compulsion or a command, just his confidence that they could do this.

"Please trust me, as I've trusted you," he rumbled softly, opening the door but not forcing her through it.

Silvie's face firmed up in a very different display of determination, transitioning from seeking to stop him to preparing to face danger beside him. "I do, Darling. We'll meet at the elevator." Then she blurred away.

"Silvie!" Mindy called after her. "What the fuck?!"

Boyd turned to Mindy and gave her his practiced confident grin, lips quirking up on the right just a little more than the left. "We'll be back in time for dinner."

Then he leaped up into the air of the Great Room, only needing a single flap of his wings to land in front of his suite of rooms. He heard Mindy yelling after him, telling him to wait so they could talk about this, but he did not have time for such things.

Now was the time for action, so Boyd hurried to arm himself. While donning his armored suit, he got Tinker on base comms.

"Ah... hello? What was that call about?" she asked as the line connected, more curious than concerned.

"I need a map of the mountains on my FDU. Include the base and a twenty-mile square to the northeast. Place a marker with directional and distance indicator eight miles east and nineteen miles north of the base." It was the only point of

reference he had, but Boyd assumed the angry dragon would be easy enough to spot once they got close.

“Okay,” Tinker replied, responding to his tone and not asking further questions—for which Boyd was grateful. By the time he’d donned the last piece of his suit, Tinker’s voice came back over the base’s speakers. “Done... what’s happening?”

“I’ll explain when I get back,” Boyd responded as he sheathed his sword and collected the spear one of Tinker’s drones had found and brought back.

“Wait... you’re leaving?!” Tinker’s voice changed from curious to near panic in a moment. “But what if the Last Dragon is out there?”

“Switch to comms,” Boyd called out, choosing not to tell her that reason he was going out was specifically because it was out there. Other than Silvie, she was likely the only one who could prevent him from leaving at this point. He assumed she could lock them in, at least, although he would have Silvie bash a hole in the side of the base if it came to that.

Boyd leaped over the barrier that separated the tier that his rooms and the halls exited onto and landed directly in front of the elevator doors. Silvie was already waiting inside one, so he joined her.

She pressed a button on her FDU, and the doors closed behind him. “We’ll depart through the northeast exit,” Silvie stated. Then she asked, “What’s the plan?”

The elevator was fast, and the plan was basic, so he laid it out quickly, checking the map on his FDU and sharing it with Silvie. “I can hurt it and you can dodge it. Once we are there, you’ll move me, pause while I throw something at it, then move me again.”

Silvie wasn’t quite fast enough to copy the Power of a porter, but she did a fair enough impression for their purposes today.

“We’ll get its attention and draw it off, then run,” he concluded detailing the plan, such as it was.

“Not going to kill it?” Silvie asked.

Boyd would have loved to make the attempt, but he didn't have what he would need to do so. Tinker had said she would need at least twenty-four and most likely twenty-six hours to make the things he'd asked for. His sword and spear might pierce its energy resistance but that still left some very thick scales to pierce.

“Not today,” Boyd rumbled.

“But you are planning to... eventually,” Silvie said, and it wasn't a question this time.

Boyd just gave her the same confident grin he'd used on Mindy. Silvie scowled at first, but then her lips quirked up with the smile she was trying to hide. He could feel the pride and a little thrill his reaction triggered within her through their Bond. “I love you, you big lug.”

Boyd sensed panic, worry, anxiety, and anger on his other Bonds—which surprisingly included Mindy. Someone had clearly filled Raev in because she was pissed. He knew it was mostly at being left behind, but she had no place in this plan. He could have made one to include her, but that would mean taking more time to get where they needed to be as well as needlessly exposing her to danger.

The doors of the elevator opened into another cave and Silvie blurred forward. Boyd dashed behind her until they came out onto a ledge above a sheer cliff face. Silvie passed him the larger handle of the two attached to a strong but thin cable.

They always kept a few tethers like this on hand for the purpose they were about to use it for. It allowed her to pull him through the air a few feet behind her in a position where he could partially benefit from the way her Energy Manipulation parted the air. It reduced drag and let her achieve speeds that rivaled their ship.

Boyd activated his comms as he took his end of the tether and assumed the braced position that protected him when traveling this way. He caught Mindy mid-sentence. “...

can say is that Boyd has a plan. I didn't catch the details because he was hiding them somehow, but he's put some thought into this."

Boyd grunted audibly when Silvie started pulling him through the air, accelerating rapidly. The world became a whirling blur of green, blue, gray, brown, and white as he spun through the air behind her.

He couldn't even start with his wings even partially extended to stabilize himself without risking having them badly damaged by the forces at play. His arm was flexed to prevent his shoulder from being dislocated, but even with his great strength it was still a strain. Holding the spear in his off hand, though tucked in tight to his torso, complicated matters. The grunt alerted the others to his presence on the comms.

"What the fuck, Big Guy?" Raev growled at him, "How could you leave without at least talking to me?" She had a right to be angry in this scenario, she was an equal he had not consulted with. He hadn't consulted with any of them, but only because he didn't have the time to.

"No time," Boyd grunted; the wind wouldn't stop the comms from picking up his voice.

He also didn't have time to apologize for it. Silvie had them on location before he had time to start stabilizing his tumble through the air using the slightest extension of his wings. He spotted the dragon about half-a-mile away from where she'd stopped.

"I'll apologize later," Boyd growled. "Clear comms."

Boyd watched as the Last Dragon pulled its head back for a moment before thrusting it forward and unleashing a thick torrent of the blue white energy onto the side of a mountain as it swooped towards the ground. At this distance he couldn't see the couple the dragon was still targeting, but he soon learned the source of the rockslide noises and explosions he had heard over the call earlier.

A sizable part of the mountain the dragon was targeting rose up to form a thick wall to block the destructive force

raining down upon it. The Last Dragon's breath weapon impacted this wall, causing it to explode into rubble as more of the mountain side rose up behind the first wall only to be destroyed as well.

“Not less than two hundred yards, but no more than six hundred,” Boyd told Silvie the range he was confident about his throwing accuracy while still mitigating risk. Much closer than that, and Silvie might not have time to dodge.

Silvie let him fall for just a moment as she got into position behind him, wrapping one arm around his waist, the other hand gripping the back of his head near his neck to avoid breaking it. Then the world blurred for another second as she brought them closer.

When the world resolved into greens and blacks and browns and blue, the dragon was thrusting its head forward for another breath attack. Boyd was close enough to spot the couple now, his eyes designed for flight. Silas was bounding from boulder to stump to small outcropping, finding footing with his hooves where others could not. Each push of his legs propelled him an impressive distance at speed—he moved up or down, but always away from their hunter. If not for the uneven terrain he had to navigate, he might even have been able to outpace the dragon.

Sinoe was draped over his left shoulder, her legs hanging towards the front as she faced behind them. He couldn't hear her yell, but he saw her mouth open to shout her effort as she gestured with her hands. She ripped up at the air to pull another wall out of the mountain, but then she faltered, slumping for a second, clearly at her limits. As the wall crumbled before fully forming, Boyd realized he was out of time.

He pushed his Black Flame into his spear as he pulled it back, Silvie's body pressed into his back shifted smoothly with him though it still interfered slightly with his throwing motion. He'd hoped to lead off with one of the obsidian orbs to dial in his aim, even a little, but didn't have the seconds it would take to ready one. He threw the spear right as the Last Dragon began to unleash another energy attack.

Boyd followed the beam as he readied one of the larger obsidian orbs, hoping against hope that the dragon's aim would be off. He knew it was bad form to take his eye off his target, but he could not help himself. He had to know the couple's fate. Maybe it intended to sweep over them, and his spear would reach it in time. Unfortunately, this world had never been that kind.

Boyd's heart sank as the beam descended on the fleeing couple, but Silas proved to be worthy of his respect in his final moments. The satyr must have felt Sinoe falter because he did not glance back. He knew his fate and acted exactly as Boyd would have done. Silas planted both hooves and put his full body, from strange ankle joints to his wrist, into throwing Sinoe clear.

She flew away from her husband just barely fast enough to get out of the descending energy's path and into a clump of trees leaving Boyd's sight. Silas was washed away in the blue-white beam that immediately followed, but Boyd swore he would remember the hero. Boyd's already sinking heart froze as the energy beam began to drift towards the trees Silas had thrown Sinoe into.

Then, his heart soared as a wonderful sound filled his ears—a dragon's cry of pain. The sound *hurt* as it echoed off the mountains, triggering several rockslides and avalanches on the ice capped peaks. Boyd embraced the pain, balling it up for later use.

His eyes snapped back to the massive Last Dragon, a fighting grin splitting his lips. Boyd could hurt the Last Dragon, the ragged hole his spear had ripped through the membrane of its right wing clearly visible. He'd been aiming for the dragon's neck or chest, hoping that a lucky strike might deal critical damage. It must have dipped, or his aim was high, because he caught the wing near the thick joint where it connected to the dragon's torso.

It was by no means a critical wound, not even being a sizable hole considering the massive size of the beast's wings, but it had to hurt. As far as history knew, nothing had ever hurt



the Last Dragon. Pain might be a completely new sensation for the huge creature.

Boyd couldn't be sure how he knew, but its glowing blue eye on this side had locked onto the source of that pain. Namely him. "Move!" Boyd called out as its head snapped in their direction.

The world became a blur for a few seconds as Silvie removed them from the path of the dragon's retaliatory attack that blasted a massive hole in the mountain behind them. The world came back into focus, but continued sliding to the side as Silvie circled the dragon, keeping them several hundred yards away from the dragon.

Boyd charged his obsidian projectile and threw it, aiming for the wings. He was familiar with how deceptively fragile wings like the Last Dragon's could be. He judged them to be his best target to deal damage and cause pain. His shot went wide, missing by a couple of yards, his aim thrown off by the continuous motion of circling the dragon.

"Above it," he called out to Silvie who promptly gave him a better angle.

Boyd threw his remaining five large projectiles as rapidly as he could, taking advantage of the angle while he had it, aiming for the already wounded right wing. Two obsidian balls hit the membrane, one punching through and leaving a small hole while the other bounced off what must have been a thicker part of the wing.

That's why he'd wanted to save his spear, the balls simply didn't have enough piercing power to get through the physical toughness of the dragon's scales with the beast's energy resistance overlaid on top of that. He could only get through the one layer with his available resources.

Another ball smacked into the thick bone along the top of the wing, glancing off the top but doing no noticeable damage. Another hit the massive creature's back, again bouncing off but hitting squarely enough that Boyd thought he saw a scale crack as the hardened and reinforced obsidian exploded into shards.

Boyd's last throw was the winner, smashing into one of the small bones that supported the membrane in the last, outermost segment of its wing. The bone was close to the same thickness as the apple sized ball that impacted it with all the force Boyd's A-Ranked strength could manage. It snapped cleanly and *loudly*, clearly audible at a hundred yards above the beast.

The cry of pain that followed was much louder as the dragon's right wing snapped in against the beast and it began to drop in surprise. More avalanches and rockslides were triggered by its roar, and the massive beast crashing into the forested valley below likely qualified as an earthquake.

The dragon's bulk crushed the trees and stone it landed on into dust and splinters that scattered into the air, hiding the beast from view. A sinking feeling filled Boyd and he reached for his shield a moment before a familiar dreadful sensation filled him. Silvie wasn't dumb, she hadn't left them hovering in the air and presenting an easy target. They'd wounded the beast, but that only made it more dangerous.

The dragon's head shot out of the dust its crash landing created. Boyd got his shield up between them and the beast as it started spitting short bursts of its breath weapon at them rapid fire. Silvie blurred them out of the path of any that got close but couldn't stay far enough away from all of them to protect Boyd fully.

The chunks of energy burned white-hot. Hot enough to make rock explode on contact and turn the rest of the mountain's stone face into lava. That led to a fair amount of radiant heat. A few of the short beams that came close imparted enough raw heat to overcome Boyd's natural resistance and sear his flesh.

The shield protected his torso to a limited extent, with Silvie's body with her higher resistance doing the same for his back and the majority of his wings, as they remained tucked tightly in. The top joint of his wings, though, and from his knees down were seared badly enough that Boyd suspected he had at least second degree burns and some third-degree burns.

This pain he bundled up with the ache the dragon's cry had previously imparted.

Eventually, there was a pause and Boyd found that they were now closer to three hundred yards away as Silvie added some distance to give her more time to dodge each ten-foot-wide burst of energy that streaked through the air after them. Distance didn't matter for his Mental Domination; it didn't stop him from reaching for the dragon's mind to slam a tether into place.

The dragon was old and had a strong mind, even if it only had limited intelligence. Mental Powers were the only ones that ever did anything to the creature, but the result was always muted, and it was always quick to overcome any form of control. The fact that Powereds with mental abilities typically lacked the durability to survive for long in its presence meant there were few recorded instances of sustained mind-powered attacks against it.

Both of them were in a desperate fight for survival—something that was likely new for the dragon. Boyd's Power struggled to find purchase, but ultimately it was Boyd's familiarity with things that could and wanted to kill him that won out. Its center was broken while Boyd's remained firm. He used his desperation while the dragon's desperation used it.

The tether connected and Boyd surged his accumulated pain and fear down it, driving it into the *nearly* indestructible beast's mind. The dragon screamed again, thrashing about to try to destroy whatever was causing this pain. Boyd doubted it realized the pain originated in its own mind. After a moment of uselessly destroying tree and stone, it leaped into the air, winging awkwardly to the east.

The top third of its right wing was only partially extended, making its flight jerky and erratic. It was running away, though, that much was clear by the cries it released as it fled. A pleased smile came to his lips as Boyd noticed that its tail was even a little tucked under it.

He'd made the Last Dragon flee like a beaten dog.

Boyd's smile faded as he remembered Silas's loss and Sinoe's uncertain state. He'd driven the dragon away, but their mission was, at best, only partially successful.

## Chapter 50

“We did it?” Silvie asked, her voice filled with uncertainty, as the Last Dragon flapped away from them.

Boyd didn’t want to jinx it so just watched for another moment.

Then Silvie cheered, “We did it! We lived everyone, we’re okay and the dragon is running! Our man is *that* amazing, not even the Last Dragon can stop him.”

The comms exploded as Raev, Mindy, Tinker, and somewhat surprisingly Laura began speaking over each other. It was Tinker’s voice that contained the most relevant information as far as Boyd could tell.

“Tinker repeat,” he growled, “everyone else clear comms, mission still in progress.”

“The stealth drones are in pursuit; they were already in the area and should have no issue catching up to it,” Tinker expanded on her initial, much shorter report.

“Thank you, keep us posted,” Boyd rumbled as he took a deep breath, still carefully watching the retreating dragon until it rounded a mountain, and he could see it no more. “Silvie, we need to find Sinoe, we don’t know her status.” He paused, taking a deep breath. “For the rest of you, you should know that I don’t think Silas made it.”

“Oh, no!” Mindy’s voice came over the line in a gasp.

He suspected she’d been, at the least, occasional acquaintances with the couple who’d accepted the mission to be his guards, based on their prior interaction. Boyd hoped this loss wasn’t too big a blow for his soon to be lover.

He wasn’t sure what else to say, so stayed silent as Silvie flew them over to where they’d last seen Sinoe. He would have preferred to start flying himself, not enjoying being carried like this, but his wings had been disabled. He wouldn’t want to fly on his own power for a while, not with the top joints badly burned like they were.

He didn't want to look down at his lower legs, but based on the fact that he was suppressing a cold sensation in relation to a burn, it couldn't be good. He knew he would heal, though, so it was a small price to pay to save a life. If only they'd been a little faster, it might have been two.

The ground was broken and charred where the dragon's breath cut through it in the process of blasting Silas out of existence. Molten stone cooled in the center of the four-foot-deep crater, fading to orange as the heat dissipated and the stone solidified. Boyd spotted Sinoe kneeling at the edge of the channel the dragon's breath weapon had cut into the mountain as it shifted towards where Silas had thrown her.

The deeply tanned beauty appeared unhurt but had collapsed on her knees and was hunched over with her face in her hands. Silvie set them down about ten feet away and he saw Sinoe stiffen. At the same time, he recognized his own inadvertent response to the gorgeous but grieving woman's Power and stamped down hard on his Aura that had started to slip from his control.

Her head turned to regard them, tears streaming down her face, but anger in her eyes. "Get away from me!" she hissed.

Boyd was not offended, knowing that he would react poorly to anyone who inflicted lust on him while he mourned the loss of a lover. "Check on her, please," Boyd murmured to Silvie as he turned to walk away to put some distance between them. He regretted his preference for going barefoot, as each step stung the burned soles of his feet.

Looking down as he walked revealed that the bottom six inches or so of his greaves had melted a little. Boyd remembered that Tinker had told him how even the leather looking backs of his armor were metal that her machine tricked into looking and behaving like leather. They would probably have to be cut off of him... fantastic.

Boyd walked off a ways before turning to keep an eye on Silvie and Sinoe. Silvie was kneeling down next to Sinoe and rubbing her mostly bare back. Boyd found it easier to keep

his eyes from fixating onto the woman from here, so assumed he was out of her range. His Aura certainly shouldn't reach her without him putting in some effort from this distance.

“Did the drones find the dragon?” Boyd asked into his comms.

“Yes, it is heading east but does not appear to be returning to its nest. I'm sending some of my drones there, as well,” Tinker responded promptly. “Silvie said you were hurt. Are you okay? Should we come with the ship?” She took the opening to fire off several questions.

“No,” Boyd responded. “It isn't worth the risk. The dragon might be leaving, but this is still the Wild Lands.”

The Last Dragon's presence would have sent everything nearby into hiding, but that would only last for so long. Boyd was being vigilant, using his Mental Domination to box up the pain from the burns and keep his senses clear. He knew from past experience that he could keep this up for several hours, at least.

“The ship is designed for missions just like this,” Tinker argued.

“Silvie is faster than the ship in atmosphere, especially at these short ranges,” he argued. The ship needed time to get up to speed when not in vacuum. Boyd had reviewed the ship's specs on Wednesday, along with the basic defensive capabilities of the base. He would fill in the rest of what he needed to know as time went on.

“Silvie will take Sinoe back,” Boyd decided, “when she's ready and then come back for me—she can do all that before the ship would even get here.”

“Excuse me?” Silvie said over the comms. “Sorry Sinoe my... ah... Boyd is being an idiot.” Silvie had likely been about to say my fiancé but decided against using the term in front of the recently widowed woman.

He watched Silvie stand and take a couple steps in his direction before continuing. “I will certainly not leave you

alone out here. You're hurt! Could you even fly if you had to?"

Boyd frowned. "It will only be for a few moments." Having expected the pushback, he'd already prepared the necessary supporting arguments. "I am injured, that is true. But I have not exhausted my Power, or worse, burned it out. Sinoe might have pushed too hard... and no, you shouldn't ask just yet. I also did not just lose my spouse. I *will* be able to maintain my situational awareness and defend myself if I am attacked. I also do not trust my control over my Aura right now—not under her influence. If I did, I would tell you to take us both back to base."

He turned, scanning the immediate area. "I don't want to inflict that on her, especially not right now," he rumbled.

He was too far away to see Silvie's scowl, but he knew it was there—he didn't need to check their Bond to know she was furious with him. Boyd knew that she knew he was right to send Sinoe back first, and she hated it.

"Fine," Silvie snapped, then returned to kneeling beside the grieving woman and providing comfort.

Boyd hoped she was also getting her ready to move.

"She says she wants to talk to you first, just... stay a bit back," Silvie said after a minute or two.

Boyd trudged his way back over, blocking out the pain each step caused in his feet, ankles, and lower legs. He stopped about fifteen feet away, the same separation Sinoe had maintained the other day when she'd said it was manageable. Silvie turned to give him a fragile smile over her shoulder, but Sinoe kept her back to him.

"Hello, Sinoe," Boyd rumbled, using just enough volume to carry his deep voice across the distance between them. "I'm sorry for your loss and that we weren't fast enough."

"We did not expect you to come, so I will try not hold your tardiness against you—even while everything I am wishes you could have been faster." Her sweet voice was filled



with sorrow. “I wished to apologize for snapping at you, and to thank you for saving me. Silas would have been...” her voice broke for a moment, “so, so grateful.”

“Neither apologies nor thanks are needed,” Boyd rumbled back. “The Devoted will not leave our allies to die when we have the ability to save them. You are both heroes for risking your lives to find the Last Dragon’s nest, and I will make sure Silas is remembered as such. As far as the apology goes, I understand why my presence is not welcome—especially now.

“If Silvie hasn’t mentioned it, I asked her to take you back to our base. It is big enough that we can keep our distance from one another. If you have somewhere else where you won’t be alone, she could take you there instead, if you prefer,” Boyd offered. He would only insist she stay with them if the only other option was leaving her alone. Sinoe would be better served by the company of loved ones or friends, right now.

“Silas and I lived alone due to my... proclivities,” Sinoe responded, her voice still containing a shake. “He was so... patient... You can just leave me here. The mountains are my home now that he is gone.”

Boyd frowned at her back, having a much harder time keeping his eyes on appropriate places of her mostly bared form now that he was closer. “Stay with us for a few days at least. We have rooms where you can be alone the whole time, if that is your wish. I did not know him well, but I doubt Silas would want you to be alone out here right now.” It might be a low blow, using her husband’s memory like that, but Boyd did not want Sinoe to die needlessly because her mind was consumed by her recent loss.

Sinoe’s slender, rich earth-toned, shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath. “You knew him well enough to be correct, it would seem. I will go with you, but I would return to this place once my Power returns to me, to erect a memorial.”

“We will happily assist with that,” Boyd agreed. Few would see it out here in the Wild Lands, but maybe it would bring her comfort.

“Thank you.” Sinoe stood smoothly, and Boyd had to struggle to avert his eyes from where the motion drew them, scolding himself internally. She’d *just* lost her husband minutes ago. “We should leave before I break.”

“You’re so strong.” Silvie murmured, Boyd picking up the softly spoken words over their comms as she got into position behind Sinoe. “I would have broken already. We’ll be there in just a moment, then we’ll get you behind closed doors.” With that, Silvie blurred away with her passenger.

“Could you please be prepared to receive her, Mindy?” Boyd asked over the comms. “She didn’t look hurt, but Laura should probably check her over.”

“I’m already preparing a room for her,” Mindy replied.

“I’m waiting at the elevator,” Laura stated.

Boyd reminded himself that he was working with professionals and that, as their team leader, it was still good practice to give the orders anyway. If nothing else, it helped him keep his team members’ skills in mind.

“Thank you, ladies,” Boyd rumbled softly as he strode forward to look into the fifteen-foot-wide and four-foot-deep trench the pass of dragon’s breath had scoured into the ground. He peered into it, not expecting anything but hoping to find something of Silas—something for Sinoe to bury or use in whatever ritual she wished to mark her husband’s passing.

He noted one of Tinker’s new drones, still bright pink and dinner plate sized, but with three bulb-like protrusions on the bottom in a triangle. They were both faster and tougher than the last iteration, with more sensors as well. It wasn’t suited for combat but had been designed for reconnaissance. Tinker was still settling on a combat effective design; she kept thinking of improvements she wanted to make, so was hesitant to commit to one.

Anything organic in the trench had been completely destroyed, except for an odd stick that protruded from the cooling orange center of the trench. It was odd, not only in that it was a piece of wood that refused to burn while partially submerged in molten stone, but in that it had clearly been shaped. The stick was tapered with a notch cut into the end.

Boyd remembered that Silas had a bow slung over his shoulder when he'd met him but had no idea how it had survived the dragon's breath. He carefully made his way into the trench, and while the stone was hot enough to sting his already burned feet, it wasn't enough to cause further damage. He used his long tail to extract the stringless bow, sliding it out of the still soft, though cooling, stone cleanly. It was a beautifully crafted weapon that felt like wood in his hand but must be something more to have survived the energies it did.

"What are you doing?" Silvie asked from behind him, causing him to start. He reminded himself to speak to Tinker about making Silvie a bell she couldn't remove, so he would always hear her coming—that, or make her carry around a box of Tic-Tac mints.

"I think this was Silas's bow." He held up the length of wood with its finely shaped handle and intricate carvings along each limb. "I have no idea how it survived but Sinoe would probably like to have it."

"You're so sweet Darling, but your feet are starting to sink into the stone."

Boyd looked down and confirmed that his feet had already sunk about an inch into the soft stone. Silvie floated down and came in behind him, wrapping him up as she said. "Hold on tight to it."

Boyd gripped the length of wood as they blurred through the air, arriving back in the cave to find an empty elevator car waiting for them. Silvie set him down and beamed up at him as the doors closed behind them.

"You did good, Darling. Mindy was right to lift the compulsions. I regretted it when we were flying out to face the

Last Dragon, but you were right. I'm glad you reminded me to trust you."

"I just wish we were a little faster," Boyd sighed, weariness setting in as the adrenaline faded from his system.

While only the tops of his wings, his feet, and his lower legs had been badly burned, heat had still scorched the rest of him. It didn't matter that his skin from his elbows and knees down transitioned to a deep scarlet, Boyd was sure that all of him was currently as red as a lobster. Everywhere that was not severely burned still had painful first-degree burns. He was likely dehydrated on top of everything else.

"We did what we could, I was the only one who delayed things." Silvie took his cheeks in gentle fingers. The coolness of her fingers felt nice.

Boyd thought back, finding only the second he'd stopped to reassure Mindy as a potentially wasteful moment. Given how close things had been as they had come in, it might have been enough.

*'Don't be ridiculous,'* Mindy scoffed into his mind. *'That moment mattered to me, and it likely stopped me from trying to interfere. I could have locked down the base, too, you know. I read the manual.'* The last thought came with the mental equivalent of a haughty sniff attached to it.

Out loud, she said, "You saved a life, so be proud. Silas would consider his death an honor, especially since he gave it to save Sinoe. He met a hero's end. Don't cheapen his sacrifice by taking the blame for his death upon yourself."

Boyd straightened his shoulders from the slight slump they had dropped into and sent Mindy his thanks. Silvie's slightly concerned gentle smile bloomed into a more honest grin. "Thanks Mindy!" She chirped, "Having someone who can do what you do for us is so nice. Ready to face the others?"

Boyd smiled back at her but asked his own question instead of answering hers, "Am I in a lot of trouble?"

“Hard to judge, but less than you might think, at least that’s how it seemed to me,” Silvie said with a little shrug. “You did save a life.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you, so take some of the credit.” Boyd grinned back, relieved that his team seemed to understand.

“I will not.” Silvie shook her head, causing her silver hair to swish around her shoulders. “I wouldn’t have done it if you hadn’t pretty much made me. I don’t know how you stayed so calm. There is no way I could have done it without you feeding me your confidence like you have been. Speaking of which, it is nice... but could you please stop? It’s not quite distracting, but I don’t think I should stay like this.”

Boyd blinked and checked to confirm that the flow of his confidence was still going to Silvie. He tapered it off, then transitioned it back to a drip of affection for his silver haired lover. “Better?” he asked.

“Yes... but no,” Silvie sighed. “Feeling so confident was really nice, but false confidence leads to trouble. I still can’t help but feel guilty for some of the things I manipulated you into doing because Mindy reinforced my confidence before I volunteered for your testing—when this double agent stuff all started. Anyway, I think keeping the others waiting will only make them more upset. Are you ready?”

Boyd nodded, not too concerned as Silvie tapped on her FDU and the elevator made its artificial *whooshing* sound to allude to movement. The doors opened a moment later to reveal an angry looking Laura. Foot tapping, hip cocked to the side, and arms crossed over her chest, her long fingers tapped her opposite arm as she leveled a glare right at Boyd.

“But I was careful!” Boyd blurted out.

Laura’s glare narrowed further, and she marched right into the elevator. She tapped the FDU on her wrist and the doors closed, opening again a moment later to a well-appointed medical clinic. Tinker was there and watched him with an upset frown.

“Bed, now, on your stomach,” Laura stated in a tone that brooked no argument while pointing him at a Boyd sized medical bed. There was a head support on the end near the wall with a hole for his face that he laid in.

He heard Tinker let out a little gasp that became a sob. “His feet and ankles!”

Laura made a *tsk* sound as she clicked her tongue. When she spoke, her tone was still professional but contained an edge of stress. “That’s why I needed you here. The... what do you call these?” She pointed at Boyd’s greaves. “Never mind, this bottom part of his armor melted and looks to have fused to his flesh. I need to know what cuts it.”

Boyd felt gentle hands carefully lift one foot to expose his lower shin and ankle.

“How in the world were you walking on these? You should be unconscious from the damage to your wings alone. I’ve seen the model of your nervous system; you should be in agony and going into shock.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about Boyd going into shock,” Silvie said to reassure the nurse. “I’ve seen him hurt a lot worse than this and it doesn’t happen. It was one of the reasons the other kids were so scared of him. He’d have broken limbs, be all cut up and covered in his own blood, or badly burned like this, but he would just keep coming at you.”

*Tsk.* “This is exactly the behavior that I was warning you about,” Laura scolded Boyd. “Just because you don’t feel pain doesn’t mean you aren’t making your injuries worse.”

“It isn’t that he doesn’t feel pain,” Mindy’s voice entered the conversation, “it’s that he uses his Power on himself to lock it away—which he needs to stop doing, immediately.”

“Why would I stop now?” Boyd rumbled.

“It is fine, when you have a place to put it, but keeping it locked up like that causes it to build and build. Then it overflows. Your other self has been protecting you from the consequences, but it is like torture to him. He is experiencing

all that built up pain, now... Which means that you are experiencing it. I'm taking the option away. You will either stop using your Power to lock away the pain, or I will make you start sending it to me."

He felt her hand settle carefully onto his back. "Mindy, let's talk about this," Boyd tried.

"Five," Mindy stated.

"Now just hold on a minute..." Boyd tried again.

"Four."

"I'm not a child," Boyd scoffed.

"Three." Mindy added a tone of warning, making the number sound more threatening than should have been possible.

"Shit, fine." Boyd ceased the minor effort of will his training had forged into an automatic response to block out pain.

He failed to restrain a groan that forced its way out of him as pain filled his senses. The worst of the burns lacked any sensation, the nerves mercifully having been burned away. Regrowing those would itch terribly, he knew, but for now he welcomed the few places that felt cold.

Most of him burned and stung, even the parts of him that had been relatively protected had the equivalent of a severe sunburn from the short burst of radiant heat. The stinging was worse near the edges of the cold parts, creating a sharp and disorienting contrast. It felt like he was still burning.

"Are you happy now?" Boyd snapped, but the words came out more like "Arr yoo haappy nuuw?" His speech was slightly slurred.

"Uh, Darling?" Silvie asked, her concern clear in her voice.

The pain was too much of a distraction for him to pin down what she was feeling across their Bond, so Boyd simply asked, "Yesh, my loove?" but again the words slurred.

“What’s wrong with him?” Silvie asked, her tone filling with panic.

“Jus a lil ired, nuthin to worry ‘bout,” Boyd tried to reassure his panicking lover.

“Laura, what’s happening?” Silvie pressed.

“Heart rate and respiration elevated. Slurred speech and fatigue,” Laura stated with much more confidence. “Now we have symptoms of shock. This I can deal with. I’m going to put him under until his regenerative healing can take care of the worst of it. I’ve got a couple things that help with burns that might accelerate things after we get this suit off him.”

“Alright, well, hurry! Put him under!” Silvie insisted.

“I’ve already administered general anesthesia; he is on his way out. Night, night Boyd.” Laura said this last with a bit of warmth.

It was the last thing Boyd heard as the light reflecting from the gray tiles of the clinic’s floor collapsed into a single point before a wave of black swallowed him whole, dragging him down into its deep and comfortable depths.



## Chapter 51

Boyd heard, “He will be waking up any time now.” That this was Laura’s voice came to him after an amount of time he couldn’t begin to guess at.

“Huh, that really is handy,” Tinker’s voice replied.

“Not nearly as much as this sonic whatsit you lent me,” Laura replied. “The suit just melted away. I would have had to use a vibro-scalpel to pretty much cut away his skin with it melted to him like that. It reduced the damage and therefore how long it took to heal. Do you think you could make me one? They would love to have something like this in the hospitals.”

“Uh, it has to be calibrated carefully to the material. I could put one together with an interface for the team’s suits, but even then, each one is different,” Tinker replied. “Making one for general use like in a hospital wouldn’t be feasible. The risk of a miscalibration causing catastrophic damage would be too high.”

“Like an exploding water bottle,” Boyd giggled, leaving his eyes closed because it felt good. “Best listen to her warning, Laura.”

“I trust her judgment more than yours, repeat patient of mine,” Laura replied. “I’ll take one for the team, then, when you have the time, please, Tinker. I’ll give you all some time with Boyd, but he needs rest.”

Their nurse’s voice became whip sharp. “And no funny business—certainly no laying on him this time. I’ll be back soon to change his bandages.”

Boyd heard receding footsteps before Silvie asked, “Hi Darling, how are you feeling?” His Bond with her felt a little muted, but he sensed concern burning strongly within her.

She didn’t need to worry. “I feel goood!” He drew out the word, then let out a cackle. Good was a funny word.

“Kuh-he!”

Mindy's signature little laugh put a bigger smile on his face. "She's got him on the good stuff."

"Hi Mindy," Boyd replied, deciding he should open his eyes because both Silvie and Mindy were very pretty, and the back of his eyelids was kind of boring. He didn't regret his decision, especially since Tinker was there, too, and she was also very pretty.

Boyd decided he should tell her that. "Heyyyy Tinker... you are very pretty."

Tinker's hands paused where they were fidgeting with one of her braids. Her face turned a light pink and her pretty hazel eyes grew a bit wider, which Boyd found delightful. Speaking some more he added, "Your eyes are lovely, and your lips so kissable. I love your little braids, too. So cute."

Tinker's cheeks flushed a cherry red and her lips parted in a little gasp. "Oh, my... Um, thank you. You're very handsome, too."

"Oh, goood," Boyd chuckled. "I was a little worried I would need to wear a Vader mask with how everyone was acting."

"No," Tinker shook her head. "You mostly looked badly sunburned, outside of the really bad burns, that is. That's all cleared up, though."

Boyd grinned and turned to a still very concerned Silvie. "I feel goood, loverrrr."

"I know." Silvie pouted cutely. "It just shook me a little. I've seen you hurt plenty of times, but this was the first time I've seen you act like you were hurt. It just reminded me that you're mortal, and I can lose you... that I almost lost you to that damn dragon. If I was just a little slower with one of those dodges..." Her voice trailed off.

He blinked up at her owlishly. "But you weren't," Boyd said, "because you are my Silvie, the most glorious badass on the planet. I knew you could do it—that you would do it. The possibility of failure never came into my mind. Yeah, I got hurt... but like you said, that happens. This is

nothing. Kiss me.” He held his arms open towards his constantly floating lover.

Silvie came into his arms and carefully kissed him, somehow imparting a fierce passion while being as gentle as if he were a newborn kitten or some other fragile creature. It was nice, in an unusual way. Eventually she broke the kiss and floated back, a weary calm settled on their Bond.

“I love you,” She whispered as they parted.

“I love you, too.” He smiled at her before turning to the smaller women at the side of his bed.

“Tink, would you like a hug or a kiss?” he asked.

Across their Bond he sensed she was feeling very shy after his prodding, and he didn’t want to push too hard. “Just a peck would be fine,” he clarified. He smiled reassuringly as he felt her mind swirl, considering the options.

“A hug and a peck,” she said, nodding. His clarification had made the choice much easier. She’d likely been concerned that he’d want a kiss like what he’d exchanged with Silvie. Although he sensed she wanted to give him one, she was not ready to do so in front of an audience. Their date made him think she might have taken more if they’d been alone.

Tinker climbed up onto the bed and gave him a careful hug and a quick peck on the lips before scrambling away and hopping back to the ground. “Um, I have work to do in my lab. Could someone please keep me updated?” she asked.

He could tell she was only partially retreating out of embarrassment. She really did have something she wanted to get to work on with some urgency.

“Of course, dear. Laura said he needs about eight more hours before he’ll be mostly healed, and she wants him to sleep through most of them. I’ll contact you if anything changes though.” Mindy said with warmth, also aware of Tinker’s slightly flustered state.

“Thanks!” Tinker chirped before fleeing the room.

*'You little shit.'* Mindy said in his mind. *'You hid from me that you've had her secretly working on dragon slaying weapons? Now that she's put together what they are for, you've got her all excited that her boyfriend is going to be a Dragon Slayer.'*

Boyd grinned at Mindy, knowing that it would be read as devilish and doing nothing to change it. His encounter with the Last Dragon only left him more certain than ever that he could kill the beast, if he had the time to prepare properly. Now that he'd seen how it fought, beating it almost seemed a foregone conclusion.

Maybe it was the drugs, but Boyd felt it might almost be *easy* to kill the immortal and indestructible threat to humanity. It may have been both an immovable object and an unstoppable force to everyone else, but not to him.

*'Give me one reason not to tell Davis... or worse, Silvie... what you plan to do.'* Mindy scowled at him.

He sensed that Silvie had picked up on the fact they were having a private mental conversation and was a little jealous but was dealing with it. He would make sure to dote on her soon; make sure she knew she was special.

For Mindy's benefit, he thought about the fact that he was just completing the mission *she* gave him. What better way to catapult The Devoted onto the world stage than killing the Last Dragon? Especially so shortly after killing Omega Ray.

Besides, if that wasn't enough, it wouldn't be *his* privacy she was violating. Poor little Tinker would be devastated to discover she had betrayed a secret Boyd had managed to keep from Mindy.

Her scowl deepened. *'You are such a little shit.'*

Boyd just grinned back at her, sitting up a little straighter and opening his arms to beckon her for a hug. Him and his other self were aligned in fulfilling a desire that had been building within them both. Resisting it was becoming

more difficult by the day, especially with the training sessions, and he would do so no longer.

Mindy scowled at him for another moment but sensed only affection and the desire for an embrace in his thoughts. Eventually her scowl faded into pursed lips, then into a slight smirk. She didn't want to fight with him any more than he wanted to fight with her at that moment. If she wished to protest, she could do so later.

She stepped forward and leaned over the bed to come into the hug. She tried to be gentle, but he pulled her in closer, pressing her chest into his.

“Kuh-he, be careFULL!” The last syllable rose as his right hand dropped down to grab her glorious ass. His other self assisted in keeping his intention from his former and soon to be new lover.

Boyd had big hands and filling them was more than a reasonable ask for most women. With Mindy, his cup runneth over. She was wearing tight athletic pants and a loose top. Boyd was lucid enough to sit up and pull her forward. His wisdom was rewarded with a wonderful visual as he ogled her pendulous breasts, along with having his palms filled with splendidly warm softness.

“You are such a little shit,” Mindy said with laughter in her tone. “Okay, okay, you have been patient. We'll work a little more cuddling and touching into our therapy sessions. Now let go, your burns aren't fully healed, and Laura is not someone I want to mess with.”

A benefit of Boyd's A-Ranked strength was that even when he was being extra careful—as he was because he realized he was heavily drugged—she wasn't going anywhere unless he wanted her too. Boyd didn't know what Mindy had to worry about from the courteous and professional nurse, but relented after another squeeze or two, enjoying her softness and warmth.

He settled back into the bed, glancing up to his wings to find them held up and away from his back in a medical rack, the upper portions loosely wrapped in bandages. A

blanket covered him from the waist down, but he assumed his feet were similarly treated. He also realized that he couldn't feel a thing from his wings, although his feet were a little uncomfortable.

“He should eat.” Laura came back into the room with a tray. “I'm sure one of you wouldn't mind feeding him.” She was being a little short, but Boyd wasn't sure why.

“Oh, me!” Silvie chirped, blurring to relieve Laur of the tray and then floating more slowly back to Boyd's bedside.

Laura glanced at him, and her eyes narrowed just a little before she turned and walked past the curtains that were on either side of his bed, blocking much of his view.

“Let's see,” Silvie muttered, “we've got meatloaf, potatoes, steamed vegetables and three fruit cups. Aww, it's already all cut up and it definitely didn't come that way. Say ahhhh...”

Silvie held up a fork with a square of meatloaf on it and moved it towards his mouth. Boyd was fairly sure his choice was either to open his mouth or to have meatloaf mashed into his face. He opened his mouth and accepted the morsel. It was surprisingly good. Mushy hospital food usually focused more on nutrition and being easy to digest than being palatable.

Then, he accepted the next bite, and the next, as Silvie cooed and encouraged him to eat. He would probably normally have complained about the treatment but found it incredibly sweet in the warm and comfortable state whatever Laura had given him induced. Eventually, the tray was empty, and his face dabbed clean with a sightly damp napkin—even though Silvie hadn't spilled anything.

Boyd asked a question that had been bugging him. “Where is Raev... and why is she drunk?”

“Oh!” Silvie let out her bell like giggle. “She's keeping Sinoe company. She wanted to be here, but we didn't want Sinoe to be all alone and she took to Raev, so our kitsune volunteered to stay with her. They got drunk... that's one way

to deal with things. She wanted me to tell you she's sorry for not being here when you woke up."

"No, that's good. Tell her thank you if you talk to her before I do. What else did I miss?" Boyd asked.

"Well..." Silvie hedged, and Boyd felt a sense of trepidation flow through her. "It's been twelve hours. Laura wanted the burns to mostly heal before waking you up, since it wasn't expected to take too long. The Last Dragon has been flying straight at a city for ten of those. Based on prior behavior, it's going to attack it."

Boyd's stomach roiled. Dammit, he didn't have time to be relaxing in a sick bed. Plans had to be made, he needed to get to Tinker's lab. Some of the designs he'd given her needed to be updated.

"Don't worry, though!" Silvie added before Boyd could begin to rise. "It doesn't seem to be healing quickly, so it's even slower than normal. They'll have a full four days to evacuate and have already started doing so. Nobody is in danger."

"Oh." Boyd settled back into his pillow. That gave him a *little* time to relax in a sick bed. He didn't know about eight more hours, though.

"Which city?" He asked, curious about which city he would swoop in dramatically to save.

'*We are going to talk about that,*' Mindy growled into his mind.

At that moment, the base's synthetic female AI voice of said, "Incoming call for Boyd, from Hope." They'd updated the system to use their informal names.

A big smile split Boyd's lips, they didn't normally have permission to contact each other. She must have found out about him being hurt and gotten special permission. She was such a sweet woman.

"Answer," Boyd called out happily.

At the same time, Silvie muttered, “Oh no, this is the worst way.”

Hope’s image appeared on a view screen mounted to the ceiling for viewing from the bed. It wasn’t the largest view screen, but only an image from the shoulders up of the breathtaking woman was visible. Boyd’s eyes were strong, so he easily made out the details of her angelic face.

Her deep cerulean eyes shined brightly in the light of the screen she viewed him on, but she was in an otherwise dark room. Boyd’s smile faltered, sinking into a concerned frown. Her eyes were only cerulean if she had cried recently. The red that rimmed them confirmed his concern, but the pout of her full lips made him certain.

“What happened?” they both asked at the same time, voices overlapping.



## Epilogue

Hope took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. She'd been crying since she realized that all the hopes and dreams she and Silvie had planned for... well, forever... but specifically for the past three years, was going to be ripped from her. And just when they were about to come true, too. She blotted her eyes with a soft washcloth and then smacked her cheeks a few times to get some color back into them.

If this was going to be the last chance she'd have to see him, she couldn't let him see her a crying mess. "Come on girl," she muttered to herself, grabbing a brush and fixing her sandy blonde hair, "keep it together long enough to say goodbye. You owe him that much, at least."

Finally as put together as she was going to get, she arranged things just so in the room. Maybe if she dimmed the lights, the splotches on her face wouldn't be so obvious. Grabbing a tissue to blow her nose, the washcloth to wipe at her eyes, and a tube of lip balm to make her feel like she put some effort into looking good for him, she called out to the room's AI, "Call Boyd, at Mountain Base."

It took just a moment, but the screen soon brightened to show the inside of what looked like a hospital room. Silvie stood beside a hospital bed, in which lay her Boyd. He looked pale and his eyes were slightly glazed, but what immediately caught her attention was the way that his glorious wings were held up and away from him in a rack that supported their weight. That, and the way that the top third of his wings were covered in loose bandages.

"What happened?" they both asked at the same time, voices overlapping.

"You first," Boyd insisted quickly, before she could say another word, binding her to answer first by their old rules.

Dammit, he'd beaten her to the punch. She'd almost forgotten the fact that whoever spoke first set the order of the conversation. It had seemed like such a smart rule when they were eight, one that kept the adults off their backs because it

kept their voices from getting too loud as they shouted over one another to be heard.

Hope frowned but bowed to their old rules. “The Last Dragon is heading towards my city, New Eden.” She tried to smile but knew that it didn’t reach her eyes. “Which wouldn’t be too bad because something managed to hurt it, so we have almost four full days to evacuate. That’s plenty of time to get everyone out, so we would just lose the buildings. No big deal, we can rebuild buildings, right?”

“Yes, you can,” Boyd nodded sincerely while the smile returned to his face.

A piece of her heart clenched, while the rest of it fluttered. She only wished she could be there instead of here, to see that beautiful smile of his in person. She held it together as long as she could, but the thought that she wouldn’t get to see that smile every day like she and Silvie had planned burst through the damn of her reserve.

“Then why are they making us fight it?” Hope’s face crumbled and she failed to restrain the sob that burst from her soul, although she did manage to hold back further tears.

“What?!” Silvie snapped. “They can’t do that! Your shields might be able to take one, maybe two blasts, but no more than that. That isn’t nearly enough with how often it can attack.”

“I know,” Hope replied bitterly. “I tried to tell them, but it was like it always is.” She adopted a deeper voice, trying to mimic her idiot of a handler. “‘You can do it Hopewing!’ and ‘Whatever you can do will surely be enough.’ They never listen.”

“And because it’s already wounded that...” her face twisted into a sneer, “that jerk that I have to call Captain thinks he can beat it. It’s the Last Dragon! Just because it has a broken wing doesn’t mean his stupid little energy swords that he’s so proud of are going to scratch it. I know it’s terrible, but I hope it kills him quickly so the rest of us can run away.”

She hated letting Boyd see her like this—a mix between upset and angry. She knew anger wasn't something he associated with her, and she wanted his last memory of her to be... well, if not cheerful, then at least resolute and brave.

“But no, now I have to go and probably die needlessly before I even get to be with the man I love. It isn't fair! I tried to tell them no, but they already told everyone that we would save the city, so now nearly a third of the civilians are refusing to leave. It just... It isn't fair!” She punched a pillow beside her on the couch, producing a soft thump.

“When will you make the attempt?” Boyd asked calmly.

“There are two mountains it should pass through a hundred miles north of the city. The plan is to try and stop it there,” Hope said despondently.

At her words, Boyd frowned. She didn't want to remember him as sad, though. “Who knows,” she tried and failed to put some cheer in her voice, “maybe we can give it a boo boo and it will turn back.”

Boyd blinked, but then he grinned.

“Hope,” Boyd said warmly, drawing her eyes to him. He looked so confident and his expression—even though she knew he'd practiced it with her and Silvie like a thousand times—reassured her just like it was supposed to do. “You don't have to worry... and thank you for answering my question. Now, I'll answer yours.”

He grinned his cockiest grin. “Silvie and I already tangled with the natural disaster that's headed your way. I got a little burned fighting the Last Dragon, but it got the worse end of the deal. You see, I broke its wing and put a few holes in it... and I wasn't even prepared for the fight.” Boyd said the words casually, as if it were no big deal.

“I'll be healed up in a few hours then I'll go spend some time with Tinker—she makes our stuff... you'll love her. She'll help me get prepared for the next round. Then we are coming to save you, alright? So don't fret. Just like we always

promised each other, I'll be there when you need me," Boyd vowed. "And who knows, if defeating the Last Dragon gives me enough clout, I'll ensure you are transferred to The Devoted so that you will never be alone again."

Hope's eyes went wide. Could it be true? Had Boyd been the one to injure the Last Dragon—if anyone could, it would be her Boyd. Hope knew he could do the impossible.

She saw him turn to a dark-haired woman she recognized as Mind Witch. What had her real name been again? Oh, yeah...Mindy. Hope couldn't help the jealousy that rose within her at seeing Boyd's old flame. It should have been her, or at least Silvie, that he lost his V-card to. Instead, the older goth witch had taken advantage of her man.

Boyd said, "And no, we won't be discussing this. There is no longer another option. I will not force you to participate, but our odds improve with your assistance."

"R-really?" Hope asked, her voice filled with disbelief. "You really hurt the Last Dragon?"

"I did, Silvie was there, and I call on her to confirm it." Boyd once again used one of their old rules.

Silvie didn't let him down. "I was there, Hope. He can really do it. We are going to come save you."

Hope's heart surged and her face bloomed into a hope-filled smile. "You are?" she asked on a rising note, wanting to believe them, but not quite ready to—not yet.

"Yes, we are on our way. We will kill the Last Dragon and help save you and your city," Boyd promised.

"I... I don't know what to say, and I don't have much time left. I used every piece of goodwill I earned from my handler to get a few minutes for this call, but I'm so glad I did. Thank you... thank you so much." Her voice brightened considerably, and a grin stretched her lips.

"No need to thank us, we keep our promise," Boyd grinned.

Hope beamed at him. “I should have known you would. Now, I really do have to go. I guess I’ll see you soon.” Her heart soared, a far cry from how she’d started the call. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, see you soon,” Boyd agreed.

“Bye hun!” Silvie chirped before the call ended and the screen winked out.

Hope danced around her dimmed room for just a moment, letting her wings rustle together as she spun and twirled in excitement. She let herself feel like a child once more. Oh, how she loved her Boyd! Silvie too, of course, but he was the one who had turned near certain death into a celebratory reunion.

The movement helped relax her wings which had been stiff for hours, ever since that idiot had insisted their team make a pointless stand to protect some shiny buildings. He had far too much confidence for someone who lacked any real skill and resisted training to the extent he did. All he had going for him was a flashy Power and classical good looks.

Boyd understood what it really meant to be a Hero. She’d witnessed him learn the often-painful lessons that one needed to experience in order to fully understand their role. Thinking about their past made her remember all the times she’d seen Boyd’s big, strong back as he inserted himself between her and whatever danger they faced. It always made her feel so safe, and soon she would see it between her and the Last Dragon.

“Hopewing!” A voice that totally ruined her recently improved mood preceded her team’s Captain into her supposedly private room. Hope knew most people found his voice pleasant, but it grated on her.

“Oh good, I made it in time.” He smiled that smarmy smile of his, practiced and fake in all the wrong ways. “I know the Corruptor has affected you, but you must resist.”

He wore what he thought of as a charming smile on his square jawed, strong-featured face as he brushed some of his

slightly too long and overly feathered dirty blonde hair from his face to peer at her with pale blue eyes. Ughhh... so boring.

“I’m glad you managed to resist until I got here,” he said. “I’ll help you persevere through the urges the Corruptor has forced upon you.”

Hope turned away from the idiot to hide the roll of her eyes she knew she could not resist, pretending to be reading something on her desk. “As I have said *countless* times now, Boyd has not forced anything on me. This has been proven—again, *countless* times. I have allowed myself to be tested in every way you have asked. My mind and heart are free from outside influence. I also asked you not to call him that in my presence.”

“Hopewing...” Archangel sighed behind her. “I know whatever... that creature has done to you prevents you from seeing it, but his vile influence is clear to me. Someday I’ll find a Powered who can detect and remove it.”

Hope’s eyes rolled again as she stated calmly, “His name is Boyd... Dashing Devil would also be acceptable. He did nothing to my mind but has won my heart. You just can’t accept that simple truth because you are an arrogant narcissist.”

“Hopewing!” This time Archangel gasped her name as if shocked.

She didn’t know why he would be; her assertions on this topic never changed.

After a moment he let out a long breath. “I know it is not your fault, but your words wound me. You are upset. I know you do not think I can defeat the Last Dragon, so must be worried for me. But you will see.”

He paused, face lighting up as if struck by an idea. Hope figured the chances of Archangel being struck by an innovative thought were about the same as him being struck by lightning.

“I’ll do it for you,” he declared. “That will certainly earn your love. I know it will.”

Hope's lips formed a secret little smile. The man who would defeat the Last Dragon already had her love. He'd earned it long ago. Feeling a little devilish, likely due to her Boyd's influence, she decided to give Archangel a uselessly cryptic warning. "If you behave as you usually do on the day we meet the Last Dragon, you will not like the repercussions."

She knew he would take it to mean that if he engaged in his usual showmanship, the dragon might kill him. He would want her to mean that because it could be taken to mean that she cared for his well-being. She could say without hesitation that Archangel was one of the few living beings she'd met where she'd found that not to be the case.

"I promise I won't be contacting Boyd tonight," she promised, "now leave. I wish to be alone."

It was a lie of course, she wished to be with Boyd, Silvie and the rest of The Devoted. Once Boyd killed the Last Dragon, he might just garner enough good will to finally get her transfer approved—so that day might be coming sooner than even Silvie's plans anticipated. The fact that Boyd would use his hard-earned favor to bring her home filled her heart with warmth all over again.

# Afterward

First off, thank you so much for sticking it out. I hope you enjoyed the story. I know it got a little chunky but there was a lot I wanted to get to before the third point of Boyd's story.

Please consider leaving a review, I know we writers harp on about it, but they really are meaningful in a lot of ways. For example, I personally think 3 came out a lot better than 1 and 2 in part because of the reviews. My new editor, Dutch, played a massive role as well, but I went looking for an editor because of the reviews—so it all comes back to them.

Speaking of Dutch, we will be working together towards an improved re-release of 1 and 2 in the near future. They will be getting the pacing, grammar, and tense overhaul you hopefully enjoyed in this book. And because Amazon requires a re-release to be at least 10% different, there will be some additional material, too. Between that project and writing 4, I expect to stay busy through December of 2023. I hope to find some time to work on one of the many side projects I have going in the wings, too.

If you would like to get in touch or follow me for updates, use any of the following:

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