

# Enchanted

ink



*by Robin Lynn*







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*“If you always do what you’ve always done,  
you’ll always get what you’ve always got.”*

— *Anonymous*

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Love you all.

—Wings

# PROLOGUE

The roar of the thunderstorm outside is deafening, intermittent booms of thunder rattling the window panes in their frame. The angry cacophony feels a little heavy-handed, even to a man who believes that the Universe matches energy, but under the circumstances, Ashton can't spare the mental bandwidth it would take to dwell on that.

Whitaker is *laughing*. Leaning casually against the sleek paneling of the hallway, his tattoo machine is still dripping color onto the table full of used equipment behind him. He's effectively blocking the way out, and he's *laughing*. At almost six feet exactly, Whitaker is scarcely two inches shorter than Ashton, but right now his presence feels giant, and despite his own more muscular stature, Ashton feels *small*.

Licking dry lips, Ashton's gaze darts briefly over to that table and the machine laying placidly on its side across the instrument tray, its needle pointed firmly in his direction. It's silent, rendered powerless at the moment, but that doesn't matter. Motionless and harmless though it currently may be, the once-familiar apparatus nevertheless *feels* like a weapon.

Like a threat.

Half-naked and alone on this emotional rollercoaster, Ashton has never been more vulnerable, and it's distressing.

He's sweating. Droplets gather on his forehead, one breaking away to track down over his temple and cheek as a lock of damp, dark hair falls into his line of vision. Against his thighs, both of his hands flex with rage and despair, blood boiling in his veins. Pain and anger throb in the space behind his eyes and heat radiates in waves from his face, undoubtedly flushed red with humiliation. He can't even bring himself to stare into the mirror and fully absorb what's been done to him—this is truly his own version of hell.

“Oh, come off it, Ashes. I’ll fix it up then, if you’re going to be so pissy.” Whitaker’s words don’t match his tone, even discounting the sneery English accent, and the laugh that follows his would-be promise lays bare his lack of sincerity. Even his demeanor, the casual way he pushes a palm through his floppy, platinum-blond hair or the way his manicured nails tap his chin feels dismissive, irreverent. “It’s very *you*, though, you have to admit.”

A dramatic boom shakes the bones of the shop as a bolt of lightning snaps outside, casting a brief, eerie glow across Whitaker’s face, courtesy of the giant windows facing the street. His gray eyes flash dangerously. The sight sends a chill down Ashton’s spine, making his pulse race and turning him breathless as he struggles to cope with reality. Ashton’s mind races right along with his heart as various pieces of the puzzle continue falling into place.

Everything suddenly makes so much *sense*—the waiting until no one else was present, Whitaker refusing to allow him to check on the progress, and of course, this strange, late-night session that was never about *clients* and preserving business hours in the first place.

Ashton should’ve known. He should’ve *guessed*.

He tries to make himself look into the mirror. To digest the situation, to see that *he* is still there, buried underneath the problem. He manages to fixate briefly on the familiar planes of his chest, the bulky curve of his thighs, the sharp cut of his jaw, and the messy shock of dark hair atop his head. To ground himself in his own familiar blue eyes.

He tries to look for long enough to at least kill the magic, to settle the enchanted ink—to put the charm *away* so that it isn’t just *out there*, adding fuel to Whitaker’s entertained fire. It’s painful to try, though, and he finds himself frozen in place.

*Hell* is definitely the right word. Being forced to confront his worst apparent mistakes *and* his misplaced trust in this way is overwhelming, it’s too much. Ashton’s chest feels horrifically tight as the edges of the mangled design catch his



peripheral vision, and he squeezes his eyes shut so as not to see. Somehow, miraculously, he manages to harness the magic for himself, to contain the charm, and to shut it down.

*Exhale*, he tells himself, once it's over. *Breathe. In and out. Just get out.*

Blinking back tears, Ashton stares up at the ugly popcorn ceiling for a handful of seconds, focusing on the rumble of thunder and the downpour of rain in order to center himself.

“Ashes, darling, just remember—”

He moves. Without glancing Whitaker's way or acknowledging his presence at all, Ashton brushes past to yank his discarded t-shirt over his head and grabs his coat from the rack. He slings his work bag over his shoulder, picks up the book carefully stashed beneath it, and pulls the front door open, preparing to brave the storm. The bells jingle cheerfully above his head.

*“You asked for this.”*

Clenching his jaw, Ashton is instantly soaked as he steps outside, head tucked down against the unrelenting rain. His book is folded into his jacket in order to protect the pages, and that's enough for now. He doesn't think about where he's going, and he doesn't look back.



# CHAPTER 1

## *One Year Later*

The twelfth annual “Enchanted Ink” Tattoo Convention has been in full swing for hours, but Ashton has yet to venture inside. It’s not as if he doesn’t know what he’ll find there: a fairly standard convention space, divided using equally standard black curtains hanging from predictable portable frames creating both booths and stations offering displays that are *anything* but ordinary. Various tattoo artists and their work, in the flesh—the best of the best, by both fact *and* opinion.

In addition to the booths, there are always several centralized showcase stands, right in the middle of all the hustle and bustle. Elevated platforms where human works of art strip down to their underwear and pose, proudly displaying full-body and wildly colorful tattoos boasting some of the most intricate and beautiful imagery that probably exists in the entire inked world.

This particular convention admits artists by invitation only, and while Ashton isn’t technically here to work this year, it’s an event he’s enjoyed immensely in the past. It’s bittersweet—perhaps a touch heavy on the *bitter*—hovering on the outskirts, wondering whether he’ll ever find himself behind a booth and promoting his work again. While that remains to be seen, there’s plenty here to worry about in the meantime.

The thought of Whitaker working somewhere inside the building behind him crosses Ashton’s mind and makes him grimace. He can practically feel the tentative nerve he’s so painstakingly gathered, the courage to *finally* wander through the front door, trickling away like water through a sieve.

*Again.*

Good thing it’s a nice day out, today. Sixty-eight degrees and sunny, not a cloud in the sky, and Ashton brought a book.

He can wait. The courage to go inside will come.

*Probably.*

Sighing, Ashton rubs the sleeve of his too-dressy collared shirt across the backs of his eyelids. The button on the cuff pokes his eye, and it feels like a call-out. He's too dressed up, he looks out of place. Too *covered*, if nothing else. Which isn't to say that tattooed folks can't be modest—naturally, that's false and would be a terribly judgemental view to hold. Either way, the whole point of a tattoo *convention* is to show off one's body and as much art decorating skin as possible. It's *supposed* to be a positive, empowering experience.

That's definitely the point, and his body is aesthetically pleasant to look at, both sculpted and toned—yet here Ashton is, buttoned up solidly from head to toe. Acting like he cares more about looking the part of a corporate stooge rather than flaunting the walking canvas he is. *Lame. So lame.*

*Lame, but necessary*, he reminds himself.

Currently, the only visible sign that Ashton is *not* the stuffy ink-virgin he appears to be at first glance pokes out from his collar to curl lazily around the right side of his bare neck. Just a tendril of light blue, highlighted masterfully with bright white accents, meant to appear as if his internal power source is leaking from a deep cut in his skin. Ashton adores that particular tattoo, might go so far as to call it his *favorite*. He designed the pattern and the magical component himself so that when he tilts his head a certain way and with intention, the ink sparks to life. It swirls freely in a misty, almost glowing haze that twists and curves gently through the air before settling back onto his skin, dormant again.

As a tattoo artist himself, Ashton knows that he should be setting a better example for others—for his profession—at least at a convention. He should be in a t-shirt or less, laying it all out there, unwilling to act or even *feel* ashamed of what some... *asshole ex* did to him. It's frustrating. What Whitaker took by crossing the lines that he did shouldn't have the power to dampen his love for the art... or for himself.

Really, if anything, Ashton's willingness to be transparent, to get loud about his ruined ink could help others who may have experienced the same thing. People who might feel shame and fear, might be paralyzed out of coming forward to have their tattoos fixed, their psyches healed. Ashton knows, all too well. He even *wants* to be that guy—a role model, or something close to it.

Still, walking the walk isn't simple. Facing up to this type of mess is practically trauma therapy. Certainly not the easiest thing to do when ink—especially *magical* ink—is so intensely, innately personal, and where *big* emotions come so strongly into play.

Say, for instance, when those emotions are tied up in both a personal relationship and an entire livelihood, all flushed down the drain and swirled away together in one fell swoop. Some might go so far as to label that misery, though Ashton is usually not so dramatic. Sure, he's made some mistakes, and he knew that he broke Whitaker's heart when he chose to be honest about his (lack of romantic) feelings for the man, but he truly thought they'd end up *friends* and stronger for it.

Instead, Ashton found himself partnerless, friendless, jobless, and with a humiliating ink pattern decorating his back. One that he has to look at, think about, and suffer its existence every single minute of every single day. As someone who modifies other people's bodies for a living, it's not the most ringing endorsement of either his talent *or* his judgment.

So, no. Ashton will not be strutting around with his own personal canvas on display. Not this year, anyway, and perhaps not ever again.

The damaged ink *is*, however, the reason he's here at all, subjecting himself to the potential humiliation of running into his smarmy ex-boyfriend-slash-employer in the first place. This particular convention hosts the best of the best, and that's what he needs now. Essentially, inside that building is every single one of the very *limited* number of artists that Ashton

would even *consider* trusting to get near him with a tattoo machine.

That is the hardest part of a cover-up, after all, never mind one of this magnitude—finding someone who can be *trusted* with it. Not merely with the design or the artistry, or even the skillful infusion of magic itself, but with the *history*. With the repair process of something that's essentially infused with a person's psyche. This tattoo is baked into who he is as a person, entwined with how he sees himself.

And someone he thought he could trust turned that into a weapon, wielded it with the sole intention of causing pain.

*Damn, that hurts.*

Shaking his head to clear those uncomfortable thoughts, Ashton swings his legs, letting them smack against the stone wall he's sitting on. Meanwhile, he exhales intentionally and closes the cover of his book in favor of at *least* doing some people-watching, but his fingers linger on the cracked spine. It's his favorite: a well-worn (*read: falling apart*) copy of the first book in *the* best fantasy series ever written, and Ashton is prone to carrying it around like Linus and his security blanket. He's found that reading familiar passages reliably calms fraught nerves and helps him mentally escape whenever a situation is particularly anxiety-inducing.

This mess certainly fits the bill. Anxiety was obviously a given with coming here, so it's no surprise that the bindings of the book have been tested today.

*Thank you, Michael Shield*, Ashton thinks silently to himself, running fingers over the author's raised name where it's printed across the bottom of the cover. He wishes that *Michael Shield*, whoever he is, would show some interest in attending conventions like these (except for books and authors, rather than tattoos and artists), because Ashton would gladly hop on a plane, fly cross-country, and pay any exorbitant amount requested for even the briefest opportunity to stand in his presence.

Perhaps Michael Shield isn't interested in interacting with fans or being idolized that way, but Ashton would love nothing more than to look him in the eyes, shake his hand, and say "thank you." As a creator himself, he can't help but feel that Michael deserves it, too. Deserves to experience tangible gratitude and recognition for what surely cost him blood, sweat, and tears to produce. To know for a *fact* that the final product has become a source of comfort and a chance to temporarily escape from what Ashton would describe as an otherwise mediocre life.

Those things are important.

*Anyway.*

With a sigh, Ashton blinks and glances around, realizing abruptly that it's well into the afternoon. He's been parked here, at the top of the stone steps leading to the convention center, essentially since the event doors opened early this morning. It's the perfect place to watch as various customers and artists wander in and out of the building, and to keep an eye peeled for Whitaker.

There's been no sign of him, thankfully, and Ashton has to admit, he's getting bored just sitting here quietly as the day wears on and on. Part of him regrets not asking his brother along today for moral support, though on the other hand, Austin would have told him to *suck it up, buttercup*, hours ago, and to stop being dramatic in general. Honestly, Ashton's not entirely ready for that sort of "help", and from a know-it-all sibling, no less.

He'll stop leaning into his negative feelings about what happened when he's damn well good and ready to do so.

Still, if he lingers out here much longer, the artists inside are going to begin wrapping up and then Ashton will be denied the opportunity to see them carving live. He won't get to observe either the art or magic being demonstrated, never mind hope to confirm any instincts on who might be *the* candidate to help him out. With a not-small amount of residual trepidation churning in his gut, Ashton spins around to face the



building and hops off of the wall, dusting off the seat of his pants once he hits the ground.

Striding towards the door more confidently than he feels, Ashton makes eye contact with the ticket-taker as he produces his elite pass. Well—technically not *his* pass, but possession being nine-tenths of the law and all, here he is. The lanyard and tag showed up in his mailbox a week ago and mark him as an artist, a convention invitee, and a part of Whitaker's team. While the last two are obviously no longer the case, Ashton's not about to pass up free admission with VIP access.

So he flashes the badge without hesitation and then immediately stuffs it into the depths of his pocket where it can't be questioned by anyone who might happen to know that Whitaker DiAngelo and Ashton Andrews definitely do not work (or play) together anymore.

The main floor of the convention is pretty much exactly as Ashton expected—the setup is always the same, year to year. Tons of individual booths occupy the majority of the space, each one decorated with its own certain flair. Sample artwork is hung and displayed on various racks and wires, there's heaps of related merch crowding tables, and most booths have a setup geared specifically for the owners to demonstrate their skills live and in person (plus lines of willing patrons gaming for a shot at the chair).

Conventions are great for business, but they're a toss-up when it comes to actually *getting* work done. Some artists come with their own clients lined up, more interested in putting on a curated show than anything else, some do flash sheets only, and some arrive willing to ink up whoever might happen along that day with a wild idea and fifty bucks. Theoretically, he could spend hours watching different artists at work or even sampling the well.

But he doesn't.

The truth is, Ashton knows exactly where he's going and to whose booth. He plays it cool just the same—dragging his feet, poking around, and generally pretending that he's not

actually making a beeline for Link Remington and *Soul Survivor*'s giant set-up towards the very back of the Expo Center's main hall.

Deep down (and despite all of his hesitation and bluster), Ashton pretty much knows that if anyone here is going to sell him on their ability to handle the re-work he has in mind for his piece, it's Link Remington. *Not* that he and Link have ever actually met—not officially, anyway—but Ashton has been a fan of his work for years, following him on various social platforms, reading articles, and buying magazines that feature the man or his shop. Overall, simply admiring his skills, steadfastly but from afar. Link does follow him back in several places, but Ashton figures that's a professional courtesy—they've never spoken.

The thing about Link's work that sets him apart from other magical tattoo artists is that it's *pure*. Each piece he creates has an obvious, visual backstory, the mystical elements entwined seamlessly with the ink in a thoughtful, intentional manner that Ashton recognizes from his own process. Link doesn't merely *tattoo*, he creates. A single glance at his art reveals someone who takes immense pride in everything he sends out into the world, a work ethic that Ashton relates to very strongly, and something that's non-negotiable when it comes to fixing his own piece.

As he approaches the booth for the studio that Link co-owns with his sister, *Soul Survivor*, Ashton spots the younger Remington—*Sam*, *short for Samantha*—first. It's widely known that the siblings perpetually have a plethora of magazines clamoring to shoot and interview them, partly because of Link's immense skill and fast-rising popularity, but also because both of them are model-gorgeous, and naturally so. The type of human beings admirably referred to as "God's favorites," without irony. Thanks to that, it's quite likely that almost everyone in this room could easily pick both Remingtons out of a lineup, and Ashton is no exception.

Sam's freehanding. A lock of pink-streaked, blonde hair falls across her forehead and she brushes it away reflexively

using her forearm, undaunted. She's in the zone, channeling laser focus onto the spot where her needle meets the client's skin. For the moment, she's working behind the right side of the table, at one of two stations the extra-wide booth offers, and Ashton weaves his way into the crowd of people gathered to watch. Sam's client is a particularly fit and muscular man sitting backward in the tattoo chair, and the piece that Sam is inking onto his shoulder is fairly photorealistic—her signature style.

Ashton's eyes scan it critically, noting a design that contains various but reasonably common elements, mostly skulls and thorny branches. It's nothing overtly elaborate or complicated, which is somewhat surprising. At first glance, the tattoo might even seem mildly generic, especially for a Remington piece, but Ashton knows what to look for and his eyes swiftly clock the spark of magic being infused from Sam's machine into each and every line. His own artistic experience and gut instinct both tell Ashton that underestimating this tattoo would be a mistake.

He's right. Sam finishes what she's doing less than five minutes after Ashton's arrival, and then the real demonstration begins. Sitting back and wiping her brow with a rag, Sam nods at the client to stand while one of her assistants drags a full-length mirror across the floor. On her feet, Sam positions the muscular man where she wants him: sandwiched between the mirror held up by her assistant and a second, enormous looking glass that's been propped against the back wall.

The size of both mirrors would probably seem more impressive if Sam herself wasn't so tall. The frames alone must be pushing ten feet, but the top of Sam's head *has* to be breaking six, though her high-heeled combat boots probably add a good five to seven inches. Live and in person like this, Sam dwarfs her own equipment and it's a bit jarring to absorb—magazines and social media don't do her presence justice. She's stunning—dressed in a whole lot of leather, her long hair pulled messily into a ponytail, accenting the tattooed stars on her left cheek. She's very attractive, aesthetically speaking.

As the audience murmurs amongst themselves, Sam clears her throat to indicate that it's showtime, and Ashton promptly forgets about her appearance completely.

*This should be good*, he thinks, recognizing the mirror setup as the standard way for a client to witness the full glory of a completed magical piece on a tough-to-see region of the body. This particular one has the benefit of reflecting everything that's happening for the crowd, as well.

"So," Sam says, clapping her hands together and turning to address the audience, larger than when Ashton first arrived, but that's expected for a reveal. Ashton tries not to be too annoyed when he's jostled roughly to the side by a handful of inconsiderate newcomers who partially obscure his view.

"For those of you who weren't around when I spoke earlier, this piece is a cover-up, and we did a bunch of work on it before the final session today," Sam explains, smiling widely. The excited, innocent look on her face is terribly charming in person and has Ashton developing an immediate understanding of why people gravitate toward the young artist. Pretty and charismatic, her personality stands in stark contrast to her usual creations, which from what Ashton has seen tend towards the dark and macabre. It's part of why he never considered hiring Sam over Link, though their skills are arguably comparable.

Depending on what happens next, Ashton wonders if he should reconsider.

"We all know that tattoos are personal, especially magical ones," Sam continues, the crowd murmuring their agreement. "So you'll forgive me for not delving into the backstory too deeply on this one, but suffice it to say, Remy's goal was to replace some bad memories with good ones. To show love and joy flourishing in the face of pain and death, and I hope—"

Here, Sam cuts herself off, faltering nervously. She flushes a little, which Ashton finds rather endearing. A genuine but unnecessarily self-deprecating reaction, since Sam is objectively the kind of skilled (and *popular*) artist that would

have anyone who knows their salt laughing at the idea that she'd showcase subpar work at an event such as this. Apparently, she is just that humble.

“Anyway,” Sam mumbles, clapping the newly-tattooed man on the shoulder and thereby directing the crowd's attention towards him. “Hope you like it, Remy. Go ahead and do your thing.”

Frustratingly, Ashton now has to stand on his tiptoes to see over the people that have unceremoniously pushed their way in front of him. He does so willingly, though, and watches with rapt interest as Remy turns his gaze toward his left shoulder and closes his eyes. After a few seconds of silence, the tattoo on his back begins to change.

This is the most fascinating part of the process for Ashton, always and with no exception. Seeing how an artist's magical touches influence the ink, how their charms translate onto skin and the human body—it's *always* different, always unique, and the pinnacle of why it's so damn important to secure an artist who is in sync with their client's vision, their needs, and who they *are* as an individual. Get it wrong, and the final result could be anything from “just not that impressive,” to outright disastrous.

There's nothing of the sort, not even a *hint* of that, here. There's also nothing terribly extravagant or showy—no fireworks that shoot wildly into the air from Remy's skin, no dragon that leaps off of the canvas and breathes fire. No, Remy's tattoo is much subtler and far lovelier than some loaded series of cheap tricks.

As they all stand by and observe, the thorny brambles that twine and wrap around piles of skulls and bones begin to shift and move. They stretch and snake, creeping further onto Remy's bare skin, winding around his chest and arms. Buds first appear and then bloom, blossoms peppering the full length of the vines as they continue to reach and stretch. It's hauntingly beautiful.

When it's all over, the skulls have disappeared completely, buried beneath a colorful canvas of ten different shades of roses, covering nearly every bit of exposed skin Remy has on display from the waist up. The crowd erupts into an enthusiastic burst of clapping and cheering, and Ashton watches with interest as Remy accepts a tissue from the assistant, blotting at his eyes before hugging Sam—quickly and gruffly, but visibly tight.

The onlookers disperse but Ashton sticks around, hovering at the periphery and half-listening as Sam goes over with Remy how he can keep the tattoo in its current form or alter it back, or even shift it to any step in between. Remy goes through the motions of doing so several times until he gets the hang of it, ultimately opting to put his t-shirt on with the roses in full bloom, many of them poking out from beneath his sleeves.

“Thanks, sister,” he hears Remy say, his voice laced with a *very* pleasant Cajun drawl. “I’ll see yous both this weekend for poker at my place, yeah? Don’t wanna disturb the princess while he’s working, he’s liable to take my head off.” At that, Ashton’s eyes follow Remy’s vague arm gesture over toward the left side of the Remington’s stall. As fascinating as Sam’s demonstration was, he almost forgot that there was more to see.

Good art will certainly have that effect.

Once reminded, though, his eyes alight swiftly on where Link—the man he came for—is hunched over, working on the stomach of a petite redhead and apparently, completely oblivious to the show being put on less than ten feet away. That’s consistent with what Ashton knows and would expect of him, and it feels encouraging.

Quietly, Ashton leaves Sam’s area behind to get closer to Link, essentially opting to creep over the man’s shoulder in order to watch him work. He’s close enough to eyeball the tattoos Link has decorating his own skin, but sadly, the man is about as covered today as Ashton himself. Worn flannel



instead of starched linen, but still covered, though probably not for the same reasons. Outside of magazine shoots and as suggested by his social media postings, that's all Link ever seems to be wearing—flannel and jeans. It's still a disappointment, but there are plenty of other interesting things to see.

Inching closer, Ashton somewhat belatedly realizes that Link and his client are having a quiet, lowkey conversation, one that doesn't seem meant for public consumption. He wonders if he should back off, since their tones sound sort of loaded, but the redhead catches his eye and winks. Reassured, he opts to stay, offering her a small, appreciative smile in return.

"I know I've said it like a hundred times, but this really means a lot to me, Link," she says, back to talking as if no one else is there, and Ashton supposes that's pretty normal when you're basically the storefront display for a bunch of window shoppers. Link only grunts, wiping a gauze square across his inked, bleeding canvas before getting back to it, and—*alright*, that's less the suave *artiste* Ashton expected, but to each their own.

"Seriously, Link," the redhead persists, lightly smacking Link's free hand where it's resting on the other side of her belly. "I thought I was a real renegade when I got that Hot Mess Express ink, still dunno what the heck I was on. I'm just glad I won't be stuck with "Bad Skylar" written in Comic Sans and with an arrow pointing... uh, well, you know, *down there*, for the rest of my life."

Link pauses at that to sit up. He dabs at his work again, exhaling a critical noise, and with his sideways movement, Ashton can now see that the piece is just a simple pair of shoes. Red and sparkly with a shiny, sequin-like effect that he knows from experience is not terribly easy to achieve, but that's... it. Just shoes. Ashton tries hard not to feel let down, but the redhead isn't remotely on the same page. When Link taps her shoulder, she lifts her head to look at the design and *squeals*.

“It’s *perfect*,” she gushes, kicking her feet. “Link, how did you make that whole thing disappear?! It’s like it was never there, even though the shoes are so much smaller!”

*Oh.*

Ashton mentally reverses course. If what Skylar says is true, then this *is* some impressive work. The skin around the shoes is alabaster-smooth and clear, with no sign there was anything else marring it at all. It’s virtually impossible to restore magically-inked skin in that fashion—Ashton would absolutely know. He’s worked extremely hard to become the artist that he is, and that’s not a skill in his arsenal for a reason. A good cover-up, sure, but the ability to *erase* existing ink?

His interest in possibly securing Link’s services heightens.

“Take ’em for a spin,” Link says gruffly and Skylar grins in response, eyes focused on her abdomen as the sparkly heels click together three times before vanishing completely in a puff of smoke. They reappear just as she throws her head back and laughs, drumming her feet in excitement before leaning forward and grabbing Link’s head to yank him forward and plant a rough kiss on his cheek.

“Geroff, Sky,” Link protests, ducking free to return his tattoo gun to the holder next to the rest of his ink and supplies. “Get out of my chair,” he demands, physically turning away, but even Ashton can see that his cheeks are pink and he’s smiling. Apparently, *humble* really runs in the family, and *endearing* isn’t trailing very far behind.

Clutching the Michael Shield book tightly in his hands, Ashton steels himself to make conversation. Speaking of skills that aren’t in his arsenal, that list doesn’t end at ink erasure. Casual social interaction has never been his forte, and it’s something Ashton nearly always has to psych himself up to do. As tough as it is, Ashton decides that once the redhead has said her goodbyes and Link is finished cleaning his station, he’s going to make his move.

The reality of the situation is that Ashton is tired of living with the disaster he's carting around on his back, and Link's skillset appears to be exactly what he needs. Add to that the quiet compassion, empathy, and style with which he managed to craft the witnessed cover-up for his friend, and really, there's nothing else to think about. Link is the tattoo artist for him.

While he waits, Ashton busies himself with perusing Link's sample books and the merch that *Soul Survivor* has displayed for sale. There's even an iPad on the table that's pre-loaded with an animated slideshow featuring a selection of Link's magical tattoos, and Ashton swipes through them with growing interest. There are plenty of examples that appear as equally complex and nuanced as Ashton is seeking for himself, and the obviously happy customers wearing them go a long way towards reassuring him that he's doing the right thing.

He's so engrossed in analyzing Link's various finished pieces that he doesn't immediately notice the shadow drop over him, cast by the man standing on the opposite side of the table. When Ashton does glance up, everything he might've been thinking flies out of his head, chased away by the pair of gorgeous, emerald-green eyes peering back at him. His mouth, suddenly dry as bone, drops open but nothing comes out.

He can't help but stare, admiring the faint smattering of freckles dusting the man's face, the soft curve of his plush lips, his artfully-tousled honey-brown hair, and the perfect dash of matching scruff painting his chin. It's all so flawless that Ashton can't help but wonder if some of those things were tattooed on, too.

*Link Remington*, up close and personal, puts the version Ashton has seen on social media, in magazines, and in various advertisements and interviews on notice. He's beyond lovely, his presence something like magnetic, and the moment their eyes meet, something electric flashes between them. It's jarring—an instant connection that feels impossibly deep and

powerful, a pull so oddly gripping that Ashton couldn't begin to put a name to it if he tried.

In actuality, it's terribly unnerving, and as he gropes at the table for something to hold onto, to keep himself upright in the face of—*what exactly is happening here?*—Ashton has the strangest, fleeting thought that whatever it is, he shouldn't fight back. Solely based on his expression, Link seems to be feeling some type of way too, and that's...interesting.

After a minute, a woman somewhere behind Ashton bursts out laughing, the piercing noise slicing harshly through the moment, and Ashton blinks hard. When he opens his eyes again, Link's still looking back, but they're essentially standing and staring stupidly at each other, which is bizarre.

Link breaks the silence.

"I know you," he says carefully, shaking a finger, eyebrows knitting together slightly as he visibly racks his brain. "You're Ash Andrews, right? You used to work for Whitaker, over at Sainted Angels. I love your stuff, man. Huge fan."

Blinking in surprise, Ashton takes a step back and touches a hand to his chest. "Me?" he asks, genuinely shocked. "That is... entirely unexpected. That is to say—I'm surprised you're aware of my work." The resulting grin he gets in response is nearly enough to knock Ashton off his feet, but he forces himself to try and act cool, to not stutter like a lovestruck fangirl, or stare blankly like the socially awkward freak he definitely is.

"Well, yeah," Link affirms brightly. "I follow you pretty much everywhere online. So, uh, you showing here today? Come to check out the competition?"

"Not exactly. Actually, I was hoping," Ashton starts and then hesitates, nearly losing his nerve now that the time has come and Link is so much more... *Link* than he expected. In other circumstances, he'd like to take this man to dinner, to buy him a drink, to see if Link would be interested in *him* as a

person. To get to know each other, perhaps discover whether that electric *pull* was merely a strange one-off or something much rarer. Something important.

Unfortunately, Ashton needs Link, and he came here for a reason.

*Decisions, decisions.* While his frontal lobe is entirely aware that hiring Link for such a tricky job and asking Link out are two emotionally-charged exploits that he should probably not be attempting at the same time, his hindbrain is having a difficult time focusing on *why* that is.

Ashton clears his throat and tries again. “If you know who I am, then you’ll understand when I tell you that I’m in need of your particular skill set, and that not just anyone will do.” As he speaks, Link’s cocky, flirty grin fades to something more mellow and contemplative, but he continues staring, regarding Ashton with unhidden, open interest.

“A cover-up?” Link guesses correctly, his hands absently organizing some of the artwork displayed on the table between them. Ashton nods and Link looks thoughtful. He shoots a glance over in his sister’s direction, but Sam is busy with a new client, so Link just strokes his chin. “Skylar was my last for today,” he muses, opening his mouth like he’s about to ask a question before abruptly stopping and narrowing his eyes.

“Can I ask you something?” he says, and Ashton nods again. “You and Whitaker, are you still—”

“Definitely not,” Ashton answers quickly, punctuating his reply with a firm shake of his head and a grimace. “And while I’m sure you were asking in regards to a professional capacity, I’m well aware of how rumors travel in this community, so I’d like to take the opportunity and clarify that the answer to whether we remain involved personally is a hard no, as well.”

The grin returns to Link’s face in full force, and Ashton can’t help but flush a little under his attention—it’s daunting. Link’s presence is so full, so lively, so all-encompassing in a way that Ashton was totally unprepared for. On the other hand,

it's been ages since he felt this sort of instant spark with another person, and he can't claim that he's not enjoying the way it's playing out.

Just then, Link's gaze dips to Ashton's hands, taking notice of the book he's holding. Slightly self-conscious, Ashton forces himself not to shrink or hide—he's not ashamed of his taste. In fact, he's proud of it. If Link is going to mock him for loving Michael Shield's fantasy novels, then Ashton would rather know now and save himself the trouble of getting invested, only to be hurt later. If the choice is between Link or Michael, well. Michael has spent years proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that he'll never let him down.

"You borrow that copy from the library?" Link asks lightly, though there's *something* lurking in his tone that Ashton can't quite put his finger on. "If not, it's pretty beat-up. You should get your money back." He winks, clearly finding his own joke amusing.

Surprised, Ashton holds the book up and smiles ruefully before shrugging. "No," he replies, "It's one of my favorites. I'm afraid that I've read it so many times, the love is really beginning to rub off. If this book were the Velveteen Rabbit, it would have long since anthropomorphized and hopped away. I own first editions of the entire series and, unfortunately, most of them look like this. What about you, have you read them?"

He looks expectantly back at Link, who doesn't answer. Instead, he tips his head to the side and bites his lip, shaking a finger in Ashton's direction as he says, "Hang on one sec."

While Ashton obediently "hangs on", Link pops over to the far side of the extended booth where Sam has started inking his second client. They exchange a handful of words before Sam looks up with eyebrows raised, darting a not-so-subtle glance in Ashton's direction. That's followed by a two-fingered wave, since the rest of them are wrapped around her machine. Link says something else and Sam nods, waving him away. Grabbing his jacket, Link briefly squeezes Sam's



shoulder as he makes his way back to where Ashton is waiting.

“You got any plans for tonight?” Link asks, eyes twinkling.

“Oh, um. No? Not yet,” Ashton replies, semi-stumbling over his words and resisting the urge to tell Link that like all nights, he *planned* to return home and sit in his apartment quietly. Luckily, his ungraceful answer has Link looking positively delighted. Jacket shrugged on, he rounds the table and boldly hooks an arm through Ashton’s right, steering them both onto the convention floor without a moment’s hesitation.

“Not yet, huh? Alright, then what would you say to a tour of Soul Survivor’s home base? We call ’er the Soul-arium, and she’s my pride and joy. It’s a pretty cool place, worth the field trip, though I’m definitely biased. Either way, it’s a safe place to kick back, talk shop, have a couple of beers, get to know each other better. And then, you know, we’ll decide together if I’m the right person to fix whatever that British douchebag fucked all to hell on your skin.”

Link’s presence at his side is intoxicating, but his last sentence brings Ashton to a dead stop, nearly tripping over his feet as he freezes in the middle of the aisle between parallel rows of booths. He stares warily up the few inches that Link has on him and frowns.

“How did you know that it was Whit?” Ashton asks softly, holding his book that much tighter while simultaneously doing his best to suppress the tremor threatening to destabilize his voice. “I never...”

The smile on Link’s face turns a little sad, and his grip tightens around Ashton’s arm. For whatever reason, it feels comforting. “Well, like you said, rumors travel fast in our world, but mostly? Call it a hunch, from a guy who’s been there.” Link’s silent for a moment, waiting as Ashton scans his face, finding only sincerity and perhaps a hint of regret in his expression. It’s all genuine enough that before he can second-

guess himself, Ashton is nodding and allowing Link to lead him on.

“For what it’s worth,” Link adds conversationally, as they stroll together, “I never liked that snotty bastard. You and me? Probably would’ve been friends a long time ago if he wasn’t tangled up in your life like plastic wrap in water.”

Ashton snorts, but the smile starts melting off of his face when he notices that they’re quickly approaching Sainted Angels’ booth and the familiar, frosted tips of Whitaker’s obnoxiously gelled hair come into view. He looks like he’s taking fashion advice from a nineties boy band.

Privately, Ashton wonders if he can perhaps just shrink behind Link and—

“Boy, he really messed you up,” Link remarks, and Ashton isn’t entirely sure if he loves or hates how incredibly blunt Link is about—*apparently*—everything. By way of a reply, Ashton scowls and attempts to take them on a detour between stalls, but Link stops him. His gaze is focused on Sainted Angels’ booth and he chews his lip, humming thoughtfully.

“Stop me if I’m out of line,” he says, scooping an arm around Ashton’s waist and tugging him in before there’s time to fully process what’s happening. It’s intimate, like *they’re* intimate, like they’ve *been intimate* and this is just natural for them. The gesture forces Ashton into Link’s side, has him instinctively fitting an arm around Link’s narrow waist, the other reaching to touch his solid, firm chest for balance, and *oh*.

*It’s very pleasant.*

Link raises a questioning eyebrow from *much* closer this time, and Ashton gives him a half-smile, squeezing his torso—he’s willing to see where this leads.

They fall into step far too easily, the lines of Link’s body firm but welcoming, and he’s warm, easy to sink into. When Ashton sniffs experimentally—he’s basically crushed into the guy’s ribcage, it’s only natural—he finds that Link smells like

a woodsy sort of cologne, spicy and musky, and with just the faintest hint of sweat from working.

In truth, Ashton has to basically choke back a groan, because this man is ticking *all* of his private fantasy boxes. While it's been an incredibly long time and he'd love to indulge, Ashton reminds himself that there's too much at stake to play fast and loose. He focuses instead on not tripping over Link's feet and subtly checking him out while he can't be caught doing so.

Something that catches his attention is the charm Link wears around his neck—now that it's right in front of his face, Ashton realizes that it's not just *any* old piece of jewelry. Of all people, Ashton would recognize that particular amulet anywhere, and at first, it's hard to believe his eyes. He glances covertly at the cover of the book in his hand for visual confirmation that isn't needed—his instincts are correct. That is *the* necklace that Michael Shield's main character, Dean, wears in every single book.

Upon even closer inspection, Ashton discovers that Link isn't actually wearing a necklace at all—it's a *tattoo*. An incredible tattoo, hyperrealistic, with a metallic copper finish to the amulet and a black cord that Ashton feels like he could absolutely reach out and wrap around his fingertips. The art has been inked with a magical component causing it to swing and sway with the movements of Link's body, just like a real piece of jewelry would. In awe, Ashton makes a mental note to ask about everything he's discovered later.

This, at least, explains Link's reaction to Ashton and the book. He must be a *huge* fan himself if he's willing to tattoo something so specific from the series onto his skin.

*Fascinating.*

Ashton is so caught up in those revelations, in the mounting excitement over Link and his potential interest in something he holds near and dear to his own heart—not to mention, the way Link is quite literally holding *him* as if he matters at all—Ashton forgets to be anxious, even as they

eliminate the remaining distance between them and Whitaker's booth.

He snaps back to reality less than a second before they pass, in time to see Whitaker himself look up and register Ashton and Link, tucked into each other's arms. Making unflinching eye contact, Link releases Ashton's shoulder in order to extend his arm and raise his middle finger boldly in Whitaker's direction. Almost manic laughter bubbles in Ashton's throat at the vexed expression on Whitaker's face, and he lets it fly, feeling reckless and wild as Link grins down at him and leads them confidently out the front door.



## CHAPTER 2

As far into the outskirts of the city as Link's shop is located, Ashton doesn't have much choice other than to drive himself, trailing behind Link's car in his own beat-up truck. It's the obvious and smart decision; after all, he'll need to return home at some point and it seems rude to create a situation where Link will feel obligated to drive him there. Also: technical stranger, taking him to a semi-obscure location in the middle of nowhere—seems prudent to have his own exit.

*Just in case.*

At the same time, Ashton would be lying if he said he wasn't disappointed, having passed on the opportunity to take a ride in Link's sleek, perfectly-maintained, classic muscle car. That, or perhaps he's simply reluctant to leave Link's side—the man is *magnetic*. Whatever the winning reason, Ashton nearly takes Link up on his offer anyway, even if the end result would be him traipsing towards town at midnight, wandering down pitch-black, unfamiliar, and undeveloped roads for miles before ultimately having to hitchhike back to his own apartment.

As he navigates carefully in the wake of Link's tail lights, Ashton takes a moment to give thanks that the *Enchanted* convention was held locally for both of them. There's no telling how this meet-cute might have gone had one or both of them been visiting from out of town, or if they were traveling for the experience. Honestly, Ashton doubts that he would have bothered engaging with Link at all in either scenario—the fact that he *could* run home with his tail between his legs if things didn't go smoothly was the defining push to *try*.

So, perhaps it's a moot point.

In that same vein, though, Ashton finds himself reflecting on what Link said about the two of them potentially becoming friends “a long time ago,” had it not been for Whitaker. He supposes that’s not such a strange thing to say. Since their split, Ashton has learned that Whitaker’s unsavory reputation preceded him, much more than he was aware. Perhaps the *really* strange thing where Link is concerned involves the two of them living in the same city, working in the same industry, moving in the same circles, and never once crossing paths until Ashton took fate into his own hands.

Shortly after exiting the highway that runs out of the city proper, Link leads their tiny caravan off the main drag, turning onto a frontage road that Ashton never would’ve seen on his own. It’s pitted, rough, barely paved, and not particularly well-maintained. The trees create a tunnel of sorts above their heads, and his junky ride isn’t thrilled about traversing the bumpy path. The sun’s gone down early tonight thanks to the time of year, and in the gloom, Ashton feels relieved that he never tried to make the trek to Link’s studio alone.

Aside from the occasional streetlight, there’s nothing *here*. Nothing besides deep, looming, and shadowy woods, their own headlights, and a horror-movie vibe, anyway. Without Link’s car in front of him assuring the way, there’s a zero percent chance Ashton wouldn’t have turned around by now and given up completely. A part of him is still considering it.

Right on time and out of the darkness, a dilapidated building rises to Ashton’s right, what appears to be an old and long-since abandoned factory. It’s here that Link pulls off the road and parks, in a small lot bordering a strange, isolated doorway that’s set down and almost directly into the hillside behind it.

“What,” Ashton murmurs to himself, turning the wheel to park next to him. This is not what he was picturing.

Taken aback, he kills the ignition but hesitates to actually get out of the truck. It’s not kind, but Ashton almost wonders whether Link’s intentions with him are actually good. He feels

slightly guilty for entertaining such a thought, even peripherally, but they *are* in the middle of nowhere, in front of what appears to be some sort of secret hideout. If it wasn't for the old-fashioned gaslight lantern hanging at the top of the stairs that's casting a bright, welcoming glow over the parking lot and the area leading down to the sunken door, Ashton might have taken his foot off the brake and bailed.

Common sense reigns, thankfully, and Link waits patiently, almost nervously, at the top of the steps. As Ashton exits his vehicle and locks the door behind him, Link reaches to straighten the sign that hangs from the arm of the gaslight's pole. It's a simple, painted affair that reads, "*The Soul-arium,*" with an arrow pointing down towards the stone-set door.

"I know it looks sketchy from the outside," Link admits almost sheepishly, and Ashton just raises his eyebrows, definitely not disagreeing. "But she really is a cool place. Nothing like her out there. Used to be a government bunker a million years ago, but a bunch of rich guys with too much money and time on their hands bought and renovated it completely. You know, just in case the world ever got nuked and they needed somewhere to keep smoking cigars and drinking brandy, yelling into the void."

"I see," Ashton says, glancing around. The exterior is certainly unique, he can give Link that. "And... the foundry? How does that factor?"

Link squints up at the building set fifty yards or so behind the door, like he hasn't really considered the question. "Pretty sure it was a decoy. There's nothing in there, smokestacks are fake. What there *is*, though, is a secret road into the bunker itself, a freaking tunnel that leads straight into the garage. Can't say I like leaving my best girl out here in the cold, but I figured you probably wouldn't appreciate having an underground passage sprung on you, wondering if we were headed to the Batcave or something."

He turns and hops easily down the short flight of stairs, Ashton following a lot more slowly, one hand brushing over

the sturdy, steel railing on his way down.

“And how did you come to take ownership of such a place?”

Link makes a disgruntled little noise as he fumbles with his keys. “Long story,” he mutters. “For simplicity’s sake, let’s just call it a family heirloom.”

While Ashton is certainly curious about what that means, he doesn’t press and Link doesn’t offer, finally succeeding in hauling the heavy door open and holding it for them to walk through. Light pours through the crack, and even from the limited view Ashton has, standing behind Link and peering over his shoulder, he can immediately tell that the odd exterior gives *nothing* away in regards to what’s within.

“I know it’s sort of weird,” Link hedges, that hint of nervousness and slight embarrassment coloring his voice again as Ashton steps past him onto an iron balcony that overlooks an absolutely cavernous room below. The Batcave reference suddenly makes sense. There’s a matching curved staircase bending around the wall to his right, but Ashton opts to pause at the railing and take in the whole scene first.

“There’s no drive-by, walk-in traffic, and it’s nowhere convenient for townies and drunk college students to stumble in for their first ass-unicorn or four-leaf-ankle-clover at ten p.m. on a Friday. But me and Sam’s business has always been mostly fueled by word of mouth, and we’re good with it staying that way. ’Specially since we live here, and with all the press we’ve handled lately—tends to bring out the creeps. Just works out better to keep off the beaten path, you know?”

“Hmm,” Ashton says, nodding. He doesn’t know. He’s always worked in easily-accessible storefronts in busy parts of town. “I can understand that.”

Slipping past him, Link starts down the stairs while Ashton continues to marvel at everything he’s seeing. “The Soul-arium” is truly surprising: beautifully constructed and maintained, nothing at all like its crumbling exterior facade.



The atrium they're standing in is two stories high at least, with walls and decorative pillars carved out of what appears to be marble. Link wasn't exaggerating about the rich-guy renovations, apparently.

The wrought iron balcony that Ashton's standing on is wide and welcoming, wrapping nearly halfway around the room. It boasts several luxurious, winged-back chairs pushed off to one side, plus a low table with a stack of magazines heaped on top. It's probably safe to assume that this is some sort of waiting or consult area, judging by the coffee and tea bar pushed up against the railing to the left.

As he descends the staircase, Ashton can't help but admire the nearly double-floor-to-ceiling display of backlit glass "windows" set into the wall behind the rail. They're obviously an illusion, since not even the tops are visible from the outside, a tromp l'oeil that Ashton finds extremely effective at convincing his own brain that he's not underground at all. There are plenty of other lighting fixtures, as well, resulting in a soft and homey glow that's doing the heavy lifting to showcase this as a welcoming space.

Abruptly feeling foolish for worrying, Ashton is mostly just glad that he didn't run.

The lower floor of the atrium is set up like a reception area, with plenty of plush-looking couches and chairs, a huge TV mounted to the wall, and a full bar sweeping across the entire right side of the room. Link catches him eyeing up the liquor display and shrugs sort of self-consciously, but Ashton's certainly not judging. It's clear from just a casual glance that "The Soul-arium" is a lot more than merely the Remingtons' studio (and apparently, Link and Sam's home). It's also a space they've crafted specifically to be welcoming towards anyone invited in.

For various reasons (none of which he could articulate at the moment), that realization makes Ashton oddly warm. Considering how and why he came to be here, it feels reassuring, as if it matters. He notices that Link is still looking

his way, smiling hopefully and maybe waiting for a reaction, so Ashton smiles back, hopefully indicating that he understands.

“It’s lovely,” Ashton offers.

Link beams. “C’mon,” he says, waving his arm for Ashton to follow as he moves past a tall reception desk and up three more stone steps, through an extra-tall archway and into an adjacent room. Naturally, Ashton follows, curious and wide-eyed, but for good reason. If he found the atrium impressive, he’s not sure that there are words to describe his feelings about the Remingtons’ actual workspace, which is definitely what this is.

It’s a library. Or, it *was* a library at some point, and it’s clear that the Remingtons have worked to retain the atmosphere. More marble pillars carry over the theme from the atrium, although these are square. They’re built into stunning hardwood floors and bordered by cozy brick walls on all sides. At the far end of the room is a curtained alcove with a giant telescope featured inside, and Ashton knows that his mouth is hanging open as he tries to take it all in.

Aligned end-to-end down the center of the room are three extra-long, dark, wooden tables, each with matching chairs. Glancing over them, Ashton clocks plenty of art supplies and organized paperwork spread down the length. Link wanders closer and gestures to a laptop charging on one side of the closest table to where they stand.

“Sam,” he says, rolling his eyes. “Kid loves all that digital art shit.”

“And you don’t?”

Link laughs softly. “I’m old school,” is all he replies.

Nodding, Ashton wanders further into the space, letting his eyes rove over the table that, by default, must belong to Link. It’s sparser and more basic than Sam’s—where Sam has cluttered stacks of books, state-of-the-art tools, her tech, and a handful of fidget toys meant to spin and squeeze, Link has

less. A few staple reference texts about magical art infusion, but the rest is practical supplies. Sketchbooks, pencils, pens, even charcoal and paints, all neatly kept. Ashton respects that, can relate to it, and it makes him feel drawn to Link even more.

Turning his attention to the rest of the library, Ashton takes in the way that the siblings have divided both sides of the room into sections. Using wooden bookcases that match the tables and are filled to the brim with various works on magic, art, and other, far more obscure and fascinating topics that Ashton would *love* to lay eyes on, they've created semi-private stations that still fit with the aesthetic of the room.

Different alcoves have different chairs or tables, obviously meant to accommodate different tattooing needs. Ashton thinks he recognizes Link's style more in the stations to the left, while Sam's are probably the ones to the right. It's all a bit overwhelming, unlike anything he's seen in the entirety of his professional life.

Over the course of Ashton's career, from training to apprenticing to freelancing, every shop he's worked for (including, and perhaps especially Sainted Angels) has been *sterile*. Not in regards to cleanliness, which is a given, but rather personality. Blah, boring, and sterile. Emotionless, lacking *heart*. While it was never his shop or place to say, that whole concept and presentation always sat uncomfortably with Ashton, being in such stark contrast with what they *did* in the space. Whitaker never understood his gripe, wouldn't even consider entertaining his thoughts on the subject, and in hindsight, Ashton resented that, too.

But *this*—something about this place calls to him and feels *right*. Something about it tells Ashton that it's where he's meant to be, that he's finally come home. Of course, he knows that's ridiculous. That he's being strange and silly, likely projecting the weird, intense emotions being stirred up in his head by what they're about to discuss. After all, he's only just met Link, and this is the man's home. Most assuredly, he's getting *way* ahead of himself.

Still, as Ashton turns to look at Link, full of wonderment and even joy, he finds the man with both hands shoved deep into his pockets, staring back with a soft, appreciative smile on his face. Something passes between them, and he can't help but start to wonder.

Perhaps it's not so strange, after all.



Against all odds (and everything Ashton's prepared himself for when it comes to having this discussion), talking to Link turns out to be quite easy. Perhaps that's because Link is somewhat of an open book himself, offering anecdotes and personal stories from his own life that both assist Ashton in getting to know him and also serve to keep him from spiraling while he recounts his own bullshit. Thanks to that, Ashton manages to tell his story without drifting too far into unhappy nostalgia or making both of them terribly uncomfortable by having some sort of mental breakdown.

They wind up sitting together on one of the atrium couches, and Link shows himself to be a surprisingly thoughtful host. He disappears momentarily, returning from the depths of the bunker with a big plate of sandwiches that he sets down carefully before retrieving a bottle of whiskey from the bar. After pouring each of them a generous three fingers, he leaves it on the table with an easy, "Help yourself."

Grateful for the liquid courage, Ashton *might* favor the whiskey a bit more heavily than is strictly wise on an empty stomach, too late in his attempts to compensate for it with bread, meat, and cheese, none of which put any real damper on his significant buzz.

The end result is an Ashton that's somewhat looser and far less uptight about sharing than usual. That's okay, in his

opinion, because he needs to be honest. It's crucial, even. Link deserves to have all of the background information on the project—on *him*—before he decides whether he even *wants* to attempt giving Ashton what he's seeking.

Between sips and bites, Ashton pours out his entire relationship with Whitaker. How they met while Ashton was still in art school, how Whitaker had been a guest speaker in a “practical applications” seminar meant for students who had no idea what they wanted to do with their talents upon graduation. How after watching Whitaker's presentation and listening to him talk, Ashton found himself smitten with tattooing and never looked back.

It didn't hurt that Whitaker's specialty was *magical ink*, or that Ashton had always been interested in exploring the intersection of art and magical infusion—that discovery only cemented his choice and made him feel increasingly enamored. *So* enamored that he gladly stepped into the role of “Wide-Eyed Ingenuer,” opposite Whitaker's “Captivating Mentor,” with the experienced man more than happy to take a naive and eager fledgling underneath his wing.

Whitaker was an industry veteran at that point, running his own shop and boasting a reputation that kept him in both expensive liquor and designer clothing without breaking a sweat. As far as Ashton was concerned, their *partnership* was a match made in heaven. He didn't know what he didn't know.

And to be fair, at first, Whitaker was cautious to maintain professional distance between the two of them. To curate the appearance of having principles, boundaries, and ethics. He initially set Ashton up as an apprentice to one of his employees instead of himself, theoretically allowing him to grow as both an artist and a person without undue pressure on *how*, exactly, he should go about doing that.

Most importantly, Whitaker gave him the praise, acceptance, and validation he never received before finding the art community—for his work, yes, but also for who he was becoming as a *person*.

Hindsight being what it is, Ashton can see through the facade now. Can pick out the various situations in which Whitaker was carefully manipulative, exerting his influence in the most subtle of ways. He was particularly skilled at leading Ashton to feel empowered and as if he was making his own choices, all the while ensuring that the ones made benefitted both himself and the studio, in whatever manner Whitaker desired.

Eventually, that subtle influence began seeping into Ashton's personal life. The first time Whitaker kissed him, Ashton had recently become a full-fledged artist in his employ. At that point, he still had stars in his eyes when it came to the man. In many ways, Ashton owed him his entire life, certainly his career and client list. Aside from that, just the idea of being *wanted* by someone as skilled and as talented, as *successful* as Whitaker was—well, it was flattering. Even now, Ashton's not sure that he can be blamed for falling so easily into that trap.

And Whitaker wasn't a *bad* man, not really. At least, not when it came to their relationship. He never treated Ashton cruelly or forced him to do things sexually that he wasn't interested in doing. Whitaker simply knew what he wanted and wasn't averse to using control and manipulation to get there. Even being somewhat aware of those proclivities, Ashton hadn't been unhappy with him. At Whitaker's side, he'd enjoyed his life in general, liked his job at the shop, and he and Whitaker shared many good times together.

It's a conflicting history to reflect upon, but ultimately, the only thing that Ashton *really* wishes he could change about it has to do with the ending.

Sitting in the Soul-arium's lobby, he tells Link as much. The rest—well, those were learning experiences, everyone has them. The problem truly was the way Whitaker behaved *after* they split, and Ashton... perhaps he should have seen it coming.

The day Ashton broke up with him, Whitaker seemed to take it well. Ashton tried to be sensitive, bringing his soon-to-

be-ex to his favorite martini bar where Whitaker nursed drink after drink, listening intently in what *appeared* to be a thoughtful manner as Ashton laid himself bare. As kindly as he was able, Ashton explained that while he loved Whitaker as a friend, he wasn't *in* love with him, and he thought they both deserved better than that.

The conversation had been calm and civil, they embraced comfortably outside the restaurant before leaving in separate Ubers, and Ashton returned home that night feeling relieved. It was as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders, since—at the time—Ashton was *sure* he'd managed to preserve both a valuable friendship and his job in Whitaker's shop.

Not to mention, his work-in-progress ink. In retrospect, this is where he should have focused his concern—it was the biggest thing hanging in the balance, the aspect of his life most out of his control and *in* Whitaker's hands. Obviously, he should've waited. He simply didn't recognize the danger at the time.

Of course, Ashton considered that in a worst-case scenario, his tattoo could be at risk of going unfinished. That *is* the worst scenario he envisioned, though—*that it wouldn't be finished*. That Whitaker would be too heartbroken to work on him, and that he'd need to find a new artist and perhaps shift his vision. He never even considered Whitaker might be capable of something more sinister and vindictive.

His optimistic belief that things were fine seemed to be validated when Ashton showed up to work the next day and Whitaker treated him the same way he always had, minus the tongue down his throat and the frequent, cheeky requests for sexual favors in the supply closet. In fact, things were almost *too* perfect, too normal and routine, and perhaps that should have been a clue as well.

Still, even now, Ashton has to wonder why he should have naturally assumed the worst of someone who previously only ever seemed interested in lifting him up.

Of course, not everyone agreed. In the aftermath, Ashton's brother Austin, for instance, was quick to point out that anything Whitaker might've given Ashton had strings attached or helped Whitaker himself out in some fashion. All the same, and even knowing the outcome, Ashton thinks that's a rather cynical way to look at life in general. Most things in the world are quid pro quo, tit for tat. That fact certainly doesn't mean that *everyone* is secretly hiding a monster behind their mask.

Whitaker was, though.

Three days after their break-up, Whitaker asked how Ashton felt about scheduling an evening session, one with the specific goal of putting the final touches on his back tattoo—mainly, the magic. This particular piece of art was something they worked on together, something Ashton spent hours painstakingly sketching, erasing, and sketching again until it felt perfect, hunched over his desk until his back ached.

*Wings.* Big, beautiful, feathery wings that would stretch wide and glow, a true extension of himself and how hard he's worked to earn them.

They would be a metaphor for everything Ashton thought he'd never do, never accomplish, but was doing all the same. For his mother, who told him that he'd never amount to anything, that art—*any art*—wasn't sustainable, wasn't a "real" course of study or basis for a career. That magic was a waste of time and energy. For his father, who disappeared into the night without bothering to say anything to Ashton at all. For himself and his own insecurities, for the ways he let the world convince him that he wasn't good enough but still somehow managed to prove himself wrong.

Suffice it to say, inking those wings onto his skin was a *very* big deal.

Design-wise, they were meant to stretch across the entirety of Ashton's back, spilling over onto his shoulders and biceps, the feathers individually drawn and then filled in a deep, inky, blue-black shade. Magic would help the color appear to be



reflecting the light, and each feather would shift and shimmer, creating an ombré effect with any movement.

Whitaker was confident. He *said* so, repeatedly reassuring Ashton that he had the complicated magical component worked out completely. That when the piece was finished, Ashton would be able to flex his muscles and the wings would appear live in the air behind him. He said they'd be strong and fierce and glowing, a testament to Ashton's character, his internal strength, and frankly, a walking billboard for both his and Whitaker's artistic strength and skill.

Recounting this part of the story is rough, and Ashton has to break, sucking in a haggard breath and glancing away, shifting against the couch in what he hopes is a discreet motion. He's not trying to be rude, but it's simply too difficult to maintain eye contact with Link while simultaneously sharing this piece of his history. Being vulnerable is one thing, but Ashton's not actually interested in bursting into tears, and Link's thoughtful, understanding eyes with their adorable crinkles at the corners *might* just be the thing that puts him over the edge.

Fortunately (or something), that can only happen if he keeps looking at Link's lovely face, so the solution is clearly to turn slightly to the right and focus on repouring his drink, then play with the rim of the glass where it rests in his lap. All the while, Link sits quietly, patient and still, only responding by reaching out to squeeze Ashton's knee briefly before taking his hand away again. There's no pity, no judgment or demand, just the right amount of solace, offered without expectation. It's appreciated.

"So, anyway," Ashton continues, clearing his throat before launching back into sharing his memories of that day. In his peripheral vision, Link nods for him to continue.

It was a Saturday.

It was raining outside. Ashton's socks had gotten wet on the short walk from his truck into the shop, and the rubbing of

his dress shoes against wet, irritated skin led him to consider whether it would be inappropriate to go shoeless.

He left them on.

The shop smelled like lemon disinfectant. Whitaker's regular cleaner had been through earlier that morning, so everything was scrubbed and shiny. Ashton arrived with coffee for them both, despite the hour. Whitaker's fancy, eight-dollar latte went mostly untouched, which was irksome. In retrospect, it was all so normal, so mundane.

As for the man himself, Whitaker had been quiet, focused, but he was often that way when working, so Ashton didn't think much of it. In the entirety of the six-plus hours he sat in Whitaker's chair, they exchanged a total of maybe ten words. Ashton came well-prepared for such a long session, spending most of it napping and then later, with earbuds in, streaming a TV show on his phone. Doing so served to both entertain himself and to ward off the misophonia, the amplified physical discomfort that came from the tattoo machine buzzing non-stop in his ear, moving repeatedly over already-sore skin. The weather did nothing to drown that out.

*It will be worth it*, he told himself, somewhere around hour five when the pain was approaching unbearable. Whitaker didn't offer him a break, though, and he was the one *doing* the work, so with a little grit and willpower, Ashton managed to stick it out and power through.

By the time Whitaker finished, it was long past sunset, taking the sky from ash gray to jet black. As such, the other two artists who were hanging around earlier in the day were already gone. Thinking back on the whole series of events, Whitaker *did* seem oddly smug, strangely self-satisfied when he sat back on his stool and pronounced the tattoo complete. In the moment, Ashton chalked that up to being pleased with the outcome of a difficult piece of work.

He wasn't wrong.

At Whitaker's word, Ashton practically leaped from the chair. He could barely contain his excitement, pulse racing at the thought of seeing his beautiful wings on display for the first time, both on his skin and in the air. He was so sure that it would be one of the most impressive pieces he had ever seen.

The rain began to pour harder overhead, the lightning flashing and thunder clapping, maybe in warning. He didn't pay attention.

If nothing else, the righteous pride on Whitaker's face as they approached the mirrors together should have clued him in that something was wrong, but without context, Ashton didn't even realize that was what it was.

No, as Whitaker walked him between the two-mirror set up in the shop's hallway, constructed for just such an occasion, all Ashton could feel was *thrilled*.

"Flex," Whitaker commanded, smirking as Ashton stood shirtless and staring at his reflection in the mirror, barely giving him a moment to glance over the ink decorating his skin.

"Go on, flex."

Ashton frowned. There was something glaringly wrong, that much he could tell from the jump. The outline of the wings was there, yes—bone and muscle, anyway. Anatomically, the wings existed, but they were *wrong*. Where there should have been blue-black feathers, there was damaged skin. Burn marks, fractured alulas, everything misshapen and sad-looking. These were bruised, broken appendages that appeared *nothing* like what Ashton had envisioned, what he designed.

"What...?" was all he could manage at first, the air stolen from his lungs as he tried to make sense of the mess marring his back. Whitaker didn't answer, just looked on placidly, head tilting coldly to one side.

"Flex," Whitaker repeated, arms crossing tightly over his chest, and it was then that Ashton slowly began to understand

what was happening. His blood pounded angrily inside his head in time with the rain against the roof, but at the time, his mind refused to accept the truth.

*Surely, he thought, Whitaker wouldn't do something so deliberately hurtful, so elaborately deceitful—would he?*

There *had* to be some other explanation, something he was missing. That possibility was beyond cruel—too much to consider. Wracking his brain for options, Ashton half-panicked and settled on the idea that he was simply getting ahead of himself. Perhaps this was all an elaborate illusion, something Whitaker created to surprise him. Perhaps the design would transform fully into the wings he was expecting with a little concentration and a simple flex.

*That must be it, he thought.*

Presently, Ashton explains this theory to Link using the example of the evolving tattoo Sam created for Remy as a convention demo. He describes the way the roses grew from a barren tangle of nothing to a host of full blooms under Remy's attentions and how thrilled Remy seemed about it.

"That *must* have been it, had to be," Ashton explains, recounting his own desperate feelings inside that moment, his frantic and terrible need for reality to *not* be what it so obviously was.

In his peripheral vision, Link winces and stays silent, giving Ashton all the time he needs to continue, not pushing when his one long sip of whiskey turns into three. Though he doesn't speak, Link does reach out an arm, draping it across the back of the sofa like he *wants* to touch Ashton and provide comfort but isn't entirely sure that it would be welcomed. Any other time, Ashton would have been happy to pause and correct Link's misgivings, but he fears that if he stops now, he'll never get this out.

"So I flexed," Ashton says, diving back into the story head first, the ice rattling in his glass.

The wind howled, the rain poured, the lightning flashed, and Ashton flexed.

He flexed, and then watched in the mirror as his new wings came to life for the first time and his dreams of what they might be went swirling down the drain. To Whitaker's credit, they did appear behind him, just as planned. Just as they worked together to create and have them do. Except, despite the wings rising proudly into the space above Ashton's shoulders, they remained every bit the contorted, monstrous messes he saw inked flat onto his skin.

There was no evolution, no magical moment where the wings transformed from ruined to healed, and Ashton was very abruptly forced to accept that there wouldn't be. That the disaster he saw was what he would be stuck with.

Overwhelmed with sadness and fury, Ashton found himself choking on air, staring into the mirror, and then the ceiling, struggling to process the details. The way that even the limited feathers he *did* have were drawn damaged and twisted, a few of them appearing to *fall off* as he stood there watching. His wings were truly grotesque, more like sticks than wings at all, and they were clearly created to look as if they *hurt*.

They did hurt. Not physically, of course, save for the echoing burn of the needle pulsing against abraded skin, but in every other way something *can* hurt. For everything his wings were supposed to represent and display, this was the polar opposite.

To Ashton, it felt as if he was staring at the physical manifestation of every insecurity, every dark and warped feeling he'd ever harbored about himself made tangible and brought to life. *Damaged*. This was how Whitaker wanted people to see him, this was how people *would* see him, now and forever.

And Whitaker laughed. He *laughed*.

"A year later and I'm only just now working up the courage to look into having it fixed," Ashton admits softly.

He's still glaring down at his lap, focusing intently on his fingers and where they're wrapped around the now-empty tumbler. His head is a little fuzzy, limbs warm and heavy with the effects of the alcohol, and he's unabashedly glad for it. This was a hard enough conversation to have, no need to endure it sober.

And perhaps that's why, when Link's hand inches closer, when it *finally* closes the distance, squeezes his shoulder, and stays there, Ashton leans into the touch without really thinking about what he's doing. It's *definitely* why he's able to summon the courage to look up and meet Link's gaze.

When he does, though, it's a strange comfort to see that Link looks horrified, not at all as if he thinks that Ashton is being overdramatic or ridiculous. That alone allows him to exhale a sigh of relief and to relinquish some of the anxiety he's been holding onto while spilling his guts.

"Ash," Link says, shifting closer on the couch as his grip tightens on Ashton's shoulder. His expression is incredulous, his wide, green eyes blinking as he shakes his head in disbelief. "That shit is *really* fucked up."

Unable to help it, Ashton laughs. Link's words are just so... *pure*, considering the complexity, the layered nuance of the situation, and all of Ashton's feelings surrounding it. For his part, Ashton has wallowed and dwelled, over-analyzed and second-guessed himself for a *year*, now. Over and over he's tried to be objective: organizing his memories and boxing up his emotions, only to pull each one out in turn and consider it carefully in context. He's returned to the situation repeatedly, taking months to gain distance, to work up the courage to face each difficult piece from an objective point of view.

Hearing the reality of it stated so plainly, so bluntly—it does Ashton's soul *good*.

Smiling widely back at Link, he laughs again and then Link joins in, and soon they're giggling somewhat drunkenly, heads tipped carelessly onto the back of the couch, their faces *way* too close together. At that moment, Ashton knows that he

made the right choice in coming here, for more than one reason. He'll just take whatever comes next one cautious step at a time.

“Alright,” Ashton says, once they’ve both regained a modicum of control over their respective emotions, though neither of them moves away. Emboldened by the sustained proximity, Ashton’s fingers develop a mind of their own, working their way across the couch cushion to cover Link’s hand where it rests splayed against the fabric. “So, do you think you can help me?”

Link’s smile is blinding as he grins in reply, nodding confidently, without any sign of hesitation. “Oh, hell yes,” he replies.



## CHAPTER 3

A week later, hunched over preliminary sketches laid out across Link's workbench in the library, they begin to hammer out the project's many details. A *project* is definitely what this particular tattoo is, as the planning, complex artistry, and magical infusion needed to pull it off are inarguably next level. While Link seems confident in his skills, he's also quick to admit that the execution will still be a challenge, albeit one he's both excited and anxious to take on.

After quite a bit of hemming and hawing, Link ultimately predicts that Ashton's tattoo cover-up will take a minimum of five sessions. Potentially more, but definitely not less. Subsequently, Link hinges his willingness to take Ashton on *officially* as a client on one thing, and one thing only: a promise.

They're sitting across from each other, and Link looks him square in the eyes when he declares, "You can't look. Like, at all. Not 'til it's done."

"You can't be serious."

"As a heart attack, baby. I'm all-in, but you gotta swear you won't try and activate the magic *or* peep the ink on your back until the design is finished and I give the 'OK'."

"Fine," Ashton says reluctantly, *warily*, side-eyeing Link with everything he's got.

"Hey, I know it's a big ask, but sometimes these things get *seriously* worse before they look any better," Link explains. He gazes at Ashton thoughtfully, almost critically, like he's trying to suss out whether he thinks Ashton can be trusted to keep his promise and not peek. "*Also*—and you know this—there's no telling what'll happen when Whitaker's charms interact with mine. Gotta give a guy time to wrestle that shit into submission."



Ashton raises an eyebrow, but doesn't disagree.

"Can't have you sliding into some kind of depression spiral, staring into your bathroom mirror and thinking I jacked you up worse. *'Specially* when I'm not even there to defend myself." Link bites back a smirk as Ashton stares at him, steadfastly unflinching and not actually answering his question. Link just blinks innocently and doesn't relent, so after a minute or two of silence, Ashton throws up his hands.

"Alright," he relents, leaning back in the chair he's currently occupying, rough sketches lying forgotten between them. "I was lying the first time I said I wouldn't, but I'm being honest now." It's the truth, or close to it, though Ashton knows that the temptation will be near-impossible to resist. The issue is that what Link is *really* asking for in this promise is *trust*, and when it comes to this tattoo, *trust* is precisely what Ashton struggles with handing over.

In the end, Ashton supposes that Link's request is not only doable but worth it, considering that said trust has to go both ways. It's not as if he *couldn't* steal a glimpse when he's alone in his apartment—Link would *never even know*.

Clearly finding his reticence amusing, Link leans forward over folded hands, eyes twinkling. His interlaced fingers are smeared with color, and Ashton has the odd urge to suck them into his mouth, one by one. For no other reason than to see if, on Link's skin, *red* and *blue* and *green* might have different tastes.

*What a ridiculous notion*, he thinks, that reality not changing in the *least* his desire to do so anyway.

"Alternatively," Link suggests, "I could chain you up in the basement until we're finished. The Soul-arium, the bunker it's in? This place has a whole-ass dungeon one floor down. Hidden doors, chains, arm and leg irons—the whole nine yards." Link wiggles his eyebrows and secretly, Ashton thrills at his blatant flirting, at how obvious it is that the attraction he feels isn't one-sided. Despite that, he resists overtly crossing the line—it would be reckless. He's done it before with much

lower stakes, and look at what it wrought. That mistake was a *huge* part of what brought him here.

“Sounds messy,” he replies instead, and Link laughs.

Perhaps *after*, when this piece is done and the tension between them isn’t riddled with painful memories and regret from Ashton’s past—maybe then they can explore what’s between them, see where things go. If Link remains interested, of course. If this flirting isn’t merely an elaborate ploy to gain Ashton’s trust and make him vulnerable.

*Not* that he’s sincerely entertaining that being the case. Not that he would be anywhere near the Soul-arium right now if he considered that anything more than a passing intrusive thought, but nonetheless. His intuition, his innate sense of who is worthy of his love, his faith, his trust—it’s failed Ashton before.

Oblivious to the internal turmoil he’s experiencing, Link keeps talking. “So, if you’re good with that—the plan for the ink, not the... chains in the basement thing—then there’s only one thing left to do.” Tipping his head back, Link tugs his bottom lip in between his teeth before slowly letting it be pulled back out.

Mesmerized by the gesture, Ashton just nods, fairly certain he’d happily agree to damn near anything Link proposed while looking like *that*.

“Show me,” Link says gently, and those two little words are like a bucket of cold water poured directly over Ashton’s head.

*Right.*

It’s not as if this request is some sort of revelatory concept, or even anything he wasn’t expecting. Of course, Link has to see the whole canvas. Has to visualize the blank slate and all of its moving parts before he can get to work. *Of course.*

Up until this point, the work and the planning has been a strictly over-the-shirt affair. Link had no issue with using a measuring tape and some traced lines to come up with relative

proper dimensions that would be usable for his sketches. He's been wonderful—so careful around Ashton, so sensitive, thoughtful. He's never pushy, never suggests that Ashton is overreacting by wanting to keep his ink disaster under wraps for as much and as long as possible. Link seems to perfectly and completely understand the way this entire mess amounts to so much more than color and blood and skin, and Ashton is grateful.

That actually reminds him to bring up what Link deserves in return, which is the entire world, but he'll have to settle for hazard pay.

“Wait.” Ashton quickly derails the previous train of thought and the way Link is visibly preparing himself to catalog his skin. “Payment. We didn't discuss...” He clears his throat. “I'm aware of your going rates, but this particular piece is extremely labor-intensive. You should increase your hourly and charge for the extras, it's what I would do.”

The corner of Link's lip quirks up as he narrows his eyes and nods once, leaning back in his chair with both arms folded across his chest. “You're askin' me to charge you *more*, Ash? Usually, I get people in here begging for the opposite.” Link's tone is teasing, and Ashton rolls his own eyes in response.

“I'm treating you the way that I would want to be treated as the artist in this situation,” he persists, not failing to notice the way that Link chews on the cap of his pen, twisting it around in his mouth without using his hands. Somewhat nonconsensually, Ashton experiences a rapid stream of thoughts regarding how much he would *love* to be that pen, but this is not the time.

“Very sexy of you,” Link replies cheekily and around the cap, which does not help.

Ashton ignores him. “I appreciate both your kindness and care, but I'm a client. You are a talented artist providing a specialty service. The fact that I *like* you as a human being only bolsters my desire to ensure you receive the compensation you deserve.”

The cap-less pen gets twisted around Link's fingers. "Well, when you put it like *that*," he begins, and then adds, "I'm still going to say no."

"Link—"

With a dismissive grunt, Link drops said pen onto the table with a clatter, tapping his foot against the floor. "I'll make you a deal," he offers, hand reaching out across the table, palm up, *trust me*. "Come work with us, here. At Soul Survivor, with me and Sam. Let me put you on the website, brag on how the great Ashton Andrews is taking clients at the Soul-arium these days. I know you need a job, and we could sure as hell use the fresh blood. If you're worried about being under me—"

Here, Link stops and snorts, shaking his head briefly before continuing, because apparently, some jokes *are* entirely too low-hanging fruit, even for him. "We can work it like a contractor position. We use your name, you use the space, bring your own gear or pay me for mine—whatever you want. I'm flexible," Link finishes with a wink. "You might even say, *easy*."

Ashton squints, skeptical. Link isn't wrong about the whole "needing a job" thing, but he can't quite parse what Link and the Soul-arium would get out of this deal. In exchange for employment and a complex tattoo cover-up with the potential to reverse a severe depression spiral, the Remingtons get *him*?

"Seems wildly uneven," he replies reluctantly, but Link just blows a raspberry and waves a dismissive hand.

It *is* Link's prerogative, and the more Ashton considers the offer, the more he thinks he'd be a fool to turn it down. While he does have some savings, living off of them in perpetuity isn't exactly a solid gold plan. Plus, he actually does have a list of loyal clients who went Jerry Maguire on Sainted Angels in the wake of his departure, and many are waiting to book appointments for both works-in-progress and new pieces alike. He's been trying, but tattooing sporadically out of his living room isn't doing his reputation any favors.

While Link waits patiently for his answer, Ashton scours his head for a good reason—*any* reason, really—why he should say no. He comes up empty.

In the end, Ashton wishes he could say that it's his need to make money, or even his interest in getting back to work in a meaningful way that has him reaching across the table to shake Link's hand and seal their gentlemen's agreement. Frankly, though—and not that Ashton is admitting this to anyone—having a valid reason to spend additional time at the Soul-arium is a *very* enticing proposition. It's an excuse to be around Link more, and against his better judgment, that is something Ashton is *very* interested in.

“Welcome aboard,” Link says, squeezing his palm, and for the first time in quite a while, the prevailing feeling Ashton has when he thinks about his future is *hope*.

After that, there's no more stalling to be done, so Ashton relinquishes the lingering prayer that his luck will never run out. Pushing back from the table, he stands, glancing first around the library and then out into the foyer-slash-reception area that Link and Sam seem to conveniently and accurately call “the atrium,” checking for any lingering souls.

It's late. Ashton stopped by to see Link long after the shop's business hours finished, but he's learned that doesn't necessarily mean that the Soul-arium will be empty. Earlier, when he first arrived, Sam and some friends were hanging out in the atrium, drinking and playing card games while Ashton and Link adjourned to the library. While he only interacted in passing, guided through the room with Link's protective hand between his shoulder blades, everyone seemed friendly, and the vibe was joyous.

Those people have since gone, either home to their own beds or off to crash in one of the many spare rooms this bunker has on standing invitation to guests. Generous to a fault, Sam and Link apparently think nothing of letting friends use the extra spaces at will, and in fact, they keep a host of beds made up for that express purpose. That's a fact that a

fortunate Ashton learned from experience, the first time he came here and drank slightly too much to drive home safely.

Link, ever the perfect host, hadn't given him the chance to try. Instead, he insisted Ashton sleep off both the liquor and the post-trauma dump adrenaline crash, doing so without so much as a hint of judgment. Chattering enthusiastically about *ink brands*, of all things, Link led him down several hallways, stopping at a somewhat utilitarian space that nonetheless functioned flawlessly for its intended purpose.

Ashton enjoyed his night's sleep very much. He enjoyed waking up to a cup of coffee from Link even more, and he regretted immensely having to leave.

He wishes he had some of that early-morning tranquility now.

Craning his neck, Ashton attempts to see as much of the atrium as he can without appearing unhinged. At the moment, the common spaces of the Soul-arium appear to be abandoned. That should be reassuring, but there's no accounting for who might be lurking just out of sight or around a given corner. At bare minimum, Sam is down here somewhere, and this is her home—she could wander in at any moment and be perfectly within her right to do so. Just thinking about that possibility, Ashton's fingers falter on the buttons of his dress shirt.

Thankfully, Link senses his discomfort immediately. "Hey," he says, appearing like magic at Ashton's side, the light touch of fingers on his elbow both reassuring and humiliating at the same time.

"I'm sorry," Ashton murmurs, ducking his head. "I know that I must seem—"

"Don't." Link cuts him off, closing his hand the rest of the way around Ashton's arm and tugging. "You don't gotta apologize for how you feel, and I'm not gonna listen to you beat yourself up about it." Taken aback, Ashton lets himself be swept along in Link's wake, uncaring that his shirt is

unbuttoned halfway down his chest, because at least it's still covering his back.

Without explanation, Link ferries him down the steps of the library and across the atrium, out through an opening in the far wall. All the while, he hangs on tightly, a steady harbor in the maelstrom of Ashton's otherwise storm-tossed boat in a sea of anxiety. Exiting the common spaces, Link heads confidently down the residential hallway Ashton recognizes from his drunken stumble and subsequent walk of shame the next morning.

They pass an industrial-style kitchen on the right, the place where Link made him coffee, continuing on but stopping far short of the empty room Link set him up in previously.

"11". That's what the brass numbers on the door declare, and Link artlessly shoves a key into the lock before jiggling the handle and pushing it open. "This is mine," he mumbles, rather unnecessarily, since yes, Ashton does possess reasonable powers of deduction.

Like much of the rest of the bunker and the spare room Ashton borrowed, Link's space has somewhat of a utilitarian feel. There are smooth concrete walls and basic wooden furniture including a queen-sized bed, double nightstands, a tall dresser, and a desk. While simple, the room is homey and tidy, and Ashton can tell from his quick, covert glance around that Link takes pride in keeping it that way.

The head of the bed is pushed against the wall opposite the door, and there's a shelf built into the wall that runs the length of the room above it. On that shelf, Link has an assortment of trinkets displayed: everything from bobbleheads, action figures, and Batman paraphernalia to books and various DVDs. There's also a very fancy-looking gun mounted over the shelf, not that Ashton is any kind of a weapons expert. *Fancy* feels like a safe label to apply, though, as the weapon boasts intricate carving on the barrel and is meticulously displayed in a glass case.

Of note, amongst Link's book collection is a hardcover set of Michael Shield's entire arsenal, complete with custom, themed bookends. It makes Ashton smile to see, although oddly, the books are wholly pristine in appearance. It's as if their bindings haven't so much as been cracked.

*That's strange*, Ashton thinks, but then again, maybe it isn't. Perhaps Link keeps a reading set in the library, and these are first-edition collectibles. Not everyone is so callous with theirs, the way he is. Ashton lets the thought go and turns his attention to the rest of the room, because something else feels off.

The culprit is easy enough to zero in on. Rather notably, Link doesn't have a bunch of art or even any color splashed across his space. His bed sports plain white sheets, two nondescript, standard-size pillows, and an army-green knit blanket spread over the top. The bedding is immaculate, tucked in using hospital corners. As a whole, the choices seem better suited to outfitting military barracks than an artist's private space, but Ashton knows perfectly well that not every artist wears their passion on their sleeve. Or, decorating their home, as it were.

Still, Link's walls feel *bare*, as if they're waiting for something to complete them. But maybe Ashton is projecting—he enjoys color.

With a soft click, the door closes behind them and Link moves past Ashton into the open center of the room. He's not shy about personal space, one hand brushing gently against the small of Ashton's back as he goes. It's not unclear what Link is doing, providing him a safe, private space to quite literally put his insecurities on display, and it's appreciated. What Link does next, though, is the real surprise.

Before Ashton can so much as pop another shirt button free, Link is stripping down to his boxers, right there and without so much as a single word of explanation. When he sees Ashton staring back at him in bewilderment, he flashes the charming, cocky grin that Ashton is quickly coming to



adore. He shrugs, lifting his arms as if to say, *what did you expect?* When Ashton merely continues to look on quizzically, Link drops his arms back to his sides and then rests his hands on his hips.

“Tit for tat,” Link says, presumably by way of explanation, and while (from what Ashton can see) Link’s tattoos are gorgeous and flawless (as is the rest of his body, and *Heavens*, is it difficult to resist staring), Ashton decides that he appreciates the strange gesture all the same. “So? What do you think?”

Stepping closer—purely for objective assessment, one artist to another—Ashton takes his time visually cataloging Link’s tattoos. Some are fairly simple, such as the red and raised, almost tribal design on his right forearm. It turns the skin surrounding the ink equally red and veiny when Link squeezes his fist—a basic charm. Then there’s the demon-faced amulet around Link’s neck, which of course, Ashton has already noted. On Link’s back, a small constellation recognizable as Aquarius, his astrological sign, is adorably constructed by connecting a smattering of existing freckles together.

“What do I *think*? I imagine something along the lines of what Pope Julius II thought when he first laid eyes on the Sistine Chapel.”

“You know, some people just say, ‘*I dig it*,’ when they like stuff.”

“Hmm. Fascinating. A true anthropological revelation.”

“Dude.”

Ashton smiles, but he’s really focused on the artwork. While some are indeed basic, several are not nearly so simple. The first complex creation to catch Ashton’s eye is an inked version of Link’s gorgeous classic muscle car, perfectly depicted down to the characters on the license plate. It’s showcased by several different stretches of roads running

across various planes of his body, some disappearing into the distance, allowing the car to power along and do so as well.

The interesting thing about the car is that it actually drives, and not only on the tattooed roads. As Ashton stands there and watches, it circles Link's torso just above the line of his boxers, dips below, and then reappears traversing the back of Link's thigh. Ashton has to lean to see it follow the vanishing stretch of yellow-lined asphalt that narrows to nothing near the posterior hinge of Link's knee.

Fascinated, Ashton finds himself almost gawking as the car shrinks smaller and smaller until it's out of sight. Even knowing that the tattoo is enchanted, Ashton still startles when the vehicle seems to appear out of thin air, motoring around the curve of Link's neck, down over his left pec, and settling just beneath his ribs on the left side. Link laughs heartily at his reaction, looking extremely pleased—as well he should be, the work is impressive.

“Sometimes she turns into a horse,” Link says casually, his index finger tracing over the car's curves. “You know, like Black Beauty?” Ashton keeps his eyes fixed on the ink, but the gears in his head are turning. Something about the way Link's speaking is pinging his radar. Honestly, if he didn't know better, Ashton might think that was *another* reference—not to the well-known movie, but to the main character of Michael Shield's novels, or more specifically, the black horse that he rides named Beauty.

His light suspicions evolve into a much more confident surety when Ashton shifts his attention to the other pieces Link has adorning his body.

The fire-breathing dragon that sits on his right shoulder blade, for starters. That's straight out of Shield's second book and one of the greatest challenges his main character has to fight and overcome. The dragon itself is a perfect likeness to the images in Ashton's head, all the way down to the iridescent scales bedecking its back and the trove of treasure it's guarding.

There's also the pen on the exterior of Link's left thigh that rotates and extends, transforming into a sword. That one's impossible to mistake for anything other than what it is, which is Dean's iconic weapon of choice. The sword's distinct carvings leave no room for misinterpretation—the piece is something Dean sleeps with underneath his pillow, something he cherishes and never willingly goes without.

Next, there's the black could-have-been-a-dog-but-is-definitely-a-Hellhound on Link's outer right thigh. There's no denying Dean's faithful companion from book three onward—her purple eyes are enough, but Violet the Hellhound is important. She's an overt symbol of the main character's desire and ability to connect with and save even the most damned souls and wayward creatures, including those who would try and take his own life.

Last but certainly not least, there's a pattern Ashton recognizes as an anti-curse sigil, placed smack in the middle of Link's chest. The design likely has some functional protective ability, but it also happens to be identical to the charm *Dean* has inked in the very same spot. In the books, the sigil prevents Dean from being possessed by evil spirits, but it's also a sign of his commitment to the cause that he serves. It's a badge of honor, and one he wears proudly—if secretly—an open declaration of what he does for humankind, though few in his world recognize or understand what it means. Ashton supposes that's a metaphor in and of itself.

When he finally steps back, Link is peering down at him, wide-eyed and earnest, like he's waiting for Ashton to say something specific. If he's being perfectly honest, Ashton is a bit lost. It must show on his face, because Link huffs, slightly frustrated.

“You left your book on my table in the library,” he says pointedly, and it feels like a prompt. For *what*, though? What does Link *want*? Ashton finds himself squinting again, which leads Link to cough and scratch awkwardly at the back of his neck. “I, uh, I know you said that you bring it everywhere. I guess I just thought you were exaggerating.”

*Unhelpful*, Ashton privately gripes.

“You’re... a fan of the novels as well,” he ventures carefully, though even as the words leave his mouth, his conjecture feels slightly off the mark. That’s essentially confirmed when Link glances away and laughs softly.

“Something like that,” he replies.

Mulling over the possibilities, Ashton wanders to the shelf above the bed that displays all of Link’s knickknacks. Running gentle fingers over the—*just as he thought*—brand-new versions of the entire Shield book collection, he gives up.

“I think you’re going to have to connect these dots for me, Link,” Ashton admits. “You’re clearly a fan, rabid enough that the majority of your tattoos relate to Dean’s journey, and yet, these books appear to be untouched, as if you’ve never even opened them.” He turns to regard Link curiously, one hand still wrapped around the first book in the series’ elegant binding. “Not that I blame you, I suppose. My nerd heart suspects that these are actually very expensive first editions, so perhaps you keep your own well-loved copies elsewhere.”

Once again, Ashton knows that he’s missing the mark, though he still can’t figure out what or why. For his part, Link just hooks his fingers together behind his back, ducking his head to the side as the hellhound and the dragon hiss at each other, the dragon’s fire flaring briefly and unexpectedly off of Link’s back and into the air.

“You’re trying to distract me now,” Ashton observes. “And yet, you clearly wanted to show me this, want me to recognize something. Why?”

Link shrugs nonchalantly before stepping back into his jeans, although he leaves his chest bare for the time being. “You’re about to be vulnerable with me,” he says softly. “I thought I could return the favor. With all the talk we’ve had about tattoos being more than ink, about how sometimes the meaning behind the art can be complicated and confusing,

even when you love the tattoo itself. Which—I know you don't, I just thought... ”

While he has no idea what Link is driving at specifically, Ashton suddenly understands that this is a lot more than a “tit for tat” visual exchange. There's something else happening, there's some key piece of information that Link is subtly trying to share, and he's *close*, he just needs a little... *push*.

Forcibly swallowing his near-paralyzing reluctance to let his walls bend (never mind break), to even *begin* to get close to Link with everything else that's going on, Ashton exhales intentionally and follows his gut. Without giving his brain time to second-guess his instincts, he steps squarely into Link's personal bubble. More confidently than he's done anything in quite a while, he reaches out and places two fingers atop the amulet at the base of Link's throat.

“Tell me about this,” he instructs, holding steady eye contact and silently thrilling when Link swallows hard and visibly suppresses a shiver. It is satisfying to know that his proximity has the same sort of effect on Link that Link has on him, but that's really a thought for another time.

“Sam inked that one,” Link says quietly, so quietly that Ashton almost has to strain to hear. He also focuses *just* off to Ashton's left as he talks, almost avoiding his eyes, which isn't Link's usual style. “Well, she did all of mine, actually, 'cept one, but this was the very first. Thought it was fitting, you know? Since Dean's sister gives him the necklace in the series. Family ties, and all that.” When Link finishes speaking, his eyes find Ashton's once again, and they look almost pleading.

It abruptly occurs to Ashton that there might be an extremely obvious answer to this quandary. An answer that he was, up until this point, disregarding completely for the pure absurdity of it, the extreme unlikelihood that he could *ever* be so lucky as to—

*No*, he reprimands himself. *Don't get carried away. There is simply no possible way in Heaven, Hell, or anything in*

*between that Link Remington, perfection personified that he already is, could also be...*

But against his attempted rationalizations, the puzzle pieces continue to coalesce, fitting together as flawlessly as Link's ink adorns his skin.

After pondering for a moment, Ashton decides, *what the hell?* Link clearly *wants* him to guess, so it can't hurt to test the waters.

"So... you're not actually a rabid fangirl? Gender-neutral usage of the term."

Link's laugh is even more subdued this time, and he shakes his head in the negative. "Not exactly," he hedges, fingertips perhaps not-so-unintentionally brushing Ashton's thigh. His skin tingles in their wake—there's *heat* between the two of them, emanating from both of their bodies, shared easily since Ashton has yet to step back and Link looks extraordinarily comfortable where he's standing a mere handful of inches away.

"Link," Ashton says slowly. "Stop me if this leap is not the puddle-sized one I believe it to be. If, say, in reality, I am attempting to hop across the Grand Canyon." When Link just smiles shyly and lets his hand come to rest on Ashton's hip, he takes a deep breath and continues. "Are you by any chance implying that you *are* Michael Shield?"

"No," Link replies petulantly, right before he rolls his eyes and shrugs. "I'm Link Remington," he clarifies. "Michael is just an alias." Annoyed, Ashton slaps his chest lightly, amused at the way the amulet jumps when he does—that's an *excellent* charm.

"You ass," he chides, huffing a small, disbelieving chuckle. "And you're *ashamed* of that? I—truly, I don't believe that I've ever encountered a more determinedly self-deprecating person, Remington. *Without* your success as a writer, you have more talent in your baby finger than most people harbor in their entire bodies. The way you create

artwork, the way you build *worlds*, it's—well, actually, now that I know it's *you*, I believe I can see a lot of similarities between the two, but I'm no less blown away by it."

While Ashton rambles, Link returns to looking determinedly *anywhere* but at him, though the grunting noise he makes suggests that he disagrees wholeheartedly with Ashton's assessment.

Ashton frowns. "Your books helped me through some very tough times," he says frankly after a long moment of silence, shifting back slightly to put some space between them. "Not to sound like a starstruck fan—though, for the record, that's exactly what I am—but I'd appreciate it greatly if you wouldn't disparage either your stories or yourself in front of me. If your goal tonight in revealing this bit of information was to put us both on more even footing, then it follows that you should *also* be working to overcome such insecurities and feelings of shame."

Link's eyes are slightly shiny when he glances up, and Ashton smiles warmly, hoping to put him at ease.

"Ash, listen," Link says hesitantly. "Only like, five people in the whole world aside from my publisher know about this. It may seem stupid or whatever to you that I'm... *closeted* about my writing, but it's just how I am, so if you're gonna judge me—"

"I would never judge you," Ashton interrupts. "And my comments weren't about that. I said and I meant in front of *me*. You should work on overcoming your shyness and shame in front of me."

Mouth snapping closed, Link's expression shifts and he looks Ashton over appreciatively, like that's exactly the reaction he was hoping to get. In response, Ashton quickly thumbs open his remaining shirt buttons before shrugging the fabric down his arms and tossing it away. It lands on the back of the chair facing Link's desk.

Now, Ashton is neither naive nor new, and he is not remotely ignorant to the way Link's eyes roam across his skin. They're hungry, greedy as they take in his array of tattoos, curves, and probably the mole above his right nipple, plus everything else that's on display. Theoretically, this would be the part where Ashton's nerves and anxiety take over and threaten to freeze him in place, but surprisingly, it seems as if Link's revelation actually did its job.

Ashton feels fine.

Still, he begins the show by facing Link and closing his eyes to activate the magic in his wings. In the darkness behind his lids, Ashton can see the room brightening with the lighting effects that accompany their appearance, likely casting some interesting shadows against Link's bedroom walls. A sharp intake of breath follows, and Ashton—while he's no longer feeling embarrassed or ashamed—can't bear to watch Link's reaction.

Instead, he recounts in his own mind what Link must be seeing: the sparsely-feathered stretches of irreparably damaged bone and muscle, ultra-real in appearance and all the more devastating for it.

*Ugly. Broken. Useless.*

"Ash," Link says gently, prompting Ashton to reluctantly open his eyes. Since he isn't sure whether or not Link is done looking, he holds the magic steady—he'd rather not draw things out or have to start over. What Ashton notices when he glances around is shocking, has him blinking wildly, just in case his vision is still clearing and he's seeing things wrong.

He's not. Link's expression isn't at *all* disgusted, it isn't filled with pity or distaste. If anything, he looks... awed. He *is* standing awfully close, though, and that's distracting. He's peering intently over Ashton's shoulder, presumably to get a close look at the ink's details, and when he turns his head, they're nearly nose-to-nose.



“I know how you feel about these, Ash,” Link murmurs, his voice almost reverent in tone as his hand reaches out, seemingly only remembering at the last possible second that the wings aren’t tangible before pulling it back. “So don’t take this the wrong way. I’m not dismissing the hurt you feel, and I’m definitely not trying to change your mind. But these—they are fucking incredible, Ash, and you look... ” He pauses, shaking his head and stepping back a few paces to admire the entire picture while Ashton shifts uncomfortably. “Fucking incredible.”

When Ashton doesn’t say anything in return, Link holds up his camera in question. “Okay if I... ?” he asks, and Ashton nods, swallowing the discomfort he feels at the idea of having pictures of this travesty floating around out there in the world.

*No, he corrects himself. Not, “out there in the world,” just with Link. And Link is trustworthy.*

“This way, you won’t have to demo it again, not if you don’t want to. But Ash,” Link adds, clearly no better than Ashton is at leaving barely-scabbed-over insecurities unpicked, “these suckers are fuckin’ *badass*. Now, don’t get me wrong—I’m not suggesting what that douchebag did to you was anything less than completely fucked up and shitty beyond the telling. Give me a tire iron and five minutes alone with the dude, that’s all I need, I swear, but—”

Link waves his hand dismissively before pulling it down over his mouth and continuing. “It’s not about him at all. It’s about how you carry them, buddy.” As he talks, Link focuses his camera and starts grabbing shots while Ashton remains quiet. He’s definitely a rambler, filling the silence as he clicks away.

“They’ve got this kind of cool, death metal vibe, I think. Makes you look like you went through some seriously wild shit. Like... maybe you were thrown into an epic battle, one where you had to fight for your life, and then against all odds, you made it out the other side. Beat to hell, obviously, but alive all the damn same, and that’s what matters.” He huffs,

glancing up over the viewfinder to make solid eye contact before dropping what Ashton understands is perhaps the most meaningful compliment he has to give.

“Dean would absolutely dig these things, man. Seriously, you know it’s true. Oh—shit, I dunno how to—” Link cuts himself off suddenly, fumbling the camera and motioning for Ashton to turn around, which he does, still without comment.

In his peripheral vision, the tips of the destroyed wings sway, charred and painful to look at, even indirectly. It’s uncomfortable to think about viewing them as anything but a hot mess, a mistake, but at the same time, Link’s words settle heavily in the back of his mind. Despite all of the anxiety and frustration he harbors towards the tattoo, what Link said *does* make Ashton think.

Not that he believes on *any* level that he could ever learn to love his wings. Not the way they are at the moment, at least, but *perhaps*, in time, he should consider examining them a bit more closely. Not literally, of course, but the idea of them. At minimum, enough to process the trauma surrounding their origins.

Maybe someday. He’s just not ready yet.

The problem is, if he *doesn’t*—and this is always something that’s persisted at the back of Ashton’s mind—even covered up, the scars of what Whitaker did to him will always be there, just beneath the surface. It *would* be better for Ashton if he could own his wings and their history, enough to stop them from owning him.

Maybe, with Link’s help, he can find a way to do just that.



# CHAPTER 4

The truck has barely come to a full stop in its spot outside of Ashton's apartment building when his phone vibrates between his thighs and sends a shock of interest rolling up his spine. The culprit is Link, which feels ridiculously on the nose after this emotional rollercoaster, *tease* of a night. Alone and cloaked safely in the darkness of his vehicle, Ashton doesn't need to pretend. He allows himself exactly *one* goofy grin while swiping open the screen.

Link

home safe? Just checking. Rough stuff tonight, you did great.

Link

but don't text and drive. unless you have an auto-stop charm on your truck. I'll be here.

Ashton

pulling in as we speak. And thank you :) i appreciate the affirmation and concern for my well-being. Do you do this for every client?

Link

maybe

Link

i'm full service buddy, i told you

Ashton

then i appreciate the... servicing. Almost as much as I appreciate your vulnerability today. It helped.

Link

ain't no thing, chicken wing

Link

I am so sorry I said that.

Ashton

no more sorry than I am... but  
nonetheless, you should take the  
compliment

Link

hey, you're the one out here  
looking fear in the eye and shit.  
you're the badass phoenix rising  
from the ashes, i'm just some  
dude with a pen

Ashton is sliding into bed by this point, his eyelids heavy and threatening to close, but despite that, he isn't in any kind of rush to end the conversation.

Ashton

you're hardly so basic. if you  
were, we wouldn't be having this  
conversation

Link

i'm the Cinna to your Katniss,  
deal with it

Ashton makes a face. That's a far more platonic allusion than he would prefer, but it's endearing, all the same, and it's great fodder for a reply.

Ashton

Cinna is extremely important to  
Katniss' character development  
and her survival in the Games.  
He's also an excellent friend, a  
surprising ally in a sea of  
backstabbing users.

Link

Damn, Ash. you really just say  
things, don't you?

Ashton

and to be very fair, we also  
wouldn't be having this  
conversation if I wasn't a  
complete, cursed disaster

Link

i think you mean charmed ;)

Ashton

I definitely mean cursed

Link

well, I'd rather have you. Cursed  
or not.

Ashton

Goodnight, Link.



Putting aside the fact that Ashton wakes around noon, the texting resumes first thing in the “morning,” less than five minutes after his eyes pop open. The message from Link that’s waiting on his screen makes Ashton feel warm and appreciated, something exciting and long-forgotten awakening with him, full of hope as it moves through his veins.

It's *nice*.

Link

hope you're still feeling okay.  
morning afters can be rough

Ashton

i am. grateful to you for asking,  
but i'm okay

Link

Cool.

Ashton

and you? you opened some old  
wounds as well

Link

don't worry about me :) i'm  
awesome.

Link

are you cool if we talk about  
something else?

Ashton

of course, Link. did you have  
something in mind, or..?

Link

I mean, I was just lyin here last  
night, thinking that i know all the  
worst days of your life but like,  
not your favorite food. any  
chance you wanna tell me some  
boring shit?

Link

you know, only if you want

Link

can also tell me to fuck off, don't  
even worry about it

Ashton

I don't want you to fuck off :)

Ashton

not to be basic, but i like coffee.  
Tea, as well. Orange rooibos,  
with clover honey. Charmed to  
stay warm, of course.

Ashton

also, lying here? Are you still in  
bed too? that makes me feel like

less of a waste of space

Link

no clients til four. photoshoot  
canceled, so my sched was  
blocked. PJs all day, baby.

Link

and tea is not a food!

Ashton

fine, then. I do enjoy a nice, juicy  
cheeseburger.

Link

Oh god

Ashton

don't tell me you're a vegetarian.  
this partnership might not survive  
it

Link

what? Jesus, coming for my  
throat. no, cheeseburgers are my  
fave too. If you're interested, i  
make a helluva good bacon &  
onion special, we could plan for  
dinner one night. post-work feast,  
my treat

Ashton

that would be... wonderful. I've  
been eating alone quite a bit.

Link

well, shit. that's one thing we can  
definitely fix :)



Link

alright, one more and then i gotta  
hit the sack... eyes are burning  
and i've got an eight am cover-up  
involving a leaping dolphin and a  
bikini area

Ashton  
sounds tragic.

Link

trust me, you wouldn't trade

Ashton  
so is it a twenty-something post-  
grad with regrets, or the  
Aquaman ripoff supe from that  
satire show on Prime?

Link

i have no idea who The Deep is  
because i would never watch that  
show. either way, 0/10 would not  
recommend

Ashton  
noted. So, last would you rather?

Link

hit me

Ashton  
would you rather throw into the  
sun... classic rock or early 00's  
pop punk

Link

classic rock is life, what a waste  
of a question Ash

Ashton  
favorite song, then

Link

that would be a tie between  
ramble on and traveling riverside  
blues. nothing beats Zeppelin

Ashton  
i'm afraid to reciprocate



Link

...

Link

it's taylor swift, isn't it

Ashton

i am suddenly asleep



Link

morning sunshine! how're we  
feeling about friday? still on or  
are the nerves winning?

Ashton

they are determined, but they  
won't win. thank you for asking.

Link

that's what i'm here for—full-  
service, baby.

Ashton

you're very determined to be  
seen as "full service"

Ashton

we'll have to test that theory,  
sometime

There's an almost forty-five minute delay between his message and Link's response, and Ashton never does gather up the guts to ask whether he's gone too far.

Link

;)

That's all he gets in reply, and Ashton falls asleep wondering what the hell a *winky face emoji* is supposed to mean.



Ashton

do you have hobbies, Link?  
besides your writing? that is more  
of a career, I suppose.

Link

it's fun, though

Link

tattooing is fun, too. sometimes i  
just draw for the hell of it... or  
get one of Sam's goofball friends  
to let me ink something stupid.  
It's just like.

Link

my dad kind of always taught me  
that art should be purposeful, not  
just for kicks, so maybe I don't  
hobby it up as much as i should.

Ashton

I can't imagine that I would be a  
professional artist of any kind  
with that mentality. I have to  
create for fun to be able to create  
for work

Link

dude, yes

Ashton

we should create something  
solely for fun together, sometime.

Link

i've been meaning to paint the  
walls of my room.

Ashton  
say less



Link

just to put it out there, you don't  
have to answer any of these  
random texts, if you're busy

Ashton

oh? but then how will you know  
i'm not ghosting you in advance  
of our actual appointment?

Link

dude, i'm way too insecure to try  
and pick that apart lol

Ashton

i enjoy talking to you very much,  
Link.

Link

good because this is like the  
fourth convo we've had today

Ashton

not if you count the entire day as  
"one", which i think technically  
we can, since the only breaks  
were for terribly unimportant  
things like work and preparing  
sustenance

Link

dude i think i've had more meals  
with you than Sam this week

Link

that's a good thing, she chews  
with her mouth open



Link

you never told me about your  
hobbies

Ashton

i certainly did, you're becoming  
senile in your advanced age

Link

i am twenty fucking eight and art  
does not count

Ashton

???? you can't arbitrate what  
someone else counts as a hobby

Link



Ashton

art

Link

fine, don't tell me

Ashton

i like bees. watching them. I've  
always wanted to keep a hive, but  
my balcony is small and the  
rooftop of my building is  
communal. I can only imagine  
the letter i'd receive from the  
building management and

probably several angry neighbors  
if I installed a hive.

Link

probably not a lot of flowers and  
fruit trees downtown either

Ashton

precisely. I suppose i could install  
a concealment charm, but that  
seems like a lawsuit waiting to  
happen.

Link

lmaooo can you imagine? go up  
there to smoke, wander into your  
usual empty corner, then bam!  
waist-high in honey and fuckin  
bees everywhere ☐

Ashton

it wouldn't be fair to the bees,  
either

Link

well, we have a whole ass field  
here that nobody's using, if  
you're serious. I always wanted  
my own berry bushes

Link

you know, for pie

Ashton

that's a hobby of yours? baking?

Link

eating

Link

pie is life ash



Ashton  
still up?

Link  
unfortunately

Ashton  
should've gone with your gut?

Link  
definitely. should've drop kicked  
that guy to the curb the second he  
walked thru the door.

Ashton  
ouch.

Link  
spent the last 3 hours redoing the  
same simple charm six times over  
because it was "off," and he  
knows because his brother's  
girlfriend's dog is a tattoo artist  
and she told him so, also i'm a  
scammer because i didn't refund  
him after taking so long

Ashton  
☐☐☐

Link  
i'm sure you get it

Ashton  
do i ever. if it's helpful, my Yelp  
review should balance his out

Link  
lmao screw you, man.



Ashton

any chance you're awake

Link

for you? always

Ashton

i must say, that is certainly the  
definition of full-service

Link

i told you

Link

truth?

Ashton

always

Link

Sammy went on a date. she's at  
some fuckin' rave downtown and  
i've been waiting up like a  
worried mom

Ashton

force of habit or bad vibes?

Link

both? I dunno. better question,  
what are you doing up? it's 3 am  
and i have it on good authority  
your ass has a living room special  
bright and early

Ashton

i am embarrassed enough to be  
tattooing four feet away from my  
buffy dvd collection and  
matching action figures, it's  
redundant to rub it in

Link

what, did you see your life flash  
before your eyes? cuppa tea,  
cuppa tea, almost got shagged,  
cuppa tea

Ashton

Link

Link

not sorry, spike is iconic. so, if  
you're not binging buffy or  
playing petulant parent, why are  
you awake?

Ashton

truth?

Link

always

Ashton

nightmare. that's—i thought you  
might understand. I think all of  
this has stirred the pot, so to  
speak, mentally.

Link

this the first night you've had  
trouble sleeping since our  
session?

Ashton

not exactly.

Link

want to talk about it?

Ashton

do you mind?

Link

lay it on me, sunshine.

Ashton

thank you.

Ashton

back when it first happened,  
these dreams came every night.  
hyper-realistic, filled with fire  
and brimstone, which i'm sure  
has absolutely nothing to do with  
being raised under constant  
threats of the same if I failed to  
find my way.



Link

sorry to hear that, sunshine. utter  
bullshit.

Ashton

definitely. they stopped after a  
while. decreased severely in  
frequency, anyway. I just—was  
not prepared for them to  
resurface. they're so real, so  
visceral. I wake feeling like i am  
on fire and while it's happening, i  
can feel the damage to the wings.  
sometimes i wonder if Whitaker  
charmed them to do just that.  
hurt.

Link

that ain't no charm. maybe i  
joked before, but you're right.  
that's a curse. did i mention i'd  
like five minutes alone with him  
and a tire iron?

Ashton

once or twice

Link

it could be a hot poker instead

Ashton

noted. hopefully our FBI guy has  
fallen asleep at the keyboard

Link

man, i'll risk it. i'm pretty sure  
anyone with two eyes and a soul  
would look the other way

Link

but the dream—it happened  
tonight?

Ashton

yes, unfortunately

Link

what did you do? what do you usually do?

Ashton

usually I lie here in the dark, sweating and struggling to loosen the vice around my chest until i feel semi-human again. It's very sexy

Link

and you texted me instead?

Ashton

i suppose i did. I fell asleep earlier and never answered your last message. I apologize if that was inappropriate

Link

absolutely not. I'm glad you did. feel any better?

Ashton

yes, actually. No hyperventilating needed.

Link

so, if i'm hearing you right, you don't usually reach out for help when you're struggling, but tonight you did, and it worked. Yeah?

Ashton

perhaps

Link

damn, Ash. some people might call that growth ;)

Ashton

i'll alert the presses

Link

damn right

Ashton

thank you, Link. i'm very glad  
that we've become friends.

Link

me, too, sunshine. looking  
forward to friday.



Link

you ever charm your snacks so  
they don't run out

Ashton

i'm not very good at tangible  
transformation. I admit that i've  
tried out of desperation, and the  
resulting doritos tasted like  
sawdust

Link

dude... you need to be  
replicating, not transforming

Ashton

□

Ashton

where have you been all my life

Link

eating snacks



Link

what are you wearing?

Ashton

pardon?

Link

dude. your instagram post! the  
hell are you wearing?!

Ashton

it's my living room, i can wear  
what i like

Link

it looks like someone made it  
with their feet

Ashton

I made that sweater, thank you  
very much. and i like it. the sky  
blue brings out my eyes

Link

yeah, it's bussin'.

Ashton

what has public transport got to  
do with this?

Link

I really like the giant irregularly  
shaped bee on the front

Ashton

thank you. I choose to pretend  
your compliments are sincere.

Link

i like the flower too. and the  
cotton ball clouds

Ashton

same

Link

you have to wear pants to work  
here

Ashton

we'll see

Link



Ashton

tell me about your ink? any or all  
of it

Link

you got all night?

Ashton

yes

Link

tit for tat? about whatever's on  
your tits 😏

Ashton

always



Link

i see you lurking on social media.  
doomscrolling?

Ashton

no. i was stalking you.

Ashton

your twitter, specifically

Link

yeah? see anything you like

Ashton

what's with the live tweeting?

Link

c'mon, TWD is awesome!

Ashton

hmm. the leader of the savior  
group is terribly attractive,  
despite his horrific behavior. i  
will give you that.

Link

euyuck. I mean, he's ruggedly  
handsome, yeah, but he kind of  
reminds me of my dad

Ashton

you are an interesting man, Link

Link

glad you think so. uh, actually,  
that's sort of why i msged

Ashton

oh, you need a reason to message  
now? earlier you texted to let me  
know the Soul-arium was out of  
Cookie Crunch

Link

yeah, what's the ETA on that,  
anyway?

Ashton

friday, if you're waiting. thought  
you were the master replicator

Link

☹ not tonight

Ashton

Link, are you alright?

Link

nah.

Ashton

lay it on me.

Link

earlier, when you were scrolling,  
liking all my tweets, did you  
happen to see me fuck up?

Ashton

the tweet from Michael Shield's  
news & updates account? I don't  
think anyone noticed. I wouldn't  
have, if I didn't already know.

Link

someone did.

Link

got a text from an artist friend,  
guy I go way back with, name's  
Kane.

Link

we used to be... real close.  
million years ago. he knew i liked  
writing stories, but he thought  
they were crap. big waste of time,  
embarrassing, even. might be  
possible he's a big part of why i  
don't go public with my identity  
and crap. he put 2 + 2 together,  
and it was a shitty convo.

Currently, Ashton's propped up by pillows in bed, ankles crossed, staring down at the screen of his phone in the dark. It's the same way he's ended most nights lately, and he hasn't been this content about life and his choices in ages. Up until this point, the conversations have been fairly light, and the parts that haven't were mostly Ashton's doing.

Link is kind and he is thoughtful, he's *flirty*, and he's sweet. It's very obvious to Ashton that he's interested, but his vulnerability has been almost surface-level before now. This is an interesting development, and well worth staying up late to see. He'll need to tread carefully—Link requires validation that doesn't cross the line into pity, which would repulse him

and drive him swiftly back into his shell. It's a fine line for Ashton to walk.

Color him intrigued.

Ashton

completely unrelated, i'll be  
needing to borrow that tire iron  
when you're finished with it. hot  
poker, whatever you decide to go  
with. I'm not picky.

Link

you sly dog. you always know  
what to say, don't you?

Ashton

so, this sentient sludge stain had  
thoughts about your indisputable  
and incredibly admirable  
successes?

Link

you're good for my ego, man. but  
yeah. I don't get it.

Ashton

i suspect that it was not the cruel  
words themselves, but the fact  
that they came from someone  
who you once cared for deeply,  
respected, and believed that you  
could trust, which hurt.

Link

yeah. I mean, somebody's always  
got something to say. my books  
have a handful of 'this is gutter  
trash,' reviews, but you know,  
not everybody's got good taste.  
plus, hot bitches and haters are  
like shit on velcro, so i'm usually  
whatever about insults.

Ashton



if they don't know you, they  
can't hurt you.

Link

bingo.

Ashton

consider: who is he to judge?  
clearly, he was wrong before in  
telling you not to pursue your  
dream. I'm certainly biased, but i  
do believe your sales records and  
many awards count as objective  
proof.

Ashton

in short, fuck him.

Link

i know you're right. sorry. didn't  
mean to bring such a heavy vibe

Ashton

not heavy at all. I was hoping you  
might feel relieved

Link

you know what? kinda do.

Ashton

good. fuck him. may there always  
be Legos scattered across the  
floor wherever he walks barefoot.

Link

damn

Ashton

may any available charger be the  
incorrect type for his dying  
electronic device

Link

shots fucking fired

Ashton

may traffic lights perpetually turn  
red upon his approach

Link

i would literally give up

Ashton

may he always feel as if he's  
about to sneeze, yet no sneeze  
ever comes

Link

Ash. I mean this with love, but  
you are terrifying.



Link

Ash

Link

Ash

Link

Ash

Link

Ash

Ashton

it has been three minutes!!!

Link

Ash it's important

Ashton

i'm here

Link

let me transform that fuckin'  
tattoo.

Ashton

it is eight am on a thursday

Link

be so badass, Ash. think about it.  
ain't nothin' in the world like  
reclaiming some shit somebody  
else tried to take from you

Ashton

so you've said

Link

sorry, man. It's been on my mind  
for days, and you would look so  
smokin' hot working that charm

Link

like, devastatingly handsome

Ashton

i'll think about it.

Ashton

you're a terrible salesman.

Link

i think i'm adorable

Ashton

ask me again in person



Link

tomorrow, huh? how are we  
feeling?

Ashton

excited. for our first ink session,  
but also to see you.

Link

yeah?

Ashton

of course, Link. you know i've  
enjoyed our nights together, and  
our talks.

Link

be awesome to do it for real

Ashton

i'm looking forward to it. ☐☐

Link

see you soon.

Ashton

you will. I'm ready.



It's once again on the late side of the evening when Ashton returns to the Soul-arium for his first official ink session with Link. Once again, the business end of the operation has been shut down for the night, and all that's left are Sam and her friends. They're clearly in unwind-mode, sprawled across the furniture, relaxing and enjoying each other's company as usual. Ashton waves as he passes through the atrium, savoring the atmosphere of everyone laughing and playing games, drinking merrily.

This place is so unlike any shop or even any social circle he's been invited to join before, but in the best way. Ashton is secretly pleased when he lifts a hand and Sam waves back, following the gesture with a hearty, "Hey, Ash! Nice to see you, friend." As he moves towards the library, he hears Sam making a lighthearted joke to her friends, a crack at Link's expense. Something about Link's eyes having the chance to rest after being constantly glued to his phone's screen all week.

Butterflies flutter in Ashton's stomach. *So Link hasn't been hiding their communication.* That seems like a good thing, both intimidating and reassuring, even if his nerves are already out in full force tonight. For once, at least, it isn't because of the tattoo and his reluctance to display it, though. No—Link has already seen everything there is to see in that department, and between that and their texts, Ashton is left feeling emboldened, virtually done with hiding his damaged ink completely.

Truthfully, he's been mentally ready to "let it go" like a Disney Princess, ever since texting with Link the night prior. To prove that (to himself, if no one else), he's out here flaunting the goods like it's Fleet Week and he just turned twenty-one. Instead of wearing his normal, business-casual, crisp white button-down, Ashton threw caution to the wind by selecting a tight-fitting black t-shirt that hugs his chest like a second skin. It *also* allows the very tips of his wings to spill from the bottom of the sleeves, revealing where they curve around the back of his biceps.

After adding a pair of skinny jeans and boots, Ashton has it on good authority (he snapped a mirror selfie and winced his way through sending it to his brother Austin for approval) that the outfit is doing him a number of favors. He's anxious to see if Link reacts, if he has anything to say, frankly, because this new and improved attitude is due in no small part to Link himself.

The nearly nonstop texting has made it clear that their flirtatious interactions have tenuously crossed over the line from professional into something not-entirely-platonic, but no farther than that. In truth, Ashton couldn't say whether he's feeling more disappointed or more relieved by the boundaries both he and Link seem to be hovering within, though he can admit that for the time being, it's probably for the best. His tattoo isn't the only thing they need to consider, there's also the fact that Ashton is due to start taking clients at the Soularium this week—tomorrow, actually.

While it'll be a relief to be out of his living room, and he certainly wouldn't want to damage this valuable, fledgling partnership, Ashton would be lying if he claimed not to be intrigued by the possibilities. The past few days have been extremely pleasurable, he's enjoyed talking to Link immensely, and he's fairly certain—if the frequency and volume of return texts are any indications—that Link feels the same way.

They've covered a vast range of topics by now, and messaging Link has objectively become the highlight of Ashton's day. Doing so is the first thing he thinks about upon waking, and the last before falling asleep at night, usually to the squint-inducing brightness of the phone's LED screen lit up beside his head.

Texting Link is just so *easy*. Link is no different over the phone than he is in person, except that *not* being face-to-face seems to make it easier for him to open up about his own insecurities. Ashton can understand and appreciate that just fine, especially when it's brought them *here*. Against his best intentions going in, it does feel as if they're building something, maybe even something big.

Early as it might be, Ashton's heart clenches in his chest when he considers the possibility that someday, he might walk out the Soul-arium's front door, never to see Link again. After all, that's what normal clients do, once a tattoo is finished—barring scheduling another, of course, which... he could do, in perpetuity. Theoretically.

The fact that he's thinking this way is telling. Early or not, it's apparent that Ashton is in deep. It almost feels pointless to try and fight the losing battle of pretending that he's not developing some *serious* feelings for this man, and quickly. Even still, whenever he considers letting his guard down, the ghosts of Ashton's history, his past mistakes, resurface with a vengeance. They vie for air time in his head, warning him to proceed with caution, to slow down, to guard both his heart and mind, to protect the life he's rebuilt.

*It is different, though,* Ashton finds himself thinking, late at night, after his phone screen fades to black and ceases buzzing with Link's replies. *This isn't Whitaker.*

For starters, Ashton is no wide-eyed ingénue. He's also not an employee of Link's, but rather a contractor, in charge of both his fate and finances. He isn't bound by any non-compete clauses, isn't dependent on others for a weekly paycheck, the way he was at Sainted Angels. If he doesn't source his own clients, he won't have any. If one of the Remingtons refers someone to him, or if he picks up the rare walk-in, Soul Survivor takes a cut, but that's both industry standard and something Ashton can control.

Hell, the flexible schedule might even allow him the opportunity to return to school, to perhaps take some new classes or pursue a degree that could translate his desire to teach others into ability. With a bit of education, he'd feel comfortable taking on apprentices, holding workshops, or maybe guest lecturing at the University. His skills are niche, yes, but they're solid, and his charms are both innovative and top-tier.

Plus, it's always been a passion of Ashton's to spread knowledge where he can. To support the next generation of artists, especially those with the talent and drive to unify art and magic. A few nights ago, he brought that bouquet of ideas to Link, inordinately encouraged when—even through text—he seemed completely for it. In fact, Link was *so* excited and enthusiastic, Ashton couldn't help but feel slightly relieved that there were screens between them. That Link was unable to see him dabbing at his eyes, overwhelmed with unexpected emotion.

Whitaker *never* showed interest or care for what made *Ashton* happy. Never created room or left space for what he might want out of life.

Everything is different with Link. Every single thing.

Even now, he can feel that difference—it's in the way Ashton's fingers tingle as they twist together nervously. The

way his heart pounds just a little bit faster and his mouth turns dry at the mere expectation, the *anticipation* of seeing Link, live and in person.

Unwittingly, a smile spreads across Ashton's face—he can't help it, he's just so... *happy*. Halfway up the three steps that lead from the atrium into the library, Ashton stops short, frozen by that simple realization.

*Happy*. He's happy. It's been a long time since that was a word he would think to use to describe any feelings he might have about himself or his life, but here he is, and it's... easy. *Obvious*. He's *happy*, and a not-small part of that has everything to do with *Link*.

While Ashton is standing there, doing his best impression of a Madame Tussaud's display and processing a moment inside of his own head, Link appears. He steps out from one of the alcoves on the left side—*his* side—of the room, wiping down his favorite tattooing machine with a clean, white towel. Link is *very* particular and proud of his equipment, treats his machines like children.

He looks up when he notices movement in the doorway, recognition causing a grin to spread slowly across his lovely face, lighting up his emerald eyes and crinkling them at the corners.

“Hello, Link,” Ashton says, and it comes out almost breathless, his entire demeanor slightly more overt in broadcasting his interest than he might necessarily prefer. That's the price of being blindsided by his thoughts, missing the chance to center himself before Link was *here*, with no safe place to rest his gaze. All Ashton can do now is smile ruefully and—if the way his cheeks heat is any sort of tell—pretend that he has no idea he's blushing. “It's very nice to see you.”

Honestly, it's possible that Link doesn't notice his reaction, since his own pleased expression shifts quickly to thinly-veiled lust as his eyes drift over Ashton's outfit.



“Hey, Ash,” he replies, somewhat distractedly. Speaking of blushing, when Link realizes how terribly transparent he’s being, his cheeks turn pink all the way down to his neck. He ducks his head as he clears his throat, spinning on his heel to set the tattoo gun down on a table, and Ashton suspects it’s strictly for something to do.

When he turns back, he tips his chin toward Ashton’s arm. “Do the thing,” he says eagerly, unambiguously requesting a live demonstration of his previously-declared favorite of Ashton’s tattoos. During the past week (and on repeat request), Ashton has sent video after video showcasing him doing the trick over and over. Link’s a tattoo artist, he’s seen it all, and Ashton truly thought that the novelty would’ve worn off by now.

Apparently not.

Glancing down at the artwork depicting a thin, silver blade inked carefully onto the sensitive skin of his inner forearm, Ashton flashes Link a predatory grin before flicking his wrist in practiced motion. When he does, the weapon—which is no ordinary knife, but a tri-edged sword featuring a long, rounded hilt—slips smoothly down the length of his arm and into his hand. A second sweeping motion has Ashton drawing back to create the illusion of “releasing” the blade, sending it off like the skill is second nature in his arsenal.

At the moment, he’s close enough to make Link endgame. He sends the weapon spinning, flying end over end in Link’s direction with intent to maximize the dramatic finish. With a tiny jerk of Ashton’s fingers, the blade finds its target, appearing to embed itself fully in the center of Link’s chest. Buried to the hilt, it disappears abruptly in a puff of purple smoke before reappearing on Ashton’s arm.

“Awesome,” Link declares in amazement, staring down at his own chest and then up at Ashton in awe, like he’s never seen a simple illusion before. “You’re awesome.”

“The magic that brings your inked version of Beauty to life is far more complex and subtle,” Ashton retorts, deflecting the

praise easily, but sidling up to Link all the same. He stops speaking as Link reflexively turns into him, bringing them chest-to-chest. There's a pause, as if they're both unsure what to do next, and with good reason. What *is* the proper greeting between brand-new friends who have been in near-constant contact, flirting incessantly for a week straight, but haven't actually been up close and personal in the same time frame?

*You're overthinking it, Ashton*, he chastises himself, taking in Link's warm, green eyes and subsequently opting to move on instinct. It hasn't failed him yet, not where Link is concerned.

Stepping further into Link's space, Ashton slides arms up and around his shoulders, cupping the back of his neck. At first, Link stiffens beneath his touch, and Ashton flinches, thinking he's made a terrible mistake. Thankfully—*thank God*—almost immediately, Link relaxes again, shaking his head slightly as if to clear it and exhaling softly.

Quickly getting on board, Link's hands start to move, sweeping slow, broad strokes up Ashton's back with one coming to rest against a shoulder blade and the other in the dip of his lower spine. Link feels deliciously, impossibly *good* in his arms—solid and welcoming, and the two of them fit together seamlessly. Fit together in a way that has Ashton wanting to say *the hell with it* when it comes to his tattoo, wanting to instead drag Link caveman-style instead into one of the Soul-arium's many empty rooms.

Preferably, Link's own, but this is no time to be picky.

Link's skin is warm beneath his hand, and the *things* they could do together surge through Ashton's head. The way it would *feel* to drown himself in Link, to press their bodies together and just *be* for one night: no history, no caveats.

Or—hell, Ashton's feeling reckless—*however* many nights they might choose.

Those thoughts should shake Ashton to his core, to the very depth of his being, the feelings and strength of his desire

to *be with* Link, in whatever way Link wishes to have him. They should, unquestionably.

For whatever reason, they don't.

They don't. Not with Link releasing him only to look *so* ridiculously fondly down the two-inch height difference between them. Not with the way Link's hand lingers on his bicep, nails trailing softly down the length of his arm, making the hairs there stand up in interest. Not with any of those things, and definitely not with the way Link acts just as reluctant to step away as Ashton feels.

No, there's nothing to fear, here. They're in this together, whatever comes of it. That much is very, very clear.

"So. You're looking good," Link comments as he moves towards his drawing table. Scooping up a couple of left-behind ink bottles, he relocates the duo over to the workstation set up for them to use today. Motioning for Ashton to join him, Link bustles around and makes a valiant attempt to look busy. If Ashton didn't know any better, he might make the assumption that Link is feeling as nervous as he is.

It's reassuring.

"New clothes?" Link continues, shuffling supplies around. "You know, 'cause you're usually more... buttoned up."

"Sometimes I look like this," Ashton says, intentionally evasive, suppressing the grin that tugs at the sides of his mouth as he wanders towards Link's chair. "I used to dress this way often, actually. Before."

"Oh," Link replies lamely, squeezing the empty bottle in his hand until the cap pops off, startling him and causing him to fumble. "Well, it—it suits you. You look good."

"You said that," Ashton teases, though secretly, he's entirely pleased with Link's reaction, happily pouring fuel upon the fire by pulling said *good-looking* t-shirt over his head. Casual as anything, he drapes the fabric over the semi-reclined chair before glancing innocently at Link.

Despite the fact that Link *must* have been expecting some level of disrobing, his mouth still drops open slightly and his eyes glaze over. Satisfied, Ashton smirks and straddles the back of the chair. Wrapping his arms around the leather like he's comforting an old friend, he settles in to wait. Relaxed, as if there's nowhere in the world where he could possibly be more comfortable.

*Hey, he's traumatized, not dead, and definitely not new.*

"Jesus Christ," Link mutters from somewhere behind him. He's clearly fighting for his life, though to his credit, he manages to keep from dropping anything else before finding his place at Ashton's side. Cheek pressed against the headrest, Ashton struggles not to shiver at the first touch of Link's fingertips grazing his skin, carefully applying the initial ink transfer template that will guide his hands as he begins fixing Ashton's wings. This is just linework, though. The design will become far more complicated and require skilled freehand to evolve it as time goes on.

"You never finished telling me about your tattoos," Link says, a hand resting softly against Ashton's flank as he finds his bearings, machine checked and poised for action. "You showed me the blade and we got sidetracked sending videos. You ready?"

"Of course, Link," Ashton replies, answering both questions at once as the machine hums to life. Anticipation is always the worst, and he instinctively braces for the initial stroke. Link presses down, and for a minute or so Ashton remains quiet, allowing his body to adjust to the irritating sensations of the needle dragging and piercing. He *is* used to it, though, and the pain settles swiftly into something akin to background noise. Ashton inhales and then releases a slow, intentional breath out, ready to try and hold a conversation.

"As you said, I have the tri-edge," he begins, glancing at his forearm and flicking the weapon down into his hand, just out of habit. Instead of throwing the blade and disturbing

Link's canvas, Ashton just flips it, "catching" the pointed end of the illusion before waving it away, back onto his skin.

"What else? There's the leak in my Grace," he continues, tapping the side of his throat. The fact that he's positioned the way that he is makes it easy for Link to get a visual on this one. With a thought, the blue-white light is swirling and shifting, floating just above Ashton's skin. It's a miniature version of the glow that's *supposed* to appear when he spreads his wings, appearing to spill from the inked "cut" in his neck.

"Love that one," Link comments off-handedly. "What, it's supposed to be like your power source?"

"Something like that," Ashton responds noncommittally. "My essence, a gift from my divine creator, what or whoever that may be. Perhaps a visual symbol of my intrinsic talents, and how so many have tried to manipulate and use me, even *cut* me, to access them. Whether with the goal of making me believe that I was less for their existence, or to use for personal gain—either way."

From his place at Ashton's back, Link grunts. "That's pretty damn deep, Ash," he remarks, needle buzzing busily away. "Not for nothing, but that whole theme fits in pretty organically with your wings. You know, the whole, flying-through-Hell, coming out the other side damaged but alive, stronger for what you learned along the way? That thing?"

When Ashton remains silent, Link pushes on. "I'm just saying. You, uh—happen to put any more thought into letting me make this a transformative tatt? No pressure, just a question. You did say I could ask, right?"

In truth, Ashton is tired of feeling exhausted by his wings. By the whole situation, really. He's more than ready to move forward, bolstered by the increasing certainty that Link is the one to take him there, in more ways than just the literal. Weighing his options, Ashton hums and shifts slightly, unsticking his chest from the chair's leather.

“I trust you,” he says, wetting his lips. “Whatever you think will look best.”

Link’s foot must tap the pedal powering his pen because the buzzing noise abruptly ceases. “Wait, seriously?”

“Seriously,” Ashton replies, offering a small nod that doesn’t require the lifting of his head. “Continue, please.” He settles down and goes quiet, waiting for Link to pick up where he left off before continuing to describe his assortment of ink.

Link does, but he places a warm, gloved hand on Ashton’s shoulder first, murmuring softly, “The trust isn’t going unnoticed. I won’t let you down.”

The buzzing starts up again, the feel of linework resuming over Ashton’s ribcage, and he takes a second to detach himself from the discomfort. Talking to Link about other things helps. He clears his throat. “Where was I?”

“The ribs,” Link suggests. “Front left.”

“Ah, yes. The obscure lettering just below my rib cage was done in an ancient, dead language. The language of the angels, supposedly—something I was randomly drawn to. The actual inscription functions as a healing charm, cleverly built in. I’m not sure that it would do very much if I were, say, stabbed straight through the heart, but for stubbed toes and papercuts, it’s fairly effective. To be fair, I haven’t tested its limits. As we discussed during planning, it should speed up the healing of the work you’re doing, allowing for more sessions closer together.”

“Damn. I gotta get me one of those,” Link replies enthusiastically, his free hand bracing against Ashton’s shoulder. It’s difficult to remember that Link is in professional mode at the moment, that he isn’t being flirtatious. That doesn’t stop his bleeding warmth and physical touch from feeling good, though, needles aside.

“I’d be happy to replicate it for you. Whitaker taught me the charm, and he’s very protective of the formula. Naturally, I’d like to make it one of my staple offerings at an accessible

price point going forward.” Link snorts in appreciation, and Ashton smiles. “Really, the only other big pieces I have are the flowers covering the side of my stomach and opposite ribs,” he says, a hand moving to reflexively brush over the massive, colorful assortment of blooms and vines that curl around his abdomen and up his flank.

If it wasn’t for the wings, Ashton probably would have extended the pattern much farther onto his back, but as it turns out, skin is a limited commodity. It’s a favorite, though. The florals aren’t complicated, and there’s nothing particularly magical about the design, save for the way the plants can rustle as if blown by a gentle breeze and the bees hop peacefully from flower to flower. Strange as it might seem, Ashton enjoys watching them immensely, the same way he does their living counterparts. He finds the lowkey, subtle enchantment interminably soothing.

Not everything has to be flashy and made for show.

“Oh, and a map of the world—a globe, I suppose—on my right thigh. It spins. Very technical stuff. That’s it, though.”

“Mmm,” Link says. “Liar.”

“Fine,” Ashton relents, sighing. “There is also an obligatory, text-only, typewriter-font ankle tattoo that says, ‘too much heart,’ are you happy?”

“Yes,” Link replies smugly. “Hey, we’ve all got one.”

“Speaking of which, I *would* like to have a guinea pig inked at some point. I just can’t figure out where to place it, or if I’d be terribly disconcerted by him appearing randomly on my neck, the way Beauty does for you.”

Clearly caught off guard, Link laughs loudly, pausing his tattooing to bend over and guffaw, stopping the pen until he can regain control of himself. Sighing in amusement, he pats Ashton’s flank and drops his forehead briefly to a patch of untouched skin, hot breath ghosting across Ashton’s ribs and distracting him thoroughly from whatever train of thought he might’ve had going. Link doesn’t seem to notice the way his

canvas is melting into a human puddle, since he sits up and resumes his work without any further teasing.

“Damn, Ash,” he says, a hint of admiration in his voice that Ashton enjoys immensely. “You really are something else, sweetheart.”

The casual term of endearment has Ashton tingling all over again, but he forces himself to relax and let Link do his job. For the next hour or so, the salon is quiet, save for the tattooing machine and the murmur of conversations floating in from the atrium. To his surprise, Ashton actually dozes off right there in the chair, lulled to sleep by the familiar buzzing of Link’s equipment in his ear. That same sound used to grate when he was in Whitaker’s chair—now it’s soothing, like an old friend.

The discomfort from the linework is surprisingly minimal; whether because he’s used to it, the healing charm is working overtime, or Link is just that talented, it doesn’t matter. With Link’s practiced, light touch and careful hands, it amounts to the same thing. No one needs or asks for a break, and therefore, Link is easily able to accomplish everything he set out to do in their introductory session without difficulty.

Ashton only wakes to Link rubbing aftercare balm onto the skin of his back and shoulders. It’s enjoyable, which isn’t surprising, though Link is perhaps a bit more thorough than strictly necessary. Not that Ashton is about to complain—it’s been quite some time since he’s been touched so gently, so soothingly. He considers pretending not to be awake in the hopes that it might continue, but that seems unfair to Link, who is probably more than ready to relax himself.

After yawning and blinking his way back to a normal, fully-alert state, Ashton waits until Link has secured a piece of plastic wrap over the span of his new ink before sitting up straight and turning around to check in. He shifts *just* far enough for one of his knees to press flush against Link’s thigh.

“Hello, Link,” he says sleepily.



“Hey there, Ash,” Link replies brightly, a sweet smile brightening his face as if he’s pleased to see Ashton all over again. “You did great, we kicked linework’s ass. Miles to go, but it’s a damn good start.” Gathering up the strewn remnants of his trash, Link snaps his nitrile gloves directly into the garbage can before lifting both his arms high above his head and stretching luxuriously, allowing himself a *very* indulgent yawn.

“I should let you get to bed,” Ashton says regretfully, standing and shaking out his own stiff muscles. Gingerly, he pulls his t-shirt over his head and down to cover Link’s work. It’s not discomfort-free, but he’s had worse.

Even though he’s expecting it, when Link nods and smiles ruefully, Ashton’s heart sinks in his chest. He can’t help but feel moderately disappointed that Link isn’t arguing or asking him to stay.

It’s silly that he’s so reluctant to leave. After all, he’s been in Link’s company—had Link’s hands *all over him*—for hours upon hours tonight. Not only that, but he’s returning first thing in the morning. He’s hardly even *leaving*, just going for a nap and a shower before work, a job where Link will also be, since it’s his place of employment, too.

However silly, it helps that Link appears to both understand and feel the same way, wiping his hands on a rag as he follows Ashton out. All through the empty atrium, all the way up the stairs, and for several charged minutes of lingering in the doorway, Ashton tries to think of reasons not to walk away, because Link is *looking* at him like he wants to say something. It *is* possible, of course, that Link simply wants to ensure that the door is locked behind him, but Ashton’s not actually delusional enough to buy into the musings of his own insecurities.

Not tonight, anyway.

Leaning against the open door with his head pressed back against the frame, bottom lip pulled in between his teeth, and ink-stained towel slung over his shoulder, a lazy exhaustion

pervades Link's entire being. It makes Ashton want to gather him up and tuck his tired body into bed (beside him), a caretaking urge he's not sure that he's ever experienced prior to today.

Despite the unrelenting eye contact Link is giving him, Ashton resists acting on anything. He steps away, moving backward up the exterior steps instead. As Link watches him go with eyelids heavy, Ashton raises a parting hand and attempts a wink.

"Goodnight, Link," he tells him.

"Goodnight, Ash," Link replies, his smile drowsy but still flirty as Ashton's logical brain forces his feet to turn and walk away. "Text me when you get home," Link calls after him. "Drive safe."

"Thank you, Mother," Ashton replies over his shoulder, but he's smiling, too.

Later, as he climbs into bed, the four unread messages that await him are no surprise, but they *are* a comfort. A constant, practically, at this point. Settling back into his pillow nest to type his response, Ashton feels content, but he also begins wondering whether he made the right series of decisions tonight, standing there in the doorway, saying goodbye to Link. Whether perhaps *he* should have been the one to make the first move, stepped forward and told Link plainly what he was feeling, what he desired.

It's not as if Link doesn't know how emotionally draining this whole process has been for him. He knows all too well the reluctance Ashton carries when it comes to letting someone in, the fear that he harbors of making a mistake, of creating another situation like the one he went through with Whitaker.

*That's a sobering thought.*

Suddenly horrified, Ashton wonders if *Link* thinks he sees *him* that way. If, in Link's mind, he's being viewed as the same sort of risk, the same potential mistake, and nothing more. It's true that Link's words on the screen are the same flirtatious

sweetness that Ashton has become accustomed to receiving from the man, but the way that he never even *tries* to test the waters in person is telling.

That's it. That's enough.

Ashton makes the decision, right then and there, that he needs to be more careful with Link's heart. He needs to ensure that he doesn't end up trampling all over it in a misguided attempt to guard his own. Yes, *he* is important, and proceeding with caution in new relationships is prudent. That's a lesson Ashton needed to learn, but at the same time, he never wanted to become selfish or cold.

The very thought that he might have hurt Link in some way, even a little and by accident, is heartbreaking.

After work tomorrow, Ashton will say something. He'll extend an olive branch and see if Link seems receptive. That's easy enough—a drink together, perhaps, nothing serious. It's nerve-wracking, but deep down, Ashton knows that he has nothing to fear.

Over the past few weeks since they met, Link has been nothing but supportive and kind. He's only ever shown interest in Ashton and handled him with care, doing everything possible to empower and help him to cope, to move on. It's an uncomfortable realization for Ashton that perhaps he hasn't been doing as much as he could be to return the favor, to lift Link up in the same sort of wonderful way.

*Self-awareness is a journey*, Ashton supposes. At least he sat with it, and now that he knows, he can work hard to be better. Link deserves that.

They exchange another handful of superficial texts, Link relaying that he's excited for Ashton's first day tomorrow.

Link

be nice to have someone other  
than Sam to bitch about shit with



Link

bring your best petty

Ashton

oh, i can be petty, just you wait

Ashton

after i left Whitaker, his cable TV subscription was still logged in on my phone. there was a built-in remote one could use to change the channel, I used to wait until I thought he was home and turn the station. repeatedly. eventually, he canceled his cable.

Link

have i told you yet today that you're awesome?

Ashton

have i told you that i think you are awesome, too?

Link



Long after they've exchanged their second set of goodnights for the day, Ashton burrows down underneath his blankets with the darkened phone still clutched between his hands. Warm and fuzzy, he stares up at the ceiling and wonders how it's possible that he's managed to fall so far, so fast. It's been a mere handful of weeks, and he already can't remember what life was like before Link became the virtual center of it.

It's hard to wrap his mind around how much he's changed. Or how he could *possibly* be so sure, already—and *he is*—that he wouldn't change a thing.



## CHAPTER 5

It's pouring rain the next morning, windy and cool. The sky is gray, the ground wet and sloppy when Ashton makes the drive from his apartment in the city back to the Soul-arium. Despite the overhang at the drive-through, the three seconds his arm is outside the car grabbing his order are enough to soak through the cuff of his shirt, and that's unpleasant.

Thanks to the rain, the frontage road the shop sits on is borderline washed-out, and not for the first time, Ashton wonders how economical being housed this far out of the way can possibly be for the Remingtons. While the siblings don't seem remotely bothered by the clientele they might be missing, Ashton worries about his own income. Specifically, his ability to attract clients without impulse access or Whitaker's name behind his work.

While Link seems to be under the impression that *his* name will bring some form of clout to Soul Survivor and the Soul-arium, Ashton's not nearly so sure. Perhaps that's on him, though, and Ashton just needs to believe in himself a little more. Without question, Link makes him want to do exactly that.

As he squints against the buckets of water dumping relentlessly onto his windshield, wide rivulets obscure the glass and replenish faster than the wipers can clear a path. Ashton grumbles, flexing his fingers against the wheel and praying vehemently that one of his tires doesn't get stuck in the mud. His old truck is reliable, but it's also just that—old. Hitting an exceptionally jarring pothole, he wonders whether it would be prudent to phone today's appointments and warn them about the traveling conditions.

Ultimately, he pulls over (well, he brakes in the middle of the sodden, gravel road underneath a tree) to do exactly that.

To Ashton's immense relief, no one seems to mind. Each of his clients in turn reassures him that they aren't deterred and still plan to make the trek. In fact, most of them seem *thrilled* to be headed to the Soul-arium, regardless of the barely-paved access road and weather situation. Until that moment, Ashton hadn't realized how much of a reputation the place really carries, but the short conversations with his clients go a long way towards calming his fears about sustainable income, as well as reassuring him that partnering with the Remingtons is the right thing to do.

As he pulls into the puddle-studded and extremely muddy lot in the shadow of the old factory, Ashton suddenly has one, very intense regret. *What* was he thinking, not accepting Link's offer to grant him access to the tunnel leading to the Soul-arium's indoor garage? For a person who rarely stops worrying about the pitfalls that come with repeating past mistakes, he surely overlooked *that* one.

It's just before nine in the morning and therefore business hours, so the front door should be open. Unfortunately, to get *into* that door Ashton will have to slosh through some pretty nasty terrain. To top things off, as he searches around, patting the seat next to him (and then behind him, and then underneath both seats, each shift with increasing panic) Ashton realizes that he's left his umbrella at home, because of course, he did.

*Great.*

That's just great. That's precisely what he needs, to show up for his first day at his brand new job looking like a drowned rat. Not to mention, having to then spend the *rest* of that day wearing half-dry clothing and wet-fucking-socks. Call it a Pavlovian response or perhaps PTSD, but *wet socks* have been firmly branded into Ashton's brain as an omen of bad tidings, a thing to be avoided at all costs.

He's well aware that he's overblowing things. That, technically, a damp piece of clothing is *not* a serious concern, but in his mind, it's worse than breaking a mirror while deleting a chain letter after walking beneath a ladder on Friday

the thirteenth and simultaneously opening an umbrella indoors.

With that perspective, it isn't long before Ashton (still dry, since he hasn't left the safety of his truck) and his broken brain have allowed this nothing issue to work him into a complete frenzy. Between the weather and the impending sock situation, he becomes convinced that the world is trying to tell him something, to the point where he's seriously considering turning the truck around and driving home instead of heading inside at all.

The steaming cup of coffee with "*Link*" scrawled across the side, sitting innocuously beside his own in the carrier, does nothing to ease that building fear.

It's just too familiar. It's too *much*.

Ashton panics. His chest is tight, his pulse is loud in his ears, and if it wasn't for the soft *ding* of his phone from inside his trenchcoat pocket, that apprehension would have won. Would have seized the reins and taken control, leading him to shove his key back into the ignition, spin the wheel for a hard turn, and leave Link, the Soul-arium, and the Soul Survivor brand behind for good.

Anxiety is *not* logical. It is *not* rational. It does not *care* that Ashton—the rational side of him—*knows* without a shadow of a doubt that sweet, wonderful Link Remington is *not Whitaker*.

He doubts that Link could be so cruel if he tried.

Ashton—the *real* Ashton, not the anxiety-ridden mess who's entirely too fixated on socks—*does* know that, though. So when he lifts his phone and sees Link's name illuminated on the screen with the message that follows, his heart jumps for joy. Just like that, all thoughts of fleeing are stamped out like a match in the rain, snuffed by his all-encompassing desire to simply bask in Link's presence again.

It's so easy.



Link

Mornin' sweetheart. Get your ass  
in here before breakfast gets cold

Smiling somewhat stupidly down at his screen, Ashton attempts to reset. He takes a slow, deep breath, exhaling intentionally right as another message comes in.

Ding.

Link

Look up

That's all this one says. Ashton obeys immediately, his eyes squinting to peer through the water-distorted glass of his passenger-side window before eventually finding Link. He's standing in the arch of the Soul-arium's entrance, holding the door wide and waving.

"Hi!" he yells, his greeting semi-drowned out by the rain and walls of the truck.

Paradoxically, Ashton's mind is still telling him to run, while his heart demands the opposite—pushing him to dive in head-first. Just to complicate things, one look at Link wearing soft sweatpants, a worn t-shirt, and an open robe first thing in the morning has his body weighing in with some equally strong options and doing so with demands that are on a *completely* different wavelength than either his head or his heart. It's distracting, confusing, and exactly what he needs.

The well-timed interruption breaks Ashton's anxiety's hold over him, the nerves dissipating into something less fraught. Seeing Link's smiling face, his excitement once again begins to outweigh his apprehension. Even as he pockets his phone, lifts the coffee carrier, and kicks open the truck's door to a relentless, angry downpour, his spirits can't be dampened.

He's good. He *won't* let fear win.

Ashton's resolved as he's ever been—shoulders back, chin up, head held high. That is, until he takes four wide steps to round the truck and promptly slips in some mud. Stumbling and tripping, he tries hard to regain his footing before ultimately failing. When he goes down, he goes down hard, and face-first.

Both he and the coffees go flying, the slickness of the grass under his feet eliminating any chance Ashton might have had to stop the horrifying sequence of events that follows. Before he can react, the world is upside down and he's nothing but a witness, feeling like he's watching it happen from outside his body. Thankfully, the concrete steps leading down to the Soul-arium's entrance are there to break his fall, and Ashton goes tumbling down them, too, whacking his forehead on the edge of the last one as he rolls.

Flat on his back and swimming in a mix of mud, coffee, and dirty water that's been accumulating on the stone at the bottom of the steps, Ashton blinks dazedly up at the gray sky. His head throbs and spins as rain continues to pelt insistently at his exposed skin. The droplets are cold and sharp, each hit a stark reminder to Ashton that he is just not the kind of man for whom things ever go right.

“Wonderful,” he mutters, a drop hitting him squarely in the eye. “Just wonderful.”

“Holy shit, Ash!” Link's voice comes from somewhere to his left, because of course, *of course*, Link was here to witness his monumental failure at simply being alive.

Before he can protest the babying, Link's arm is sliding underneath Ashton's shoulder blades, encouraging him upright with a firm, steadying hand that wraps securely around his ribs. The motion grates against the newly-tattooed skin of his back, but compared to the pain filling his head, it's just a minor nuisance.

“C'mon, Fred Astaire,” Link quips, “Let's get you inside.”

Stumbling over the threshold together, Link slams the Soul-arium's door shut behind them while Ashton leans heavily against the wall, trying to catch his breath and regain some semblance of composure. Water sluices steadily from his hair, running down his trenchcoat to create puddles on the iron walkway. As his heartbeat returns to something less reminiscent of hooves in a horse race, Link's face appears in front of him, shaking the rain from his own head with a goofy smile on his face.

Ashton opens his mouth to say something, to *apologize*, but is distracted by something warm and noticeably thicker than water trickling down over his right eyebrow and obscuring his vision. The smile slides off of Link's face as he steps forward, hand reaching out in concern.

"Do I need to put you in a bubble, or what?" Link asks softly, pulling off his robe and then his t-shirt without any hesitation. He's balling up the latter and pressing the material against what is very obviously a significant cut to his forehead before Ashton realizes what he's doing—he'll blame the concussion. Despite the pain in his head, the blood in his eye, and the fact that he's humiliated himself (*again*) in front of Link, Ashton can't help but be charmed by Link's presence.

They're close, with mere inches—just the *tiniest* chasm of space—between their faces, and Link's doesn't offer any indication that he's uncomfortable with that. In fact, as he holds pressure on the wound and Ashton finds the courage to meet his gaze, all he can find in Link's expression is fond warmth. If he wasn't soaking wet, muddy, and quickly becoming chilled to the bone, Ashton doubts that he'd be able to stop his body from reacting to the proximity of Link's muscled, naked chest. As it is, he just shivers.

Taking notice of his increasing discomfort, Link lifts the crumpled t-shirt enough to check on the status of the injury underneath. "It's not as bad as it looked with all that blood on your face," he declares, picking up Ashton's hand and plucking free the mangled drink carrier he's still clutching. "Probably don't need this," he teases, dropping it into a trash

can by the railing before relocating Ashton's hand to hold pressure on his own head.

"Right, of course," Ashton murmurs, embarrassed, but he clutches Link's shirt tightly all the same.

"Let's go get you cleaned up," Link continues, stopping at the top of the stairs to pull off his own wet socks and to make sure that Ashton is steady enough to make it down without help. He seems totally unfazed by this whole, disastrous event, no matter how hot Ashton's cheeks burn or the way he tries to sink into his jacket, hoping to disappear forever.

Sam is nowhere to be seen, probably in the library setting up if she happens to have an early client. Ashton is grateful for that—this situation is awful enough without adding extra witnesses.

The path Link carves for them through the halls of the bunker is familiar, and Ashton recognizes that they're headed for Link's room, through the atrium and past the kitchen. As they walk by the open door, some tempting smells waft to reach his nose: bacon and eggs, fresh coffee, toast. Ashton abruptly feels immensely guilty.

"I apologize for ruining your breakfast," he says, reflexively catching Link's forearm without thinking *too* much about the urge that leads him to do so.

But Link just smiles amiably, glancing over his shoulder and patting Ashton's hand on his arm. "No worries, bud. Food can wait. Anyway, I made all that stuff for you. Sort of a 'welcome to the team,' first day celebration thing. We'll get you cleaned up and then see what needs reheating."

"This is mortifying," Ashton mutters, as they arrive at their destination and a still-shirtless Link holds the door open for him. *Holds the door open*, like he's not some sort of casual Adonis, like it's not taking *every* ounce of Ashton's willpower to keep from openly gawking at his form. In true Link fashion, that casual cool persists as he tosses his robe onto the bed and rifles through his bureau. While Ashton stands there,

destroying his original shirt, Link pulls out a fresh one alongside a pair of jeans and changes into both without pause.

It's not as if Ashton hasn't seen the man down to his underwear, he *has*. Not to mention, both of them happen to be seasoned professionals, veteran artists working jobs where it's natural and expected to see various exposed body parts nearly every single day. Heck, earlier this week, Ashton had a topless woman in his living room and he was about as interested in that as a toddler at the Met. He *shouldn't* be fazed now.

But Link has some kind of magic about him, an energy that Ashton's never encountered before. It *must* be magic—that's the only way to explain his magnetism, his charm.

The ease with which a half-dressed Link moves around him in the room, the comfort he has with his own body and whoever might see it—Ashton *wishes* he could be more like that. When Link catches him looking, he just grins and tosses a bundle of clean clothes Ashton's way. Grappling with them clumsily, Ashton isn't entirely sure whether to prioritize those or his head, awkwardly managing to keep hold of both.

“First of all,” Link says, now fully-dressed after shrugging on a flannel, “You tripped. It's no big deal, shit happens. It's not some kind of prophetic sign that the universe hates you, alright?” Narrowing his eyes, Ashton finds himself wondering whether Link is actually this intuitive, or if *he's* just that transparent.

“Second, this place is the most easy-going work environment you're ever going to find, so let's just get that out of the way. Me and Sam love our work, but we also live here, so it's home first. Same vein, when you're here, you're home, too. Cool?”

Without waiting for a reply, Link points towards a sink that's mounted to the wall, lifting his finger to the mirror above it before skating out the door and leaving Ashton behind. As it closes behind him, he calls out, “Come to the kitchen when you're done and I'll fix up that head of yours.”

The latch clicks, and he's alone.

Still dripping wet and clutching the pile of dry clothing (and the bloody t-shirt), Ashton glances around Link's room. He's unable to stop himself from entertaining the thought that this is *not* how he imagined returning to this space. Moving towards the sink, he sets everything he's holding down on Link's desk and then strips. A glance in the mirror tells Ashton that the wound on his forehead is still oozing, but nothing that appears overly serious. The memory of his skull connecting with sharp concrete flashes across his mind's eye and makes him wince, which in turn has him believing that the healing charm on his ribs is working overtime.

Somewhat awkwardly, Ashton manages to stick his head underneath the running faucet in order to rinse the mud from the back of his hair and neck. He winds up swiping a towel from the back of Link's door to dry off, crossing his fingers that Link won't mind. Ashton can't imagine that a towel would be his line in the sand, but one never knows.

The clothes Link offered fit him well enough, if a touch long in the leg when it comes to the jeans. It sets a funny feeling loose in Ashton's belly to consider that he and Link are virtually the same size, as the idea of Link wearing *his* clothes is something that provokes more interest than it probably should, at this point.

Clad in his new t-shirt, flannel, and feeling much better, Ashton makes a brief and ultimately fruitless attempt to tame his completely destroyed hair before throwing his hands in the air and opting to lean into the wild, unstyled look. "Sex hair", as it were, has always been a thing he's naturally capable of sporting, and he'd be lying if he said he wasn't curious to see Link's reaction to it today.

Not that he's testing the waters or anything, but after his earlier entrance, Ashton is of the mind that he deserves a bit of a redemption arc. While his socially awkward vibe might be interminably unfixable, Ashton himself is neither stupid nor naive. The hair is *hot*.

Gathering up his dirty clothes, muddy coat, and purloined towel, a warm and cozy Ashton exits Link's room and makes his way towards the kitchen. After a minute of hemming and hawing, he opts to leave his shoes where they are, which happens to be lined up neatly next to Link's desk, drying out. While he knows that Link is probably correct in his assertion that not everything is a sign from the universe, the whole wet-sock thing still hits uncomfortably close to home. Ashton's not about tempting the fates when an alternative is *right there*.

His quiet, socked-foot approach provides very little warning to anyone listening, which results in Ashton being gifted the chance to hover in the doorway and watch Link work. It *is* a gift—Link is just so full of *life*, and it's difficult to feel anything but happy when he's around. At present, Link is facing away from the hallway door and therefore him, singing along to the radio and dancing, quite literally, as if no one is watching.

A grin spreads across Ashton's face as Link spins around on one foot, holding a pan of eggs dramatically out to the side as he screeches into his spatula, belting out the high note of the song that's currently playing. Forgoing subtlety, Ashton allows a laugh to escape from his throat and it catches Link's attention. Link's head jerks towards him, cheeks flushing prettily as he opens his mouth, presumably to defend himself.

Except, he doesn't. No actual words make it through Link's lips, just a semi-pained, tiny squeak that reflects the way his eyes turn glassy and unfocused, gaze roaming over the length of Ashton's body.

*Well.* That certainly answers Ashton's question from earlier in a way that has *him* blushing and ducking his head, like he was the one playing popstar in the middle of the kitchen. As quickly as it comes over him, though, Link's shell-shocked interlude dissolves and his normal persona returns. It's so brief that Ashton almost wonders whether he imagined it, tilting his head curiously as Link bustles over to help himself to the dirty clothing, using a foot to nudge Ashton into taking a seat at the table.

“Hang tight,” Link says, juggling the laundry while simultaneously spooning some eggs and bacon onto a plate and placing it in front of Ashton. He winks before disappearing out the door, leaving Ashton alone again, eggs notwithstanding.

Without any good reason to refrain, Ashton shrugs and tucks in, only realizing once he’s halfway through the plate (and the steaming, delicious cup of coffee Link must have poured before he came in), that he was starving. Anxiety has been his constant companion for the past twenty-four hours, and that always makes him forget to eat.

By the time Link reappears, Ashton’s plate is clean and he’s moved on to checking his phone, worried that he’s cutting things close. His first appointment should be arriving within the next half an hour, his station isn’t ready, and there’s still an open wound on his face.

“Clothes are in the washer,” Link announces, sitting down next to Ashton and flinging open the first-aid kit that’s in his hands. Once again, Link’s proximity causes Ashton’s breath to stutter in his chest, the pure joy of having him only a few inches away almost overwhelming. He’s easy—casually leaning into Ashton’s space, close enough for his coffee breath to ghost across a cheek as he peers critically at the cut.

Muttering some explanation about angles, Link grasps Ashton’s chin and gently tilts it down and to the side. He uses a single finger to brush away a lock of hair before wetting a piece of gauze with hydrogen peroxide and dabbing away. The corner of his mouth quirks up when Ashton flinches.

“Cold,” Ashton says, by way of explanation.

“Mmhmm,” Link agrees amiably, though he doesn’t stop what he’s doing. “There. Just need a coupla butterfly bandages to hold this sucker closed, and you’ll be good as new. Probably brewing up a hell of a bruise, though. Better practice your, ‘you should see the other guy,’ speech.” Link is already unwrapping said bandages as he speaks, and when Ashton doesn’t protest, proceeds to apply them to his face.



Ashton, meanwhile, is trying his damndest to focus on the fading sting of his cut and the blooming ache caused by Link pressing his fingers into the skin next to it. Not the most pleasant sensation, but the alternative would be acknowledging his body's push to convince him that leaning in and catching Link's lips with his own is *the* move. Worse, his heart seems to have jumped on board with the belief that this a *very* good idea, leaving his brain struggling to keep a hand on the wheel.

Hoping that Link doesn't think much of it, Ashton's eyes drift closed. It's a lot to process—the gentle warmth of Link's hands, the spicy scent of his cologne, and especially the ridiculously *soft* expression he's wearing on his face. Individually and collectively, each of those things is working to amplify his desires *and* make them extremely difficult to ignore.

At one point, Link leans forward to peer over Ashton's shoulder and down the back of his borrowed shirt, fabric held gently away from his skin, breath puffing at the nape of his neck. "Back looks okay," Link declares. "Nothing worse than what I caused." Ashton opens his eyes in time to see Link grin as he slides back in his chair, slamming them closed immediately. He's never reversed course on a decision so quickly, but there's absolutely no way he can control himself while Link is so close.

When Link is finished working, he very softly murmurs, "All set, sunshine." Almost as if he's reluctant to let go, his fingers trail slowly down Ashton's cheek. Bracing himself, Ashton opens again, unsurprised to find Link staring intently back. He swallows hard as their eye contact holds, charged in a way that makes him forget that anything else in the world even exists.

Until—

"Ahem." It's Sam, hovering in the doorway and awkwardly clearing her throat, and that's enough to burst the moment. The sound has both of them jerking away from each

other, practically jumping to their feet and simultaneously rattling off lame excuses. Sam isn't having it, but she doesn't seem particularly bothered, either, sighing and waving them off.

“Yeah, yeah,” Sam says dismissively, with a roll of her eyes that makes Ashton wonder exactly how often she's walked in on Link doing something like this. That thought doesn't sit well in his stomach, but everyone has a history. If Link only wanted him for a quick roll in the hay, he could have made a move ten times over by now, and that's enough for Ashton to put those particular worries aside, if not to rest.

“Ash,” Sam continues, “your ten o'clock is here. She knows you might need a few minutes, I have her set up with some tea in the atrium. I gotta get back, I've got a client in the chair. Link—you good to show Ash his station?” Sam's tone is pointed, and Link looks appropriately chastised, nodding swiftly and shifting on his feet under his sister's disapproving gaze.

“Bacon?” he offers, holding up the platter and flashing Sam a cocky grin.

Sam rolls her eyes again and raises a hand before disappearing back into the depths of the bunker. Once she's out of sight, Link looks over at Ashton sheepishly. “You ready?” he asks, jerking a thumb over his shoulder and in the direction of the library. He grabs two strips of bacon and shoves them both in his mouth, talking around the food, which Ashton should definitely not find endearing.

“C'mon, let's get you set up and ready to kick some tattoo ass.”

“I'm ready if you are.”

Relievedly, the rest of the day passes in a much smoother—if busier—fashion than it began. Despite the slow start, both Remingtons and Ashton wind up with their hands full, inking customers from nearly the minute they step out of the kitchen

until the Soul-arium closes its doors to business around seven in the evening.

Ashton's first appointment takes up a good chunk of the day in and of itself. It's for a regular, a woman named Tanya who's on her second session for the third tattoo he's put on her body. Four hours of coloring and shading turn almost *sixty* individual leaf outlines into photorealistic foliage, and Ashton pushes his limits, laying ink until his hand cramps up. The end result is worth it, though, and he feels accomplished.

This thing with the Remingtons is working. Despite his initial concerns, the blending of his old life and this budding new one seems to be progressing seamlessly. Interestingly, Tanya is the owner of the first tattoo he inked at Whitaker's studio, an impulse walk-in, lured to the shop by Ashton's apprenticeship flash sheet posted to Sainted Angel's social media. He did another piece for her a year later, and then the linework for this one in his own living room.

Not the most professional of circumstances, naturally, but Ashton's not sorry for doing what he needed to do. More importantly, his decisions led to the retention of loyal clients like Tanya, awesome, collaborative customers who appreciate his talent for what it is and never held his lack of a real studio against him. Tanya once told him that if he set up shop on the sidewalk, she'd be there, first in line.

Still, Tanya seems excited to be at the Soul-arium today, starry-eyed over the Remingtons' presence and chattering about wanting to book another tattoo just as soon as this one heals. Really, Ashton can't blame her—the Soul-arium speaks for itself. It's welcoming, visually interesting, full of attractive people, and it feels like home. It's unsurprising that clients want to be here and will go out of their way to do so.

As far as the actual process goes, it helps that Tanya is exactly what Ashton needs to soothe his fraught nerves today. She's the kind of client a tattoo artist hopes for—knows what she wants but respects the creative process. No wiggling or squirming under the needle. Friendly, but not so talkative that

Ashton wants to put his pen through his eardrum by the time they're finished. It's also a back piece, so there's no random, awkward eye contact—there's very little to fuel his anxiety in this sitting.

While he's working, Ashton happens to take notice of the Wonder Woman ring Tanya's wearing on her left hand. He mentions it, and they spend the next hour and a half intensely discussing subversive intersectional feminism and barriers to dismantling the patriarchy. It's an excellent way to spend a large slice of his day.

In the end, Tanya stands at the far end of the library in front of the Remingtons' double-mirror set-up, eyeing the final result critically. From several feet behind her, Ashton admires his carefully-constructed answer to what was honestly an extremely vague idea. If he's remembering correctly, Tanya's request was something along the lines of, "some kind of jungle thing," and that was it. The lack of elaboration or any sort of specific detail nearly gave him an ulcer as he sketched, erased, and sketched again, but ultimately, Ashton came to adore the design.

Now that it's on her skin, he just has to hope that Tanya feels the same.

As she holds her wadded-up shirt in front of her chest, Tanya uses one hand to sweep her long, blonde hair forward over her shoulder and out of the way. She makes *steely* eye contact with herself in the mirror, blue eyes curious and with no sign of nerves to be seen. Ashton has to admire that—this is not a girl who has confidence or trust issues, that's for sure.

In the mirror behind her, the leaves begin to rustle, shaking as if wind-blown inside the tear-drop outline that runs from the bottom of her spine all the way up to her neck. The multi-tonal green leaves start out densely-packed at the lower linework and loosen as they twist their way up her spine. When the magic is activated and they sway on her skin, the effect is stunning, shimmering, like patches of light poking through a dense canopy to alight on the foliage below.

In the middle of the rounded bottom of the overall tear-shaped design, a tiger's face appears in the brush. With narrowed eyes and facial muscles tense, the animal appears ready to pounce. In sync with Tanya's smile, the tiger pushes its head through the ring of leaves and roars, glinting eyes and sharp teeth making the movement look *so* realistic, Ashton almost forgets that this particular tattoo includes a new, proprietary charm he invented himself.

That is, until the entire bunker goes freeze-frame still.

"Holy shit, Ash, you did it!" Tanya exclaims, whirling around to throw an arm around his neck in excitement, and Ashton thinks she probably forgot that she isn't actually wearing a shirt.

Link appears in his periphery, with Sam just behind him, both of them looking stunned and confused. Link's finger is out, pointing almost accusatorily in Tanya's direction. "Did—did that thing just roar?! Like, make actual *noise*?"

"Oh," Ashton says, somewhat abashed, snapping the stretchy nitrile of his glove against his skin. "I apologize, Link. I should have discussed trying out a new enchantment with you and Sam before doing so here, at your shop. I assure you, it won't happen again."

He waits, expecting to be scolded, but Link just blinks at him blankly, exchanging a disbelieving glance with Sam, who mostly looks incredibly excited. Link exhales loudly before raising his hand and stepping forward to clap Ashton on the shoulder.

"Dude," he says, clearly still processing his astonishment. "It *better* happen again! This is exactly the kind of bangin' creativity I was hoping you'd bring to Soul Survivor. Never, ever let me catch you apologizing for pulling off something that cool and badass. Man, we are so goddamn lucky to have you here." He shakes his finger in the air before turning his attention back to Tanya.

"Let's see it again," he demands with a grin.

When the excitement over Ashton's new skillset has reduced to a simmer and Tanya has been wrapped up and sent on her way, they order pizza. When it arrives, the three artists scarf it down while hovering over Link's work table, a late lunch or an early dinner, Ashton isn't even sure. Thanks to the lack of natural light filtering down into the underground space, it's nearly impossible to gauge the passing of time.

Surprisingly, Ashton finds himself unbothered by that. He's content, enjoying his work and the easygoing atmosphere the Soul-arium provides, happy to simply go with the flow and immerse himself in his art. He's not sure that there's ever been a time when he's felt *secure* enough to really do that.

The third table in the library, the one farthest back, becomes designated as Ashton's and he's quick to make it his own. At Sainted Angels, the work areas were communal and counter space for sketching and drawing was a limited commodity. To be able to stretch out, to keep multiple works-in-progress going at the same time, *and* have space left over to meet with clients? It's heavenly.

The secluded alcoves sectioned off by the bookshelves are perfect as well, in Ashton's opinion. They provide the right amount of privacy and accessibility, plus if necessary, they can be blocked off easily and completely using a portable curtain. The alcove to the left of Ashton's table is dubbed his specifically, which is almost overwhelming, especially when Sam tells him to outfit and decorate the space however he likes. In addition to his welcome breakfast, Link's also taken the liberty of sticking three metallic-pink, inflated balloon letters to the wall between bookshelves to christen it.

Naturally, they spell "A-S-H," and Ashton can't stop his gaze from being drawn to the shiny mylar all throughout the day. In fact, he finds himself smiling, just thinking about how they got there.

All told, by the time the Soul-arium's last scheduled client for the day is happily heading out the door, Ashton is feeling *exceedingly* pleased about his decision to come work at Soul

Survivor. His muscles are sore from the long day of work, but in a good, satisfying way. He's even—*mostly*—ready to relinquish the idea that the series of unfortunate events from earlier that morning might herald the apocalypse. To accept that they probably aren't a sign of anything at all, save for the fact that Ashton should never try to run in the rain.

Above them in the atrium, Sam's parting conversation with her client is muted by the height and distance. Her laugh echoes as the Soul-arium's heavy door swings closed with a thud. Inside the library, Ashton heads towards the sound, having just finished organizing his paperwork, stowing his gear, and cleaning his spaces.

"Hey," Link calls out, and when Ashton turns, he sees him emerging from his own alcove, waving a tube of healing cream. Standard cream, not charmed, which is interesting. Although, Link *is* frequently old-fashioned in his methodology, so perhaps it's not. "Lift your shirt up, sunshine, let me slap some of this on you. Meant to do it this morning, but we got a little sidetracked."

Now that he's been reminded, Ashton can agree that the skin on his back does need a modicum of attention. It's feeling a bit raw and tight, and he certainly should know better than to let brand-new ink go this long without moisturizing. Considering that, he doesn't utter a word of protest before shrugging off Link's flannel and tugging the borrowed tee up over his head.

Without looking for Link's reaction, Ashton folds his arms, leaning against the nearest bookcase shelf to wait. He shivers a little, maybe from the draft floating in from outside, or perhaps it has nothing to do with the temperature at all.

Link's hands find his shoulder blades, dry fingertips caressing gently before he starts rubbing the balm in circles over irritated skin. Ashton's healing charm is definitely doing its part to mitigate the inflammation, but the treatment still feels wonderful. And when Link's fingers dig tentatively into the meat of his muscles, carefully pressing the day's tension

away in long, languid strokes, Ashton can't help but sigh and lower his head, eyes drifting closed in appreciation.

*I could get used to this*, he thinks.

“Again?” Sam says loudly as she enters the room, but even with his head down, Ashton can tell that she's teasing this time. “When you two are done touching each other, let's have a celebratory, first-day drink. I could use it.”

Link snorts. “This is work-related touching,” he fires back. “Don't be jealous, just because I'm better and more dedicated to my craft than you are.”

“Okay, Link,” Sam replies easily, as Ashton stifles a smile against the skin of his arms. “We definitely all believe that you're only rubbing Ash down for *work*. You got me. Hey, didn't you ink Rufus again a couple days ago? That's our grandpa's war buddy, Ash, he's a million years old. Skin like a naked mole rat. So, whaddaya say, Link? You gonna make a house call and oil him up, too?”

Very suddenly, one of Link's hands disappears from Ashton's back, and behind him, Ashton registers the sound of something being thrown. It's swiftly followed by a chair scraping against the floor as Sam dodges whatever the projectile was, cackling while running away.

“Yeah, you better run,” Link mutters under his breath. Since his ink is probably sufficiently moisturized, Ashton straightens up and turns around, only to find himself nearly nose-to-nose with Link, who was apparently standing *very* close as he applied the balm.

“Hello, Link,” he blurts out, unable to think particularly clearly with Link's beautiful, blushing face *right* there, and no veritable reason for either of them to still be lingering in each other's spaces. No good reason... except for one.

“Hey,” Link replies, breathy and quiet, his green eyes darting from Ashton's blues down to his mouth and then back, licking his own lips unconsciously in the process. “Ash, I—” Link cuts himself off as Ashton steps closer, leaving him to



track the motion of his throat as Link swallows heavily, his eyes turning slightly glassy, the way they looked in the kitchen this morning.

Link rambles when he's nervous. "I'm, uh, I'm not trying to make things weird. Or pressure you, or something," he continues, and Ashton nods, tilting his head just slightly to the side, lifting his chin until his mouth and Link's are less than an inch apart. "I like you, and I respect you."

"That's good," he replies, offering a small smile. "I'm very glad to hear it." Ashton pauses and gives him a chance to disengage, but Link doesn't move away. Notably, he doesn't close the gap between them, either. "I'm a mess, Link. I'm—" He shakes his head, almost imperceptibly. "But I am happier today than I have been in a very long time. I'm happy *here*. With you."

Link sucks in a breath, one of his hands gingerly finding its way to Ashton's waist, the other reaching up to touch his jaw. "Could be somethin' seriously good here, Ash," he murmurs, their bodies swaying magnetically closer until it feels as if every part of them is already kissing, save for their lips.

"I think so too," Ashton agrees, his voice barely above a whisper, not that it needs to be.

"Been dying to do this since the night we met," Link adds, right before leaning down to eliminate the final scrap of empty space between them and touch their lips together. It's a soft, easy kiss. Sweet, cautious, and barely there, at first. Even still, Ashton's eyes flutter closed, a soft sigh escaping his lungs as Link curls a hand around the back of his head and opens his mouth, just enough to turn this test of the waters into something very, *very* real.

Ashton's entire body tingles and his belly feels like someone lit a fire inside of it as their lips move in sync. Link seems to be enjoying it as well, humming with satisfaction when he pulls away, opting to keep their foreheads pressed together as he composes himself.

“Damn,” Link says, eyes still closed. “No regrets here.”

“None at all.”

Leaning forward boldly, Ashton steals another chaste kiss before untangling himself from Link’s arms and retrieving his t-shirt to pull it over his head. When he turns back, Link is looking at him like he hung the moon, and Ashton feels *so* wholly undeserving. What has he even *done* for Link, what has he ever given the man to deserve such attention, such affection in return? That thought bothers him so much that he ends up blurting it out.

“I just don’t understand why you’d be interested in *me*. I haven’t given you a reason to think that—that I’m a worthwhile venture. What I can offer, I’m not sure that I’m... useful. To you.”

Immediately, Link’s expression shifts from lust-filled to bewildered, and Ashton scrubs a hand over his face in frustration, mostly at himself. He must not be explaining his concerns properly.

“I just mean—”

“Ash,” Link says, clearly in disbelief. “People shouldn’t want you around because of what you can *do* for them. You’re not like, a tool to me, you’re a person! I... like you, and I like you because you’re cool, you’re fun to talk to, great to text with in the middle of the night. We’ve got a shit-ton in common. You need more reasons? Alright, I got ’em.” Link holds up a hand and starts ticking off fingers. “You’re a bangin’ artist, you’ve got an ass that won’t quit, you get my *Buffy* jokes, and you’re a hell of a lot better to look at across the dinner table than Sam and her My Little Pony-ass hair.”

While Ashton fidgets uncertainly with his hands, Link steps forward and cups the side of his face, forcing Ashton to look him in the eye. “Stop trying to figure out what you owe me,” Link says, rather insistently. “Just hold my hand. Enjoy the ride.”

He pauses, and Ashton takes a moment (and a deep breath) before nodding. He *wants* to. *God*, does he want to. If he doesn't know anything else, Ashton sure as hell knows that he wants *this*.

“Gonna kiss you now,” Link murmurs, and in response, Ashton grabs hold of his shoulder, pulling him in and kissing back, waves of relief and desire flooding through his veins as their mouths connect. There are several soft presses in quick succession where Link draws away in between, apparently giving Ashton every opportunity to back out if he changes his mind.

When he doesn't, Link threads a strong arm around his waist, yanks him close, and uses the hand on his jaw to nudge it open so that he can sweep his tongue inside. Ashton can't help it—he moans and wraps an arm around Link's neck in return, holding him close.

Enamored, he lets Link stumble them towards his work table, knocking a couple of chairs over in the process as he tries to find something solid for them to lean against. It's wonderful, being in Link's arms this way, and Ashton thinks that he could probably do this *forever*.

Despite that—or maybe because of it—something in the back of his mind urges him to stop.

He wants Link, but he wants to *keep* Link, and a little voice inside his head is telling Ashton that he should *slow down* if that's the case. Not because of Link, but because of *him*. If anything, his little outburst only moments prior is a great example—Ashton needs to figure out his own shit first. Anything less would be unfair to Link.

“Wait, wait,” Ashton gasps, exhaling roughly against Link's kiss-swollen lips. He struggles to resist, summoning every *single* ounce of willpower that's hiding in his body to keep him from diving back in, and it's definitely touch-and-go for a moment. “I want...” Ashton trails off, words failing him completely, but he thinks to motion in-between their chests with his fingers, nodding and just hoping beyond hope that

Link *understands*, because words aren't exactly his friend and ally right now. "I do, I *really* do. Please, believe me. I just need..."

"You want to take things slow," Link offers, one arm still wrapped around Ashton's waist, his half-hard cock brushing Ashton's thigh through the fabric of his pants. He doesn't look remotely upset. On the contrary, he smiles, both with his mouth and his eyes, brushing a thumb over the curve of Ashton's cheekbone.

"Course, sweetheart. We've got all the time in the world. Hey, you still want to get that drink?"

It's as simple as that. Ashton set a boundary and Link accepted it, no questions asked. There is no drama, no fallout, no angst. No secret harboring of resentments, stashed away to weaponize when Ashton is least expecting it.

Out in the atrium, Sam has the TV on and three glasses of whiskey poured, though she seems genuinely surprised (but pleased) when the two of them actually make an appearance. They pass the rest of the evening sipping their drinks, talking, and laughing together. They take turns swapping stories and jokes, and when all three of them are several whiskies deep, Link sits on Ashton's lap and plays with his hair.

It's almost impossibly perfect.

Once they're all yawning and bemoaning early appointments, no one so much as entertains the idea of Ashton driving home. After all, that's what the Soul-arium's spare rooms are there for. It would be strange if he *did* leave at this point, plus he has an entire set of clean clothes waiting in the dryer. It's merely the logical choice to stay.

After bidding goodnight to Sam, Link walks a warm and fuzzy Ashton to the door of his borrowed room, their hands intertwined, shoulders bumping as they wander the halls. He stops just outside the doorframe like a perfect gentleman, and Ashton likes him *so much*. Link is the epitome of respectful, and that's wonderful, except—and this is *not* the booze

talking, Ashton is... *ninety* percent sure of that—he *is* starting to wonder whether there might be a middle ground between ‘*space*’ and ‘*sex*’. Equally, Ashton wonders whether he can trust himself to navigate that space safely for both of them.

He turns to Link, thoughtful, placing a palm in the middle of his chest when he leans in to say goodnight. On the spur of the moment, he decides that he very much wants to find out.

*That* might be the booze, but to hell with it.

“Something wrong?” Link asks, his fingertips grazing Ashton’s bicep, smile sweet as honey.

“Do you think—would it be strange if I said that I wanted to share your bed tonight? Just...” Ashton pauses and squints, tilting his head to the side and regarding Link thoughtfully. “I want to suggest ‘cuddling’, but I’m wondering if it will insult your manly sensibilities.”

Link first looks surprised, and then scoffs. “*Real* men aren’t afraid to be the little spoon, Ash,” he replies, doing an eyebrow wiggle that makes Ashton chuckle. “Would it be *strange*? Hell, no. It would be fuckin’ awesome,” Link clarifies, reaching out his hand to once again take Ashton’s own and squeeze.

“My boots are in your room, anyway,” Ashton reminds him. “It’s probably just as well.”

“Probably just as—” Link stops short in the middle of the hallway and throws his head back, laughing loudly and tossing Ashton that irresistible, dimpled grin when he does, the one that could light up an entire city. “Whatever you want, sunshine,” he says, patting Ashton’s hand with his free one. “Whatever you want.”





## CHAPTER 6

Inside the sanctuary that is Link's room, it's surprisingly easy for Ashton to strip down to his boxers and slide into bed next to a man who has somehow, in just a few week's time, become the molten, exigent center of his universe. As wholly ludicrous as that may sound, it is (at least in Ashton's current, tipsy state) still easily recognizable as the truth.

Pressed up against his chest, Link is warm and welcoming, mind and body. He is all the things Ashton has pined away for, hoping to find in a friend, a *partner*, a lover. Link's lips are soft but sure as they trail over stubbled jaw, his hands interested but respectful where they grip Ashton's hip and slide across his back.

It feels so obvious. An undisputed, universal truth: Link—*Link* is the reason Ashton left Whitaker to begin with, Link is what and who he was missing all along. He's the answer, the reason Ashton jumped when he saw the cliff. Maybe he didn't know exactly what he was seeking then, but his gut told him to try, that somewhere out there was *more*. Still, he assumed that such stories were merely fodder for fairytales. That happy endings were unicorns, a long shot at best, but mostly a lie.

And then along came Link, turning every one of those assumptions on its head and forcing Ashton to acknowledge that this *thing* the two of them seem to share—this unearthly, gravitational *pull* that currently has Ashton unable to resist pressing his lips against Link's over and over and over—was out there all along, looking for *him*.

Cocooned in the nest of Link's bed, they lie together, kissing with limbs entwined for what might be an endless eternity. Hours, days, or perhaps mere seconds—Ashton's savoring it all and hungry for more. No amount of time could feel like enough to spend in Link's arms, and he finds himself

almost desperate to hold onto tonight. The way Link kisses is tender, thoughtful, but still passion-filled enough to get his motor running. Running *hot*, in a way that Ashton hasn't felt in years. Perhaps ever.

Wrapped up in each other, Link kisses using his whole body, and Ashton is *very* into that. He molds himself to Link's curves, sliding their legs together and allowing Link to cup the back of his head and tilt it about. To press a thumb against the soft pad of his chin when he wants Ashton to open, to brush lips and sigh against his throat. It's nearly magical, what sparks between them, and that's saying nothing of what it *feels* like for Ashton to lick into Link's mouth himself, to have Link's tongue moving against his own, to feel Link's heart racing beneath his hand.

He can't deny this—Link's lips on his make Ashton feel alive and worthy, or maybe just *good*. It's *nice* to simply feel *good*.

After a while, the deep, intense kisses they're sharing slow to something easier, more gentle, less all-consuming. Just simple, easy presses of lips traded back and forth, neither one of them seemingly anxious to be the person who ends things first, the unfortunate soul who succumbs to the warm, sated energy they've created and (however understandably) falls asleep on the other.

Link slides a hand down Ashton's jaw, thumb tracing over a cheekbone as his dark, green eyes blink slowly, hazily at him in the dark. "Can I tell you something?" Link asks hoarsely. Ashton nods, leaning forward to steal another sweet kiss, which Link accepts with a delicious, tiny hum that Ashton is happy to swallow. Link licks his lips as they separate again, flashing an *unbelievably* soft version of his usual cocky (but charming) grin. The sight of it makes affection swell almost inexorably in Ashton's chest.

"Anything," he replies fondly. His fingertips are on an explorative journey, trailing down Link's neck, over his amulet, and across his chest, cataloging curves and planes



before coming to rest lightly wrapped around Link's ribs. Truly, Ashton is beginning to suspect that he could never get enough of this man. However silly, he can't shake the feeling that he should be *closer*; that he can't *get* close enough to Link at all, and he can't bring himself to stop touching because of it.

"Tell me," he affirms, instead of giving voice to any of that sheer insanity.

Link shifts against the sheets, shimmying over onto his back, presumably to make himself more comfortable. This unfortunately dislodges Ashton's hand on his torso, but Link seamlessly reaches down and threads their fingers together beneath the blankets instead. Once he's settled, Ashton leans in, propping his chin onto Link's shoulder and pressing a kiss to the delightfully smooth skin that he finds there. He waits patiently in silence, wanting to give Link the same breathing room and respect that he's always provided.

"So. You know Violet, the Hellhound?"

Ashton nods, chin pushing into Link's bicep. "From your books. Named for the color of her eyes."

"Sort of. She... wasn't a tattoo I ever wanted," Link admits, avoiding Ashton's gaze and speaking into the darkness. He pauses, pulling a deep breath into his lungs that Ashton can feel expanding his chest, *hear* as he releases the air with measured intent. He stays quiet, the break in conversation carrying on for long enough that Ashton feels the need to make it clear that he's listening, that he's indelibly invested. He squeezes Link's hand.

"Not actually one of your favorite characters?" he ventures, shooting for light and gentle teasing.

Link doesn't laugh, just shakes his head, *no*, before turning his face and burying his nose in Ashton's hair. The gesture is unexpectedly intimate, grounding, and yes, somewhat surprising, but Ashton relishes it. After all, Link has brought him so much comfort, been unwavering in his support since

the day they met, the very *least* he can do is return the favor, in whatever small way Link might accept.

“Book three wasn’t written when I got this tattoo,” Link explains. “Violet—at least, the Violet you know—didn’t exist.” Link shifts, lips grazing Ashton’s temple as he relaxes back against the pillow again. “Thing is, there was this guy. Another tattoo artist, actually.”

Ashton immediately hums in understanding, and that, at least, makes Link laugh.

“Yeah, you got it, sweetheart,” he says, the hand holding Ashton’s releasing it in order to snake underneath and around his shoulders, pulling him close, instead. Ashton goes easily, settling into Link’s side and breathing his spicy, musky scent quite happily. “Always comes back to some guy or girl, doesn’t it?”

“The things we do for supposed love.”

“Anyway, Sam never liked the dude, said he had bad vibes. That she’d ‘heard some things’ around town about him. Tried her best to warn me off from the jump, but back then, I dunno. I was going through something, I guess. Too much anger and nowhere to put it, and this guy was good for blowing off steam. We’d create some ink, and then we’d party hard. There’s a related story somewhere in here about the tat on my forearm and a drunken night where I inked it on myself, but we’ll have to circle back, ’cause that’s so not the point.”

Link coughs into the elbow not hooked around Ashton’s neck before clearing his throat, and Ashton recognizes a stall tactic when he sees one. He doesn’t say anything, though, and eventually, Link continues.

“Lawless was the guy’s name. Probably should’ve been a red flag right there, to be honest, but I wasn’t the healthiest back then, and maybe trouble was something I thought I wanted. I was a mess, all over the place—restless, just got dumped by a chick who didn’t like my ‘gay smut,’ hurt my ego and my feelings all in one. Because of that, I was in a rut

with writing, my publisher was up my ass, deadlines were coming and going without me. Sam was pissy, Soul Survivor's client list was down and so were our sponsors—everything was frustrating the hell out of me, and I was dealing with it... uh, let's just say 'badly'."

Link sniffs a little, prompting Ashton to snuggle closer. He slides a hand toward the middle of Link's chest in what he hopes is a reassuring gesture. From the way Link's arm tightens around him, the intent seems to be received.

"I won't judge you," Ashton reminds him softly, when the silence drags on for a bit too long.

"I know," Link replies quickly—a little *too* quickly—but then he's sighing, nodding, and pressing another kiss to the top of Ashton's head. "Right. So, I was *dealing with it* by going out and partying, basically. Tattooing tipsy, getting blackout drunk, high, you get the idea. Whatever Lawless had on tap, I was down. Thought I was invincible, but really, I was just out of control. I was ditching work, acting like an idiot, starting fights, running all over the country from one party to the next with Lawless and his boys. Letting him... letting him do all kinds of degrading shit to me, whenever he felt like it."

Link makes a disgruntled, disgusted noise. "The worst part is, I liked a bunch of that degrading shit a lot more than I should have."

When he pauses this time, Ashton's ready, cupping the side of Link's face to draw him in and kiss him sweetly. *I'm not judging you*, he thinks, sensing that Link wouldn't want to hear it but hoping that he understands. Ashton does his best to pour the affection he feels for Link into his touch, and it's a relief when Link sighs against him, shuddering a little.

"I think you're more ashamed of that last part than you need to be," Ashton says gently.

"Thank you, sweetheart," Link says softly, before continuing. "So, I guess things got pretty bad. I wasn't showing up or answering phone calls, to the point where Sam

did some light hacking to track me down, barged in on where we were partying. Tried to throw hands and drag me away, which didn't work out so hot for anyone. She's stronger than she looks, but it was like, ten against one. I'll spare you the details, but I'm seriously lucky she didn't decide to hate me forever.

“Eventually, after some pretty nasty nights and worse mornings, I saw the light. Wanted out and told Lawless as much. I guess he and Whit had some similar ideas about tattoos and ownership, or maybe just revenge. Unfortunately for me, Lawless wasn't half as fucking subtle. Looking back, I think maybe he thought he was doing me a favor, I don't know.”

Link groans and drags a hand over his face, shaking his head behind it, clearly embarrassed. This time, Ashton keeps quiet, giving him space to process his thoughts. “Lawless had these like, *big fuckin' dogs* he brought everywhere with him,” Link says. “Bars, grocery stores, concerts—laws, rules, public decency didn't seem to matter. They were giant, slobbery things that looked like hell on wheels, between the teeth and the paws the size of a toddler's head. Growly, sometimes, but give 'em a treat and they were big, dopey babies.

“Lawless treated them like shit, though. Not abusive, exactly. Didn't hit 'em or make 'em fight, always kept 'em fed and never left them out in the cold, but he made it *really* damn clear that they were just *dogs*. You know what I mean? Not something to be appreciated or loved, just a dog, an animal to sit at his feet. Whole thing never sat exactly right with me, but so long as he wasn't being cruel...” Link shrugs, and then adds almost sheepishly, “plus, they did get plenty of love, just not from him. Nothin' better than a giant dog to curl up with when you're drunk and lonely.

“Anyway, those slobbery monsters were a great example of how Lawless viewed everything, *everyone* in his orbit. As possessions, assets. Things to prop up his image, to make him look however he wanted to look at whatever given moment. Maybe even to be used, traded to get something better. Stupid,

but I never realized until it was *way* too late that the ‘possession’ mentality included me, too.

“To make a long story short, Lawless talked me into getting wasted—you know, ‘one last party, for old time’s sake,’ or whatever. I guess he was sipping water, plus I figured out later he slipped me a piece of a ‘shroom bar. Once I was seeing stars, he broke out his pen and tattooed Violet, his favorite dog, on my thigh.”

Ashton can’t help but inhale sharply at the revelation, even though he strongly suspected that a twist like this was coming.

“All that, just to remind me of my place. To send the message that *I* was a dog, his dog. That I belonged to him, or something equally stupid. As if I was ever going to buy into that over some ink. Obviously, he never really knew me at all, because the second I woke up and put two plus two together, I did the exact opposite.”

Link tucks a hand behind his head and gives a small, humorless chuckle. “Just—remember what I said about being a mess when I tell you the next part, ‘cause I’m not advocating violence, here.”

“Go on, what did you do?”

“I punched him in his smarmy face, stole his car, and ditched it in a lake. Called a friend at the Humane Society—Remy, you know Remy, from the convention? The dude who did the live demo with Sam at the con?”

“The blooming roses?”

“That’s the one. So Remy has his own past with Lawless, and he knew about my... ongoing situation from Sam, so trust me when I say that he didn’t need half a reason to ruin Lawless’s day. Next morning, Animal Control went and took possession of his dogs. Happy to report that these days, Violet and her friends are running free and happy at our friends’ farm two counties over, and the girls have no qualms about sharing their Cal King with a bunch of drooling oafs. So I guess it all worked out.”

It's clear that Link tacked on an ending he hoped would lighten the story and steer the focus away from him, but Ashton sees straight through it. "Oh, Link," he murmurs, the grip he has around Link's waist tightening. "That is truly horrific. I'm so sorry you went through that."

Ashton knows that he doesn't have to elaborate. It would be redundant—Link is telling him this story because he already knows that the reaction will be one of understanding and empathy. Ashton appreciates the trust, the way that Link is letting him peek behind the curtain of a life event that helped shape and mold him into who the man is today. This is clearly a very painful, humiliating memory, but he shared it anyway.

For the first time since Whitaker did what he did, Ashton finds himself the *tiniest* bit grateful. Not that it happened, necessarily, but that the experience changed him into someone who can both understand and relate to Link's pain, his *fury*, in the most base and visceral way. It's possible they wouldn't be here right now if either of them had managed to escape their fate—and perhaps *that* is the real twist.

Abruptly, Link rolls over to face him again, eyes sparkling, and Ashton wonders—however inappropriately-timed the thought may be—how anyone could possibly be *so* beautiful, even in the hazy dark.

"Thing is though, yeah, it pissed me off," Link says, "Yeah, I moped around for a good long while, stewing about it. But then I *did* something to channel that shit. All the anger I wished I could aim in Lawless's direction? I poured it into my books. Into Dean and Violet, into the *plot*, expanding the story until it started to unfold into the one you know now."

"That's admirable, Link," Ashton says, and means it.

"A redemptive arc for Violet, where everybody discovers that her master—the character based on Lawless, in case you hadn't guessed—is the real villain. That no matter what Violet *looks* like, or how she acts before someone gives a shit about her, she's only misunderstood. She gets to be the unsung hero, and Dean gets a friend."

“And you get to not hate what you’re wearing on your own skin,” Ashton adds, appreciative.

“Bonus,” Link agrees, shuffling closer and wrapping an arm around Ashton’s torso. “I did have Sam tweak her into a Hellhound, but really, Violet is still pretty much how Lawless drew her. Except now, she’s something I can look down at and feel good about seeing. But *I* did that, Ash. Not Sam, with her tattoo machine and her ink, her magic. Definitely not fuckin’ Lawless, though having me scarred and stuck with Violet is what he wanted.”

Link slides a hand over the nape of Ashton’s neck and into the strands of his hair, tipping his head forward *just* a hint, so their lips brush together once (twice). When they separate again, Link holds him just out of reach, eyebrows raised. He clearly wants to hear that his message has landed. Perhaps that ripping his own wound open wasn’t without purpose.

“I’m getting there,” Ashton says softly. “This is helping.”

“The kissing? ’Cause I can definitely do—”

“Link,” Ashton chastises, but he’s smiling, ducking his face into Link’s warm neck to hide it. “Thank you.”

As he nuzzles into Link’s side, Ashton feels gentle fingers begin combing through his hair. They stroke softly and urge his tired eyes to close, to send him off to sleep on a blissful cloud, Heaven brought to Earth, here in Link’s arms.

“No problem, sweetheart. Night,” Link murmurs, but Ashton’s already too far gone to reply.



The month that follows is surprisingly similar in form and flow to that first day and night, not that Ashton is complaining. *Surprised*, yes, but not complaining. His official return to

work as a resident artist at the Soul-arium provokes an impressive influx of customers wishing to book appointments with him and the Remingtons alike, so it seems as though Link was correct about Ashton's name and the associated P.R. More clients are always a good thing, and Ashton's residual concerns about income begin to evaporate, but the backlog the interest creates has them all running a little ragged, trying to keep up.

Even still, the Remingtons insist on playing as hard as they work, and most nights end with some sort of party to help them relax and unwind. Some nights it's just the three of them, hanging out and streaming a series on Netflix with half-glasses of wine. Sometimes it's a couple of leftover clients, cocktails, and card games. Frequently, though, it's a handful of Sam and Link's friends, each with varying ideas of what "*relaxing*" means. Those nights tend to last the longest and end the latest, and—in Ashton's opinion—embody a rather loose definition of the word he's familiar with.

As such, Ashton finds himself sleeping over at the Soul-arium with increasing frequency. Depending on what's been going on during the day (and who comes over in the evening), that doesn't always translate to cuddling with Link in his bed, though that certainly happens often enough. It's just that while Link has never made Ashton feel anything but welcome in every corner of the space where he lives and works, the last thing Ashton wants is to overstep or crowd him.

Therefore, he very happily accepts Sam's offer to make Room 15 into his own space, a place where he can leave some toiletries, clothing, books, etcetera: whatever might be useful on those nights (and subsequent mornings) when it's safer or simply more convenient to stay. And if that makes it easier for Ashton to justify his growing desire to do just that, then fine. If Room 15 provides an excuse to ignore the lonely pit of longing that forms in his stomach during the times he *does* make it home, only to fall asleep solo and moderately depressed in his boring, empty apartment—well. That's no one's business but his own.



He supposes that one could argue it's not very healthy to suppress such feelings and emotions, but after entertaining that possibility, Ashton decides that this doesn't count. He's *better*. He's happier, less miserable of a person in general. He hasn't needed to refill his anti-anxiety medication or use one of those maybe-snake-oil charms he bought off Charmsy to ward away panic attacks in over a month.

It isn't just *Link*, either, and Ashton's rapidly growing interest in him—he feels as if his whole life is changing for the better, his self-confidence following (albeit slightly more sluggishly) along with it.

Just like the person to whom it's attached, the tattoo Link's fixing is also transforming entirely, slowly but surely. Not that Ashton has seen any tangible proof of that himself, but their regular sessions seem to be progressing as expected, and he trusts Link to tell him the truth. While Link continues to stand by his request for Ashton to refrain from activating any magic while things are a work-in-progress, he assures him (early and often) that the piece is exactly where it's supposed to be.

Ashton's wary, of course, because that's his nature, but he's also fully handed over the reins when it comes to directing the process. To Link's immense surprise and delight, that includes standing by his word in their first session and giving blanket permission for the adding of transformative properties. Yes, *blanket permission*, even if those charms will inherently require some preservation of the original work.

Admittedly, Ashton wasn't *completely* sold when he gave the previous 'okay', but after hearing the story about Violet (and subsequently learning how close Link's current tattoo is to the original he despised), he truly changed his mind.

Or, perhaps more accurately, he decided that Link could be trusted fully, both as an artist and as a human being, especially with that particular decision-making process and the execution. If there's one thing in this world of which Ashton is sure, it's that Link would never do anything to intentionally make him hurt.

Not Link, the man who created space for him in every imaginable sense. Who finds Ashton's eyes across crowded rooms, just to ensure that he's *okay*. Who encourages Ashton to set boundaries and limits and is *happy* when they're enforced. Not Link, who always has a second cup of coffee waiting in the morning, who warns him about triggering trauma in movies, who replenishes his ink pots without a word and then denies he did, only copping to it when pushed, and even then, just with a wink and a smile.

"It's a gift, Ash. Keep it," he says, every single time.

Link takes him out. Just for *fun*. As friends or something more, Ashton doesn't know, but Link seems to enjoy simply spending time with him and the feeling is definitely mutual. They go on liquor runs, to pick up supplies, to grab groceries to make dinner (also rubbing elbows). All mundane things, but because they're shared with Link, they feel special.

One afternoon, they venture to the hardware store shortly after Ashton discovers that a piece of his equipment needs repair. They grab coffees along the way and then wander the oversized aisles almost aimlessly, discussing the logistics of building a pool in the lowest level of the bunker. Ashton eventually remarks that a bee colony *outside* would be much easier, more logical, and more fruitful.

"No pun intended, huh?" Link jokes, elbowing Ashton in the ribs right there in hardware, which is equally on the nose.

"I'm just saying. One step closer to pie on tap."

"Or, maybe I just want to give you reasons to stick around," Link suggests, his eyes twinkling, and Ashton nearly has to summon the powers of darkness to keep from slamming him up against the wall of cabinet fittings.

A few days later, they do a driving tour of the city. Tooling around in Link's car, the two of them take turns pointing out personal historic landmarks, places that have meant something to them at one time or another. Ashton directs Link past the art college he attended, and Link coasts slowly past the bar that he

and Lawless used to haunt. Ashton shows Link his shoebox of an apartment and then discovers where Link and Sam grew up. He learns that the Remingtons lived above their father's tattoo shop as children, in a now-decrepit building that appears to have been recently condemned.

Maybe it was nicer once upon a time, but it *is* located in a particularly beaten-down section of town, an area with a reputation for not being the safest after dark. The boarded-up storefront is dark, and the windows above that Link claims look in on the Remington family living room are shattered. Link doesn't seem bothered, but Ashton thinks he understands better why the out-of-the-way Soul-arium feels so enticing to the siblings.

After that, they pass by Sainted Angels, and Link asks whether Ashton wants him to throw a rock through the front window, or maybe put his pocket knife into one or more of Whitaker's tires. He's probably not serious, but it makes Ashton laugh in the middle of an otherwise emotional moment, and that's appreciated.

The following Saturday, Ashton's client list is short while Link and Sam have blocked the whole day off for press. They're interviewing with a magazine and shooting a matching cover, which, despite a generous offer of inclusion from Link, Ashton could not be *less* interested in if he tried.

The production crew arrives early, nearly at the crack of dawn, setting up their gear safely out of the way in the Soul-arium's garage. Ashton has every intention of ignoring the whole thing completely, but both of his appointments finish earlier than expected and he feels strange lurking around the empty library, waiting for Link like some sort of fan girl or groupie.

After several lackluster attempts to sketch, work on his social media, or develop the new concept charm that's been floating around his head, Ashton throws in the towel. He heads up the stairs to the garage and slips inside quietly, fully intending to stick to the shadows and just observe the goings-

on. He's successful, at least at first, since the Remingtons are actively engaged in the shoot when he arrives. Ashton doubts they can see much of anything past the set's edge, not with those floodlights in their eyes.

The two-story-high garage has been transformed. The overhead lights are off and there's an enormous, dark backdrop hoisted behind Link's car, which is being used as a prop. Enough photography equipment is present to make the place look as if a movie is being filmed, and there's rock music playing. The photographer himself seems pleased, calling out instructions and praise when Link and Sam easily comply, posing and smoldering at the lens, one shot after the next.

The siblings are wearing dark, coordinating outfits: an evening gown for Sam and a casual suit for Link. It's just a blazer over a collared white button-down shirt, slacks, and dress shoes without socks, which seems odd. Must be some sort of fashion statement Ashton doesn't understand.

Despite the simplicity, they look incredible. Link especially, of course, is ethereal and flawless under the flattering lights. Professional and smooth, they shift and angle their bodies like real models, and while Ashton's seen their print work many times, he's still awed to discover how natural both of them are at *doing* it.

Someone calls for a break, and Ashton's luck runs out the second Link steps past the focused, glaring lights. Link blinks twice, adjusting, and then immediately makes eye contact. He grins deviously, and before Ashton can really understand what's happening, Link's shrugging him into an almost identical blazer pulled from a giant rack of clothing, some lady with a powder puff is dabbing away at his face, and the lights are now in *his* eyes.

Naturally, he protests the entire way, but Link has apparently decided that he's done taking no for an answer, brushing off Ashton's self-deprecation and declaring that this is part of the P.R. contract he signed in exchange for the artwork.

He's bullshitting, of course. No one signed anything, but the pleading look on Link's face can't and won't be denied. Not to mention, the pure, almost childlike joy that lights up his lovely green eyes when Ashton sighs and relents is (probably) worth the embarrassment that will certainly come with being immortalized in a photo alongside two seasoned superstars. He tells Link as much, but Link just laughs and claps him on the shoulder.

"Get used to it," Link says. "You're one of us, now."

While Ashton mostly just hovers awkwardly behind them as Link and Sam position themselves attractively against the car, he does manage to take *one* pretty stellar shot where he doesn't feel entirely out of place. Link has to practically shove him onto the hood to convince him to do it, but once he's there, the *very* talented photographer snaps a momentary Blue Steel that impresses even Ashton himself.

"Male modelin' sonuvabitch," Link says proudly. "Hot damn! Knew you had it in you."

Ashton blushes, but deep, *deep* down, he feels proud. Another new experience in the books, thanks to Link.

Apparently, the Remingtons handled the interview portion of things prior to shooting, so after the photographer declares them wrapped, they're done for the day. As Ashton returns the blazer to the coat rack, Link pulls him aside and asks if he has any plans for the remainder of the afternoon. When Ashton shakes his head in the negative, Link grins and tells him to hang out for a second, darting off down the stairs to wash the makeup from his face and "grab something" from the kitchen.

As Ashton lingers and watches from the sidelines, the crew swiftly packs up the set. They return the garage to its usual bright, industrial state, disappearing with all of their cameras and equipment as if they were never there. The transition is almost startling, even more so upon the realization that for Sam and Link, this is fairly routine.

Link reappears less than ten minutes later looking fresh-faced. He's wearing jeans and a t-shirt, a large, covered basket hanging from one arm. He's smiling widely and winks when he catches Ashton's eye.

"Hey gorgeous," he says. "You ready?"

Well, he *was*. Glancing down at his buttoned dress shirt and slacks, Ashton frowns. The professional vibe might've come in handy for the shoot, but now it feels like too much. "Will I be overdressed?"

Popping the trunk of his car, Link sets the basket inside and slams it shut. He makes a face, scrunching his nose as if Ashton has said something patently ridiculous. "Can't be overdressed if there's just you and me to see it!" Rounding his car the long way (apparently just to invade Ashton's space), Link leans in close and murmurs, "Besides, you look damn good in anything. But if you're worried, you can always take it off."

Ashton and his heated cheeks are smart enough to know when they're bested, so he smiles, nods, and parks himself in the passenger seat of the car.

As it turns out, Link packed an entire picnic spread earlier that morning, just in the *hopes* that Ashton would be free and willing to share it with him. He's bossy when he's getting his way, though, so after a short drive and messy park job next to the river, Link makes Ashton sit on a rock and close his eyes while he lays out the spread. Grateful as he is for such treatment, Ashton even offers some light complaints from behind his hands, just to make his inevitable appreciation of the "big reveal" even better.

Turns out there's no need to use his acting skills or exaggerate his delight—Link's setup is impressive. There's an assortment of Ashton's favorite snacks and sandwiches, oven-warm slices of pie, and multiple beverages: tea spelled perma-hot, soda and beer to stay ice-cold. Link even charms the blanket they're sitting on to keep away bugs, and that's a *lot* of

magic— a lot of *work*—for what’s supposed to be a relaxing afternoon off.

Sliding down from the rock, Ashton sits cross-legged by Link’s side, glancing briefly out over the moving water. He resists the urge to make a cheesy crack about how the view is beautiful and the river is nice, too. “This is extraordinary, truly. Thank you, Link. You must be drained,” he says softly. “Between the magazine feature and this—I don’t know what I did to deserve all of your energy.”

The heaping forkful of pie being shoveled towards Link’s mouth comes to a halt in mid-air, Link’s mouth hanging open as his eyebrows knit together in confusion. “*Do?*” he echoes. “Shit, Ash, I’m the one trying to score time with you.” When Ashton just peers skeptically back at him down the length of his nose, Link sighs. “One of these days, you’re gonna believe me,” he says, shaking the fork until the pie falls off, landing on his paper plate with a plop.

“Eventually,” Ashton replies, scooping it up with a finger and lifting the sticky bite to Link’s mouth, raising an eyebrow in suggestion.

Eager despite his apparent disbelief, Link opens and wraps his lips around the digit, holding eye contact as he sucks every trace of filling from his skin. Ashton is suddenly very glad they’re sitting, and that one of the cloth napkins Link packed with the picnic is currently draped across his lap.

“Yeah,” Link says, breathy and quiet as he releases the finger and licks his lips clean. The background noise of the rushing river isn’t anywhere near enough to drown out Ashton’s heart racing in his ears, and his skin feels hot despite the fall chill.

“Perhaps sooner rather than later,” he amends, smiling, which has Link positively beaming in return.

Silly as it might sound, Ashton didn’t necessarily realize that this type of thing—all of it, every bit—was something he was missing in his previous relationship. When he and

Whitaker went *out*, it was for business, or at most, Whitaker's pleasure. Even the martini bar where Ashton broke his ex's heart and set the stage for the horror show that followed was known to him as a place of *business*. Not a "date night" spot or even just a place to call "theirs," but somewhere that he and Whitaker went to network, to recruit the upscale sort of clientele his ex preferred.

That's just the way things were. Most nights spent at the martini bar (or anywhere) with Whitaker were filled with mingling and chatting with others, talking about *work*. Rarely, if ever, did they go out as a couple with the primary goal and intention of simply enjoying each other's company. Though it's true that those nights *did* often end with some form of carnal encounter, that certainly didn't make them *romantic*.

In fact, when Ashton scours his memory, it's peppered with an assortment of supply-closet-hookups and back-alley-gropefests, much more than it is anything resembling "romance". The closest thing to the dictionary definition of "date" that Ashton can even come up with are the times when Whitaker ordered takeout ahead of his arrival and put it on the good china so they could eat before having sex.

Having spent these recent weeks with Link, having experienced true chemistry and attraction, having *seen* firsthand how beautiful close friendship can be, those memories feel almost cringe-worthy. *How* could he ever have mistaken whatever was between him and Whitaker for the real deal?

Regardless, he's here now, and there's little point in dwelling on the past.

Looking forward, though, things are less than sure. He and Link have only one tattoo session left, and then their handshake deal will be complete. To be fair, it's a long session, one that will be exhausting for both him and Link, and they've agreed that it should wait for a blocked-off Saturday when neither of them has other clients. Whatever the outcome, it's



sure to be heavy, emotional, and at the very least, Ashton balks at the idea of sharing that moment with anyone but Link.

Thankfully, Link seems honored, even excited by Ashton's request to keep the reveal private, so that is how it will go.

It's nice to have that settled, but the end is only the beginning. Beyond it still looms the question of what will happen next, of where things will go—with Link, with his job, *after* his ink is done and his original excuse to hang around the Soul-arium no longer exists.

It's not as if Ashton suspects that Link or Sam has some hidden agenda or marked interest in ending their business relationship. That's *highly* unlikely, considering what success it's brought to all of them. The Soul-arium provides a stable base of operations for Ashton to work, and his new, innovative charms are attracting more clients than ever, boosting Link and Sam's rosters in the process. There's also the fact that outside of their excellent professional rapport, the three of them get on like a house on fire. So that's probably not a concern, either.

Plus, if the Remingtons *were* chomping at the bit to kick him to the curb, it seems seriously unlikely that Link would insist on including Ashton in their recent magazine spread. That would be very strange, indeed.

No, Ashton feels confident in both his welcome at Soul Survivor and the ongoing security of his job, but when it comes to his personal life and *Link*—suffice it to say, Link is the wildcard.

Perhaps that seems silly, after all Link has done for him, but the thing is, they haven't actually *talked* about it.

They *don't* talk about it—any of it.

From the way they're always together in the bunker, to all of their frequent outings. From the nights spent curled around each other on the atrium's couch, to the steaming cup of coffee waiting without fail, every single morning—they don't talk about it.

From Link's tendency to corner Ashton in one of the hallways when they're between clients, slamming him up against the wall and kissing him like it's *air*. The way he wraps a hot hand around Ashton's neck, presses a tongue into his mouth, jams a knee between his thighs. The way Ashton kisses back, hard and passionate, giving and taking what they need from each other without any reservation.

They don't talk about how, at the end of a long day, Ashton will press up against Link's back, pushing his face into the firm muscles beneath Link's t-shirt to try and relieve the exhaustion settling behind his eyes. Or the way Link always sighs happily, melting as he holds onto the arms wrapped around his waist.

That's saying nothing of the way that they gravitate to each other's sides, even in crowds, even when they should be doing other things, speaking to other people. Or how Ashton finds it terribly easy to read Link's moods: when to give him space versus when to pin him down and heap on the affection he so desperately craves but won't request. It doesn't cover all of the nights they spend wrapped in each other's arms, whether it's Ashton crawling into Link's bed after failing to fall asleep by himself, or them tumbling into it together, no thought of being apart considered.

They do every one of those things, but they don't talk about any of it.

From an outside perspective, Ashton supposes that it probably seems obvious they're together, but the fact remains that *they* haven't discussed it, haven't technically made that decision.

According to Sam, though, Link used to frequent the bars in town almost every other night, bringing home various and sundry people more often than not, a habit that he's allegedly completely abandoned since Ashton began coming around. That probably says more about their situation than anything else, since it's not merely the variety in partners Link's apparently relinquished willingly—it's sex altogether.

Not that Ashton ever asked him to, or that he's remotely opposed to *sex* (with Link) in any way, shape, or form. On the contrary—he can't remember a time in his life that he's ever been *so* unbelievably interested. And yet, neither of them has made a move to escalate their physical relationship to the next level.

Which naturally leaves Ashton to wonder: is Link not interested, or is he simply being respectful? It's true that they've had more than one conversation regarding Ashton's hesitancy in mixing business with pleasure. At this point, though, they're pretty damn deep in the hole to try and deny that's what they're doing. Still, the scars Whitaker left run deep, and it seems fairly reasonable to admit that Link is probably waiting for *Ashton* to give him an unambiguous green light.

He wants to. *God*, does he want to. As the days go by, the temptation, the *desire* to show Link exactly how badly he wants him ratchets up notch after notch, and Ashton only becomes more sure of where he needs to be headed. Yet, when an opportunity arises, he finds himself hesitating, lacking the confidence to just climb into Link's lap in the actual heat of the moment and *do* it.

But the time has come. Saturday, when his tattoo is finished, Ashton is going to tell Link that he wants to make the romantic relationship between them official. That he's not afraid—or, well, he *is* afraid, but he's not going to let that fear control him any longer.

He's ready.



## CHAPTER 7

It's Friday, and the ink session that's scheduled with Link tomorrow morning is meant to be Ashton's last.

For this tattoo, that is. Who knows what the future might hold?

As monumental events go, this one feels pretty anticlimactic. In fact, the whole week has been nothing but normal, *mundane*, even, at least for Ashton. Constant work, plus a bunch of boring, lonely nights when he's finished. With Link's next book teetering on the edge of release, he's been absolutely swamped, inundated with both regular clients and incessant demands from his publisher. He's been in editing and P.R. hell, constantly hunched over his laptop at his work table, and even catching a midweek red-eye to L.A. to hammer out some unexpected issues.

As a result, Ashton hasn't seen much of him at all. He even slept in his own apartment, *several* nights in a row, which is becoming less and less fun every time he does it. Shutting down his station the previous evening, he considered staying over in Room 15, just because the alternative felt rather bleak. But with his only appointment slated for late afternoon the following day and *without* Link to provide an excuse, Ashton felt awkward.

Loneliness aside, he really couldn't justify hanging around the Soul-arium without a solid, tangible reason. Not that he thinks Link or Sam would mind, it's just not actually *his* home to use in that fashion.

*Maybe someday*, Ashton catches himself thinking as he steps out of his car, preparing to go inside. He's slightly wistful, but it's the strength of his desire, the intensity with which he *wants* that dream to come true that takes him by surprise.

As the Soul-arium's heavy front door slams shut behind him, echoing throughout the cavernous space, Ashton hops down the iron stairs with a spring in his step. With any luck, Link is down here somewhere, having returned from his trip, and Ashton will at *least* get to check in with him before tomorrow.

If he's being brutally honest, though, he is hoping for more than just a quick tête-à-tête. With his nerves on edge the way they are, he could do with some unwinding. Perhaps some *actual* Netflix and chill (not the euphemism) while curled up together on Link's bed. Or maybe they could re-watch one of those old cowboy movies Link likes so much, the ones with all the guns and tuberculosis. With any luck, Link won't be too busy.

Ashton spots his client relaxing with a cup of tea on one of the couches in the atrium. He gives her a wave as he passes, holding up a finger—*just a minute*. His station should still be ready to go since he left a brand-new, sterile tray laid out last night, but it never hurts to be sure. Mentally, he's running through the design and the charms he plans to use, cataloging the ink colors that need to be pulled from his supply drawer.

As Ashton climbs the steps to the library, he's pulled from his thoughts by the sound of buzzing. That's curious, because he checked the books yesterday evening, and as of closing time, there weren't any customers (besides his own) marked in for this time.

Peering around the doorway and into the first alcove, Ashton catches sight of Link just as he's putting the finishing touches on some ink. His client is a thin woman with long, wavy brunette hair that's braided to one side, presumably to keep it out of the way. The rib-and-shoulder-blade tattoo she's having done runs directly over some prominent bones and nerve-filled areas that Castiel knows are painful. He's unsurprised to see her eyes squeezed shut and both of her hands clutching the chair, holding on like it's a fireman carrying her out from a burning building.

Based on that, Ashton thinks he can guess how the rest of the session has gone.

*Poor Link*, he thinks.

Neither the client nor Link notices him immediately, so Ashton creeps closer. Peering over Link's shoulder, he takes in the way the majority of the tattoo has already healed—Link must have been doing it in stages, probably for the uncomfortable client's comfort. While it's not an overly complex piece and likely could have been accomplished in one long session, it *is* a tattoo of significant size. The basis of the design is a staircase made out of books, which is a fascinating concept. The stairs originate below the client's armpit and curve up around her back, taking advantage of her anatomy.

It's a *lot* of linework, copious shading using color, and a character piece to boot—there's a little girl climbing the steps, and her features are quite detailed, delicate, even. One foot on the step in front of her, the child wears a blue dress and appears to be following a blue butterfly, almost as if the butterfly is her guide. That's not all, either—surrounding those main design elements are various flowering blooms that add color, interest, and whimsy.

The overall effect is both elegant and intricate, and Ashton can't help but stare, truly appreciating (not for the first time) how incredibly talented Link is when it comes to his art.

“Alright, Marie,” Link says gently, moving his machine away from her skin and wiping over the design with some green soap solution. He does a double-take when he finally notices Ashton standing there, his features visibly softening and a smile spreading across his face. “How are you feeling?” Link is definitely still talking to Marie, but his eyes are for Ashton only, and Ashton struggles not to blush under his attention.

Oblivious to the shift, Marie nods as she stands and stretches her legs, shaking them out. “Better, now,” she admits, offering Ashton a small wave but otherwise apparently

indifferent to his presence. “Got a little rough at the end, there. It’s done? Like, for real this time?”

“It’s done,” Link confirms, shooting her a wink and gesturing invitingly towards the double-mirror setup at the back of the room. With single-minded focus, Marie heads that way, leaving the two of them to follow. Several paces behind her, Link presses a kiss to Ashton’s cheek while keeping his still-gloved hands to himself as they walk.

“Missed you,” he says quietly, before turning his attention completely back to his client like the consummate professional he is. “Alright, you ready?”

Nodding determinedly, Marie exhales with intention and stares at her tattoo in the mirror. As Ashton watches, the tiny blue butterfly begins to quiver, flapping its wings until it lifts off from Marie’s skin and *grows*. Once in the air, the butterfly becomes larger and larger until it’s reached the size of a real one. It flits from flower to flower in the process, each bloom suddenly appearing significantly more photorealistic than before. After a once-around the blossoms framing the girl on the stairs, the butterfly takes off again and perches on Marie’s shoulder, delicately fluttering its wings before dissolving into thin air with an ethereal shower of blue sparks.

It’s lovely.

After the charm concludes, Ashton can’t help stealing a glance at Marie’s reaction, surprised to see that she’s covering her face. She snuffles and shakes her head just slightly, shoulders quaking as she makes an obvious attempt to reel herself back in. Ashton feels awkward, wondering whether he should make himself scarce, but they’re standing in front of his station. Fortunately, Link’s prepared, appearing by her side with tissues. He murmurs some quiet words and takes her in his arms, hugging her tight against his chest until she’s managed to compose herself again.

“I’m sorry,” she wheezes, pulling back from Link’s grasp and blowing her nose into the tissue he offers. “It’s just that this is *exactly* what I saw in my dream. A beautiful tribute for

my Dad, thank you. Thank you, Link. It was worth every second of the pain.”

The awkward feeling returns, making Ashton feel like he’s intruding uninvited on an intimate moment. As discreetly as he can, he compliments Marie and then escapes to the atrium with the intention of retrieving his waiting client. That should leave enough time and space for Link and Marie to wrap things up privately, or at least to relocate.

Stopping at the reception desk, Ashton checks the appointment book, pulling out the sketch he made previously and tucked in there last night. *Ah, yes.* This is a tattoo he’s been greatly looking forward to working on. It’s technically simple: just a bee, realistically drawn and climbing over a black and white graphic honeycomb pattern, but it’s *huge*—nearly a full half-sleeve in size. All of the line work has been previously completed, so it’s just color, details, and magic left for today.

Creating art like this is exactly what he needs. It’s the perfect distraction, the best outlet for channeling anxiety about his own tattoo crossing the finish line tomorrow.

“Kai?” he calls out, and the girl on the couch looks up from her phone with a grin. Ashton likes this particular client a lot. She’s almost as tall as he is, sports pink and blue cornrowed hair, and has an assortment of other, incredibly well-done tattoos covering her dark skin. He supposes that could be an uncomfortable scenario, since Kai happens to be someone who followed him from Sainted Angels, but she’s never brought it up. While Ashton does worry about gossip and his clients’ perceptions of him, he’s well aware that other people aren’t thinking about him in the way he thinks about himself.

Realistically speaking, even if Kai *does* know something about what went down between him and Whitaker, she probably doesn’t care. After all, she followed *him*.

Another thing Ashton likes about Kai is that she’s a *great* client to work on. Easy, low-maintenance. There’s never any



fidgiting, and she rarely needs breaks. Since it's far from her first rodeo, she knows exactly what to do and what to expect, which allows Ashton to slide directly into his process without any muss or fuss. They make small talk on the way to the chair, and then Kai puts in her earbuds and closes her eyes, leaving him to his work.

As expected, the soothing hum of the tattoo machine and the familiarity of putting needle to skin sweeps Ashton into another world. It washes away any lingering worry he might have been harboring about the ever-looming *what comes next*, allowing him to be present and enjoy the moment. For the first time in several days, Ashton's mind is blissfully blank and focused.

After some unknown amount of time, Link pulls up a chair to watch him work. His presence brings Ashton back to reality in some ways, but ultimately, they keep things light. Easy talk about their respective weeks that segues into cementing plans to watch a movie later, just as Ashton hoped. When the conversation reaches a natural lull, Link squeezes his shoulder and disappears off into the depths of the bunker.

Left alone once more, Ashton throws himself back into his work. This time, though, he finds it significantly more difficult to fully escape. His thoughts are a little wild, split haphazardly between Link, his own tattoo woes, and finally, what he's really supposed to be focused on at the moment: the living tapestry in front of his face.

He manages to get himself together enough to finish, and Kai's piece comes out looking pretty spectacular. The entire work, but especially the way that the bee's wings spark to life and shimmer when they move. Similar to Marie's butterfly, the charm Ashton uses allows the bee to lift completely free from Kai's skin and go zipping away with just a thought. Beyond pleased, Kai gushes her delight as Ashton wraps his satisfied client in plastic and settles her bill at the reception desk out front.

He finishes the related paperwork and files it, drumming his fingers against the desk as the door slams shut and he's alone again.

Before setting off in search of Remingtons (one in particular), Ashton glances down at his phone to make sure Link didn't run to the store or something. There are no messages, so he shoves it back into his pocket. Wandering out of the atrium and past the kitchen—empty, save for some telltale signs of recent cooking activity—he's confused to encounter neither hide nor hair of Link *or* Sam anywhere.

In fact, Ashton's not even sure that Sam is home, since he hasn't seen her at all today. Sam's a social person, and she usually wanders through the workroom to say "hi" whenever he's around. Scratching his head, Ashton shrugs and keeps looking. The next natural stop is Link's room, since it's on the way to the space he's come to think of as *his*. It comes as somewhat of a relief when Ashton finds the door open and Link's lights on—he was starting to think he'd been ditched.

One hand resting on the cool metal doorframe, Ashton pokes his head around to peer inside, blinking in abject surprise at the sight that meets his eyes. Link's room is... *transformed*. Well, perhaps not by magical standards, but at least from how Ashton has become used to seeing it.

The space, while always tidy and homey (unless Link is in a bad mood and hoarding pizza like the apocalypse is nigh), is a place that its owner clearly regards as serving a function, nothing more. Link is absolutely not the kind of person who nests, decorates for fun, or uses any particular space in and of itself to bring him comfort. According to Link, beds are for sleeping (or sex), and bedrooms are for changing, storing one's personal items, and achieving alone time when common spaces are occupied. They are not extensions of one's personality.

Ashton finds this incredibly strange and has poked and prodded at Link more than once regarding his views. He's teased Link about the way his decor reads incredibly sparse for

such a visionary and gifted artist, to the point of being shockingly utilitarian. Somewhat defensively, Link explained that despite having an artist for a father, his upbringing was a lot more militaristic than it was creative and that old habits die hard.

The thing is, Link's decorating deficiencies don't actually bother Ashton. He simply finds them interesting, incongruent with who Link strives to be in all other ways. At the end of the day, though, Link's space is functional for *him*, and it *is* his, so that's all that matters.

Something has changed. Today, Ashton has to flick his gaze to the numbers nailed to the door in order to be sure that he's in the correct room.

For starters, the space is bathed in a hazy, subdued light that's both gentle and romantic, courtesy of the gauzy scarves draped over each bedside lamp. The bed itself is different, too, the mattress sans its usual army green knitted blanket and instead dwarfed by a veritable mountain of pillows and soft things. Draped over the top of it all is a particularly colorful, fuzzy-looking blanket with a large set of blue wings in the center—it has the shortened version of his name, "ASH," printed beneath them.

Down at the foot of the bed sits Link's laptop, opened, on, and presumably queued up for the movie they chose earlier. To the side, there's a cooler full of beers tucked close enough to reach from the mattress. It's sitting on the floor in the shadow of a tray table that boasts two (*huge*) freshly-cooked cheeseburgers and a big pile of fries that smell like heaven.

"I spelled the food so it'd stay warm, and the ice in the cooler so it wouldn't melt," Link pipes up, sounding slightly *off*, somehow. If Ashton didn't know any better, he might say that Link seemed nervous. Having not yet moved from where he's lurking near his dresser, Link clears his throat and falls silent again as he waits for Ashton to take in the scene.

The comment makes Ashton blink—Link doesn't usually waste magical energy on common things, says he doesn't

believe in it. The only other occasion he's seen him do so was for their river picnic, and at the time, Ashton assumed that was because he made the meal hours beforehand and needed it to last. Now, he wonders.

Either way, if the display alone wasn't enough to clue him in that Link's trying to *do* something here, *that* certainly would have.

"I know you're nervous. About tomorrow, I mean. Feeling antsy, probably all up in your own head about stuff," Link continues, stepping forward but remaining on the far side of the bed, providing space for Ashton to control what happens next. No expectations—that's very clear. "Just wanted to do something nice for you."

*Just wanted to do something nice for you.*

Link's voice echoes in his head, and everything about this hits Ashton at once, slamming into him like a freight train. The fact that Link has been away for days, has *heaps* of his own work to contend with, the fact that he arrived home only hours prior (and spent most of that time working with a client) and chose to do *this* with his first free moments is not at all lost on him. As he surveys the comforting, serene space Link has created *for him*, Ashton very suddenly—and very clearly—knows exactly what he wants.

Stepping forward, he presses two fingertips to the top of Link's laptop screen and pushes it closed until the lid clicks. Carefully, he scoops the computer up and places it on Link's desk, out of harm's way. Turning back to Link, Ashton is unsurprised to see him looking confused, perhaps a bit disappointed.

"You don't like it?" Link asks softly, his expression held carefully blank and yet terribly transparent for anyone who knows him well enough to look.

Smiling, Ashton steps forward and shakes his head. Wrapping confident arms around Link's waist, he yanks him in close, kissing him with a determined, intense energy that Link

allows but doesn't quite match. When their lips part with a soft *smack*, Link's eyebrows are knitted together, his eyes darting anxiously around Ashton's face, trying desperately to figure him out.

"I adore it." Ashton says firmly, course-correcting a bit, because the last thing he wants is for Link to hurt. He needs to explain. "I've never—this was *unbelievably* thoughtful, Link, and just when I thought that I couldn't possibly adore you more. Seeing you do this for me..." He shakes his head. "It just made me realize that I know exactly how I want to take my mind off of things. I know exactly what I want from *you*, and I don't need to see the outcome of this tattoo for that to be perfectly clear."

He pauses, stroking a hand down the side of Link's jaw. Instinctively, Link leans into it, his eyelids fluttering shut for a moment as he relishes the touch.

"Link," Ashton says, a little breathlessly, "I'm so very sorry if I stacked your worth against the outcome of your work. That wasn't fair, and to be clear, it wasn't something that I was consciously attempting to do. I fear, however, my actions may have led us to the same effect, regardless of intent."

"Ash," Link replies quietly, still nuzzling away at his hand. "If you're trying to say that you want me to bang the tomorrow-related anxiety out of your system, you seriously don't have to make a whole speech about it. And you don't need to worry 'bout me and my feelings." He huffs, as if it's ridiculous that someone would waste their time and energy worrying about him.

"I *want* to worry about you and your feelings," Ashton shoots back, tangling fingers into the front of Link's shirt as he tries to duck away, visibly embarrassed. "No," he growls, placing two fingers at the bolt of Link's jaw and applying enough pressure that Link can't really escape. He relents after a prolonged moment, reluctantly making eye contact and sighing.

“Fine,” Link grunts. “Speak. If we’re defining the relationship, let’s do it right the first time—*Tombstone* ain’t gonna watch itself.”

“Good,” Ashton says, pleased. His fingers release Link’s jaw, drifting down his chest to rest near the hand already tangled in the fabric of his shirt. Ashton holds him there, keeping their bodies only inches apart (and thereby rendering Link unable to look away, at least in any meaningful fashion). “I have you figured out,” he continues. “Took me a bit of time, but I get it now. You are forever letting me—*others*—vent and trauma dump on you. Nothing is too much or too far, because as long as I’m talking, *you* don’t have to be. Am I close?”

Link’s freckled cheeks are tinged red, and he’s huffing, doing his best to look anywhere but at Ashton. He hates this, but he takes a breath and then meets Ashton’s gaze head-on. He nods.

Ashton softens, searching his expression. “You shoulder everyone else’s pain to avoid feeling your own. You’re a beautiful, selfless human, Link. Your passion, your grace, your *love*—it makes me want to care about the world more than I do. Believe that coming to this realization has changed me, that who you are hasn’t gone unnoticed. That all the ways you *have* opened up to me, the things you’ve shared—they’re the furthest thing from unappreciated.”

“It’s not even as serious as all that,” Link says, practically whispering, but it’s barely a protest.

“I understand that you hate this part. Talking, sharing—at least, face-to-face and with the lights on.” Ashton smirks and Link rolls his eyes, but he’s not finished. “We don’t have to, don’t need to turn this into some big, dramatic scene. But I *am* asking for you to listen to *me*, because what you’ve done here —” Ashton sweeps his hand wide to indicate the atmosphere Link’s created, “speaks volumes about your feelings. I hear you. I also *see* you, and I can tell that for whatever reason and despite these grand gestures, you don’t feel worthy. Surely, I’ve contributed to that by keeping you at arm’s length, by not

being crystal clear about where my head is, and that stops now.”

Link perks up, interested. “Yeah?”

“Yes. I’m ready, and I want—you know, what you offered.”

Grinning, Link wiggles his eyebrows. “For me to fuck the anxiety out of you?”

Shoving his shoulder lightly, Ashton nods and then tips his head to the side. “Yes, but that—that isn’t *all* I want. I would hate for you to think that this is solely about sex when what I’m trying to say is that I want *you*. Everything, all of you. If you’ll have me, of course. Will you have me, Link?”

Link deflates. “Jesus. You didn’t hafta go all chick-flick-rom-com on me,” he mutters. “I’m, you know, yours.” He shrugs using one shoulder. “Think I’ve probably been yours since day one, when you reeled me in using that ridiculous sob story and those puppy-dog-lookin’ baby blues. Oh, don’t get pissy—hell yeah, I want you. Want you so bad I look stupid, I know it. I was just—I dunno, waiting. To make sure that after everything, you wanted me that much, too.”

“I’m so sorry for making you wait,” Ashton replies quickly.

“And—fine. *Maybe* you’re not wrong about the whole... hating... sharing my feelings shit.”

“Hmm. Imagine that.”

“So then, you should fuckin’ *know* you’re special, ’cause I *did* share! Cut myself wide open and spilled my guts all over you,” Link says defensively. “I did.”

“That’s very romantic,” Ashton assures him, right before grabbing his face and diving in, kissing Link hard and sure. Link’s right about one thing—the time for talking is over. They’ve said enough, now Ashton needs to *show* Link that he’s serious. Show him that there isn’t an ounce of hesitation, reluctance, or uncertainty lingering in his mind.

The message clearly translates and is received, prompting a relieved Link to kiss wholeheartedly back. As their tongues tangle, Link's hands wander before coming to rest on his hips in a way that makes Ashton melt in his arms.

It feels like a *claim*.

“Clothes,” Link murmurs against his lips, apparently unwilling to pull away, even in pursuit of something better. Sensible or not, Ashton doesn't disagree with the impulse, and so they fumble blindly at each other's shirts and belts, their proximity making the process of undressing at least three times more difficult.

The extra struggle is worth it as far as Ashton is concerned, to feel the way Link *wants* him. To relish the way Link is drawn to him, how he can't seem to stop kissing his mouth and putting his hands all over Ashton's skin.

The only strange thing in all of this is that for the first time in ages, Ashton feels each and every bit of that desire in return.

It's been a long time. Over a year since he's been intimate with someone, and much, *much* longer than that since he *felt* anything when he was. While Whitaker never pressured him for intimacy, he *always* wanted it, and Ashton was mostly indifferent towards sex, period. Whitaker must have known—when it came to their physical relationship, Ashton never initiated, not once—only entertaining the concept of *pleasure* when it was brought to him.

As a result, whenever they *did* get physical, in Ashton's mind, the events that followed were rote, even mechanical. Sex was something to be tolerated, not *enjoyed*. Those feelings persisted to the point where the act became something that was no more interesting or satisfying to him than any other biological need, and that slow spiral was a significant factor in his decision to break things off. Whitaker had needs, and Ashton just couldn't fake interest any longer.



While he's certainly no expert, Ashton *is* smart enough to know that sex isn't meant to be a chore, and that if it feels like one, something is wrong. He knows, in theory, that chasing an orgasm shouldn't foster the same level of enjoyment as emptying one's bladder, washing one's hair, or drinking water out of ingrained habit. That it shouldn't feel akin to consuming food for the sake of it, perhaps after some predetermined number of hours have passed and his brain is concerned that he *should*, never because of some true hunger or driving craving.

But that's just how things were.

With Link, though, Ashton feels *hungry*. The way Link touches him, the way he holds him close, even the way he *smiles*. All of it has Ashton's brain firing on every cylinder, lighting up pathways and activating neurons he didn't even know he *had*.

It's absolutely thrilling.

The second Ashton is naked, Link wraps hot, strong hands around his rib cage, throws him backward onto the bed, and quickly follows him down. He's near-predatory, licking his lips and climbing over him on all fours, and Ashton can hardly breathe. He touches Link's thigh reverently, staring up at him in awe while his entire body tingles with anticipation.

It's almost cliché, the way his skin *sings*, bursting with the knowledge that Link's body will be pressed against so much of it any moment.

This—*this*, he wants. This he *craves*. Even as his hand shakes, as he works tentative fingers around Link's naked hip to hold on, as he guides Link more firmly between his legs, Ashton couldn't dream of wanting something more. Couldn't begin to imagine a desire stronger than what he feels for Link in this singular, perfect moment.

*Magic has nothing on this.*

Tipping his face up as Link leans down, Ashton follows his instincts and allows his tongue to lead. He licks teasingly

into Link's mouth, keeping their kisses thorough and deep. It's exciting—every point on his body where it's touching Link has turned fiery hot, burning with need and the pure, driven excitement of having no idea what's coming next and wanting it anyway.

When Link settles readily in between his thighs, Ashton makes the easy assumption that Link wants to fuck him. That's fine—there's very little Link could suggest right now that he wouldn't be interested in trying, and he's already decided that he's lucky enough to *have* Link, to have *this*—naturally, Link topping is the way it would play. Sure, maybe he wishes they could start with something different, but it's not a problem worth pursuing.

It's not that Ashton has some issue with bottoming, either. In theory, he's perfectly fine with it, but '*perfectly fine*' is also somewhat of a triggering phrase to wander through his head right now. 'Perfectly fine' is, of course, all things ever were with Whitaker, who neither noticed his building disinterest in sex nor even cared enough to switch positions.

*Damn*, Ashton thinks, hating himself for getting hung up on the past again.

But the thought stings when it creeps uninvited into the periphery of his mind, enough to put a damper on his enthusiasm. To sour the moment slightly, even though this hangup has fuck-all to do with Link and *their* relationship. It's unfair. Ashton's bothered even though he's *happy*, even though he's turned on, and most of all, even though he thinks he would truly enjoy bottoming for Link—perhaps even love it.

The human mind can be such a terrible place to be. Ashton very abruptly wishes he could get his hands on one of those highly-regulated trauma-suppression charms the hospitals and crisis centers use for emergencies—folks do sell them on the black market here and there. Sure, sometimes people cause brain damage or forget how to feed themselves from overuse, but hey, everything comes with risk, right?

Ashton sighs and tries to shake the unpleasant thoughts away, focusing on Link, and how much he adores being with him, being *touched* by him. The musky, clean scent of his body, the soft brush of his lips, and the tingle underneath his skin when he thinks about Link *wanting* him in return.

Unfortunately for Ashton, he's not terribly skilled at hiding his emotions while in this sort of vulnerable state, and the intrusive musings cause him to stiffen slightly beneath Link's touch.

Unlike those from his past, Link notices the shift and pulls back looking concerned, which immediately fills Ashton with shame. Ducking his head, he doubles down on distracting them both—redirecting his energy towards sucking kisses into Link's chest, reaching down and dragging a teasing, loose fist over Link's cock, and then fondling his balls.

As it turns out, Link is easily distracted that way, and he hums happily, working grateful fingers into Ashton's hair and massaging his scalp. "So good," he murmurs, rocking his hips into the touch and cupping the nape of Ashton's neck possessively.

Link allows the teasing for a minute before bending down to kiss Ashton's shoulder and leaning away. He twists his torso, practically folding himself over a stack of blankets to knock open and fumble inside his bedside table drawer. When he surfaces, smiling, he's holding a bottle of lube in one hand and a condom between his teeth, which is an amusing sight. Adorable, but also a thoughtful consideration that Ashton appreciates but didn't necessarily expect.

Reflexively, Ashton moves to relax back and spread his legs, but Link stops him, pressing the tube into his hand. "Thought you might want this, while you're messing around down there," Link says cheekily, flashing Ashton a wink as he settles into his lap, this time with one knee on either side of his hips, instead of wedged in between.

Caught off-guard, Ashton finds himself gaping. When he doesn't immediately reply, Link falters, reaching to take the

lube back. “I mean, if you don’t want to, that’s cool. I don’t mind topping, or, you know, neither. Plenty of other fun stuff to do. I’m sure we can—” Link rambles wildly until Ashton manages to get a grip on his shock, reaching up to cover Link’s mouth with one hand.

“Link, shut up,” he says, mind racing, all sorts of thoughts bouncing around like a pinball inside of his head. This is unexpected and vaguely overwhelming. “I want—hmm,” Ashton breaks off, feeling around in the blankets with his free hand until he’s able to recover the fallen lube. He holds it up. “I just thought—you know what? It doesn’t matter. I would very much like to fuck you. *Very* much.”

Link’s answering grin is wide enough that Ashton doesn’t need to remove his hand to see it, though he does, anyway. This particular smile lights up his whole face, making crinkles form at the corners of his eyes and adding a bright, joyful sparkle to his lovely green irises.

“Cool,” Link says on an exhale, sinking further into Ashton’s lap and pressing him back into the mattress, hot kisses capturing his lips. “Cool,” he repeats, this right time into his mouth, sighing with satisfaction as Ashton’s arms wind around his torso to hold him down.

Admittedly, Ashton was clueless as to what this experience would actually *be* like, but the reality of it still blows him away. Working fingers into Link, sliding *inside* of him—it’s like nothing Ashton has ever known. If sex can feel like *this*, he certainly understands why people chase it.

The way they move together isn’t technical or tedious, which are the only words he would use to describe his own past experiences. This—Link rocking against him, guiding his hand, kissing like he can’t get enough—is anything but that. Like everything else with Link, it’s special, *sparkling*, messy and real. *Intoxicating* may be the best word, because Ashton certainly feels drunk.

From the way Link kisses harder, biting at his lip as Ashton pushes a finger inside, to the writhing Link does in his

lap, shoving back onto his hand and begging for something more—Ashton can barely wrap his mind around it. All he knows is that he’s never been so hard, so aroused, so ready and *into* an act of intimacy as he is right here in this moment, with *Link*.

Suddenly, a lightning bolt of need and possessive desire jolts Ashton into action, has him rolling them over so that he’s on top. After kissing Link fiercely, he lines himself up and pushes inside—slowly, smoothly, relishing every sensation and all of the wet heat that envelops him, making him want to lose control.

Beneath him, Link’s head tilts back against the pillows. His eyes drift closed and his mouth falls open around a gasp. It’s fascinating to see Link this way—so vulnerable and open, completely uninhibited and fearless.

Licking his lips and swallowing, Link nods dazedly, urging him on, grabbing at his ass and pleading. “C’mon, Ash, give it to me,” he demands, the heel of one foot digging mercilessly into the meat of Ashton’s thigh.

Wanting more than anything to please, Ashton puts everything he has into his efforts, shoving Link’s hands high above his head as he thrusts, and lacing their fingers together. His own body is trembling from the onslaught of sensation and pleasure, and it’s all he can do to resist the urge to worry about Link later and take care of himself now. Ashton quickly forgives himself for that—it’s *been* a while.

“Is this... okay?” he manages to ask, rolling his hips while looking into Link’s eyes, and *fuck*, using the word ‘magic’ seems like a god damn cliché, but *God, it is, it is, it is... magic*.

Link seems to agree, laughing in disbelief as his eyes roll back in his head, like that’s a *ridiculous question*, and that’s fine, it is. But Link’s hand fits perfectly in the dip at the small of his back.

And Ashton loves him.

Loves the tiny things—the way that Link looks up into his eyes with a mix of awe and lust and hope. Loves the way that Link’s lips graze his collarbone so sweetly, the way Link *gives and gives* and always seems to know *exactly* what Ashton needs without him ever having to say so.

He loves being with Link like this, inside of him, and all around him, loves the way Link makes him feel, both now and whenever they’re together. He just *loves* Link, every bit of him, in a way that feels beautiful, *impossible*, but equally undeniable at the same time.

There is no question. He is in love.

It’s fortunate timing for him to figure this out, because Link—wordsmith that he definitely is not—comes nearly as soon as Ashton wraps a hand around his cock, and he has something to say when he does. He crosses the finish line shaking, moaning, and clutching at Ashton’s damp back and hair, nails digging into skin so hard, they’re sure to leave marks (that will be treasured).

“*Love* you, Ash,” Link gasps into his ear, *not* as he’s climaxing, but as he’s *coming down*, and while the meaning of that is absolutely not lost, Ashton is helpless to respond, dragged as he is through the undertow and out to sea as he finishes inside of Link, too.

Once his vision clears, Ashton extricates himself carefully, flopping onto his back next to Link. The bed doesn’t so much as vibrate, because it’s one of those fancy memory foam mattresses—one of Link’s *very* few indulgences, and he’s entirely proud of it. A sated calm permeates the space, and Ashton steals exactly fifteen seconds to catch his breath before rolling onto his side and dragging Link close, catching sleepy, heavy-lidded eyes in his gaze and forcing them to focus.

“I love you, too,” he says easily, and Link beams.

It is just that simple.



## CHAPTER 8

### “Link”

Nervous as he knows Ashton is, Link has about a thousand reasons to be equally fucking worked up. As he’s discovered, it’s a special circle of hell trying to be a *good freaking friend* and therefore pretending that isn’t the case, and *where, oh where*, is his cookie?!

Upon reflection, Link supposes that he’s been given the adult equivalent of a reward cookie more than once in the past twenty-four hours, which is fair. Speaking of which—while their encounter the previous night (and the epic Round Two they shared around five a.m. after Link came back from the bathroom) went a hell of a long way towards soothing fraying edges, towards reassuring Link that Ash *is*, actually, all kinds of into him (at least as much as he is in return), this is still going to be a big day.

A *huge* day, really. One for the books, and one that represents an enormous step in their little fledgling relationship. Inevitably, Link is staring down the barrel of finding out whether he’s managed to deliver on his lofty promises and his own projected confidence. Whether his time, talent, and hard work actually translate to a final product that matches Ash’s expectations (and everything that he deserves to feel when he looks at himself in the mirror). Most importantly, today they find out whether Ashton regrets the enormous amount of unearned trust he dumped so freely into Link’s lap.

Yeah, alright, so “*huge*” might even be understating what’s at stake here, just a smidge.

Despite that, Link is absolutely not the kind of douchebag who’s interested in making this giant step in his boyfriend’s post-traumatic recovery efforts about *him*. *No sirree, Bob*.



Which is why he's suffering silently, doing his best to shove all of his feelings, all of the worries swirling determinedly around the inside of his head down and away, so that he can keep the focus solely on Ash.

The stage is set: any exterior factors that Link can control, he has. There are no other appointments booked in for today, which he *personally* checked and double-checked. Sam did try to schedule a freaking four-hour session midday, was carting around some giant tramp-stamp sketch intended for the ass of her new, piping hot flavor of the week. Luckily, Link caught wind of that and told her where he'd shove her tattoo machine if she so much as tried it.

To be fair, Sam understood, and maybe Link didn't need to be so harsh, but the last thing Ashton needs is some groupie hanging around the Soul-arium, trying to get laid. Plus, this new girl of Sam's has *rank* energy. Mellie is her name, which is as suspicious a moniker as Link's ever heard, and she's always following Sam around with her camera out and TikTok open. Shit's got "clout-chaser" written all over it, and Link does *not* like the vibe.

Sure, he wants Sam to be happy, but honestly, Link's secretly hoping this specific love interest gets her Sam fix and loses interest before the holidays. No other way to describe it—on top of constantly trying to boost her follower count, this Mellie chick has "carrots and raisins in the stuffing" energy, and that shit is *not* happening on Link's watch. Some things are sacred.

Either way, after years of living in each other's pockets, Sam is smart enough to know when to take a hint, to pick up on when Link needs some space. This time, it only took the one little threat to get her there, and *boom*—peace and quiet. Link's damn happy his sister made herself scarce last night, and he sincerely doubts that she and Ruined Stuffing will be back any time soon.

Begrudgingly, Link supposes that if Mellie can keep Sam's ass busy and out of their hair for the majority of the weekend,

then, in turn, he can muster up enough appreciation to let her clout-chasing ass stay for *one* game night.

*One.*

On the flip side, without any uninvolved bunker occupants to worry about disturbing them, he and Ash wind up getting a significantly late jump on their plans. For starters, they spend the better part of the morning lounging in bed, kissing and groping each other in between sips of coffee and shared bites of toast. Not the most inspiring brain fuel, but it was the easiest thing Link could think to make at the time. In his defense, he was distracted.

*Ash is in love with him*, and Link's focus was understandably centered around getting *back* into the body-warmed blanket nest with the guy as fast as humanly possible.

By the time they do manage to drag themselves out from their self-made cocoon *and* shower, *and* put on fresh clothing (that doesn't immediately come back off), it's nearing one in the afternoon and they're both starving. It takes a round of sandwiches, a beer each, and another interlude that consists of Ashton pulling Link down onto one of the sofas in the atrium (where he kisses with surprising enthusiasm, considering his already-chapped lips from previous sessions), before they're *finally* ready to switch gears.

When they do make the shift, the change is drastic. The mood drops the very second Ashton straddles his chair, and truthfully, Link immediately misses the light, playful tension that's been present between them through the night and into this morning. If he *did* happen to be the praying kind (he's not), Link would definitely be sending one up right about now.

To what or who, it doesn't even matter—he's willing to try it all. A hope, a prayer, or maybe just good freaking energy, he can vibe with anything that might prevent this whole enchilada—from Ashton's bestowed trust, to Link's own artistic skills, to his loud confidence about what would be best for this tattoo—from blowing up in his face.

With a deep, grounding breath and a subsequent controlled exhale, Link releases his claim on that stress, zeroing in singularly on the canvas in front of him and the task that lies ahead. As soon as the needle of his pen touches skin, he's gone. Carried away to a different universe, zen and centered like nothing else in his life allows him to be. He's *focused*, ready to channel the concepts in his brain through the movements of his hands and create some *magic*.

Tattooing is an art, sure, but it's also a skill. A highly-*developed* skill that Link has been practicing and honing for an entire lifetime, arguably since he was old enough to park his ass on the stool next to his dad's and watch him work.

This, what he's attempting here today, is the culmination of all those years of preparation. All that *work* mastering technical processes, instilling discipline, and developing his artistry—*those* have collectively brought him here. No individual piece standing alone is enough: it's the *synthesis* of those parts, the sum of the whole that pulls miracles from ink and flesh the way that Link is known for doing.

"We've got work to do," Link says under his breath, more to himself than anything else. The corner of Ashton's mouth ticks up in recognition, but he doesn't reply, just braces himself more firmly against the chair. Link thinks he catches sight of the healing charm's flare—a quick burst of blue that wouldn't be noticeable through a shirt—*wild*. He's barely touched needle to skin, but it's like it knows.

*Damn*, Link thinks, impressed. *Ashton's charms are smart as hell*. He makes a mental note to tell the guy how brilliant he is later, and then dives fully into working on the ink.

It's complex, but the moving parts coalesce easily right in front of Link's eyes. Everything makes sense: the curve of the dark lines against Ashton's paler skin, the concentration it takes to infuse the particular magic Link needs from his pen into the ink, the way the design comes to life both on the canvas and in his own mind. Both are equally necessary and

important to crafting the final product, and Link lets himself be immersed in it all.

Time flies and Link hardly notices. It's just him, the tattoo pen, and his badass skills.

Ashton is quiet, solemn, even. From his slumped-forward position, he seems content to let Link do what needs to be done and to refrain from derailing the process with small talk or flirting. Link doesn't know whether that's primarily for *his* benefit or if Ashton's just slipped into some sort of melancholy mood, borderline trance. Either way, he respects the choice and leaves him to his own devices.

It takes four hours and thirty-three minutes for Link to complete the remainder of Ashton's tattoo and by the end, *damn*, does his hand *hurt*. It's good that he finishes when he does—much longer, and Link would have no choice but to stop for the day, lest the details suffer for his muscle cramping.

*In under the wire*, he thinks, satisfied.

Even still, Link's eye is critical as it sweeps over the design, checking for flaws both magical and physical. Nothing jumps out at him, but he won't know for sure until Ashton spreads his wings in the mirror. With any other client, a small error—even a magical one—wouldn't be a big deal. It's a hazard of the job and happens frequently, even to perfectionists. Sometimes you don't know what you don't know, so touching up is a built-in part of the process. You check it, you tweak it, you're good. No harm, no foul.

With this, though, it's different. The stakes are higher. Link doesn't want *anything* tainting Ashton's moment with his new ink, with his new vision of *himself* and the images he carries on his body. Ash deserves better than that, after everything he's been through. It has to be flawless.

So Link does his best to close every loophole he can find, to infuse and secure the most flawless enchantments he's ever executed, probably in the history of his career. If push came to shove, he'd grudgingly admit that this series of work is

superior to even the designs he's inked on Sam, and that's saying something.

Finally, maybe twenty, twenty-five minutes after he should've called time of death, Link's eyes start to water and burn from concentrating so hard. At that point, even his own exacting gaze and harsh inner critic have to concede that he's done all he can do. There is always a point when creating—creating anything, really, from a picture, to a story, to a tattoo—where Link notices a shift. A fulcrum tip, so to speak, where continuing to endlessly pick and tweak has already stopped being helpful.

On the downslide (and he's *definitely* on the downslide with these wings), those adjustments inevitably throw down the Uno reverse card, each nitpick making things worse instead of better.

It's time.

“Ash,” he says gently, laying a hand over the back of Ashton's neck where there's no fresh ink to turn the touch painful, “sweetheart, I think we're done here.”

Link can feel Ashton shudder slightly beneath his hand, and while he can't help but wonder if it's a reaction to his touch rather than the anxiety of facing the music, he doesn't ask. Instead, he offers Ashton a hand up, immediately needing to swallow down his own panic when he registers the nervous expression on Ashton's face, the way Ashton's eyes stare back at him pleadingly.

Internally, Link reminds himself over and over that Ashton's trauma has nothing to do with the things they're building together. That whatever Ashton is feeling right now, in *this* moment, is his to go through. It isn't a reflection on Link, or even his work. Well—not yet, anyway. He hasn't *seen it*.

Forcing himself to slap on a bright smile and refusing to let himself be mired in his own bullshit, Link moves his hand to the small of Ashton's back and gets them moving. Gently

but firmly, he guides his friend toward the mirror set-up at the back of the room.

“Let’s do this,” he enthuses.

“Wait,” Ashton blurts out suddenly, stopping dead in his tracks with a hand raised. “Can you just... ” He trails off, glancing around before reaching over to grab Link’s wrist, maneuvering it so that Link’s hand is covering his eyes. “There,” he says, sounding terribly relieved. “I think—it’ll be easier for me this way. I’m not entirely sure that I can force myself to step in front of those mirrors while looking into my own eyes.”

“Hey, have a little faith in me,” Link replies lightly. He’s mostly joking, but Ashton immediately stops walking again and ducks away from the hand he just molded to his face. Blinking into the light, Ashton cups Link’s cheek and yanks him in for a kiss, which is wholly unexpected but not remotely unwelcome.

“It is not *you* that I lack faith in,” Ashton says fiercely, holding unflinching eye contact after they separate. He stares expectantly until something clicks and Link nods his understanding. “It never has been,” he adds.

“Yeah, alright,” Link says. “Course, sunshine. Don’t worry about me.”

“I love worrying about you,” Ashton says, before nodding in return and squeezing Link’s hand against his side. It’s an affirmation, and one that releases the vice currently squeezing Link’s heart. Something in his face must relax in kind because Ashton smiles warmly and then replaces Link’s hand—the one he’s currently holding—over his eyes.

“Lead on, cowboy.”

In front of the mirror, it’s Link’s turn to hesitate. Not the greatest look after all that, but this *is* a lot for him, too, considering what’s at stake. Also, Ashton can’t exactly see him, so he figures it’s a victimless crime. Link takes a brief moment to suck in a ragged breath, hold, and release the

lungful completely before removing his human-blindfold hands and stepping to the side.

Once free, Ashton's eyes find him immediately in the mirror, and Link nods in what he hopes is an encouraging manner. At the very least and if nothing else, Ashton smiles back.

He starts to focus and Link steels his nerves, but before the reveal can progress, before Ashton's eyes can even really find the design on his back in the mirror, the Soul-arium's main door creaks open rather ominously. The sound echoes, bouncing off of the walls framing the cavernous atrium and reverberating throughout the library. It draws both of their attention immediately, and they exchange a concerned glance.

*What the hell*, Link thinks, irritated. He went to such major lengths to keep this from happening, and here they are, anyway.

"Maybe it's just Sam," he murmurs softly to Ashton, but his eyes are focused on the iron stairwell. Something doesn't feel right.

It *is* Sam. Distantly, Link can make out his sister's voice, muffled by both the height and the grating of the door in its frame. Link frowns. It's hard to tell, but it seems as if Sam is conversing with someone just outside the entrance, someone who is trying (maybe a little too hard) to come in. As poor as Sam's timing might be, she's not the issue. *That* interruption would have been minor—Sam's sensitive. She would've popped in, said 'hey,' and then bounced to give them space the very second she realized it was go-time. Entertaining strangers, though? Not on Link's agenda.

But Sam *isn't* coming in, and Link knows his sister well. He can recognize most emotions in her voice without even trying, and right now, Sam is *angry*.

Concerned, Link strains his neck trying to hear, but all he manages to catch are scattered word fragments and Sam's frustrated, heated tone. On instinct, he glances over at Ashton

again, finding him already looking back, frozen and with worry written all over his face.

“Go,” Ashton says, without flinching. “I’m just going to find a shirt and I’ll be right behind you. Maybe a weapon, as well,” he mutters, patting his pockets and looking around.

Link barely waits for the end of Ashton’s sentence before bolting from the room. He’s not especially proud of that particular, instinctive reaction, and he’ll definitely apologize for it later, but in his defense, Sam’s been his ride-or-die since the day she was born. With an oft-absent mom and a drill sergeant wielding a high-powered needle for a dad, Sam needed *somebody* to look out for her the way a parent’s supposed to.

Everything that came after—the kid becoming Link’s best friend, her growing up thinking the sun shined out of his ass, Sam turning into an adult and the *baddest* chick on the block, capable of basically *shoving* Link into pursuing his every dream to fruition—that stuff’s all just fuckin’ bonus material. He is, first and foremost, the guy who stands between Sam and harm’s way. And sure, *technically* Sam doesn’t need her big bro to chase away bullies on the playground anymore, but old habits die hard.

Bolting across the atrium, Link scales the steps leading to the exterior door two at a time. He knows Sam’s still at the top, can hear her arguing, but she must be standing on the other side of the cracked door, out of view. Link makes it just over halfway there before Sam comes stumbling back through the opening, tripping over her feet and sending the door swinging wide. She can’t quite regain her balance, body crashing full-force into the iron balustrade, which wobbles more than Link would like for the only thing that’s standing between his sister and a two-story fall.

Sam yelps as the railing connects with her flank, letting out a grunt as she doubles over. The rough impact shows on her face, but at least she wasn’t pushed hard enough for the momentum to send her tumbling headfirst over the edge.



*Alright*, now Link's pissed.

"Sam!" he shouts fearfully, immediately regretting both revealing his position *and* showing his emotional cards to whoever's trying to invade their home, but it is what it is. His ingrained need to protect his sister isn't something that he can just override, and definitely not like *this*.

Everything happens so fast, it's confusing. Link glances between the open door and Sam, his heart beating a mile a minute and his chest tight with fear. Thankfully, while Sam winces as she uses the railing to straighten up, she waves away Link's concern, signaling that she's fine.

"What the *fu*—"

For better or worse, Link doesn't have the chance to finish his curse before the *last* person that he *ever* expected to see come through the doors to the Soul-arium saunters across the threshold like he freaking owns the place.

Stopping mid-leap and just shy of the second-floor landing, at first, all Link can manage is a blank stare and some blinking. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he thinks he *must* be dreaming. Must be safely asleep in bed with Ash, having imagined this entire day, because the alternative—*fuck*. The alternative is his definition of a living nightmare.

Between the timing and the dramatic entrance, *what* in the Lifetime Movie of the Week is going on here? There's coincidence, there's serendipity, and then there's whatever *this* is, and Link isn't buying into the bullshit. This has to be magic. *Dark* magic, because if it's not, Link's not sure he wants to live in a world where things like *this* just happen.

All of that considered, Link thinks that he can probably be forgiven for having been rendered temporarily speechless as he gawks up at the smug, condescending face of the one—*the only*—Whitaker *fuckin'* DiAngelo.

"Hello, kids," Whitaker says smoothly, and *damn it*. Link knew the guy had a stupid accent, but he immediately decides

that it's much worse in person, and curses himself for not having an Eliza Doolittle joke on standby.

Whitaker strides forward casually, as if he didn't just shove a Remington in her own fucking home, nearly sending her flying over the edge of the balcony to her death (or worse).

"Hey," Link protests weakly, waving a hand towards the door. He's still gathering his wits, exchanging a series of confused glances with Sam and unsure of what the hell to do next. Meanwhile, Whitaker starts towards him down the stairs, seriously unbothered.

"Hey," Link repeats more firmly, but the cocky asshole doesn't so much as raise an eyebrow, smirking down at him from only one step above. Irritation rises in Link's throat, and he barely resists the urge to cold-cock the dude and *actually* flip him over the railing, the way he nearly did to Sam.

"I said, *hey!*"

"You did, twice. Good for you," Whitaker replies distractedly, patting Link patronizingly on the shoulder as he passes him on the stairs, both undeterred and undaunted by the posturing. Left behind on the steps, Link fumes. Getting into a fistfight wasn't on his agenda tonight, but hell is absolutely going to freeze over before he's ever letting this fucking guy *anywhere* near—

"Ash, you're here. It's good to see you."

*Shit.*

Whitaker's already in the middle of the atrium while Link's still scrambling after him like a confused puppy, and he hates himself for it. He's just barely reaching the bottom of the steps as the walking blood sausage speaks, feeling like he's one step behind at every single turn.

*So much for being Ashton's knight in shining armor.*

A glance toward the library's archway tells him that he's too late, anyway, because a shirtless—*drool later, Link*—Ashton is filling up the space *completely*. There's something

different about Ash—his energy, or maybe his posture? Link can't quite put his finger on whatever it is, but it's *something*. There's an air about him that makes Link pause, stops him from charging into the empty space between Ashton and his ex to do something wildly territorial and embarrassing.

Notably, he still *wants* to do exactly that. It's a true fight with the devil on his shoulder, a battle to hold his own ass at bay, and one that Link nearly loses several times over in the span of less than a minute.

"Whitaker," Ashton replies flatly, his face scrunching up in confusion (but no less handsome for it, as far as Link's concerned). "What is all this? What are you doing here?"

Even as he talks, Ashton's gaze seeks to find Link's, and while Whitaker is busy preening and doing some of the most self-masturbatory orating Link's ever heard right there in the middle of the atrium, Link and Ashton have an entire conversation without exchanging a single word.

Link raises an eyebrow. *You want me to kill him?*

A brief roll of Ashton's eyes suggests no. The corner of his lips twitches, and he breaks eye contact to glance pointedly at the light switches on the wall before locking onto Link again.

*The lights? You want them off?* Link does his best to think as loudly as possible, feeling like it lands when the side of Ashton's mouth quirks up *just* slightly. The change wouldn't be noticeable to anyone that wasn't looking for it, but Link is. He couldn't look away if he tried.

Oblivious to their silent conversation, Whitaker is addressing the room like an invited orator, living up to his pompous reputation without even trying. He clearly enjoys hearing himself speak, wholly indifferent to what anyone else in the room might be doing *and* the fact that he's the opposite of welcome in this place. In Link's *safe* space, damn it.

"I came to bring you home, Ash," Whitaker declares, his aura and attitude suggesting that he truly believes he's doing Ashton a favor by offering. "People are talking, and I like

what's being said. Talking about you, actually. The things you've been doing, the charms you've been creating. As far as I'm concerned, you and me, Ashes? Nothing's changed. We're partners. Of course, I want you back. I want to *help* you."

Link makes a face and considers trialing the fire-starting charm he's been learning on Whitaker's goatee.

"Hmm. I'm doing just fine without your 'help'," Ashton replies stoically, using actual air quotes, which makes Link smirk. While he's technically looking at his ex, Link can *feel* Ashton's focus and attention on him as he edges discretely towards the wall and the switch panel. Honestly, Link has no idea why Ashton might want him to be subtle in filling that request, but this is Ashton's Thunderdome and the rest of them are just spectators.

Keeping with that metaphor, Link is Ashton's number one fan, his hype guy, his coach. The dude with the towel wiping up the blood—whatever his guy needs. So if Ashton wants sneaky special effects, then that's exactly what he's going to get.

"Sure, sure," Whitaker replies, steepling his fingers and nodding as he paces around one of the coffee tables. There's an open bottle of Macallan sitting there, and so *help* that bastard if he tries it—

"Out of curiosity, you *do* know that I could flick your precious little friends here off of a cliff, just on principle?"

Link pauses in his slow sidle towards the wall, and Sam stiffens from her warily-held position halfway up the stairs, both of them *more* than ready to throw down. Even if Whitaker is hiding some sort of weapon, or if he's weirdly good with combat charms, it'll be three against one, and Sam's *way* scrappier than she looks, plus she's almost always carrying. Surely, even this prick wouldn't be *that* stupid, to try something physical like this.

Thankfully, Whitaker holds up a hand and then waves dismissively. "Figuratively speaking, of course," he adds, a sly

grin pulling at his mouth that makes Link slightly nauseous.

*Fuckin' dramatic asshole.*

“*Ruin* them, is what I really mean, naturally. Their careers and their reputations. I could ruin you all, with just a well-placed phone call or two.”

“Your bark has always been worse than your bite, Whitaker, enough of this,” Ashton fires back with zero hesitation. “Your threats don’t hold weight anymore. Not with me, and not with the loyal clientele Sam and Link have worked hard to recruit and retain over the years.” He folds his arms across his chest and lifts an eyebrow, looking challengingly down his nose in Whitaker’s direction.

While the smoldering expression isn’t directed his way, a shiver runs down Link’s spine all the same, seeing Ash so dominant and brave and *awesome*. It’s fuckin’ hot, is what it is. He privately decides that Ashton should be an asshole more often.

To his credit, Whitaker barely reacts. His face pinches slightly at the edges, but his voice is even when he throws out his next round of insults. Despite that, the edge of fury and disdain infused into his words is impossible to miss.

“You would choose this...this slobbering mutt over me? Are you even aware of who he used to pal around with? He’s a *dog*, Ashton, nothing more.”

“*Whoa*,” Link says, spreading his arms. “Too far. Who pissed in your Weetabix?”

Whitaker ignores him completely. “I gave you everything, Ashton.”

Ashton’s eyes narrow and his head tilts to the side. Instead of answering right away, he glances at Link and nods—*go time*. All too happy to get this show on the road, Link flips the entire sequence of switches, plunging the Soul-arium into relative darkness.

As the lights flicker off one by one, Ashton speaks. “You took... *so* much more than you gave, Whitaker,” he growls. “That ‘dog’ gave me my life back, the one you stole. He is three times the man you believe yourself to be, in *every* way possible. This conversation is over, you have no business here. You’re going to turn around and exit with your tail between your legs. You’re going to leave Soul Survivor alone, period. You will not *ever* contact any of us again, or I *will* go public.”

If Link didn’t know any better, he’d say that Whitaker actually looks nervous, for once, but Ashton isn’t finished.

He takes a step forward. “I will tell the entire world what kind of man you really are. I’ll tell them what you *did* to me, and how low you tried to make me feel.”

As the lights disappear completely, Link feels a crackle of electricity skitter across his skin. He might think it imagined—maybe from the sheer volume of adrenaline and tension permeating the air—but the hair on his arms stands on end and remains that way, so he wonders. Across the room, he sees the dark silhouette of Ashton’s shoulders rising and falling as he takes a deep, stabilizing breath.

*You got this, Ash*, he thinks.

“I’m not low *or* broken,” Ashton growls, and there it is again—*static*. Some kind of powerful, thick charge rippling through the air. It’s definitely real, *but how?*

“I never was.”

Before Link can say anything or react, a blast of light has him lifting a hand to shield his eyes, quickly lowering it again just as soon as he realizes what’s happening.

“Ash,” he murmurs softly, a proud smile spreading across his face.

Beneath the arch of the entrance to the library, Ashton *glows*. His already-dazzling eyes light up an entrancing neon blue, the same charmed effects as the power source tattoo on his neck *and* the new display lighting up the stonework on either side of him.

*Wings.* They're out but tucked close to Ashton's back—the originals, rather than the end result, which Link was expecting.

They're still incredible. Ashton would disagree, of course, but Link thinks he looks seriously badass rocking the ruined ones. They hover in the air and cast magnificent shadows against the walls, just like a real pair would. Suddenly, Link understands exactly why Ashton wanted the lights off, though he's lowkey impressed by the dramatic flair.

What follows is a hell of a show, so entrancing it takes a minute for Link's brain to catch up and for him to realize—*he* didn't include that blue lighting effect in his work. It's not even a charm he knows how to ink.

*What?*

Ashton catches his eye and winks.

As Sam watches from the stairs, Link and Whitaker from the atrium floor, Ashton spreads his busted and broken wings wide. This time, he doesn't shrink, doesn't squeeze his eyes shut, doesn't make any attempt to hide. Ashton stands tall and confident, owning every inch of the damaged skin and feathers, and *damn*, does he look *sick* as hell when he does it.

Thanks to some touch-ups by Link, the wings are even more elaborate and incredible than the first time he saw them, sequestered in the sanctuary of his room. Unable to help it, Link holds his breath as the illusion morphs, desperately hoping that the enchantment will execute the way he intended, the way he meticulously inked it to do.

Slowly and smoothly, Ashton's wings begin to change. The broken parts, like both alulas, straighten and stand tall, flexing with newly-restored strength. The burns and injuries fade and disappear while fluffy feathers regrow from the roots, right before their eyes. Each one comes in just as a bird's flight feathers would—a tubular shape that unfurls from the tip down to the root.

The whole thing is beyond spectacular to witness, some of the most complex charming he's ever seen in his life. Link can

practically feel Whitaker radiating fury, and that gives him such a deep sense of joy and satisfaction. Pride, too, that *his* research and talents produced such an impressive sight, that his work managed to make such a shitty person so very mad.

It only gets better—the fuller and healthier the wings grow, the further they extend to both sides, and the more breathtaking they become.

By the end of the transformation, a brightly-glowing Ashton is brandishing two perfectly flawless wings. Every feather is intact, lovely, and shining with a multifaceted, blue-black ombré that flashes a prismatic rainbow spectrum in the light. Link finds it personally reminiscent of the way an oil slick might appear under the same conditions. It—*he, Ashton*—is truly a magnificent sight.

So much so, that even Whitaker is struck speechless.

As the glow in Ash's eyes finally fades and his wings begin to shimmer and disappear as the illusion drops, Link reaches up to turn the lights back on. Ashton allows the magic to fade away completely but doesn't do the same with the defiant stare he's giving his ex.

"How—" Whitaker starts, but Ashton cuts him off, which pleases Link immensely and has him struggling not to yell, "you tell him, babe!" Just a guess, but it would probably not be appreciated at this particular moment, especially since Ashton seems to be on a roll with the speech-giving.

"Just so you understand," Ashton begins, moving down the steps so that he's face-to-face with Whitaker for the first time. "While Link did the vast majority of this remarkable cover-up, this transformation, I *chose* to keep the original mess you forced upon me. I *chose* to own it, to wear these scars, so to speak, with pride. I even accentuated them—remember the blue lighting that you and I created for my grace? The electricity you felt pulsing through the air just now?"

Ashton holds up his left hand and points to a black squiggle decorating the inside of his wrist. Link squints,



craning his neck from halfway across the room, trying to decipher what the hell it is without it being obvious that he's out of the loop.

“That was *me*, Whit. Not just my choice, but my own charm, created explicitly for this purpose. I inked it on my skin myself, just now, while you were arguing with Link.”

“That’s impossible,” Whitaker scoffs. “There was no time for—”

“You’ve always underestimated me,” Ashton asserts, cutting him off and stepping boldly, *fearlessly* into Whitaker’s personal space. “You don’t know who I am, and you certainly don’t know what I’m capable of doing.” He holds up his hand once more and Link watches with interest, clocking the exact moment when Whitaker realizes that Ashton is telling the truth. That the tattoo on his wrist is as fresh as the one on his back.

“And, for the record,” he continues, “you didn’t break me. Not even close.”

“Yeah, you squashed cabbage leaf,” Link adds because he can’t help himself.

As soon as Ashton’s done speaking, his gaze doesn’t linger. It snaps away from Whitaker, sweeping the room with intention and swiftly finding Link’s face. When their eyes meet, the change in Ashton’s expression and demeanor is both sudden and dramatic—another, final transformation. It almost looks as if he’s physically rolling the entire situation right off of his shoulders, shrugging it away in his wake. A relieved, pleased smile spreads across his face as he closes the distance between them and loops his arm through Link’s.

“I believe we had an appointment,” he says, and that’s the end of that. Ashton doesn’t look back when he leads Link confidently out of the atrium and down the hall.

As they exit, Link can hear Sam laughing from the steps, her footsteps echoing as she finally wanders down. “Dude,” Sam says, snorting, “Pretty sure that was the most outstanding

embodiment of the phrase ‘fuck you’ in all of recorded history. No, but seriously, get out or I’m gonna shoot you.”

Pressed into Link’s side, Ashton just grins.

“What is that thing, anyway?” Link asks, gesturing towards Ashton’s wrist as they move arm-in-arm down the hall and Ashton interlaces the fingers of their hands.

“Hmm? Oh, the tattoo. Technically, it’s the letter for “C” in Enochian, the language of the angels. Same as the script on my ribs. Felt right to use for this particular effect, but it’s really just a vehicle for the charm.”

Ashton explains this so nonchalantly, so humbly, that Link honestly can’t tell if the guy understands how damn *talented* he is. He’s kind of dumbfounded, feeling compelled to clarify out loud what a *big fuckin’* deal this actually is, and what an unparalleled success Ashton is going to be in the tattoo world, sooner rather than later.

What a big success Ashton *already is*, to him.

The thing is, seeing Ashton owning his shit and being so damn brave—it makes *Link* want to do the same damn thing. He needs to stop hiding, to stop using the way shitty people from his past have treated him as an excuse to not be proud, to not be himself, to not claim his accomplishments *loudly*.

Fuck his dad’s opinion on *everything* being about work and money. Fuck him for beating into his head that anything less is a waste of time. Fuck his ex, Kane, for thinking his *awesome* smut is lame or weird, for trying to talk him into being ashamed. Kane is just *twitterguy0127393*, now, *the hell does he know?* And fuck *Lawless* for trying to make him believe that he didn’t have anything more to offer than a pretty face and some basic ink. He’s *not* a dog. He’s the guy who gave the man he loves his life back.

So fuck all of them. Link’s over it.

He’s gotta *tell* Ashton, though, and doesn’t even know where to start. Ultimately, Link opts to keep the focus on him

for today—Ashton’s earned it, and his revelations can wait until tomorrow.

“Ash,” he starts out, admiringly, “you’re awesome.”

“It was nothing,” Ashton deflects.

“Dude, I—Alright, let’s recap: this is a charm that you dreamt up, brought to life, freaking inked on the fly, *onto your own skin* after your ex showed up unexpectedly to threaten you, *just* because you wanted to tell him off. You know, sunshine, I’m not sure if you know this, but *most* people just go to the gym, get snatched, and then bang the douchebag’s best friend.”

Ashton comes to a dead stop, peering up at him, wide-eyed. “I was inspired,” he says, perfectly deadpan, which makes Link burst out laughing.

“Christ,” he murmurs, shaking his head and pulling Ash in close as they resume the walk toward his room. His room, where presumably, someone’s world is getting absolutely *rocked*, because Link has never been this turned on in his whole damn life. He’s also going to need to see that ink in action like six or seven more times, preferably from several different angles and with way less clothing in the way.

You know, for *professional* reasons. Gotta make sure it’s perfect.

“You are something else, sweetheart,” he says with a chuckle. “Don’t ever change, because I can’t fuckin’ *wait* to see what you do next.”

“The feeling is mutual, Link,” Ashton replies softly, tugging on his hand as they step inside his room. Ashton stands on his toes to steal a kiss, and magic sparks between their lips as Link closes the door behind them.





## CHAPTER 9: EPILOGUE

### *Two Years Later*

The highly-anticipated release of the latest installment to Michael Shield's most popular book series coincides somewhat accidentally with the fourteenth annual "Enchanted Ink" Tattoo Convention. This is ridiculously fortunate, since it provides a major opportunity for the man behind the pseudonym to promote both of his passions at the same time. A first, at least since his public "coming out" and the official linking of both his celebrity identities: Michael Shield, accomplished fantasy novelist, and coveted tattoo artist Link Remington from the famed *Soul Survivor*.

Proud doesn't begin to encompass the way Ashton feels about all this. To see Link happily engaging with both sets of his fans in person today—it's amazing. Plus, Link is a natural. He's kind, friendly, and easygoing, signing anything brought to his table and posing for endless selfies hugging people while flashing his megawatt smile. Sometimes the fan has artwork and sometimes they have a book, but Link exudes comfort and confidence no matter what comes his way.

One would never have even the slightest clue as to how much he's struggled to get here. Never know that Link harbored such fear and anxiety when it came to owning his writing and sharing it proudly with his real name attached. Equally, while the interests of his two *very* different subsets of fans don't always overlap, *Link* himself is the draw, and he's a big one.

The convention is packed, and the booth at the rear of the Expo Center where Link, Sam, and Ashton have set up is never without lines and a crowd. That's thanks in no small part to the spectacular displays *Soul Survivor* has created to promote each one of them, both separately and as a team. It's

not one thing or another, not merely Link's multiple ventures and extreme cover-up capabilities, or Sam's enviable, unmatched artistry and badass model looks, not *solely* Ashton's innovative charms and enchantments, which are the best in the business.

Soul Survivor is a multidisciplinary team effort, and together, they're the whole package.

Over the past two years, the Soul Survivor accounts on various social media platforms have gone viral at least once a month, and business has been non-stop since. Requests for bookings, press, brand deals, and partnerships have poured in, to the point where it's difficult for Ashton to wrap his head around the sheer amount of *interest* that never seems to stop coming.

They have a regular staff now, a P.R. person who handles most postings, which is good because Ashton is not the most internet-savvy person. Despite that, even he knows that regularly stumbling upon fan accounts dedicated specifically to his work as well as fans reposting videos of *his* charms in action means that he's doing something right.

And he is—or rather, here *they* are. Ashton, Link, and Sam have taken advantage of the publicity, ridden the wave so to speak, working hard to transform the Remingtons' original tattoo business into something even *more* novel and exciting. Something special and unique, almost proprietary to the tattoo industry as a whole. Shockingly, that's thanks to *him*.

Despite some initial hesitancy, Ashton has somehow become their secret weapon. He's now Soul Survivor's resident "Charm Specialist", an option that can be booked completely on his own or as an "à la carte" addition to augment either Link or Sam's work with a magical component that only he is capable of inking. Clients can choose from sounds, lighting, and many other special effects, and they line up in droves down the frontage road to do so.

There's simply nothing *like* Ashton out there in the world, which means that Soul Survivor absolutely dominates the

enchanted ink marketplace, and they do so without breaking a sweat.

Not everyone has been so prosperous. The last any of them heard—and, as Ashton understands it, not completely unrelated—Sainted Angels was dangerously close to going out of business. As a gesture of kindness, Ashton gave Link and Sam permission to reach out to some of Whitaker’s artists with an offer to rent studio space cheaply. Just the ones who were pleasant to him, of course.

Ashton’s found that the Universe *does* have things to say (wet socks or otherwise), and that karma always comes around *if* he seizes the opportunities sent his way.

He doesn’t feel guilty. Link’s novels have always told a thinly-veiled and transformed story of his life, but the pseudonym kept anyone from truly following the sparsely-left trail. This time though, in his latest book—and while Link was careful not to name anyone specifically—his crumbs were closer to entire cookies. As a result, their many fans were able to track down and hoard every reference and clue, easily splicing them back together. It became wildly apparent that it wasn’t terribly difficult to do, if one were to have many spare hours and the inclination to try.

After all, when Link went public as “Michael Shield”, his announcement was immediately followed by the addition of a new character to his books. An angel, named “Cas” appears in the story, looking like a dead ringer for Ashton, right down to his tri-blade weapon and the tattoos on his skin. That was probably suggestive enough, but when Cas *also* shared a tragic backstory involving a former-lover-turned-villain with a penchant for trickery and a British accent, understandable suspicions were raised.

As far as curated control of his story goes, Link mostly allows fan speculation to run wild. But when Dean and Cas became a soulmate-level couple in the books, his fans (correctly, of course) took that as official confirmation to any and all related speculation that might’ve been floating around.

Perhaps the two of them are treading the fine line of decency at this point, but if Link and Ashton are being honest, neither of them feels sorry about that in the least.

Life goes on, and these days, Ashton has nearly forgotten about Whitaker altogether. It's a nice change of pace, to feel free. To look back on traumatic events from his past and feel absolutely nothing. To be genuinely, peacefully, unfazed.

In that same vein, at the Enchanted Ink convention today, Ashton is working on doing exactly that. Putting himself out there, without fear or reservation.

Currently, he's standing inside the Expo Center, perched on a display podium meant for human models. It's one of the platforms he could barely stand to look at a mere two years prior, reflexively cringing each time even the barest idea of his disastrous ink being put on display for others to see crossed his mind.

So, *so* much has changed since then. From his tattooed skin, to his personal life, to his job. Ashton's apartment downtown is long gone, as he is now a permanent resident of the Soul-arium and Room 11. Which, incidentally, has undergone its own transformation as well. The night before Ashton was slated to move in, he came walking down the hall with a box of personal items, only to have absolutely nowhere to put it because all of Link's furniture was out in the hall.

"Worst surprise ever," a red-faced, sweating Sam had grumbled, shoving Link's dresser against the wall and hair out of her eyes before storming off in the direction of her room. "Give me twenty minutes to shower and get the hell out of dodge before you do anything loud enough for me to hear."

"Thanks, Sammy!" Link called cheerfully after her, as Ashton stood bewildered in the middle of the hall amongst the detritus of Link's belongings, holding his box and unsure what to do with it.

"I—is this a bad time?"



“Perfect time,” Link replied, scooping the box from his arms and kissing Ashton on the cheek. “Should’ve done this ages ago, but now’s good, too. Check it out.” Stepping aside, he gestured for Ashton to peek through the doorway.

Inside, only the bed remained, dragged to the center of the room and covered with a giant, cream-colored canvas. The rest of the floor was also draped, the edges of the wall taped, and there were about a million half-full cans and bottles of colorful paint with various brushes and supplies strewn about. Immediately, Ashton understood what they were doing.

“C’mon,” Link said excitedly, clapping his hands and rubbing them together. “Let’s make her pretty.”

“You did this for me?” Ashton asked, wide-eyed. “You don’t... I know you prefer your space to be clean and streamlined.”

“Boring, you mean.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You meant it, though,” Link said, elbowing him playfully and winking. “It’s okay. You know what? I’ve realized that when it comes to certain things, I don’t actually know what I like. I know what I’ve always *done*, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t a better way. Since we started having free drawing nights, this has kind of been on my mind a lot.”

“Really?” Ashton was surprised. Prior to that conversation, he wasn’t even sure Link *liked* those nights. He often had to be dragged away from whatever he was doing, only to spend half the session swirling his whiskey and complaining about not having any ideas regarding what to draw. Meanwhile, Sam and Ashton would ignore him completely, racing to see who could finish faster and with the superior end result.

Honestly, during those nights, Ashton wasn’t under the impression that Link was thinking about much of *anything*.

He *was* entirely into the idea of painting their room and making it look a bit less like military barracks, so he wisely kept those thoughts to himself.

“What should we paint?” Ashton asked.

Grinning in response, Link whipped his shirt over his head and kicked off his jeans, balling them up and tossing them out into the hall before motioning for Ashton to do the same. Down to his boxer briefs and socks, he spread his arms wide and shrugged. “Whatever we want.”

To Ashton’s surprise, they managed to make it through some actual, stellar art creation before succumbing to temptation and getting incredibly dirty right there on the tarped floor. In a puddle of spilled paint, no less, which resulted in some... interesting designs. That’s okay, because the streak marks from Ashton’s color-soaked hair rubbing against the wall as Link fucked him were easy enough to push the bed against and hide, but *they* know they’re there.

Ashton thinks about them a lot, every time he leans against the headboard.

The painted fantasy scenes that span the length of the walls aren’t half-bad, either.

Most importantly, it feels like *their* space, one they created and now inhabit together, not just a room where Link lives and Ashton is a welcome visitor.

So he’s made his mark, inside the Soul-arium and out, and while the renovation to Room 11 is a particular source of pride, secretly, Ashton is *most* thrilled about the exterior.

He still thinks back on that first night, and the moment he pulled up to the disastrously creepy Soul-arium in the wake of Link’s tail lights. How he *very* nearly turned around and left, how he wondered why *anyone* would venture out here in the first place, never mind make it to the door. He’s kept those thoughts in mind throughout the entire process of refreshing and updating their customer-facing facade, and after many long months, can finally say that the image they’re putting out to the world has been totally overhauled and is all the better for it.

A particularly lucrative partnership Sam scored with a skincare line provided enough liquid funding to level the factory and create an outdoor hangout space in its stead. After the building's remnants were removed, the ground above the Soul-arium's entrance was flattened and regraded, filled with beehives, fruit trees, a garden, and a patio packed with lounging furniture and a fire pit. Ashton now passes his free days amongst the wildflowers and with his hands in the dirt, spends his nights snuggled against Link's chest, looking up at the stars.

A mix of tiki torches and gas lanterns that match the one down front provide illumination options that can be tailored to various activities happening on the "roof," and an assortment of ground-based solar lights create safe pathways to move around. The final effect is a *lot* friendlier, brighter, and more welcoming. Flowering vines and ivy even frame the doorway that leads down to the bunker, and a large, slanted-roof pergola in the parking area creates a shelter from the rain.

Early this morning, before they left to head over to the Expo Center, Link and Ashton shared a cup of coffee on the patio. A quick charm woke the roses they recently planted around the perimeter, petals spreading, seeking sun. Link picked one, which pissed Ashton off, but then he tucked the bloom into his dress shirt pocket, letting his hand linger on Ashton's chest, and it was terribly difficult to be mad about that.

Up on the pedestal, Ashton smiles, thinking about it. He never imagined that he could be so lucky.

With Link providing moral support from Soul Survivor's booth behind him, Ashton straightens up. He stands with his shoulders back, strong and proud, shirtless and holding a partial illusion where his wings are out but the dramatic lighting is forgone. The result creates emphasis on the wings themselves, which cycle between damaged and pristine, flawless and then broken again. Interested con-goers gather below, gawking with open mouths and undisguised awe on

their faces, admiring both his body and Link's work as they pause in their exploration of the convention floor.

Down near Ashton's feet, a plaque is mounted to the platform. It details the fictionalized backstory of the Ashton stand-in, "*Cas*," the new character from Link's book. The plaque summarizes the way the angel in question's wings took damage while pulling the protagonist, Dean, from a hell dimension, and goes on to describe how Dean helped Cas learn to accept his ruined wings. Doing so winds up resulting in their spontaneous, magical healing, and there's definitely a relatable lesson in there somewhere.

This, of course, is the tie-in display for Soul Survivor's booth. That loose thread helps justify Link's decision to do press and advertising for his book right alongside the shop at what's supposed to be a magical tattoo convention.

On the long table in front of Link sits a dwindling stack of those very books. They're a limited edition, numbered run of hardcover collectibles, for sale and autographed by both Link and Ashton. He's pretty sure they come with a sticker or a temporary tattoo or something, maybe a mockup of his blade or a glow-in-the-dark version of his wings. Unfortunately, in packing for the convention, they didn't bring enough—at the rate the books are moving, every single one will be gone long before the end of the day.

As for Ashton, he still has another hour of playing supermodel and plenty of other activities scheduled after that. He's a guest speaker on a panel discussing charm infusion and Kai is coming in the later afternoon to donate skin space for a demo. Just an easy charm, strategically planned to cover Sam while she takes a break to decompress and forage for food. Link, overachiever that he is, has himself scheduled straight through with ink sessions, fix-it consultations, and book-related schmoozing.

With any luck, everyone will wrap up relatively around the same time, and they'll be able to break down the table and take off for the night as a team. Tentative plans already exist to

celebrate back at the Soul-arium, and Ashton is aware that those include both Skylar and her girlfriend plus Remy and his wife, longtime buddies of Link who have become his friends, too.

Sam is the wildcard. She has a new girlfriend and they're currently in the honeymoon phase, so their presence is a coin toss. The girl, Chelle, is a cool, talented artist, definitely one of them. She's Link-approved, though, so Ashton privately finds himself hoping that Sam keeps her around. He can't say that finding a new, different woman standing half-dressed in his kitchen every week is a perk of Soul-arium living, but nothing's perfect.

Either way, if Sam and Chelle do wind up joining in, the party could go on until the early hours of the morning. The guests will have plenty of places to crash, of course. Room 15, while it holds many fond memories for Ashton, has long since been officially returned to its former guest room glory, so there's no shortage of clean beds.

Abruptly, Ashton feels grateful to be long past the days when the Soul-arium was not his *home*. When he constantly had to worry about overstaying his welcome and moderating his drinking, careful to retain his ability to drive home at the end of the night if need be.

Thankfully, he won't have to worry about any of that after this soul-sucking monster of a day. He can simply relax and let loose, enjoy his friends, and like every night these days, fall into bed next to Link when he's done. Even now, he's already looking forward to sinking into that pleasant darkness with either Link's face or the art on their walls being the last thing his eyes see before they close.

It's really *good* to feel like he belongs.

Perhaps that's the greatest surprise in all of this, even two years into this still-developing thing with the Remingtons.

Ashton *is* happy, he's thriving. He's satisfied in his career, blissful with Link, content standing half-naked on this silly

platform and being ogled by strangers.

He glances over his shoulder, unsurprised when Link's eyes immediately find his. In fact, Link is staring more blatantly (and definitely more hungrily) up at him than any of the guests below, doing so with a dopey look on his face and his car revving excitedly on his right bicep. Link's shirt is off in solidarity, which isn't exactly a hardship and *is* earning him plenty of his own ogling, elevated platform not required. Still, he's very sweet in his aggressive support, and Ashton is unable to resist smiling back, prompting the grin on Link's face to widen.

At the same time, Ashton feels a pulse just over his heart, a *thump-thump* that's just *barely* out of sync with the beat drumming inside his own chest. He glances down to see the EKG tracing that's inked over his left breast moving, exactly the way it would on a cardiac monitor. It's medically accurate, a literal representation of Link's life tattooed onto Ashton's skin, and conversely, Link's heart walking around outside of his body.

Thanks to the bespoke charm that Ashton created exclusively for them, the ink *reacts* to Link, moving in time and form with his actual heartbeat and the way Link *feels* when he looks at Ashton. Sure, it's cliché, giving serious new meaning to the sappy, cheesily romantic trope of one's heart beating only for another, but Ashton loves it.

"Your heart knows mine," he marveled, seeing the tattoo in action for the first time.

It makes him feel warm inside, and ridiculously, *deliriously* happy knowing that right this second, *his* branded heartbeat on Link's left shoulder is doing exactly the same thing. Originally, Link intended to have Ashton's EKG inked in the very same place, right over his heart, but changed his mind after watching Cas pulling Dean out of Hell. He gave it some thought, eventually deciding to replicate the raised burn that Cas' hand sears into Dean's left shoulder by using Ashton's handprint and his own arm.

“Here’s to choosing our own scars,” he said, and Ashton loved that *almost* as much as the tattoo itself. The EKG charm is therefore inked over the palm of that tattoo, plus Ashton added a little something extra that creates a *particular* sensation when he covers the enchanted handprint with his own flesh.

As if Link can read his thoughts—and perhaps he can, Ashton is thinking *very* loudly and pointedly in his direction—he shivers. His fingers come up to brush against the burn-colored marks wrapping around his bicep, and the EKG print over Ashton’s heart speeds up.

*Later*, is what Ashton gets when Link winks at him.

Enchanted ink, indeed.

*The End*

