

# GARDENS & GHOSTS



MAZ MADDOX

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RELIC #5

MAZ MADDOX

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*To the readers who followed these nerds to the end. I hope we  
get to eat dinosaur chicken nuggets together one day.*

# PROLOGUE

REAPER



New Year's Eve, 1899

“**Y**ou look like you swallowed a lemon.”

Montana didn't take his eyes off the Allosaurus skeleton on display, his snarl barely contained.

“How could they get it so wrong when they have all the pieces?” my mate asked, ocean-blue eyes storming with genuine confusion. “The miserable bastards spent decades in a fossil pissing contest just to produce...that.”

I gave the strange parody of the Jurassic king a long look, sipping my whiskey. It stood like a dog walking on its hind legs, tail flat against the ground and neck arched so the skull pointed forward instead of straight up.

It was hilarious. Well, I thought it was hilarious. My poor Montana thought it was an affront to our species.

“Got the arms right,” I teased, laughing as he swallowed down more alcohol. “Relax. They're doing their best. Only we know how bad it is. They'll figure it out.”

“Considering how often humans get taken out by getting too drunk and trying to wrestle bulls for fun, I don't have high confidence.” Montana let a rush of air out from his nose and turned to me. “Fredrick is coming over to remind us how much the museum tickets he got us were.”

“Want me to spill whiskey on his jacket?”

That got a smirk from him, and I loved it.

“Ah, the Smith brothers,” Fredrick sang in his fake, delighted voice he put on to sound nice. He was a strange man with a habit of pissing people off while still throwing heaps of money their way. For whatever reason, he thought the stupid nonsense between Cope and Marsh was devilishly scandalous gossip and prodded us for insight while paying for our drinks.

From an outsider's perspective, the paleontological boom and vicious sabotage between the two men was pretty interesting. For Montana and me, it was years of idiotic hell

while we tried to steer them in the right direction. We couldn't outright tell either man what the ancient world was like without seeming absolutely insane, so we had to guide them.

They were far too busy trying to destroy each other and win "who has the most bones" to ever really care.

"Remind me—were either of you present when this beast was unearthed from the depths?" Fredrick asked, turning to gaze with passing interest at the grotesque dinosaur.

"Montana was," I said, passing Montana my whiskey. "He was working for Cope at the time. I was with Marsh."

"Brothers divided!" Fredrick loved that narrative. We were absolutely not divided and most certainly weren't brothers.

It was much easier to explain two men living together as siblings rather than being immortal heathen sinners who could transform into prehistoric lizards.

"Brothers wanting to do their part for natural history," Montana corrected after a sip. "We found the fossils for the Allosaurus in Como Bluff in Wyoming. This was a few years back."

"I still find it truly *fascinating* that they wouldn't display this animal until after Cope's death. Why do you think that is? Shame? Do you think this is another one of the..." he paused dramatically and placed the back of his hand near his mouth before whisper-shouting, "fakes?"

"It's not fake," we both said in unison.

Montana continued. "I was there. This is all the bones, head included."

Fredrick deflated, annoyed we didn't give him some delicious piece of gossip to chew on.

"Well," he drew out, giving the Allosaurus another dismissive glance. "I was curious if the fossil thefts were true."

"The what?" Montana's eyebrows reached for his blond hairline. "Thefts?"

“Oh, *yes*.” Fredrick’s eyes sparked with renewed gossip energy. “I heard some riffraff hired on the dig sites stole bones to sell off for profit.”

It was my turn to be offended. “What on God’s green earth would someone do with stolen prehistoric bones?”

“My dear boy, these bones go for a fortune to collectors, especially now. I’ve heard that particularly ambitious fellows chart across the ocean and dig up bones as far away as China, then sell them to naturalists here if you can believe it.” Fredrick made a little tsk. “That’s the business to be in.”

“That’s disrupting the science and selling history for a few bucks,” Montana shot back.

“Hundreds if not thousands, Montana. Not a ‘few bucks,’” Fredrick said, then corrected ship once he saw Montana’s molars grinding. “Not that I would support such disrespect to the field of paleontology, of course. I’m a man of science.”

“Where did you hear this from?” I asked, piloting Fredrick back to verbal safety.

“A friend of a friend, you know.” He waved it away dismissively.

“Could you get more information from your friend of a friend? Like who typically buys such a collection?”

“Joseph,” Montana scolded. “You’re not serious.”

“Now, now. Just a query.” I gave Montana’s shoulder a pat and aimed my smile at Fredrick. “If you could be so kind, Fredrick. You are our eyes and ears in the more refined places in society.”

“I would be delighted to introduce you.” Fredrick made the weaselly smile he often did when he got a new piece of gossip or saw a business opportunity. “Making connections is my calling after all.”

“Some would argue it’s what you were placed on the earth to do.”

“That and chew the fat,” Montana added with a bone-dry sarcasm Fredrick mistook for genuine reverence.

“You know I don’t need your flattery, gentlemen,” he lied around a delighted laugh. “I’ll organize a meeting over drinks and send you the invitation.”

“That sounds perfect.”

“Only fifteen more minutes until we ring in the glory of the new year.” Fredrick wiggled his empty glass. “I need to go make the rounds.”

I gave Fredrick’s hand a shake before he floated off to spread more gossip and chuckled at the vein popping out of Montana’s temple. “You went from swallowing a lemon to chewing on gravel.”

“What the hell do you want to talk to fossil-theft brokers for?”

“Because I have an idea.” I hooked my arm around Montana’s shoulders and rotated us clockwise, escaping the oddly angled Allosaurus in a quest for fresh air.

“Last time you had an idea, we worked for two pricks for a decade.”

Weaving around the mostly drunk crowd of overenthusiastic museum guests was difficult, and I sadly ended up with some beer spilled on my vest. The reward for our diversion was a stolen bottle of unattended, unopened champagne swiped from a stand and a clear balcony to see the stars.

“True,” I admitted, parking us at the edge of the balcony railing. The sky was wide open, dazzling with a never-ending display of lights. It was too cold for the guests to mingle outside long, but Montana and I were made of tougher stuff. Standing shoulder to shoulder, I sent the cork of the fizzy champagne flying and let it foam over the railing.

“I say if we’re going to stop these thieves, we’ll need to know where they are.”

Montana’s lemon face lifted into befuddlement. “Stop them?”

“That’s right.”

“Fredrick said these people are all over the world. He said China.”

“You know we have maps of China these days,” I teased, a bubble of enjoyment rising to the top at Montana’s annoyance. “And boats.”

“I’m being serious.” He accepted the bottle as I passed it over. Through the glass behind us, we heard the band strike up to serenade the incoming new century.

“You really think we should stand by while some vagabonds get rich pilfering the bones of our ancestors? They’re stealing them right out of dig sites, Montana. Ripping away valuable information needed to help them understand the ancient world. *Our* world.”

Montana took a swig and exhaled a puff of smoke from his nose.

“We’re just two men, Joseph. We can’t stop fossil theft everywhere.”

I leaned into his shoulder, taking the bottle back to swallow down a drink of the fizzy alcohol. The countdown had begun, a chorus of numbers shouted in descending order.

“Two tyrannosaurs who survived millions of years tucked away below the dirt, waking up just in time to help steer the paleontological boom of history. You’re right. We won’t get them all, but we’ll get some of them.” I shrugged, handing the bottle back. “Shouldn’t we try?”

“Joseph...” He shook his head, rubbing at his temple in the sign I was pushing him too hard. I touched the back of his hand, wanting to kiss him but knowing better.

“Please. I need you to trust me.”

A much softer storm clouded over his handsome face for a moment, a gentle vulnerability he rarely let show in public. The countdown inside had fallen into single digits.

“I don’t want to be away from you again. I don’t want one of us to head off to China while the other keeps digging around here. That time we worked apart nearly killed me.”

He leaned into my side as I tossed my arm over his shoulders, the stars above us dancing. The warmth shared between us kept the biting cold at bay.

“Whatever we do in the next century and beyond, I don’t want to do it apart,” I told him in a whisper. “You’re going to be at my side whether you like it or not, Monty.”

“You keep calling me that and I’m going to leave you in China,” he whispered back around a smile.

The eruption inside signified the start of the 1900s, the promise of a lifetime to come. We stood in the cold, watching the ageless starlight twinkle, having no clue what adventures were only a few decades away.

In that moment, on the New Year’s Day of our first new century together, I knew we’d never have another apart.

I couldn’t wait to see what happened next.

# CHAPTER ONE

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## MONTANA

The early spring chill was sharp against my skin, but the elk blood warmed me from the inside.

My belly was full of red meat and crushed bone, the beast I consumed skinny from the long winter but still very filling. Splattered carnage stained the thinning snow, melting from the heat of death. Through the evidence of the hunt, traces of the renewing springtime flora had begun to sprout. My breath bloomed in streaming clouds, the smell of crisp earth, blood, and snow delicious.

My home state—my namesake—was beautiful, a true cradle of life and bountiful wilderness. It was leagues away from the earth I had known millions of years ago, the landscape shifted so dramatically that I had become a prehistoric monster only known by fossilized bone and imagination. But to me, this wild earth of greens, colorful flowers, mammals, and machinery, I felt just as much a part of it as I did sixty-five million years ago.

This was home.

The only one we'd ever have.

Even now, when the snow bit at my skin that was not made for this temperature, I felt grounded. I was cold, but not in danger. My hunger was satisfied, and the urge to explore had me moving—careful not to growl or rumble because my tone moved through the earth like a phantom roar. It radiated out like a threat and shook mammals to their core. The last thing I needed was to alert anything.



This was my time to be my dinosaur self, a T.rex in a world much too small for me. I stayed quiet, and roamed, forgetting for a moment that I was alone.

I had no others who could return my calls. No one would find my scent and come looking. No one that would challenge or submit.

No one to share my meal with.

My stomach soured, but I kept walking.

I roamed, stretching my legs, drinking in the solitude of the nature around me. Twilight sky expanded in a glittering landscape of stars, swallowed into a mouth of pink-banded cliffs topped with snow. Below my claws digging into the hard, frozen earth, I knew bones waited to be discovered. I wondered how many more of us were still sleeping.

By the time I made it back to my camp, my skin screamed for warmth, and my feet hurt. My bones scraped and twisted as I shrank down, my senses dulling and mind firing back to plans, bills, obligations, and soft, quiet whispers of ache. My human body shook hard from the overwhelming chill, and I ducked into my tent to wrap up in my waiting thermal blankets and hot-water bottles.

A light bloomed from my pillow, my cell phone blinking awake with countless notifications: namely meetings scheduled with field teams excavating new dig sites for me to explore; museums and academia that needed my funding to continue work; and a reminder to call someone to look at the hot-water heater back home. It was the tedious grind of maintaining connections and future research, making sure that the proper humans had the tools to unearth more of our bones.

And keep the house in order.

My screen was taken over by a picture of Royal's face wearing a comically small child's headband with a lime-green foam attempt at a triceratops frill on it. I had to flex my hand to get it to stop shaking from the cold and tap the screen twice to answer the incoming call.

"Royal. Everything alright?"

His voice sounded clear but a little far away, indicating immediately that he had me on speaker phone.

“Hey, boss man. Just checking on you. We got an alert that the weather up north was dropping.”

“I’m fine. It’s not too bad where I am,” I told him, tucking myself further into my blankets.

“Are you doing the super-manly-man camping thing?” Dalton asked next. “Like just a normal tent and your grit to get you through the winter?”

“I’m just normal camping.”

“Normal camping is super-manly-man camping,” he went on to explain to someone, probably his boyfriend Simon. “Like he basically sleeps in a tree and eats rocks.”

“Any luck at the sites?” Royal came back, rescuing the conversation. “Find any new siblings for us to play with?”

“No luck on new shifters, but there have been some great finds out here. I’ll go over my intel when I get home. We have some new contacts here and a prospective site we can visit in the United Kingdom.” I took a moment to let a chill pass over me. “Any updates from you?”

“Blaise booked a new gig, and Simon gets to lead a dig in Alaska!” Royal announced, making Dalton hoot with joy over a chorus of laughter. Even though I couldn’t see them, I heard both Simon’s and Blaise’s smiles.

“Our boyfriends are so amazing!” Dalton cheered. “We win the boyfriend game! Suck it, everyone else!”

“Congratulations to you both. I’m very proud of you. We’ll celebrate when I get home.”

“Aw.” Blaise made a little whine of delight. “Thanks, Montana.”

“When do you come back?” Simon asked.

“A few days. I just need to wrap up here.” I dug through my bag to find my backup battery. “I have some—”

“Montana?”

Henry's voice was a cool ripple, calm and steady.

"Henry," I answered back.

From the mild calamity on the other end, I could visualize Henry forgetting about his size and crawling over laps. He had a tendency of reverting into old habits when he got excited, which was as charming and chaotic as a Golden Retriever puppy.

"Henry, watch it, man." Royal made a grunt. "Your ass is in my face."

"Oof, you're heavy!" Blaise whined.

"Did you find more of us?" Henry was asking me during the protest. "Baha said you went out to find more new shifters like me."

"I try and walk new dig sites to check for any of us still sleeping, but there wasn't anyone this time," I explained.

"Are you being safe? Are you warm? Did you catch anything to eat?"

"Yes to all three."

The rapid-fire questions were familiar and honest. These concerns were the same for every member of the family. Henry was a tyrannosaur to the bone, protective and deeply concerned about everyone's food intake once he got over the need to try and prove his dominance. That had been an intense week.

"Montana?" His voice broke the moment of reflection I had, and he surprised me by sounding much more sorrowful than I had been expecting. "Are you coming home?"

"I'll be home soon," I promised, annoyed with the knock of guilt against my chest. "Just a few more tasks to finish up here. Then I'll be on my way."

"Let me know when you want me to get your flight stuff ready, boss," Royal called out. "We all miss you, but we know you're working."

"Mm. I'll contact you soon."

A chorus of goodbyes sounded off, but Henry didn't add his until the end. It sounded like hanging up was breaking his heart.

I disconnected the call and felt a sense of emptiness for just a beat.

Waiting for me after the call ended was a series of pictures sent from Dalton's phone. They were random snapshots of their lives while I was gone for the past few weeks. Royal was posing in a new yellow apron that looked like it was plucked from an anime maid café in Japan. Dalton was proudly displaying his dinosaur-shaped pancakes like he had discovered a long-lost treasure.

Baha looked annoyed in every picture, but he was always in them.

The last one in the long line of ridiculous smiles and shenanigans—which had me worried about the state of the kitchen—was of the balcony during sunset. Orange and pink radiated across the Texas sky, which was impossibly wide and stretched forever. Clouds held the colors like wisps of pastel fire, dappled over a deep violet.

Leaning on the balcony, gazing across the expanse of forest behind our home, was the newest addition to our family. Henry's wide shoulders were angled up from his weight resting on his elbows, his dark brows lowered in an expression of pensive reflection. Golden light cut across the sharp angle of his jaw, the defined curve of his triceps, the soft fabric stretched over his strong back.

He'd come a long way from being a feral creature halfway stuck between the present and sixty-five million years ago. Navigating the human world had been tricky for him, as it had been for all of us when we first woke up after the meteor strike, but Henry had been especially unique. Language came easily to him, like a sponge of knowledge when it came to linguistics. We hadn't known this until a few months into him staying with us, when he had gone from totally mute to stringing together complete sentences in both English and Spanish.

He'd also learned just enough from Baha's Arabic ramblings to successfully call Dalton a bastard for eating the last popsicle.

It had been a fun day testing his crass language abilities.

Henry was getting much better, but he still had a long way to go.

The last picture sent to me was the one I saved as my background and something I used to help propel me out of dwelling on how long of a day I had tomorrow. Between meetings and travel arrangements, I was going to be exhausted by the time I made it to the airport, but it was nice to know that my band of brothers was waiting for me back home.

Their smiling faces, or approximation of smiling in Baha's case, all sitting around a table holding up drinks made my heart warm. Even Henry was grinning, a little crookedly and showing off his prominent canines, but the gesture reached his golden eyes.

All of my brothers were very handsome men in their own right, and they all had snagged equally charming and lovely partners, but I knew Henry was going to be similar to Yulong in his dating exploits. As soon as he was able to leave the house without one of us to escort him, he was going to be tripping over whoever he wanted to spend his time with.

An incoming call I wasn't expecting pulled my thoughts away from Henry and his future dating life.

The name displayed was not the one I had been expecting.

"Ruben. What's going on?"

"Hell of a greeting, Montana," Ruben teased. "You normally answer your phone like a drill sergeant?"

"We don't exactly have the relationship that involves friendly chats out of the blue." I tugged my blankets around me tighter. "Do you need something? Is Yulong alright?"

"I'm not saying we need to swap gossip, tyrannosaurus, but you could at least answer the phone like a normal person. You know the standard greeting is 'hello,' right? I know you've

been awake longer than phones have existed, so maybe that one slipped past you. And yes, your brother is fine.”

A fading chill clattered my teeth and made my sigh of annoyance sharp.

“Get to the point, Ruben. I’m tired.”

“I’m heading to Texas soon. I’m bringing Yulong and Lance with me. We have something interesting to talk about.”

“Something interesting?”

He paused a moment, long enough that I had to check the screen to make sure the signal hadn’t dropped.

“I think it’s best if I wait until I’m there. It’s complicated, and I don’t want to have to repeat myself.”

“It sounds like you’re enjoying a power trip and being a dick.”

A laugh rippled out of the phone, the noise filtered through sharp teeth.

“When will you be back home?” he asked once his laughter was under control.

“Give me a few days. I’ll let you know when I start heading back.” I rubbed at the tension behind my eyes. “If this is a fossil theft or tip-off, you can just tell me over the phone.”

“No, no. I’m enjoying the power trip. I’ll see you in a few days, T.rex. Have fun in the woods.”

The phone gave a little condescending beep to signify the call ending, the screen falling back into darkness.

It wasn’t shocking that Ruben, a rival fossil hunter and pain-in-the-ass Giganotosaurus, would be cagey about his intel. We had parted on what was essentially a cease-fire in order to leave wiggle room between our two groups. Yulong, my brother from the RELIC house, had fallen madly in love with Ruben’s brother, Lance.

Since we were both decent people, we stopped trying to fuck each other over when it came to fossil hunting in order for them to have a relationship.

I didn't like him, and I didn't trust him.

But I would listen to what he had to say for now.

# CHAPTER TWO

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I could smell them.

One was circling me, hiding in the brush—feathers, rabbit blood, dirt stuck to his claws. He was big, a black shadow creeping low in the brush to plan his attack. He was going to try and flank me, rush for my side and scale me like a tree.

The other was ahead, stealth not a tactic for his species. They didn't rely on the cover of darkness or speed but their brute might and deadly horns. Rich smells of broken branches and crunched leaves clung to the scent of his skin, not a trace of fear.

Much further into the woods was something much bigger, a giant who carried with him the smell of river water and chewed fish bones. I didn't have to worry about his attack, not only because I knew for a fact he preferred aquatic food, but also because he wasn't playing our game.

He said it was stupid, and he wanted to go sit in the water.

Dalton said Baha didn't play our games in the morning because he wanted to go off alone somewhere and poop.

Either way, he was one less foe I had to contend with in our game of prehistoric tag. It was a fantastic game of wit, instinct, and cunning. One of my favorite games, and one I prided myself on improving each morning we ventured into the woods for sport.

The rules were simple—whoever was “it” got to hunt for the rest of us (minus Baha because of his stance on stupid

games and/or his proclivity for solitary pooping). The predator could transfer the role to one of us after we've been caught by simply touching their snout to someone who was prey.

No death involved, which I thought was very nice. Normally, someone was torn to pieces, and you got to eat their insides.

I played a similar game with the wild deer in the woods, but I played the old way with the eating and death involved. I liked that Dalton and Royal played with the touch rules.

Dalton was hunting me currently, his scent much closer. I pretended that I didn't notice him, kept walking through the forest like I had lost their trail. He paused near my left side and went silent. It was a trick to see if I would respond to the silence, testing to see if I was bluffing.

Smart.

But I didn't fall for it. I kept my pace.

For a few moments, I thought I had actually lost him. The forest had fallen into a serene peace. The early morning sun provoked our avian cousins to sing. They were calling out to their mates; only a few got responses. I felt the urge to do the same, to rumble and announce myself like I used to do.

It always made me feel lonely to know that no one would return my call.

Dalton's feet cracked a stick to my right, his feathers lifting and changing his scent from anticipation to adrenaline.

He was going to strike.

I rotated my body away from him as the Utahraptor rushed me, the pink line of feathers above his head standing at full alert. He was so fast—so damn fast—that I growled when he nearly landed on me. His arms were wide, tail pitched downward as he leaped, trying to land against my side. The hooked claws on his feet were pulled back so he didn't cut me, and he could scale my side without puncturing skin if he was careful.

I spun, using my large snout to deflect his pounce and save me from being tagged. Dalton was quick, landing with grace and springing back into action. He rushed under my belly and circled me, trying to confuse me on which direction he'd try next. I was sure he was going to try and trick me, go for the right again even though he went left, but I should have known he was more mischievous than that.

My tail had the very distinct pressure of something grabbing it, and I sounded off with a louder rumble than I meant to as Dalton raced up my back like a clumsy squirrel. I felt his snout touch my head, a literal kiss of death, before he sprang off me and darted like a phantom into the woods.

It was done.

I was it.

My plan was to bypass racing after the much faster Utahraptor and head for the stocky Regaliceratops in order to round out the game, but my plan was thwarted by a grumpy Baha.

The smell of river water was close, the trees bending around a large, rigid sail. Baha was bigger than me, a patriarch Spinosaurus with nothing to prove and no time for nonsense. His narrow snout was all sharp teeth and business, piercing eyes landing on me as he pushed through the trees.

I gave the air a sniff, liking the smell of the cracked bark and smushed earth that followed him, and fell in line beside him as he started corralling us back home. The sun had reached the point in the sky that signaled it was time for breakfast, and to return back to being human for the day.

Royal was munching on some sticks when he came up beside me, giving me a knowing snort. Tomorrow, I would start as the predator, and he was going to be ready for me. Dalton was racing ahead of us to greet his mate Simon, who was sitting on the porch taking notes. He studied us every morning and asked us questions about our dinosaur behavior.

Blaise, Royal's mate, was waiting with towels and clothing for us to change into once we shrank down to our human

forms. I was thankful for that because it was cold enough to make my human body a little uncomfortable after the shift.

Baha's mate Jackson was inside, having stretched his long Quetzalcoatlus wings earlier in the morning.

Shrinking back down to my human form was my least favorite part. The process itself wasn't painful or uncomfortable, but it was the drastic change in senses that I hated. In my Albertosaurus form, I could smell everything in ways a human simply couldn't. My sense of smell reached for miles, picking up the very subtle notes of creatures I'd never seen before and mapping out their size, diet, if they were mammals or something else, and telling me if they could be fun to eat or not.

As a human, the best I had was decent sight, overactive hormones, and the ability to talk. I couldn't even eat through bone anymore. It was incredibly frustrating to learn that a human jaw couldn't crush bone and that my stomach would get punctured if I tried to swallow the shards.

It sucked. It was a total rip-off. For being the species at the top of the food chain, humans really dropped the ball on a lot of things.

The shift down made me shiver, the cold plucking at my skin once my feathers retracted away from my neck and back. Blaise, bless him, had the towels warmed up before bringing them out. Wrapping up in the soft, sweet-smelling cloth made everything a little easier to bear.

"How was tag?" Blaise asked as we busied ourselves with putting clothing over our cold bodies.

"I once again successfully bested a tyrannosaur with my raw wit and prowess." Dalton popped his head out of a hoodie and grinned at me.

"You ran up the back of my tail."

"Ha," Royal laughed, stepping into some sweatpants. "He tried that on me once."

"Yeah, and you messed it up. I told you it could work."

“I didn’t mess it up. I turned before you landed on me and caught you with my frill. That was badass, and you know it,” Royal shot back. “Henry, you still want to help me install a new motherboard today?”

I nodded as I tugged my jeans over my hips and pulled a sweater on.

“He gets to help after his lessons,” Baha interjected, already dressed. “We have geography and social studies today.”

“If I do double social studies, can I skip geography?” I attempted, enjoying sparring more than memorizing the names of land. “You promised you’d show me how to do an arm bar in sparring today too.”

“No,” Baha answered immediately, always unflappable. “But I’ll show you the arm bar tonight. No skipping classes.”

“Breakfast is on, boys,” Jackson called from the sliding glass door. “Chop, chop.”

“If he doesn’t skip classes, how will he learn how to be a cool delinquent who smokes in the bathroom?” Dalton asked as we piled up the porch stairs.

“Why do you smoke in the bathroom?” I asked, but it was ignored.

“Because he’s an idiot with a never-ending teenage rebellious streak.” Baha pushed the sliding glass door open.

“It’s *charming*,” Dalton defended almost in a pout. “Right, Simon?”

“Hm?” Simon looked up from his notes. “What’s charming?”

“Dalton being a pain in the ass,” Royal supplied, gaining a middle finger from Dalton.

“No. Me being a cool, rebellious, hunky guy who made Sensei Baha’s forehead vein pop out when he was my teacher.” Dalton batted his eyes at Simon in a way I realized was half joking and half his weird way of flirting. I didn’t

understand why blinking rapidly at someone was considered attractive, but it always made Simon's cheeks get pink.

This time was no exception, and Simon kissed Dalton's cheek and confirmed that yes, Dalton was all the wonderful things he claimed. They both smiled bright, the kind that people did at the very end of happy movies.

Everyone in the house smiled like that with their mates. Their smiles were wide and showed their teeth, the emotion reaching all the way up into their eyes and making them shine. Royal looked at Blaise like he was made of sunshine, or sometimes like he was the most delicious thing he wanted to eat.

Even Baha had a way of smiling that was much more downplayed, but still had that sparkle when he looked at Jackson. They pretended to get on each other's nerves and bickered, but the moment Jackson had his hand on Baha, all the bite went out of him.

The only person I never saw sparkle was Montana. He never smiled like that.

Dalton had told me his mate had died, and he didn't have one anymore. A lot had changed after Reaper died, apparently, but that was long before I woke up. I only knew Montana as he was now, and I really liked this version.

Even if he never smiled and felt miles away when he was standing right beside you.

It made my heart hurt.

The kitchen was quickly filled with the sounds of hungry bodies making their plates, dishing out scoops of fried potatoes, scrambled eggs, peppers, pancakes and other wonderful cooked food. There was a messy system in place where each of us passed plates and silverware across to one another, then grabbed as much food as our hearts desired. There was always plenty to eat, and no one ever went hungry.

Once we had what we wanted, it was a short march to the adjacent room to the new dining room table that had room enough for all of us. Montana decided it was time to upgrade

the table because “everyone kept bringing home boyfriends and strays.”

I was just a stray, not one of the found boyfriends.

“You excited about your Alaska trip, Simon?” Jackson asked over the sounds of forks hitting ceramic.

“I’m so excited,” the dimpled paleontologist answered with a grin. “I’ve been wanting to visit forever, and the dig sites out there are so unique. They’re hoping to find more Nanuqsaurus on this trip.”

“Hell yeah, fuzzy mini-rex,” Dalton said around a bite of food. “I wouldn’t be surprised if we run into Montana out there at some point.”

“We?” Jackson glanced between them. “You get to go?”

Simon pretended to be sly. “I pulled some strings.”

“You told them it was your birthday, didn’t you?” Royal supplied, and Simon laughed.

“Yeah, okay. I told them my birthday landed right in the middle of the trip, and if they wanted to let my boyfriend come with us, I wouldn’t demand a party.”

“Well played,” Jackson commended him, saluting with his fork. “Older and wiser.”

Simon sighed in a very put-upon way and nodded. “Yep. My early birthday present to myself is extra gray hairs.” He smoothed the hair around his temples with the tips of his fingers. “I don’t feel any older, but I’m starting to look it.”

“Each time you get more silver, you get sexier,” Dalton purred, making Simon’s cheeks bright again.

Simon continued to chat about his excitement for the trip, completely missing the moment Dalton let his smile fall. It was subtle and masked behind Dalton shoving more food into his mouth, but I saw it.

Simon talking about his age hurt Dalton. It made him scared.

I kept it to myself, concentrating on my breakfast and listening as the table passed around conversation of various plans for the week ahead. Most of the activities I understood, but some I didn't, and I made a mental note to ask about them later.

"Do we know when Montana is coming home?" I asked when there was a break between topics.

"Few days," Baha answered, taking a chunk out of a piece of toast. "Probably about four."

"He's been gone a long time." I chopped a thick piece of egg in half, not truly committed to eating it. "Longer than usual."

"He likes to stay out west," Royal said. "He camps and kinda clears his head."

I didn't understand why he couldn't do that here, but I kept it to myself. Hunting outside cleared my head every morning, and I honestly couldn't think of a more comfortable place than home.

"Some people need to have more time alone than others," Blaise whispered from beside me, somehow reading my thoughts.

"We used to be alone all the time," I told him. "If we were between mates and didn't have chicks to raise, we were alone. It was the worst part."

"For you," Blaise countered. "Everyone's different. Even tyrannosaurs."

Imagining Montana wandering alone in the wilderness didn't sound comforting to me. It sounded lonely, but it wasn't my place to say.

I just missed him and wanted him to be home.

"Oh, crap, I gotta get going." Simon was looking at his watch, lifting up from his seat with his plate in hand. There was still some food on it and half a piece of toast.

"Did you get enough to eat?" I glanced at his leftovers, which seemed ample. "Do you want me to make you a to-go



plate?”

“I’m full, thank you, Henry.” His dimple peeked out as he smirked. “I promise I ate enough.”

I didn’t believe him and let him know with a grunt.

Simon moved past my discomfort and turned his attention elsewhere.

“Blaise, you want to catch a ride to the museum with me?”

“Yep.” Blaise popped up, giving my shoulder a gentle squeeze. Royal gathered his plate and Simon’s, Dalton following Simon to the kitchen to give him a kiss before he left. Royal kissed Blaise as he zipped up his hoodie, and the two humans hustled out of the kitchen trying to find Simon’s car keys.

“Henry, you have an hour before we start lessons,” Baha warned as I put my empty plate in the dishwasher. “Stop trying to make Simon something to go. He said he’s full.”

“There was still a lot of food on his plate.”

“He’s fine. Leave him alone.”

Simon reappeared in the kitchen, moving a dish towel out of the way to reveal his keys. He spun them on his finger and made a triumphant noise.

Baha yelled at me as I held out a muffin wrapped in foil, but Simon took it anyway and thanked me.

I escaped the kitchen before Baha could lecture me and migrated upstairs to my room to kill an hour before my lessons began. Sometimes I got lucky, and Baha got distracted by Jackson, and I got some bonus time before I had to sit still and memorize pieces of land or how taxes worked.

Jackson also put him in much, much better moods if he distracted him for a little while. I hoped for the best.

My room wasn’t covered with colorful posters like Dalton’s or crowded with collectibles like Royal’s, but it had been my little piece of personal paradise for over a year. Montana had set me up with a simple bed, a closet with

clothing, a television for me to watch movies and educational programs, and a little potted plant. The pot was a russet-red clay, unremarkable other than the rich, wet soil inside of it. He had given it to me the second week I was there and gave me the responsibility of caring for it.

It was the first time I had any obligations as a human, the first time I was charged with caring for another living thing since the last batch of chicks I fathered millions of years previous. The small universe of my room was my own little microcosm, my everything, and I took my plant fatherhood very seriously.

One of my first English words was “monstera,” so this little thing became my anchor. It was my routine, something I could always count on every morning.

A year later, my plant was tall and proud, wide spade leaves emerald green and lush. The basic pot had been upgraded to a white ceramic throne, and the air around it smelled like life and earth. Their new sibling, a very fussy alocasia, had taken on a new leaf.

I had high hopes for it.

Said fussy thing was in need of some water as I tested the soil, and I moved it closer to the window before promising to be back with a refilled water bottle.

On my way to the bathroom, I saw Dalton had his door open and music playing. A lot of Dalton’s music sounded upbeat and exciting, like each song should be about smashing things with bats made of rainbows and spikes. But if you listened to the lyrics, they weren’t about that at all.

Well, sometimes they weren’t.

Sometimes they were about freedom and expression, ripping things down that hurt people and rising up from the ashes. That morning, after Simon talked about his silver hair and upcoming birthday, Dalton was listening to songs about heartache and loneliness.

About loss.

Peeking into his room, his posture reflected the somber vocals pouring from his speakers. His back was slumped, elbows on his knees, staring blankly ahead out the window with an unlit cigarette hanging between his lips.

“I thought you quit smoking?” I asked from the open door, unsure if I should approach or not.

“I did.” He plucked it from his lips and examined it. “Sometimes I just miss how it feels. It’s kinda like when you have a bug bite, and it itches a little bit, but you know scratching it will make it worse. So instead you scratch around it.”

“Is the itch nicotine or Simon’s birthday?”

“Nothing gets past you,” he teased, attempting a smirk that faded quickly. “I’ll be fine, man. I don’t wanna bring you down before you have to sit in a room with Baha for a few hours.”

“Are you worried?” I sat beside him on his bed, both of us watching the cigarette like it was about to do something amazing.

“I don’t think ‘worried’ is the right word.” Dalton rotated the cigarette in his fingers, his icy-blue eyes softening as he exhaled. “I feel helpless and kinda selfish.”

I wasn’t sure what I had expected him to say, not fully, but that wasn’t even on my radar.

“Selfish? Why?”

Dalton’s brows lowered, the muscles in his jaw bunching as he chewed on his thought.

“Simon is mortal.” He spoke in a tone so soft, he barely sounded like his voice. “He’s not like us. You know that. He’ll constantly change as he gets older. His ability to do everything will slowly stop. Eventually, it’ll be me, as I am right now, and a very sexy old man who I’ll have to watch fade away. I know that. I know what I signed up for. I’ll be with him until his dying breath. I’m not going anywhere.”

The room hung in a suspended silence, the gravity of it all so heavy we felt crystalized. Dalton's throat clicked as he swallowed, icy eyes melting with grief of what was to come.

"I should focus on what a wonderful, long life we'll have together, but right now, I'm so scared of what my life beyond Simon will look like." He dashed his cheek with his palm. "I don't think I'm going to survive it. I think losing him will kill me, and I'm scared, and that makes me feel like a super asshole."

"I don't think that makes you a super asshole," I told him. "I think that just means you love him very much."

Dalton swallowed again, wiping the tip of his nose with his knuckles.

"I don't want to lose him, Henry. Montana barely made it out alive, and he's a badass T.rex. I'm scared, man. Like my guts feel like rocks when I think about it."

I leaned my shoulder against his, my heart hurting for him.

There was only a year and a few weeks separating the current version of myself and the one they found crawling out of a sixty-five-million-year nap. I didn't know what all the continents were named, I was still confused about what taxes were for, and I didn't understand why everyone thought being naked was weird. Most of the time, I was in a state of curious confusion, hoping that the next day was a little clearer.

But I knew how I felt. I understood how desperately I wanted to feel something scary like Dalton did.

"There's nothing wrong with being afraid. It's what keeps us alive, keeps us motivated," I told him. "I think all you can do is keep loving him and keep being afraid. You can do both."

"That's not comforting," Dalton managed around a watery laugh. "You're supposed to be optimistic and tell me everything's going to be okay and shit."

"Would that make you feel better?" I asked, and he shook his head.

“No.” Dalton leaned against me and sniffed back more tears. “But I think I get what you’re saying.”

Outside of Dalton’s window, a black grackle was puffing his feathers out and screaming for attention. It seemed so much easier to do that than manage the courting process as a human.

“Human emotions are heavy,” I said absently. “Like rocks sitting in your body that tumble around depending on what’s going on.”

“It’s not that bad once you get used to them. Sometimes it’s awesome.” He snorted some leakage from his nose back into his face and wiped his eyes again. “Sometimes you cry a lot because your boyfriend is perfect and you love him too much.”

“When did you know you loved him? Like the scary love?” I asked, still watching the grackle outside prancing around. I felt distant embarrassment for him when the female bird left him standing there, ego deflated.

“When he broke into that dinosaur park with me,” Dalton answered without hesitation. “You should have seen his panicked, cute face when that security guard rounded the corner. It was the best thing in the world. He did that for me. He did crime for me. I fell in love so hard, Henry.” His head rested on my shoulder as he swooned with the memory. “I felt like my heart was going to just float out of my chest.”

“Had you felt that before? That...floaty feeling...before Simon?”

“Nah, not in the same way.” Dalton shrugged, his shoulder bumping my arm. “I had some fun boyfriends, people I really cared about at times, but nothing like Simon. Why?” He sat up, cocking one eyebrow. His blue eyes were a little puffy from the tears, but he still retained his mischievous air. “You crushing on someone?”

“Am I crushing someone?”

“Are you attracted to someone?” he corrected. “Like in a ‘I wanna have the sexy times with you’ kinda way. Or is it more

like ‘I don’t wanna smash genitals together, but I wanna be around you’ kinda way?’”

“I do not want to smash my genitals. Wait, is that one of those weird internet things Royal warned me about?” I winced, feeling that uncomfortable nausea threatening. “I don’t want to accidentally see something weird again.”

Dalton snort-laughed. “I love you, Henry.”

It was worth repeating. “I don’t want that.”

“Okay, noted. What if it was not smashing and whatever it is you’re into? Do you want to have fun, not-smashy intimacy with said person or persons?”

I felt a soft warmth travel up my neck at the thought. The small little nudge of embarrassment wasn’t from the notion so much as it was speaking it out loud. Somehow that action made it seem more real, less fleeting and impossible.

My attraction to Montana had been a secret I kept for myself, clumsy with how to manage it beyond thoughts and longing.

“Yeah.” I coughed, the word stuck in the tangle of feelings that followed it up my chest.

Dalton grinned with all his teeth, his nose scrunching.

“You wanna bone Montana, don’t you?”

“Really bad,” I said honestly, and Dalton fell off the bed laughing. For a second, I thought I misunderstood the slang and agreed to something outlandish. “Bone means sex, right?”

This made Dalton wheeze. “Oh my God, you’re my favorite person!”

“You’re making me feel a little like an ass.”

“You just said it so confidently!” Dalton wiped at his cheeks and gave my knee a pat. “I think you just have some puppy love for him, my man. I get it—I mean, he’s not my type. I like them nerdy and skinny. But you like the beefcakes. That’s fine. No shame.”

“It’s not just the sex-boning,” I said, which sent him into some hissing giggles. “But it’s like you said earlier, I want to be around him. He makes me feel...safe. Grounded. Is that normal?”

“Yeah, man. It’s one of the best feelings, and kinda rare for humans. But you know he had a husband for a long time,” he warned gently, the laughter easing out of his voice. “He’s a hard nut to crack, Henry. Dude’s got his walls up super high.”

“I know.” I looked back outside to see how the little lonely grackle was doing. He had flown away, and I missed him. “I don’t mind waiting outside the walls until he wants me to see inside. I just want to be beside him.”

“Aww. Damn, you have it bad for our dino daddy, don’t you?” He folded his hands over my knee and leaned his chin over them. “Have you thought about telling him?”

“He always calls us a family and says we’re brothers,” I admitted. “I don’t think he views me as a prospective mate.”

“Let’s go ahead and drop the ‘mate’ thing. You’re thinking like a burly, meat-eating dinosaur and not a burly, meat-eating dude. Start working on using ‘boyfriend.’ Secondly, perspectives can be changed. He thinks of you like a brother and someone to take care of right now, but you can convince him that you’re more boyfriend material, and I know how to do that.”

Hope fluttered in my chest like a warm little baby bird.

“How?”

Dalton’s entire being lit up like a Christmas tree, bursting with brilliant colors of excitement.

“With a grand romantic gesture, my good man! You gotta show him that you care, that you want to sweep him off his feet with romance.” He sat up on his knees and took my shoulders with both hands, meeting my gaze with a pink-stained glacier intensity. “You gotta woo the pants off this serious, sad, beefcake dino daddy and make him feel soft, gooey feelings for you.”

That sounded like everything I wanted. The baby bird in my chest was now bouncing off my ribs and singing.

“How?”

“Here’s what you need to do: fancy dinner—something really delicious, with candles and wine. Then, and this is crucial, Henry. Are you listening?” Dalton paused and waited for me to nod. “You need to serenade him with music. Real romantic shit, too. The kind of music that’ll just make his knees weak and fall into your arms.”

“That sounds perfect,” I agreed fervently, a stab of doubt halting my fluttering bird. “Dalton, I don’t know any romantic music.”

“I got you, buddy.” He squeezed my shoulders and settled his face into a serious stare of determination. “I’ll make you the perfect mix.”

Relief bloomed over me, and I let myself get excited again.

“Thanks, Dalton.”

“What are brothers for, right?” We both got to our feet, and he gathered me up into a hug, holding on tight. “Thanks for talking to me, Henry. You’re a sweet guy. Talk to Montana and be as sweet as you are to us, and he’ll see how great you are. He’s gotta.”

I squeezed him in the hug, letting go when he eased back. “Thanks for helping me too. You really think he’ll like the dinner and music?”

He grinned, showing all his teeth. “He’ll be speechless, I promise.”



# CHAPTER THREE

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## HENRY

I snuck in brief naps when Baha's back was turned, which was a dangerous game.

At any point if he turned around and caught me with my eyes shut, there would be hell to pay. I learned this lesson the hard way when I put my head down during math, and he had me recite the times tables on one leg. If I set my other leg down or got an answer wrong, I had to start over.

It was brutal, but I was a whiz at anything times nine.

I understood that it was very important to know the countries of the world and the cultures attached to each little manmade border, but it was like trying to hold water in your cupped hands for an hour at a time. Some info leaked out, some stayed, some never made it in, and the entire time, all you wanted to do was anything else. Only you couldn't because your teacher would make you do jumping jacks and list out all the countries sharing a border with China.

"Henry."

My attention snapped to him, and for a second, I thought my eyes had been shut.

He narrowed his brown eyes at me, and I swallowed. I knew that look. He had asked me a question, and I was in my own head, which he equated to ignoring him. All manner of punishments were on the backlog for ignoring him when he was teaching, most of which involved manual labor or being confined to the meeting room with only a map to study.

Baha set the dry-erase marker down and tugged down a map of the world with only the borders drawn, no helpful names listed. I hated that damn map. It got me in more trouble than algebra.

“C’mere.” He motioned with two fingers for me to join him over by the map, and I got a sinking feeling I was walking into a trap. Baha waited until I was standing in front of the map before he planted his finger against the plastic. The thing dented under his jab, right in the middle of a cluster of small countries near Africa. It was a trap. A big damn trap.

Baha got annoyed when I didn’t know the Americas or Europe, but he got extra annoyed if I failed at one of the countries near the one he was from. He took it as a personal offense for some reason and got extra creative with how he was going to cement it into my brain. I knew where Egypt was, and this wasn’t far from it.

“Which country is this?” he asked in his dry, pre-aggravated tone. “We were just discussing it.”

I leaned forward and studied where his finger was, my mind flipping through names I’d been forced to clean the bathroom floor for getting wrong in the past. I could already smell the bleach and wasted afternoon as he tapped it again.

“If you stop daydreaming, you could—”

“Syria.”

It was a guess, but I knew it wasn’t Iran or Jordan because they were both the reason I was so well acquainted with scrubbing tiles.

I knew I got it right because Baha seemed more annoyed than if I got it wrong.

“Lucky guess,” he growled.

“No, I know it because you’re a good teacher,” I lied quickly. “You taught me that.”

“Alright, smartass.” He reached up, grabbing a different pull-down map that squeaked like a dying rat before it clicked

into place. This time instead of a sprawling Earth rolled out sideways, it was a large, unlabeled map of the United States.

Baha tapped his finger on one of the northern states near the teardrop-shaped Great Lake.

“What state is this?”

“We weren’t talking about the states today!”

“Pop fucking quiz,” he answered dryly. “What state is this?”

“That’s not fair, Baha,” I protested. “We talked about those last week.”

“Right, so you should remember the states around this lake.” He tapped again. “This one. What is it?”

“Dammit.” I glared at the map, summoning week-old information and canceling out the obvious ones. A couple names floated to the top of my memory, and I whittled it down to three possibilities I was about fifty percent sure of. I took my shot and said it with all the confidence of a doomed rabbit confronting a fox.

“Michigan?”

Baha inhaled through his nose.

I was wrong.

“Illinois,” he said, moving his finger over one state. “This one is Michigan.”

“Fuck,” I growled, rubbing my eyes with my palms.

“Push-ups. Each one name a state. Go in alphabetical order.” He pointed to the floor. “Get it wrong and you start over.”

“You’re way more mad about Michigan than I thought you’d be.”

“Illinois, Henry,” he corrected, spitting some curses in Arabic afterward that I knew weren’t nice. “Start. Now.”

I actually liked doing push-ups, so it wasn’t so bad, but I didn’t want to be doing them for hours while I stumbled

through the states. The carpet was coarse against my palms as I braced myself, beginning my task with casual ease.

“Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California—”

“Start over.”

“Did I miss one?” I paused, looking up at him.

“Yes. Start over.”

“Which one?”

“Henry,” he said through his teeth and I started over.

“Alabama, Alaska, Arizona...Oh, Arkansas. California, Colorado, Florida—”

Two hundred and something pounds of solid, mean muscle sat on my back like I was a park bench, almost causing me to crash into the carpet when I dipped down.

“Start over,” Baha said from my back.

“Jesus Christ,” I ground out, dipping down much slower. “Alabama,” I grunted. “Alaska.” Another grunt. “Arizona. Oh my God. Ca—Arkansas. Then California, Colorado—”

My shoulders started to feel tight, my palms biting into the carpet stung a bit, and I was sure my spine would never be the same again. I heard someone walk over to the door of the classroom, which was also a meeting room located in the center of the house. I had been too distracted by the extreme weight on my back to have heard the footfalls, but there was no mistaking who it was the moment he spoke.

“Is this class or something else?” Montana asked, his voice causing me to falter for a second.

“Montana.” I wobbled, craning my head to see around Baha’s leg.

“Start over,” Baha answered.

“Not the state!”

“You skipped Connecticut.”

“What exactly did he do?” Montana asked, the only person in the room with some sympathy for me.

I managed to cough out, “I didn’t know where Mi— Illinois was.”

Baha gave me a less pissed-off-sounding grunt, which meant I was making progress.

Montana, my white knight, went to battle for me. “Seems harsh.”

“I gotta be harsh with tyrannosaurs,” Baha snorted. “They’re stubborn.”

There was a beat of silence, no doubt a look exchanged between the T.rex and Spinosaurus that I would have loved to have seen, but I was stuck staring at patterned carpet and Baha’s feet.

I was proud that I didn’t sound as strained as I felt when I piped in, “I needed to do PT anyway. Murdering two birds with a rock.”

“Killing two birds with one stone,” Baha corrected.

“Whatever. You’re really heavy, and I’m trying to remember what comes after Connecticut.”

“We need this room later today. We’ve got company coming,” Montana finally drawled wryly.

“He’ll get it by then.”

Baha gave my ribs a hard pat, and I growled out the word, “Connecticut.”

“Please don’t break Henry’s back. I can’t save you from Blaise,” Montana warned. “I’ve seen him throw a stiletto with deadly accuracy.”

“Noted,” Baha responded with a tone as flat as the landscape of Texas.

I heard Montana leave the door, catching just a brief glimpse of him as he turned a corner. I hadn’t seen him in weeks, and my recent conversation with Dalton stuck to the walls of my skull like glue. I had so much to do, and I had a large Spinosaurus sitting on my back demanding state names.

I knew better than to argue, protest or plead for mercy. If I dared to try either of those tactics, I'd only get a bored, "Start over," and nothing more. So I continued to lift Baha's body while fighting gravity, doing my best to summon all my knowledge of states in order to make the madness stop.

By the time I was successful, something of an eternity later after restarting a few more times, I collapsed onto the ground as Baha lifted his ass from my back.

"You going to be ready for a pop quiz next time?" he asked from above me, my arms throbbing as I lay flat on the carpet.

"Yep."

"Good." Baha bent and took my hand, hefting me to my feet. He brushed some carpet fuzz from my shirt. "Study the map and stop daydreaming in class. You're too smart for that shit, Henry."

I nodded, and he motioned for me to go, the permission I needed to escape. I wasn't expecting Montana to be home without warning, so my plan felt a little manic and rushed as I climbed the stairs. Montana's bedroom door was shut, the shower running distantly from his bathroom. I pivoted, going to Dalton's room, which was thankfully open.

He was doing sit-ups while watching one of the *Jurassic Park* movies, laughing as someone was being chased by a heard of compys.

"Hey, Dalton? Did you finish making the romance mix?"

"You bet jur-ass I did. I got so excited about it, I made it first thing." He paused his workout and the movie, spinning around to look at me. "Man, your arms looks great today."

"They hurt."

"Yeah. Class with Baha sucks." He sprang to his feet and snagged a boxy-looking radio from his dresser, a handle unfolding from the top. "There's a CD I made already in the player. Whenever you're ready to go, just push play and let the romance sweep you off your feet."

I took the machine, noting the button he mentioned was to start the music.

“Thanks, Dalton.”

“Anytime, my man.” He gave my arm a slap, then winced when I did. “Right, sorry.”

Dalton got back to his movie and sit-ups, and I got to work preparing. The music was set, which was one worry down, but I still needed something delicious to eat and fancy candles. I wasn't sure what constituted as “fancy” when it came to candles, but I knew that Blaise had a few he considered to be really nice. They smelled like various oils and wood, and a few of them sounded like a crackling fire when he burned them.

If a candle burning like a crackling fire wasn't fancy, I wasn't sure what was.

Royal was on his computer when I knocked on their open bedroom door, and he pulled his headphones down.

“Hey, man.”

“Can I borrow Blaise's wooden candles?”

“Uh, sure.” He grabbed a few off a table and brought them over. “You been working out? Your arms look stacked.”

“I didn't know where Michigan was.”

“Bummer. Don't burn those down too far. Those are his fancy ones.”

*Ah-ha.* I was right.

“I won't. Thanks, Royal.” I tucked the radio under my arm and balanced the candles with the other, then made my way downstairs. The early afternoon sun made the kitchen and dining rooms bright, the sliding glass door open to let the cool breeze drift through the house. Jackson had finished mowing the lawn outside, the crisp smell of cut grass sharp and wonderful. He stood on the porch drinking some water, and I got busy setting everything up.



The candles were placed on the steps, the radio parked at the very bottom in the freshly cut grass. I rearranged the candles a few times, then finally settled on the final arrangement of two candles per step, one on either side.

“Doing a seance?” Jackson asked from the top of the steps, studying my placements.

“Like with ghosts?”

“Or demons. I dunno what you’re into.”

“No.” I shook my head. “Neither.”

“Thank God.” He dug around in his pocket and tossed me a lighter. “Don’t burn the house down or Baha will blame me.”

I caught it and nodded. “I won’t.”

He touched the brim of his cowboy hat and went inside after kicking off his grass-covered boots and left me to my work.

I had the candles burning (safely) and the radio placed where I could get to it when the time came. Now all that was left was something to eat, and I knew just what to grab.

The sun warmed my skin as I peeled off my clothing and hung them on the railing, stretching into my Albertosaurus form with practiced ease. My arm muscles twisted and reshaped, burning just a little from the previous strain. I breathed in the false, perfumey smells of Blaise’s fancy candles, the bright, sharp scents of prey hiding in the rich forest, and the violent delight of the fresh-cut grass.

I stretched my jaw and stalked to the forest to hunt for the perfect meal to let Montana know how I felt.

It was time for my grand gesture, to put everything out there for him, and to hopefully show him how good of a boyfriend-mate I could be.

It would be the first of many failures.

# CHAPTER FOUR

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## MONTANA

There was nothing like a hot shower at home after a long trip.

My time in Montana had been an eventful one, with new contacts, new leads, and very old nostalgia, but I was happy to be home for a little while. Depending on what Ruben had in store for us when he arrived, my goal was to chase down some info leading into Mexico by the end of the month, which meant I needed to start planning immediately.

I had meant to shower much faster than I did, but got lost in the hot water for a little while. I shaved, pushed my hair back from my face, and made a mental note to get it trimmed before the next trip, then got dressed. When I left my room, Royal and Dalton were heading up the stairs with snacks and paused in mid-conversation about the legitimacy of robots being able to learn to love.

“Hey!” Royal grinned at me, abandoning the conversation. “When did you get home?”

“Daddy!” Dalton sang. “We missed you! Want some veggie nachos? Royal and I were going to marathon all the really terrible Batman movies from the ’90s again.”

“Don’t call me that, and no. We don’t have time for the Bat-Nipple marathon today. Ruben is on his way here with Yulong and Lance, and they apparently have some information to go over with us.”

“What information?” Royal asked.

“Ruben was being cagey about the details, so we need to be ready for anything. Where’s Simon and Blaise?”

“Work,” Dalton said around a bite of veggie nachos. “Just the dino darlings plus the tall pterosaur today.”

“Alright. When they arrive, meet in the conference room. I don’t want to delay whatever information he’s withholding. Clear?”

Royal gave a lazy salute, and Dalton agreed around more food in his mouth. I left them to their movies and nachos for the time being, migrating downstairs to find the rest of the household. I could hear Baha and Jackson speaking in the kitchen, their conversation shifting into one of their normal arguments.

I made a detour to grab the mail by the front door, but their voices carried as I gave them a bit more time to settle the score.

“I’m not saying that,” Jackson added casually. “I’m just commenting that you often like me more when I smell a little like dirt from what I’ve noticed.”

“There’s a big difference from you smelling like hay and smelling like sweat and mud. Or grass in this case. Hay smells nice.” Baha made a loud sniffing noise. “Pungent.”

“Everyone likes fresh-cut grass. You’re just being prickly because you wanna pick a fight.”

“If I wanted to pick a fight, you’d know it.”

Their words quieted as I flipped through the flyers for discounted pizza and oil changes, and I took that as my cue that the fire had died down. The stack of envelopes with bills or paperwork was sorted into a pile, while the junk traveled with me to the kitchen to be tossed in the recycling. Rounding the corner into the kitchen, I realized the mistake I had made in assuming their silence meant the heat had died down.

It had been quite the opposite.

Baha and Jackson were tangled up in each other in a make out session that bordered on aggressive against the kitchen

sink.

I cleared my throat to snap them from their teenage-level groping, slightly amused they both had the grace to look a little embarrassed.

Baha wiped his mouth with his wrist and fixed his shirt. “Any update on Ruben’s ETA?”

“Nothing yet.” I tossed the junk mail. “I told Dalton and Royal not to get too invested in their movie marathon. I want to be ready in the conference room as soon as they arrive. Have you seen Henry?”

Baha shook his head. “Not since class ended.”

“He’s outside,” Jackson supplied, a lazy smirk still on his face. “I think he went hunting.”

“Damn. Alright. I’ll see if I can find him.” I glanced at the clock. “I don’t like us out hunting midday.”

“He knows better,” Baha mumbled, but his previous kissing session had drained all the bite from him. “He can’t be far.”

I left Baha and Jackson to their own devices in the kitchen and made my way outside. Henry’s clothing was slung over the railing, swaying in the breeze that had lost all of its early spring bite. It was a very comfortable day for a hunt, and I could see why Henry had been tempted to enjoy the weather in his tyrannosaur form. Unfortunately, lovely weather for us was also prime outdoor weather for humans roaming the wilderness. I knew for a fact our neighbors to the east had four-wheelers and grandkids, and I didn’t want to try and explain to some tweens why a dinosaur was stomping around in the woods.

Hunting on a nice day I could understand. What truly puzzled me was the scented candles trailing down the steps of the porch. I blew each of them out on my way down, not loving the idea of unattended flames left on a wooden staircase, and walked into the yard to look for Henry. I sighed at Dalton’s boombox left in the grass and scanned the tree line for any large forms lumbering around nearby.

I gave a sharp whistle, cupping my hands near my mouth before calling his name.

A flock of birds drifted up from the forest, the tops of the trees shivering when Henry's large body pushed against them. He wasn't far, which meant I knew he could hear my call or at least smell I was standing outside. After another whistle and a shout of his name, Henry emerged from the woods with his mouth full.

His Albertosaurus form was half the size of my T.rex in mass, his body a lean powerhouse of speed. Emerald feathers puffed out around his neck like a lion's mane, but trailed off into pebbly skin of dark brown and black.

It was damn impressive he was able to snag a buck that big this time of year, and I hoped silently he didn't have to venture too far from our property to hunt it. Large antlers hung prone from his maw, which was slick with blood, and the fawn fur was torn where his teeth had ripped through it. Henry hadn't been eating the deer, though; that much was clear. Too much of it was still intact as he carried it across the yard.

I kept waiting for him to drop it and start eating, but in a very puzzling twist, he held the dead thing in his mouth all the way to the backyard.

"Henry, you can't eat that this close to the house," I called to him as he got closer. "It'll start to reek."

He paused, seeming unsure for a moment, turning his massive head back to the tree line before swinging it back my direction. For a few seconds, he seemed lost on how to handle the situation. In a move similar to a timid puppy showing off a new toy, he dropped the deer bodily into the grass, then nudged it my direction with his nose.

I read the gesture for what it was and exhaled.

"You don't need to bring us food, Henry. We've been over this. We eat together as humans and hunt on our own, remember?" I nodded to the deer. "Royal can't eat that, and the humans get sick when they see fresh kills."

Henry huffed through his nostrils and nudged it again, rolling it like a wet ball of meat my direction.

“No, thank you.”

Henry stepped over the deer and moved closer, seeming to abandon the deer idea, and continued to confuse me by angling his body over the battery-powered radio sitting in the grass.

“Henry, I need you to take that deer back to the forest. We have company coming...what are you doing?” I stared at the massive Albertosaurus dipping his body down over the boombox and carefully swiping at it with his small, clawed forelimb. It was quite possibly the weirdest damn thing I’d never seen, and considering the absolute insanity that was Dalton on a good day, that was a damn high bar to reach.

Henry, in his full, deadly tyrannosaur form, used his small arm to slap the play button at the top of the radio to summon music.

Before I could clearly wrap my mind around what chain of events led me to this moment of my life, an Albertosaurus was watching me very expectantly while “Cotton Eye Joe” blasted from a boombox’s speakers.

He even swayed a little, like maybe he was trying to dance.

*What the hell is my life?*

“Montana,” Baha yelled from the back door, openly annoyed with the music choice, volume, and situation. “They’re here.”

I gave him a wave that I heard him and killed the music with a quick stab to the radio with my finger. Henry stopped dancing, his big head tilting to one side.

“Take the deer back to the forest, shift down, clean up, and come inside. We have company, and it’s important.” I watched his golden eyes widen. “Do you understand me?”

His bloody jaws opened and closed, nose flexing with a deep breath.

“Good. Hurry, please,” I said, trying to stay even-toned. My head was starting to hurt, and I had so much day left.

Henry watched me walk up the stairs, but got to work gathering up the deer when I gave him a quick look. Whatever the hell had gotten into him had to wait, and I'd deal with it later.

Back inside, the house was erupting into noises of joy as Yu was welcomed home. It had been a few months since the last time he was home, having spent most of his time these days up in Canada with his new boyfriend, Lance. The two of them had met during the team's last big fossil hunt, reconnecting in China after nearly a hundred years apart.

Their story was as unique and charming as Yu, my oldest friend and fellow tyrannosaur—a Yutyranus. I couldn't help but smirk as his stony-gray eyes landed on me, and I pulled him into a hug like I had a million times.

"Welcome home, Yu." I gave his back a friendly clap and got one in return.

"Likewise," he rebutted. "I know you just got in yourself."

"I was only gone a few weeks. You've been gone a few months."

"We were busy." Yu tossed his arm around his boyfriend, a shorter man with auburn hair and bright amber eyes. It was rare for any of us shifters to find mates, let alone other shifters like ourselves, but Lance was just prickly and stubborn enough to weasel his way into Yu's heart. The pairing of a Yutyranus and a Troodon was weird and beautiful, which fit them perfectly.

It had been the very first time the rest of the team had seen Lance, and they were a mix of warm smiles, calm smirks, and unimpressed stares.

Yu presented his family to his boyfriend.

"Lance, you remember Montana. This is Dalton, Royal, Baha, and Jackson. Everyone, this is Lance."

Lance fiddled with his bow tie while knocking some confidence from his throat.



“H-Hello.” He gave a small wave. “I’ve heard quite a bit about you all. It’s wonderful to meet you finally.”

“So, you’re the cutie-patootie that’s been hoarding all of Yu’s time, huh?” Dalton looked Lance up and down. “Love the threads, daddy-o.”

“I...can’t tell if you’re making fun of me.” Lance’s eyes narrowed into slits.

“Nah, man. You’re adorable as hell. Yu said you were a bite-size snack rocking 1920s fashion, so I was trying to, you know, match the lingo.”

Lance’s face warped into a wince of agony, his attention moving to Yu.

“I still can’t tell if he’s making fun of me.”

“He’s not,” Baha grumbled. “He’s just an idiot.”

“Good to meet you, Lance.” Royal came to the rescue. “We’re happy you’re here, even if you do kidnap Yu for months at a time.”

“Where’s Henry?” Yu asked, and I angled my head to the back yard.

“He’ll be in soon. Finishing up a meal.”

“Bit late in the day for that.” He echoed my thoughts, and I nodded in agreement.

“Had some backslide today, I guess.”

“And here I thought you ran a tight ship,” Ruben jabbed, coming into the conversation from the front door, walking in just in time to bring the mood from joyous to mildly uncomfortable. Unlike Lance, Ruben had the pleasure of having a rowdy and painful run-in with Royal and Dalton, all parties leaving with injuries in a prehistoric fashion. Royal had stabbed Ruben with his horn and came home with toothmarks, Dalton faring about the same.

Both of my boys had scowls set on their faces, Dalton’s curling into a snarl when Ruben approached.

“Now, now, little raptor. I come in peace.”

“First off,” Dalton spat, “there’s nothing little about me. Secondly, fuck off.”

“Not exactly thrilled to have the guy who kidnapped Henry and left scars on my back standing in the house,” Royal said to me, his eyes fixed on Ruben. “No offense, Lance. I know he’s your friend.”

“He’s my brother,” Lance correctly gently. “Like how you all are brothers. Ruben’s my family.”

Yu stepped into the diplomat role. “I know this is awkward, but we need to set all that aside for now. Trust me when I say that what we have to talk about today is worth tossing all that into the past.”

“You’re lucky Blaise isn’t here,” Royal supplied. “After that shit you pulled with pushing him into Henry’s room when he was still shifted into an Albertosaurus, he kinda hates your damn guts.”

Ruben shrugged lazily. “Henry wasn’t going to hurt him. I was just trying to scare him.” His brown eyes were flecked with honey chips, and they sparkled as they slid behind me. “Speak of the devil.”

Henry emerged from the back door, wearing only jeans and using his shirt to wipe the water from his face. He had rinsed himself clean of the deer blood after shifting down, ringlets of water slipping down the dusting of dark hair over his chest and stomach. The chill of cold water made his skin alive with goosebumps, his arms flexing as he wiped the crumpled shirt down his body.

Henry shook out his shirt and folded it onto the kitchen counter before brushing his shoulder-length chestnut hair back through his fingers. He needed to shave the dark stubble on his jaw, giving him a much grittier look than he deserved. His eyes flicked over to the group, landing like solid gold hammers on Ruben.

“I remember you,” Henry said, more surprised than anything else.

“Talking already. Impressive,” Ruben mused. “Last time I saw you, you were just growling and trying to attack cars.”

“I had good teachers,” Henry answered carefully, his gaze alert and obvious in trying to size up Ruben as a threat. From what I understood of Henry and Ruben’s first interactions, it had been a clash of titans that left Henry bloody and forced into submission. He was big for an Albertosaurus, but Ruben’s much bigger Giganotosaurus form was too much for the newly awakened shifter to handle.

“Relax, tyrannosaur. I’m not here to fight,” Ruben told him easily. “The past is in the past. We have some pressing business to discuss.”

My patience for Ruben’s shrewd communication was wearing dangerously thin, and my head still ached from the “Cotton Eye Joe” assault from earlier.

“Ruben, I’m not a fan of surprise visits with nebulous circumstances. What’s going on?”

Ruben’s smirk sank into a half scowl. “I’m not going for dramatic flair, Montana. We flew here the moment we had some concrete news.”

“News about what?” My eyes darted to Yu. “What’s he talking about?”

“Let’s go to the meeting room. Everyone should be there.” Yu inhaled and said with a rush, “It’s a lot to process.”

“There’s a meeting room down the hall,” I prompted, Baha taking the lead to usher everyone toward the room.

Beyond the kitchen and movie room, a branch of the house was dedicated to the mission of the RELIC family: reclaiming the bones of ancient creatures from black-market fossil poachers. Encased in an oval was the war room, which was made up of a stretch of table with chairs on either side where the team sat to discuss plans. Against the north side of the wall was a desk comprised of computer screens, laptops, and towers, all of which Royal had running various software programs. Simon’s desk was opposite, a workstation used for

cataloging, prepping, and identifying fossils brought in for authentication and classification.

We floated to seats while Lance got out his laptop, unfolding it and plugging it into the corresponding piece in order for the monitor to read its presence.

“As you all know,” Ruben began, rich voice filling the room without needing to shout. “The Origin family has been obtaining fossils in order to gain samples of the bone. We’ve been compiling this data with the hopes to unlock ancient DNA preserved in the rock.”

“Origin?” Jackson asked.

“That’s right.”

“What’s it stand for?” Dalton quizzed. “RELIC has a cool acronym. What’s Origin mean?”

Ruben sighed. “It’s not an acronym. We are trying to discover our origins.”

“Lame.” Dalton wrinkled his nose. “You guys could’ve gone by, like...Dinosaur Ancestry DNA Discovery Yahoos.”

“Or.” Royal sat forward. “Prehistoric Extinction Extraction Network.”

Dalton cackled and reached across Blaise to give Royal a high-five.

“Focus.” I pinned them each with a look.

“Like I was saying.” Ruben began again slowly. “We’ve been collecting data from fossil bone samples for some time. If any of you are familiar with Jack Horner’s research into pulling dinosaur DNA from fossilized bone, you know that sadly DNA does not fossilize. It breaks down quickly, and the best we can pull from bone that is millions of years old is protein. It’s unlikely we’ll ever be able to extract DNA from ancient bone.”

“So, no more carving out chunks of priceless fossils?” Baha asked. “Because that shit was getting old.”

“Well, if I may.” Lance picked up where Ruben left off. “The reason we were ‘carving out chunks,’ as you put it, wasn’t to try and recreate the plotline to clone dinosaurs and make an amusement park out of it.”

“Boo,” Dalton called out in a bored tone. “If you’re going to destroy bones, at least go full supervillain and make it interesting.”

“Evil is subjective,” Ruben said. “You saw ancient bone. We saw potential.”

“Potential for what?” I asked.

“The continuation of our species,” Lance answered, commanding the conversation as he started flipping through slides of DNA sequences, genes, and various numbered charts.

“What do you mean?” Henry spoke up for the first time, face pressed in a serious furrow. “I’ve had plenty of offspring back then. When the meteor hit, I was raising a new batch of chicks.”

“Me too,” Jackson added with a sigh. “Strong ones too.”

“That was then.” Ruben kept his gaze fixed on the screen, voice too calm. “It’s different now.”

“Let me rephrase.” Lance stepped back into the lead. “We can have children, but they don’t inherit our abilities to shift, immunity to serious illnesses, or...well, our seemingly endless lifespan.” He did his best not to look at Ruben, but his eyes betrayed him. Lance overcorrected and let his eyes float all over the place before landing back on the screen. “Our children are just regular humans, with regular lifespans.”

“Does that mean all of our offspring were like that?” Henry asked, sounding disappointed. “I always hoped at least some were like me. Maybe even went to sleep like we did.”

“It seems reasonable to assume we must have had the ability to transfer those genes at some point. You’ll also remember that before the meteor impact, we had much more control over the forms we could take. We weren’t limited to only two forms like we are now: a human form and a

prehistoric one.” Lance flipped to a slide of the Chicxulub crater, the scarred evidence of our mass extinction. “When the earth was struck by this object, it changed the planet forever, and I believe it changed us too.”

Dalton leaned over the table, eyes wide and voice in a tense whisper.

“Are you suggesting...” He licked his lips. “Aliens?”

“What?” Lance’s brows knitted. “Aliens—like little green men?”

“Yeah, man. Fucking DNA-manipulating aliens. Why are you all looking at me like I’m an asshole? It’s a legitimate question!”

“Dude, you gotta stop watching *Ancient Aliens* before bed.” Royal shook his head like a disapproving father, which I felt through my bones. I was too busy rubbing the migraine from my eyes and pressing my frustration back behind my frontal lobe.

“No,” Lance repeated carefully. “I’m not saying aliens. What I’m suggesting, based on my genetics research, because I’m a geneticist and not an astronaut, is that the cataclysmic event that affected our planet did something to us—a species that has DNA that doesn’t behave like anything else on this planet.”

After forcing my headache back and blinking my attention into focus, I asked, “If our DNA doesn’t behave like anything on this planet, why were you carving into dinosaur bones?”

“At first, I was optimistic that maybe our connection with our dinosaur roots could fix the issue of our gene transferal because I couldn’t find anything useful with human DNA.” Lance flipped to a slide which broke down our sequence next to that of a human, bird, crocodile, and even an ape. “But nothing was working. I even tried our cousins in both directions and sadly came up short. Our best chance was to try and find something prehistoric and work from there.”

A few slides were skipped, landing on a picture of the amber specimen Yu and Lance had brought back from China.

Inside the orb of fossilized sap was a baby dinosaur, mostly intact, one of the best-preserved specimens to have ever been found.

“This was our holy grail,” Ruben said, sounding less than enthusiastic. “Our last shot at finding a piece to the puzzle. Because this dinosaur was so well-preserved, we were able to successfully extract DNA from it.”

“I take it from your tone that it wasn’t the piece you were hoping for,” I said, and he agreed with a grunt.

“Lance sequenced it, spliced and diced, and it did the same crap all the others did. It failed. Nothing matched. Dead end. All that bullshit of chasing down this little thing—Lance getting kidnapped, fighting armed men in an abandoned theme park—was for nothing.”

“That sounds badass,” Royal whispered out of the side of his mouth.

“We never get the good missions,” Dalton answered back the same way.

“So, we’re back to square one then.” I crossed my arms. “Do you have any other leads? Research ideas?”

“You really think I’d haul us down here just to tell you we failed?” Ruben lifted his brows and clicked his tongue. “Montana. Please.”

“We found something,” Yu cut in, voice vibrating with excitement. “Something...really amazing.” He clicked on the trackpad. A collection of pictures showing two pieces of basketball-sized amber fragments took over the screen.

Each orb of hardened orange crystal held a warped and oddly misshapen creature inside of it, twisted in such a way that it seemed to be ripping itself in half. Feathers splayed from one clawed foot to a curled-in half-wing, the spine arching and contorting. One was frozen in a beaked scream, the other a muzzle of dagger teeth with whiskers.

I had never seen a creature like them before. It was like staring at animals that had been pieced together using parts of

several different species. Or, more specifically, it looked like one transforming into another—

It hit me all at once, as powerful and all-consuming as the rock that ended our reign millions of years prior. The impact of that small, grainy picture changed our lives forever.

The amber fossil wasn't some odd creature of evolution's spare parts lost to time. It was something so much more strange, wonderful, and impossible.

“That’s a shifter,” I blurted as my mind connected the dots, my body lifting from my seat as adrenaline shot through my veins. “That’s a shifter in amber.”



# CHAPTER FIVE

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MONTANA

“Holy shit,” Royal drew out slowly.

Dalton gasped. “Metal! Look at its face! Do we look that cool when we shift?”

“This isn’t real,” I said, my heart thumping in my chest. “This is a movie prop or something.”

“It’s real,” Ruben corrected calmly. “Let me say: *they* are real. There’s two of them.”

“Bullshit, Ruben.”

“He’s telling the truth, Montana,” Yu added gently. “They’re real. I put my life on it.”

My brain was sizzling as it tried to comprehend the gravity of what had been discovered, my temples frying while trying to calculate the overwhelming odds.

Fossilized remains of any creature was rare as it was, but to find *us*—frozen in mid-shift...

*Two* of them.

“Jesus,” I found myself muttering. “When were these found?”

“Unfortunately, these two have been floating around the black market for some time.” Yu was still gazing at the amber like he was seeing it for the first time. “They’re the most sought-after fossils in the world and deep in the black market. They go for millions.”

“According to our contact,” Ruben grumbled, sounding annoyed before the name was even mentioned, “these are known as the Dinosaur Changelings. Because of their priceless nature, they are rumored to be cursed because each new owner of these fossils is usually murdered for it.”

“Contact?” I asked, finally peeling my eyes away to catch the way Ruben’s mouth twisted. “Xiang?”

“Of course Xiang.”

“They were the ones who got us these pictures,” Yu explained.

That surprised me. “Really?”

“Don’t sound shocked,” Ruben spat. “I had to pay that little shit handsomely for these.”

“Who’s Xiang?” Royal bounced his eyes between us. “And why does it sound like they give you heartburn?”

“A shifter and fossil thief,” Yu said. “They helped Lance and me get a fossil in Shanghai.”

“Microraptor?” Jackson cocked a brow, chuckling once his suspicions were confirmed. “I know who you’re talking about. I didn’t catch their name, but I’ve had a run-in with them before. That one is a lot of sass wrapped in a slutty package and has ten thousand ways to fuck you over.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Baha growled.

“It means they got me drunk with a promise of a blowjob, then took my wallet, the fossil I was trying to sell, and hid my boots on the roof of the hotel.” Jackson leaned back in his chair and snorted. “I don’t trust them as far as I can throw them, which would be far considering how much trouble it was to get my damn boots back.”

“It doesn’t sound like this information is very reliable then,” Baha added, tossing his boyfriend a shrewd look.

“It is.” Ruben lifted his chin at the screen. “Those are recent photos taken during the recent exchange. I’ve been able to verify the information presented so far, but Xiang is keeping some details close to the chest.”

“Do we know where these are now?” I asked.

“The fossils were sold off to two different buyers.” Ruben pointed to each piece, staring at the shifter whose face looked like a screaming, beaked monster twisting into a lizard. “This one is in Chicago, sold to an eccentric artist by the name of Blanco Augustine. The other is in London, but Xiang is refusing to tell me more until I meet them there.”

Jackson clicked his tongue and gave a warning hum.

“That’s a trap, man.”

“I’m aware,” Ruben growled back. “I’m not planning on letting a microraptor get one over on me.”

“Walk it back a moment,” I managed through the wave of blood rushing to my head. “Lance, what is the likelihood that you can extract shifter DNA from these? And what exactly does that mean for us if you’re successful? Is there *any* chance that this could be anything other than one of our shifter species? I want all the details, everything you know.”

“Montana, have you ever seen anything like that before?” Ruben countered, frustration lifting his words. “What the hell else could it be?”

“My alien comment is sounding less stupid right now,” Dalton said in awe.

“No, it’s not,” Baha added.

“I’m not ruling anything out at this point.” I couldn’t peel my eyes off the fossils on the screen, the amber around them cut into angles and sharp edges. They looked like treasure, gems made from life and endless possibilities, even if they did look gruesome in mid-transformation. “The odds of these two actually being our species feels about as plausible as aliens.”

“This fucking guy,” Ruben breathed out. “You realize there are eight shifters sitting around a table right now and zero aliens here, yes?” He tossed his hands up and let them slap on the table. “I can’t believe I thought you’d be reasonable.”

“I’m processing the information, Ruben,” I said. “You can’t deny this is exceptionally implausible, and the sheer luck

that this happened is about in line with a literal miracle, like Jesus-level shit, right?”

“I know T.rex is highly favored in pop culture, Montana, but you’re hardly Jesus. And unless anyone else here is hiding a very interesting secret, the ratio of shifters to aliens *and* messiahs are still eight to zero,” he cut back dryly.

“You’re being a dick.” Henry came to my unnecessary rescue, still shirtless and a scowl set on his dark features. “If the best you can do is sit there and be a sarcastic asshole, then you can stop talking.”

“Amen,” Baha agreed with a growl.

Ruben snickered in cocky delight, the sound about as pleasant as wet socks.

“Extensive vocabulary, Henry. Very proud of you.”

“That’s enough,” I said, tossing a look at both Henry and Baha. “We’re not engaging.”

“Ruben,” Lance said with a tone of a disappointed teacher. “We were skeptical when we first saw it too. Kelly thought it was the creature from *The Thing*, remember?”

“Kelly’s a sweet idiot,” Ruben replied with a sigh, then waved it off. “Moving on. Jesus-Rex asked you for details.”

Lance sighed, “Obviously, I won’t know until we get our hands on them, but I’m very confident in my abilities to extract whatever DNA is inside.” Lance flexed his fingers and fidgeted. “If I am successful, which is very likely given the amazing preservation of this fossil, it opens up some truly amazing possibilities with passing along our shifter genes to our children.”

Dalton rubbed his hands together like a cartoon villain, cackling with fiendish delight. His pink eyebrows perked as something no doubt inappropriate raced through his mind, and he shot his hand in the air like a frantic five-year-old with a burning question.

“Mr. Lance? I have a baby question.”

“I’m not answering how babies are made,” Lance said immediately, looking extremely uncomfortable.

“I know that part. Well, I know it in theory because I’m super Team Gay—”

“Dalton,” I warned.

“But if Simon and I wanted to have a kid,” he rolled ahead to the point, “would we be able to use both of our DNA? Would that be possible or is it just mine? Can we mix them together?”

“Oh.” Lance blinked. “That’s actually a valid question.”

“I have those sometimes.”

In the pause between processing Dalton’s question and forming the response, a theater of emotions played across Lance’s freckled face. The comedy of his surprise to getting a respectful question out of the chaotic man still sitting in *Land Before Time* pajama pants melted into a steely resolve that sank into a tragedy. Heartache pressed his brows down, misery tightening around his eyes.

He took a breath, looked to Ruben, and held his gaze for a private conversation held in complete silence.

Ruben played the part of stony authority very well. It was a masterclass of portraying a brick wall glaring at a desperate animal caught in a sticky trap.

“Shifter and human DNA do not mix.” Lance inhaled slowly, broke eye contact with Ruben, and grounded himself with both palms on the table. “But.”

Dalton leaned forward. “But?”

“I didn’t want to discuss this yet because I’m still working on some final data and testing. What I’ve done so far has yielded promising results, but science is a tricky thing with lots of variables, and I’m optimistic that with strong samples and more testing—” Lance rambled, lifting his hands to flap them around as he spoke.

“We might be able to apply the gene therapy to humans.” Ruben ended the poor man’s floundering.

“What are you saying?” I asked.

“We could, in theory,” Lance tacked on the last bit quickly and held it there a moment, “give humans the ability to have the genes that allow shifting and quite possibly our unique homeostasis.”

Something changed in Dalton—a profound change in him that I had never seen before. I had known the man for years, been there when he had emerged from the earth and essentially raised him like a little brother.

Never in the decades I had known him had I ever seen him so calm.

Still.

And absolutely serious.

“Are you saying that you can make Simon and Blaise shifters?” Dalton asked, voice void of any comedic lift or snarky spark.

“Maybe.” Lance wrung his hands. “Yes. Like Ruben said, I’m still testing—but yes. I think I can.”

Dalton’s attention shot to me, his leg starting to bounce. His intense stare was like a hot knife, his shoulders set like he was ready to spring out of his seat and run to Chicago.

“What are the next steps? What do we do?”

“We plan, like any other mission,” I assured him. “We’ll strategize how we’re going to approach this. Royal, see what you can find on Blanco. We need to know his exact location, his properties in Chicago, and any intel you can find about the fossil’s last known whereabouts.”

Royal was already out of his seat the moment his name was called, migrating over to his computer and immediately getting to work.

“Montana, I want to go,” Dalton argued. “Please, if you make me stay here, I’m going to go crazy.”

“You going crazy is exactly what I’m worried about. This means a lot to all of us, but you and Royal especially are a

little too close to this. You know I love you and respect your skill sets, but you will be a liability. I can handle this on my own.”

“You shouldn’t go alone,” Baha said. “You need to take someone with you. We don’t know if this Blanco guy is dangerous.”

“I have contacts and friends in Chicago. I’ll be fine.” I stood from the table, grabbing my phone from my pocket. “I need to make calls, send out some feelers. Royal, get me a plane ticket. Baha, can you arrange the safe house to be stocked with supplies and weapons just in case?”

Dalton pushed away from the table hard enough to make the chair squeal against the floor. He didn’t look back as he left the room, his hand scrubbing down his face in silent frustration. Across the table, Yu gave me a steady look before standing to go after him, and I ignored the pang of guilt slicing through my chest.

I hated letting my crew down. I hated knowing that my decision made Dalton angry, or hurt him in some way, but I was right. This mission was too important to compromise with his unique ways of handling things, most of which involved fires or explosions.

It was better I handled it alone.

I drifted out of the war room with my phone in my hands, firing off texts and emails to the people I needed to connect with before the trip. My stomach growled, and I absently remembered I hadn’t eaten anything since I got back into town. The thought of grabbing something to eat drifted through my brain a moment, but it was lost in the flurry of what needed to be done next.

My suitcase was still on my bed, flung open just so I could grab laundry from it. I sighed, starting to exchange the clothing from it so I could repack as quickly as possible. I didn’t bother turning around at the sound of a soft knock at my door.

“Busy.”



“Montana.”

Out of all the angry or disappointed voices I had expected to hear, Henry’s was not one of them. More surprising was the seriousness of his tone, the absolute resolution with which he stood at my door.

He didn’t wait for me to invite him in, or give me a chance to dismiss him, only waited until I turned around to look at him before closing the short distance between us. The muscles in his jaw flexed, the stubble on his cheeks shifting.

If I hadn’t known Henry, I would have thought him stalking over to me shirtless with the focused stare of a prehistoric predator would have been a power move. Humans do this, bow up and pretend to be larger than life and refuse to back down to establish their dominance. It’s smoke and mirrors for the most part, mammals raising their hackles and trying to seem bigger to scare the thing trying to eat them.

Henry wasn’t acting. He wasn’t trying to seem bigger in order to intimidate me.

We stood eye to eye, my level stare bouncing off golden shields.

We were two tyrannosaurs coming to an understanding.

“I’m going with you.”

“Absolutely not,” I answered immediately, sensing it was coming. “You’re not trained.”

“I’ve been training for a year.”

“You’ve been learning how to talk and eat with utensils,” I corrected him. “That’s not the same as getting mission-ready.”

“What are the requirements?” he countered. “What do I need to prove?”

“Be an awake, functioning human for more than a year.”

Henry’s eyebrow perked. “I’ve been awake a year and three weeks.”

I didn’t appreciate how quickly he answered that, nor did I like the snark of that eyebrow.

“And have trained, honed skills.”

“You don’t know what training I’ve been doing. You’re never here.” He stepped in a breath closer. “You’ve been gone for weeks at a time, stopping by for a day or two, then leaving again. You have no idea what training I’ve been doing over the past three months.”

My lack of food and draining jet lag was allowing him to get under my skin more than I expected. The heat of his skin was too close to me, the faint, sharp scent of blood still stuck to him.

It smelled delicious, and it made my brain fuzzy and impatient. Prickling frustration crawled up my hairline and curled in my stomach, but I knew better than to back away or give any indication that he was winning.

“Every day,” he continued, a steady storm brewing, “Royal shows me how to break into encrypted emails, track threads on the dark web, and navigate through computer systems on the back end.”

“That has nothing—” I tried, my argument getting bowled over.

“Simon teaches me how to analyze fossils for authenticity, Baha drills me on combat and weaponry, and Dalton teaches me to read body language and pick locks.” He switched to Spanish. “I know how to communicate.” Then to French. “In many languages.” Then to accented Mandarin. “I practice and train more than you know.”

“If you’re trying to impress me, you’ve missed the mark,” I told him, trying to breathe around the alluring taste of deer blood, sweat, and earth all while maintaining my ground. “The people training you have had years to hone those exact skills. Decades. Some of us, over a century. If I needed backup, I’d take one of them.”

“You trust them.”

“With my life.” I studied his eyes, watched his pupils flex.

“So do I,” he whispered, sounding desperate, raw. “I trust that they’ve taught me well. I know I can do this, Montana.”

I breathed out slowly through my nose, fighting the urge to shut my eyes.

“Henry, this is too important. Any other routine mission or scouting mission, I’d take you with me, but not this one. You’re impulsive. You have a temper.”

He frowned, affronted. “I don’t have a temper.”

“You snapped at Ruben twenty minutes ago. You called him a dick.”

“He was being a dick,” he said honestly. “And I wanted to leap across the table and slap him in the mouth, but I didn’t. Baha taught me that when someone’s being a shit-headed prick, you just imagine yourself slapping them and not let them provoke you.” Henry tapped his temple. “Trained.”

“I’m too exhausted to argue with you, Henry.” I rubbed at my temple. “I said no. It’s final.”

His eyes softened, the shields lowering. Instead of fury or frustration, his face dropped into a state of vulnerability. He was wounded.

“One of my first memories,” he whispered, “is Blaise standing in front of me. I’d only been awake a few days, and I didn’t like my human form at all. Nothing smelled right—it was artificial and wrong. Ruben had me locked in some warehouse basement, and I didn’t know how to get out or what to do. I was scared, and I hadn’t been scared in millions of years.

“But then there was this small thing. This tiny human, in full drag, screaming at me like an angry little hatchling. He was sparkly and green, and I loved him right away. And I met Royal, Dalton, and Simon, and I loved them too. They took care of me, even though I pissed in their hotel room and growled at people. For a year and three weeks, all I’ve known are the men that have cared for me, mentored me, made me laugh, and kept me safe. Even Baha is nice sometimes.”

Despite my efforts, I smirked, and he came in for the haymaker.

“They’re my family too, Montana. I love them. Let me help you protect them,” Henry said. “Please, I need you to trust me.”

The tremble in his voice knocked something loose in my chest. Henry’s goddamn golden puppy dog eyes pierced through my expertly callused defense that had taken me years to cultivate and stabbed me through the heart.

I took a moment to breathe in and let my eyes fall shut for just a moment.

“You will do exactly what I say. Follow my orders to the letter, don’t cause issues, and don’t go off alone unless I say so. If you go against orders at any point, your ass comes right back home.”

When I opened my eyes, I was slapped dumb with the sight of his grin.

Henry grinned with the rakish ease of a tiger who just tackled dinner, with just as many teeth and power behind the expression. I had never seen it quite as sharp, and never that close.

“I can go?”

“You’re on probation,” I managed. “You going with me is extremely conditional. Are we clear, Henry?”

“Yes.”

“You’re going to listen to my orders?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“You’re going to stay with me at all times?”

“All times,” he echoed. “I’ll never leave your side.”

“And if you disobey—”

“My ass comes home.”

“Good.” I lifted my chin. “Go pack.”

“Thanks, Montana.” His grin widened before he stepped back, all seriousness falling off him like a shrugged-off blanket. It took me a moment to catch my breath as he left the

room, the spell of the lingering smell of the hunt and display of chest hair gone like a dispelled fog.

Standing alone with a dull headache, I suddenly felt as if I had lost a battle I hadn't realized I'd been having. Somewhere in my mind, a ghost chuckled knowingly.

*You big softy.*

# CHAPTER SIX

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HENRY

“I don’t think you understand how cold it’s going to be there.” Royal was flipping through my clothing hanging in my closet, concern wrinkling his forehead. “Early spring in Chicago is not like early spring in Texas, my man. The wind bites through the bone this time of year.”

I shoved some socks and jeans into a duffle and studied how he picked through my collection.

“I have hoodies and some sweaters.”

“Yeah. I guess if you layer up, you’ll be okay, but I think you’re going to need to buy a jacket once you’re out there.” He gave up with a sigh, passing me some of my sweaters. “Pack all these.”

“You’ve been to Chicago before?” I took what he tossed me and shoved it into the duffle.

“A few times. It’s an awesome town, but it’s crowded and massive. My first time there, I got lost trying to figure out the subway, so don’t venture off into that madness alone.” He sat on the bed and tugged my duffle over. “You really gonna pack like you’re a teenage boy? Stop it. We’re gonna fold these like you’re an adult, you handsome jackass.”

“Is Dalton okay?” I sat on the other side of my duffle, watching how Royal extracted my clothing. Each piece was given a good shake. Then he gently folded the corners into themselves, then creased the object in the middle before laying it back into the bag carefully.

Royal hummed at my question thoughtfully. “He’s a little shaken, I think. We both were.”

“You don’t seem shaken.” I grabbed one of my sweaters and mimicked what he did, my first attempt a little sloppy.

“People handle heavy news differently. I need to think it over, process it in pieces, and probably go head down, working to keep myself busy. While you and Montana are out scouting, I’m going to be up late pulling intel and trying to get a head start on anything you might need, so I don’t obsess and worry too much. Dalton feels a lot harder all at once, you know? It’s like an emotion bomb for him.”

“Is he mad that he’s not going to Chicago?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

I messed up my fold and did it again. “He mad at me?”

“Nah. Just bring him back a good punny shirt, and it’ll make his day.” He glanced at me from over the duffle. “You good?”

I tossed a folded sweater into the bag. “Worried.”

“You’ll be alright. I’m mostly worried about how Baha is going to take the news—” Royal paused as Baha’s voice rang through the house from downstairs, the volume just shy of a full yell. “Ah, there it is.”

“I thought it’d be louder.”

“It’s early. Give him time.” Royal rotated his wrist to peer at his watch, the face of it lighting up with a message. “I’m going to go call Blaise while he has some free time.”

“Are you going to tell him about the fossil?”

“Once he gets home. I don’t want to stress him out at work. Plus I need time to...figure out how to tell him. It’s a lot, you know?” He gave my shoulder a pat and stood. “Don’t wad your clothes up when you pack. I know you’re a big ol’ meat-eater, but you can be classy if you try.”

“Fuck off,” I said, continuing to fold.



“Not in front of the plant babies,” Royal teased, pretending to cover one of my monstera’s leaves like it had ears. “They’re so young.”

“My plant babies have heard way worse from you,” I said around a laugh. “So much worse.”

“That’s my job as a plant uncle. I get to teach them bad habits.” Royal tossed me a smirk on his way out, exiting my room to leave me to my organization. Baha continued to speak very loudly in a clear, aggravated tone as I tossed some boxers into the bag, wondering if I was going to have to try and avoid him until I left.

A shadow darkened my doorway out of the corner of my eye, pulling me from my inner musing about the classy way to fold socks. Ruben had his shoulder braced against the doorframe, his body in a casual lean.

“Your Spinosaurus friend has some opinions about you going to Chicago, apparently.”

I turned my attention back to the socks in my hands, folded them each into a snail spiral, and tucked them into the duffle. It seemed classy, maybe even refined.

“What do you want, Ruben?”

“Curious how it was you were able to convince Jesus-rex to bring a shifter who’s only been awake a year along for what I would argue is the most important mission of our lives. Especially when it seems like your team doesn’t back the decision. I’m guessing this is the first time they’ve taken you on any mission at all.”

“I’m curious,” I said as I snailed more socks, “how it is you’ve made it this far with that attitude without getting a busted nose.”

“You learn to make sure they know they’ll lose the fight.” Ruben pushed off the frame and strolled inside, scanning my room with passive interest. “You’re protective of your T.rex. Why is that? Montana seems like a big boy, able to handle his own fights.”

“Of course I am. This is my family.”

“Aren’t we family?” Ruben’s brows lifted, his brown eyes missing the sarcasm or biting cynicism I had been expecting to find. “I was the first person you saw when you woke up.”

I tried snailing one of my shirts, but it ended up being a clump with much less finesse than the socks. It had to be unrolled and folded again.

“You locked me in a warehouse.”

Ruben snorted a laugh, sitting on the bed where Royal had been.

“I did, yeah. You refused to shift down from your dinosaur form, and I was worried you’d eat someone.”

“Still pretty fucked up, Ruben. I was scared.”

“You were scared?” He huffed. “Mijo, you were big, pissed off, and on the rampage. I didn’t know what to expect when you crawled out of the dirt, but you put me to work. I was terrified you’d rip someone to shreds and get yourself killed.”

That wasn’t at all what I had been expecting, and it made one of my boxer snails unravel in my hands.

“Really?”

“Why would I lie?” Ruben shrugged. “What do I have to gain from that?”

I shrugged. “Why tell me any of this?”

“Because despite my ability to make people want to punch me, I also care a great deal about us—all of us. Our species is important to me, Henry, and I want to see us thrive. I want to see *you* thrive.”

“I am. I’m doing great here. I have an education, a family that loves me.”

Ruben nodded along, agreeing. “I can see that. What I don’t see is them letting you spread your wings.”

I blinked at that. “Albertosaurus doesn’t have wings. I have little arms.”

Ruben shut his eyes a moment and rubbed at the bridge of his nose.

“I don’t see them allowing you much freedom outside of the house.”

“Oh.” I felt the urge to pick at a thread coming off of a sock. “Yeah.”

“Are you happy here, Henry?” he asked me, holding my gaze when I looked his way.

“I love it here. I love my family,” I told him again.

He smiled, a weak, sad thing. “You can love people and not be happy.”

“That sounds horrible,” I admitted, feeling a pang through my chest.

“It is, and it can be hard to navigate alone.”

I rubbed at the lingering sting with my knuckles. “I am happy here. I like it here.”

Ruben pulled his wallet from his back pocket, plucking a small piece of thick paper from it. When he passed it over, I saw his name and contact information printed on one side.

“I know you don’t know me very well. We’ve had a rough start to a relationship. But if you ever feel like you’re stuck or aren’t being given the freedom you want, you have another place to go. You call me anytime.”

“You mean Canada?” I asked, and he nodded.

“Yes.”

“I don’t want to leave here, Ruben...”

“Good,” he said immediately. “I’m not saying you should leave if you’re happy. Listen, Henry.” Ruben took a breath and let it out through his nose. “I give Montana shit because he’s old like I am. We’ve been around a long time, and we’re cantankerous theropods with egos. I do respect him, and I know he’s doing his best. But if you’re ever at a point that you find yourself unhappy, you have options. Understand?”

“You give him a lot of shit,” I told him honestly. “Everything you say to him is trying to stab him.”

“He can take it. And it’s fun.” He winked. “Don’t let him think he’s untouchable, Mijo. It’s good for him.” He stood, smoothing down his shirt. “Are we okay? You and me?”

Out of fairness, I took a moment to roll his words around in my head before I gave him a nod.

“We’re good.”

He mirrored my nod, sighing as Baha boomed again downstairs.

“He always this noisy?”

“When he has an opinion about something.”

Ruben barked a laugh, and I appreciated that he caught the joke. He left without another word, and I got back to work figuring out my snail-sock situation. The plan was to try and kill as much time as possible so I didn’t have to take the brunt of Baha’s opinions, my head already threatening to hurt from the stress of the day.

Trying to wrap my mind around not only the existence of a shifter fossil—our species’s fossil—but also the weight that it carried within the slab of crystalized sap was brutal. I understood fossils pretty damn well thanks to Simon’s lessons, so the mechanics of how it happened already floored me. The likelihood that any animal would be rapidly encased in *tree sap* without wiggling free, and then left undisturbed for enough time for it to turn to a tiny rock coffin for millions of years—*millions* of years was stupid enough to try and comprehend when you’ve only been aware of time for a year and three weeks—but then *found* by hairless apes who could pluck it from the earth and go, “Oh, yep! That’s an ancient species of animal, alright,” is fucking mental.

Layering that (I just learned puns, and I like them) with the mindboggling impossibility of that little dino-nugget actually being one of us—sorry, *two* of us—almost made my nose bleed.

Not to mention what it meant for Blaise and Simon. What it meant for all of us.

Thinking about all of that, everything that entailed and all the importance it carried, made my heart feel tight in my chest. I felt hopeful and scared, and I thought of what Dalton had said about loving Simon. It wasn't the same, but it was related to it. It was family to the wonderful love Dalton let fall from his eyes when he imagined his life without his mate.

Once I knew that feeling, learned what it was, I knew what I needed to do. I knew what my purpose was for the time being.

It also helped distract me from the horrendous morning kerfuffle with Montana. If the fossil made my chest tighten with resolve and purpose, having my wooing attempt ignored had it crumpled up like a crushed piece of paper.

He hadn't even tried the deer! He looked right at it and told me to take it back to the forest. Simon told me never to send food back unless it's absolutely necessary because someone worked really hard on making it, and it was very rude. I hadn't cooked the thing, but it took me a while to catch it. That thing was fast, and I was huge as hell. Deer were agile little shits when you're way too big to be in their forest and trying not to run into teenagers on four-wheelers.

Dalton's music hadn't worked either. And the candles were already out.

What a mess. I thought I was doing so well.

Feeling a little sorry for myself, and having noticed the Baha opinions had died down, I abandoned my packing and ventured downstairs. I was mainly curious if there was still some cereal left over to munch on, but I also wanted to see Yulong and see if he wanted to go hunting later. He was a tyrannosaur from another part of the world, his feathers snowy white and stunning, and he let me hunt a little further out than Montana did.

I was halfway to the kitchen when my cereal thought bubble popped. Baha's sights set firmly on me. His brown

eyes were bright, jaw set in his familiar grind, one finger crooked in a command to follow.

The first time this set of red flags happened, I learned the hard way that running was a terrible option. Baha wasn't as fast as me, but he had enough pure spite to power his endurance until my legs gave out. By the time he caught me, I was almost to the other side of the property line, lungs on fire, and was dragged back home to clean up the broken dish I left in the sink.

It was the one and only time I had ever attempted it, and I'd never try again.

Knowing I had nowhere to flee, I followed the brewing Baha as he led me to whatever hell he was cooking.

"I told Montana it was a shit idea," he told me without looking my direction, his walk brisk. "He has Yulong, myself, or even Tweedle-dee and Tweedle-dumbass to choose from." (Royal and Dalton, in that order.) "You're not trained," he went on, flinging open a hallway door and starting to rummage through things. "You're a smartass on your best days and a flight risk on your worst."

It was *one time*.

Baha jerked something free from the abyss, shoving some Halloween decorations back into place when they tried to escape. He gave the fabric a strong shake and dusted it off.

"Pop quiz." He met my eyes, holding them hostage. "How do you get out of a chokehold?"

"Chin down, turn, throw."

He kept his eyes trained on me. "Key to reading body language when someone is lying?"

"Where they put their eyes, how many times they blink when they answer questions, position of their arms and hands, and watch for fidgeting."

"If you're stuck somewhere and need help, what do you need to say to me when I answer the phone?"

"We're out of milk."

Baha took a step closer to me, his jaw bunching. “What fucking state is Chicago in?”

My arms hurt, and I winced in remembrance.

“Illinois.”

I coughed as Baha shoved the fabric he was holding against my chest, the black cloth slippery under my fingers. It smelled like closet and a little like faded pine from old Christmas tree decorations. Upon further investigation, I realized it had sleeves, a thick, wooly lining, and a strong zipper.

“It’s cold in Illinois,” Baha said. “If you get anything on my jacket, I’ll chase you down in the woods again for sport.”

“Wait.” I had to shake my head to reorient myself. “You’re not going to lock me into the closet so I can’t go?”

“No. You’d stink up the decorations and scarves.”

“I was ready for a fight after hearing you yelling.” I couldn’t help but shrug, dumbfounded. “What changed your mind?”

Baha crossed his arms over his chest, scowl stuck in place, but his eyes softened.

“Montana told me what you said. I trust you won’t fuck it up too badly.”

I gave the jacket a shake and tried it on, the insulation warming me as much as the gesture.

“Little snug around the shoulders,” I joked.

“Fuck off,” he retorted back, his voice quieting before he added, “Watch Montana’s back, Henry. He’s been pushing himself too hard, and people get sloppy when they get tired. You understand?”

“Doesn’t he always work this much?” I whispered, matching his tone.

“He usually takes a sabbatical this time of year, but he’s worked through it.” Baha tapped his temple. “Stay sharp. Don’t trust strangers. Watch out for him.”

“I will. I promise.”

“You’d better,” Baha warned. “Finish packing. Montana wants to leave in an hour.”

“I have everything I need now.” I adjusted the jacket. “I can finish up fast.”

“Get to it then.” He lifted his chin back to the stairs. “Chop, chop. He’ll leave your ass behind if you dawdle. I’ve seen him do it.”

I turned to go, but lingered for a moment. “Hey, Baha?”

He didn’t respond, only crossed his arms and waited for me to continue.

“Will you look after my plants while I’m gone?”

His jaw bunched in a way that wasn’t the angry kind of teeth grinding; it was the one he did when Jackson said something nice.

I explained, “Water them once a week on Friday mornings. You can test the soil with your finger to make sure it’s not too dry. I put the radio on for them during the afternoon, classical music, though, because otherwise the alocasia gets stressed.”

“You play music for your fucking plants?”

“Yeah, when I don’t have anything to talk about. You’re supposed to talk to them so they don’t get lonely.”

Baha rubbed a hand down his face and nodded.

“Fine.”

“Thanks, Baha.” I retreated back to the stairs and took them two at a time. My drive to stuff my face with sugar had left me, and I was determined to snail all of my socks before we left.

It was way too hot to wear Baha’s winter jacket, but I couldn’t stand the idea of it being shoved into the duffle, so I kept it draped over my arm as I dragged my duffle downstairs an hour later. Montana was standing near the front door with the same suitcase he’d brought in less than a day before. It was



surprising how a shower and life-changing news about a shifter fossil could renew some vigor in a man.

Montana had tossed on fresh jeans and a plaid button-down, looking so painfully country I half expected him to start scooting around in a two-step. Blaise had warned me over and over that the whole good ol' boy look was a honeypot of heartache, and I hadn't really believed him until I saw Montana in cowboy boots and Wranglers. It had been a series of epiphanies igniting all at once, about four hundred of them being about my sexuality.

"I thought you told me the best thing you can do to keep a low profile is to blend in?" I waved a hand at him. "This how people in Chicago dress?"

"This is how I dress when I don't have time to do laundry." Montana finished an email on his phone and shoved it into his back pocket. "We'll buy new clothes there to keep our profile down."

"We staying at a hotel there?" I followed behind him as we left, the afternoon sun high and warm on the truck's worn, leather seats. The engine roared to life, the dated dials analog and bouncing around as the machine warmed up.

"We have an apartment there. A safe house." Montana manipulated the truck into gear and got onto the road. "We have one in a lot of major cities since we travel so often."

"Oh."

He lifted one brow and glanced my direction. "You sound disappointed."

"The way everyone talks about hotels, they sound really nice."

Montana leaned back into his seat, his fingers wrapped around the top of the steering wheel.

"Some are, but it gets old after a while. An apartment feels more like a home because it has more space, a kitchen, and a normal-sized bathroom and shower. Hotels are one room, and everything's tiny. Especially for guys our size."

“I’ll take your word on it, I guess.” I sighed.

“Better this way. Space is good.” Montana motioned to his backpack sitting between us. “Inside the front pocket there’s a pill bottle. You need to take two of those.”

“What for?” I dug around in the backpack and grabbed the bottle in question, the words all medical jargon I didn’t know.

“There’s an unfortunate fact about us theropods in that we can’t handle flying,” he explained with an air of weariness. “We get sick in various degrees once we’re in the air. Baha gets dizzy, Yulong gets headaches, Dalton loses his fucking mind and starts trying to move around like a caged animal. Since you’re a tyrannosaur like me, you might get sick to your stomach. Those pills help.”

“Sick how?” I rattled out two pills, the round dots uninspiring and plain.

“It varies.” He drummed on the wheel with his thumb. “I feel like vomiting sometimes, but mainly, it spikes my anxiety and makes me nervous.”

Since I had yet to hear Montana ever crack a joke, I suddenly felt very unsure of my choices.

“Are you serious?”

“Mmhm,” he hummed. “Now I take those to help me not puke, put in headphones so I can listen to running water, and take some anti-anxiety medication right before we board. I have some spares for you, and I think you should take it when I do. Otherwise, you might arrive in Chicago shaky.”

I swallowed down the pills and capped them, tossing it back into the backpack.

The rest of the trip was mostly silent, Montana eventually turning on some music low while we drove down a long, winding stretch of busy highway. The sky was a wide-open expanse of blue with wispy white trails, the sun sliding across the dash in puddles of gold. The rocking of the truck paired with the hum of the engine almost put me to sleep, but I roused as the tires rumbled across speed strips near the airport’s entrance.

After a few more turns, Montana parked the truck in a large, tiered garage. The building echoed with distant cars crawling up and down the spine, the occasional rhythmic honk of a car alarm. Every single sound bounced around the concrete like it didn't know how to escape, hitting the ear at the wrong angle before trailing off.

It was weirdly chaotic and strange, but nothing compared to the madness that awaited us inside.

In my year and three weeks of being a conscious human, I wasn't taken to a lot of highly populated areas until somewhat recently. This was because everyone was worried I'd freak out from stress and shift, maybe try and gobble someone up as comfort food to help calm myself down. Once they learned I had no intention of blowing our cover and murdering someone for a nibble, I was gradually allowed to visit shopping malls, grocery stores, museums, and clubs.

The clubs were a Feathers & Fuckery club exclusive venture, which included Dalton, Royal, Blaise, sometimes Simon (he wasn't a fan of noise), and myself. I was sworn to secrecy because Baha and Montana would have "super murdered" them had they found out.

I liked all of those places. I liked the crowds, the unique qualities about each place, and the opportunities to learn more about society.

I immediately did *not* like the airport.

It was loud, confusing, and it reeked of stress.

Humans bumbled around in states of rushed confusion before being herded like cattle through one long, winding line after another. We had to hand over our bags after putting stickers on them, and the woman accepting them laughed when I asked if we'd get them back. Montana assured me we would once we walked away, but it still made me feel weird. I had really gotten those snail rolls down to a science and would be upset if I didn't get my clothing back.

Then there was the horrible dance with the security checkpoint, which had made top of the list of things I didn't

want to deal with again, but knew I would eventually have to. It trumped going to the dentist, and I fucking hated Dr. Fritz and his critique on my “pronounced and unsightly canines.” Getting prodded in the gums was less stressful than this TSA hellscape.

Montana fell into an automatic trance when we arrived at the TSA line, removing his shoes, items from his backpack, and everything metal on his person into plastic buckets to be scanned. I mirrored the ritual, moving much slower than the other well-practiced people of the world, and was ushered to go faster by annoyed officers wanting to get along with their day.

I rushed, forgetting various items in my pockets that made the metal detector scream at me. The bored annoyance of the agents in charge of keeping passengers safe had lost all faith in my ability to follow instruction, and I mumbled apologies as I finally fished out some loose change that had upset the machine so damn much.

“People come here for fun?” I asked Montana once we were on the other side of hell. “By choice?”

“You learn to get used to it,” he said, slinging his backpack over his shoulder. “Stick close. We need to get to our gate fast if we’re going to make the flight.”

I was surprised at the amount of shopping and food choices available on the other side, and had I not just experienced a parade of embarrassment and frustration, I would have thought this part of the airport was almost pleasant. We didn’t have time to take in the sights, and I kept my stride fast to keep up with Montana as we rushed to our gate.

Outside the strip of windows overlooking the airstrip, I watched planes lifting up into the sky as if by magic, and I got excited to know what that feeling was like. Montana’s warnings of the odd allergic reaction we had to flying was still present in my brain, but there was a much stronger bubble of curiosity disturbing that apprehension.

I didn't remember flying in my past lives. I was sure I had to have taken the form of something that could have taken to the skies at some point, but those memories were long faded. The only concrete memories I had of my Cretaceous life were of things that stomped around on the ground and dominated the food chain. It would be amazing to feel something new and exciting, like flying through the sky at hundreds of miles an hour.

It sounded fun.

We hustled to the gate, presenting our boarding passes, and hurried through onto the waiting aircraft. It was much smaller on the inside than I had been expecting, the low hum of the engines buzzing through the chatter of people sardined into small seats. There were *so many* humans crammed into place, elbow to elbow, sitting in a narrow metal tube. A pang of panic punctured my chest at the thought of shuffling into the belly of the plane, the heaviness of it crawling through me like an infection.

A small breath of relief came when Montana swung into one of the seats closer to the front of the plane, the space more open and less compact than the seats past the curtain. He took the seat closer to the window and shut the shutter, rattling out some pills into his palm and tossing them back. I held out my palm for my dose and did the same, swallowing down some chalky dots that I hoped would make me feel better.

"It's so small in here," I said.

"Don't think about it." Montana handed me a round case, the top flipping open to reveal two earbuds. "Put these in. They block out the noise."

"Can I see out the window?"

"Absolutely not." Montana popped in his own headphones. "It'll make it worse. Shut your eyes. Relax. We'll be there in a few hours." He took another long breath. "We'll be fine."

"You saying that for me or you?"

The plane made a loud ding, and a woman's voice announced that we were departing. For a few minutes, nothing

happened, but then the machine filled with people lurched and began to roll backward. Montana leaned back in his seat and shut his eyes, his hands resting in his lap with his fingers laced. I stretched my legs out and tried not to wiggle, the mounting anticipation for takeoff almost too much to bear.

Montana's window remained closed, but the lady across from me to my left had hers wide open. The airport around us rolled away; people outside in orange vests waved sticks around in a weird dance. Across the strip, another plane was rolling the opposite way.

Honestly, it was pretty boring for a little while. A bunch of turns and a long pause of nothing happening ate up an eternity, relaxing me into a false sense of ease. Seeing the long expanse outside helped me feel less trapped. I contemplated trying to nap but didn't want to miss anything exciting.

I had been so damn naive.

So, so damn naive.

The plane began to roar, the engines bursting to life in an inhale that rattled the entire beast. We shot down the runway in a sprint, galloping along the blacktop with the world blurring into smears of color. I felt the plane lift, my heart falling from my chest and tumbling into my stomach. The lady's window was nothing but sunshine and blue, the earth dropping away under us at an alarming rate. My fingers gripped into the arms of my seat as I forced myself to breathe, mentally digging for the excitement I had been feeling before we boarded. If I could find it again, find that little nugget of positivity and the thrill of experiencing something new, I was sure the teeth-clattering fear I felt sensing the ground leave me would go away.

It was fun! I was having fun! It wasn't horrifying at all. I was fine. I was totally and completely fine. There were plenty of people on the plane who weren't panicking, plenty of people...so many people. There were *so many* people on that plane. Like a crazy amount considering how small the plane was, and they were all jammed into the plane that was *in the fucking air now*—

*Okay, wrong direction of thought. You're fine, Henry. Breathe.*

I inhaled a pathetic little sputter of breath, peering out into the wide-open sky. I imagined standing outside and enjoying the sunshine, how lovely, roomy, and not at all cramped and scary outside was compared to this fucking airplane.

And for a moment, a real fleeting moment, I thought I had everything under control.

Until the plane tilted and the view outside the window changed.

I saw the ground.

I saw how far *away* from the ground we were.

And I promptly freaked the fuck out.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

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## MONTANA

Being comfortable in an airplane was never something I could accomplish, but I had found tricks to calm myself over the decades of my travels. Between the early 60s into the 2000s, I'd gone from being a hopelessly airsick husk stuck in his seat heaving into a bag to an intoxicated jackass snoring in his seat. I had found a happy medium with less-intense medication, a soundtrack of nature sounds, and a really nice neck pillow.

My routine was to wait until the last minute before boarding, take my medicine, turn on some babbling springs to whisper into my ears, and hope I fell into a light sleep before the nausea slammed into me like a freight train. My doze was just starting to fill my limbs like trickling sand when I felt Henry's grip on my wrist.

The sudden and fierce pressure snapped me from my Zen state like a slap, and I jerked awake to see frantic saucers of gold staring at me from a ghostly white face.

"You alright?" I asked, knowing he wasn't.

"We're in the sky," he said in a rush.

"Yeah."

"We're not supposed to be in the sky."

Across the aisle, the glow of an open window was like a portal to hell glowing with sunshine, and I saw the fluffy tops of the clouds. My stomach folded and flipped over on itself, and I swallowed down the urge to gag.

“You’re okay.” I focused back on Henry’s giant, panicked eyes and put my hand over his. “Take some breaths.”

“The ground is so far down.” Henry vibrated under my palm, his shoulders tensed up. “I can’t stay on this thing. I need to be on the ground.”

“We will be in just a few hours,” I whispered. “We can’t do anything right now, so you need to try and relax. Where are your earbuds?”

“Birds don’t even fly this high, Montana.” His fingers dug into my skin. “We were *never meant to be here*.”

My stomach twisted again, and I cleared my throat to give myself a moment to breathe.

Henry’s jaw flexed, expression pleading. “What do we do?”

“We lean back, take some breaths, and relax. That’s all we can do.”

“I can see the top of the clouds—”

“Henry, stop.” I swallowed again. “You’re going to make me sick.”

He leaned in closer, eyes bouncing all over.

“How do we make them land the plane?”

“We don’t.” I glanced for the flight attendant, who was thankfully not within earshot. “Henry, you can’t talk like that on the plane. You’re going to scare them.”

“I don’t want to scare them,” he added quickly. “I just want to encourage them to land the plane.”

“We’re fine. It’s two hours and we’re there. Here, borrow one of my earbuds and we can listen to water sounds—no, don’t look at the damn window!” I winced as heads turned our way, and I mouthed an apology so they’d turn back around. “Each time you do that, I look too, and if I puke on this plane, I’m going to be a little pissed off.”

Henry had gone from vibrating to twitching, one hand rubbing at his chest like it pained him. The panicked look on

his face had hardened into something fierce, his teeth flashing a bit too much when he spoke.

“I feel wrong. Something is wrong.”

“You’re sprinting toward an anxiety attack. You need to calm down.”

“I’m calm,” he lied so miserably it made me groan. “I just feel like screaming really loud, but I’m totally calm.”

“Breaths. Take some breaths or you’re going to pass out.”

He inhaled in a short, abrasive snort, the gold of his eyes darkening around the rims. Instead of an exhale, his throat tightened into a low, strangled growl. The teeth around his pronounced canines had sharpened, his stubble taking a greenish hue of his feathers.

My heart stopped. My gut spun in the other direction. My spine turned into a cold, iron spike.

Henry was starting to shift on a damn airplane several thousand feet in the air.

I had never known panic like I felt in that moment, the raw, tearing realization that we were seconds away from ripping an airplane in half with the size and ferocity of a manic Albertosaurus.

I had no choice.

I had to act. I had to do something drastic or we were all going to die.

With my back against the wall, on the cusp of life or death, I had to reveal one of my most guarded and well-kept secrets. Not even Reaper had known about this tiny, shameful thing because I honestly didn’t want to deal with the fallout.

My backpack was tugged from under the seat in front of me, the zipper slashed sideways, and my embarrassing secret pulled from its depths.

Henry watched, brow furrowing in confusion as I placed the off-white, weighted, stuffed goose into his lap. It was a

wide, fuzzy thing made of sand, cotton, stuffing, and my travel anxieties.

Henry tried to talk, his words stuck in a growl through his teeth.

“It’s a weighted stuffed animal. I hold it when I get...” Heat crawled up my neck, and I shifted sentences. “Put your arms around it and hold it against your chest.”

Henry looked down at the thing like it was speaking in Latin, his gaze darting my direction before he reluctantly did as I asked. His bulky arms hugged the goose to his chest, but his breathing kept spiking in strained, short bursts.

I reached across him and pressed the button against his arm rest, his seat sliding him backward in a lean. Henry managed a stuttered sigh, his eyes shutting tight before he tried for a full breath. Each struggling intake of air was a small victory, a limping race around the track chasing away a panic attack.

His tongue flashed as he licked his lips, and he swallowed a few times before he spoke.

“A duck?”

“Goose,” I admitted, a little defensively. “I had just gotten through the first leg of an international trip, and I wasn’t sure I could make another five-hour flight. I saw these at a store, and I was desperate to find something to keep me from getting sick again.”

“Not...” Henry exhaled shakily. “A dinosaur?”

“It was either a goose or a pickle. That’s all they had left. I wasn’t about to be the big guy snuggling a pickle.”

Henry made a coughing snort, his brows tightening. “I feel like somewhere Dalton has felt that sentence like it was a disturbance in the Force.”

“If Dalton is a Jedi, we’re all fucked.” I let myself smile at his weak laugh.

When he was finally able to wrestle down a full, blissful breath of air, it came out like it was the first breath he’d ever

taken.

“Sorry,” he whispered after his breath. “I didn’t know it would be this bad.”

“We’re all different. Just focus on breathing, relaxing.”

“I’ll do better,” he promised after a few confident breaths. “I’ll be better.”

I could see his body melt into the seat. The visible shift retracted his sharp teeth, and the green dropped from his facial hair. Only then did I allow myself to sink back and shut my eyes in relief.

“I can’t believe,” he whispered, “you have an emotional support duck.”

“Goose,” I shot back immediately, but Henry was snoring. The sound was so unexpected that I sat up to check if he was messing with me. Henry’s mouth was open slightly, black lashes fanned out across his cheeks. The tension was still a little present in his brows, frowning as he slumbered.

“Jesus,” I breathed, half relief and half nausea.

The flight attendant, sensing my discomfort and seeing my travel buddy was finally passed out, floated over with some water and a knowing smile.

“He was having a rough time, huh?”

“You have no idea.” I scrubbed my face. “Can you please give me the maximum amount of alcohol you’re legally allowed to serve?”

With a wink, they disappeared for a heartbeat before coming back with a nice, powerful little cocktail in a plastic cup. It went down with a burn and angered my stomach, but it was the perfect buzz to listen to nature sounds while my heart rate calmed down. It was truly amazing to me that the limp man beside me holding my secret stuffed animal could look so deceptively peaceful and harmless. Had he not been slumped in his seat and a little pale from the stress, I’d dare say he looked almost handsome in Baha’s jacket.

Through luck and probably some kind of divine intervention, Henry didn't wake up again until the plane was rolling across the landing strip. He burst to life with a shout, only to relax when I told him we were landing. I didn't dare open the window until the plane had come to a full stop, sliding the plastic door up to peek at the weather outside. The wide, blue, Texan skies were replaced with the wispy grays of a cloudy evening.

At the plane's final stop near the terminal, the symphony of seat belt clicks sounded in waves. Bodies lifted from their seats, flooding into the aisle like groggy zombies to haul their bags from the bins overhead. The color had started to return to Henry's cheeks as he pushed off from his seat, and my bones cracked as I stretched my legs and shouldered my backpack. There was an audible sigh of relief from Henry as we disembarked, and I felt the same breath leaving me.

"That sucked," he muttered. "I think I hate flying."

"I wish I could tell you it gets better, but it just gets easier to manage."

"Can we get out of here?" He tagged along as I steered us toward baggage claim, which was a small hike from our gate.

"Bags first, then yeah. We'll jump on the train. How's your stomach?"

Henry rubbed at his belly and shrugged a shoulder. "I could eat."

"Seriously?"

He blinked, not understanding how insane that was to me. My stomach was still in a hundred knots dipped in wax, and this asshole was peckish.

"We'll get you some food once we're there," I said, shaking my head. "I can't believe you're hungry."

"I only had normal breakfast and half a deer today," he said sheepishly. "I skipped lunch."

"You poor thing."

"I tried to give you the other half, you know."

“We still need to talk about that,” I told him over my shoulder. “You know better than to bring food to the house, and I don’t know what you were thinking with those candles. That’s dangerous.”

Henry’s shoulders deflated as he sighed, his attention divided between the crowds and the heavy scent of fast food lingering in the air. His cheeks seemed flush from the stress, so I let the topic drop.

We’d have to revisit it another time.

The crowd thinned dramatically once we left the secure section of the airport. Beyond the plethora of shopping and dining, the airport quieted into the home stretch before the exit. The baggage claim area was ghostly compared to the insanity near the departing gates, the silence welcome and calming to my nerves. Tired passengers and restless children stood around the static conveyor belt that promised our luggage, and Henry and I took our place among them.

I had been so content with the quiet and relishing in the slow untying of my stomach that I almost didn’t notice the familiar suit sauntering over to us.

I recognized his lazy strut before his face, the ease of an apex predator strolling casually around herds of unsuspecting sheep. Over the decade of knowing Baatar, I’d never seen the man wear anything less than a two-piece, tailored suit made from fabric too expensive and crafted by names I never knew. He always smelled like he’d dabbed liquid fortune behind his ears and grinned like he knew the exact price of your soul.

And I considered him one of my friends, despite it all.

“Don’t you normally send your assistant to get your bags?” I teased as he made his way over to us, used to people moving out of his way.

“Unless it has precious cargo.” Baatar slid his eyes over to Henry knowingly, then back to me. “I had to see the baby after all.”

“Whose baby?” Henry asked, and Baatar chuckled.

“Montana, he’s precious.”

“Don’t be a dick, Baatar.” I gestured between the two of them. “Henry, this is Baatar, a longtime friend. He’s our contact here in Chicago.”

“Contact, ally, and benefactor of sorts,” Baatar corrected as he took Henry’s offered hand. Baatar hummed and tugged Henry closer by a breath. “Nice grip, Henry.”

Henry’s brows had settled into his thinking frown once their hands touched. Baatar didn’t budge as Henry stepped in closer, golden gaze battling against Baatar’s mossy hazel. The two of them were a pair of extremes—both tall and broad-shouldered with the primal stares of ancient beasts sizing up a potential threat. Baatar’s skin was warm gold and tan, his short, perfectly styled hair such a dark brown it seemed black.

“Easy, little lamb,” Baatar playfully jabbed. “People will think we’re in love.”

“You’re one of us,” Henry whispered, narrowing his eyes a fraction. “You’re a tyrannosaur.”

Baatar’s teeth flashed in his smile. “I’m your big Mongolian cousin.”

“Tarbosaurus,” Henry whispered, and Baatar laughed, breathy and deadly.

“Oh, I *like* you, Henry. I think I’ll keep you.”

That was my cue, and I cleared my throat before easing Henry back by his shoulders.

“Baatar, keep it professional.” I pointedly looked at their clasped hands, and Baatar unlatched from Henry at a sloth’s pace.

“Protective of the baby, are we?”

“Wait, I’m the baby?” Henry scowled. “That’s rude.”

“You know how important this mission is.” I steered Henry back a few steps and put him beside me again. “We don’t have time to be ridiculous.”

“Oh, shit!” Henry’s eyes widened, his face stuck in an expression of horror. “I left your emotional support duck on



the plane!”

My head immediately hurt, and my stomach looped another knot into itself.

Baatar smiled victoriously as the baggage claim buzzer began to sound off.

“We need to get our bags,” I told Henry. “They’ll be on this belt soon. Can you look for them, please?”

Henry nodded. “Sorry, Montana.”

“It’s fine.” I tilted my head to the belt, and he slouched off to go hunt down our bags. I turned my attention to Baatar. “Why are you really here, Baatar? We had plans to meet tomorrow to discuss Blanco’s party.”

“Is it so weird that I wanted to see you and the new shifter?”

“Yes.” I crossed my arms. “You’ve never picked me up from an airport, and you never gave a shit about new shifters.”

He placed his hands in his pockets and lifted a shoulder. “Maybe a little sentimental.”

The knots in my stomach soured into barbs, the sting curling my expression into bitterness.

“I don’t need your pity, Baatar. You’re a better friend than that.”

“Montana, please,” he spat, the smirk dropping. “Don’t insult me. Reaper was my friend, and I miss him. I miss you too. That’s all I meant.”

The barb in my stomach twisted into a stab of shame, and I hated how deep it wounded me. I swallowed down the venomous, cruel things I wanted to spit in response to feeling wounded and cornered.

“Sorry,” I said, sounding horrible. “That was shitty.”

Baatar let his face settle into his normal, casual coolness with just a kiss of arrogance.

“You’re allowed to be shitty to me once. After that, I start charging. In return for being a prick, you’ll not argue when I take you and the hot baby shifter to the condo I have set up for you.”

“We have an apartment already.” I cut him a look. “And leave Henry alone. We’re working.”

“Your apartment is forty-five minutes away from everywhere you need to be this week. My condo is in the center of downtown, walking distance from the places Blanco will be.” Baatar turned his attention to Henry, who was staking out the belt like he was a hawk looking for a meal. “He has an ass you can bounce quarters off of, Montana. I’ve never fucked a fellow tyrannosaur before since you and Joseph refused to share. God, I bet he’s aggressive.”

“Jesus Christ.” I rubbed at my eyes, wishing I could scrub Baatar into another reality for a little while. “Why don’t you go bring the car around?”

“My driver is waiting outside. Do you know if he tops?”

I dropped my hand from my eyes and looked at him.

“We’ll meet you outside, Baatar.”

“Fine, fine.” He sighed in a very put-upon way, glancing at Henry one more time before strolling away. I took a moment of peace to center myself before returning to Henry’s side. My suitcase had been successfully retrieved, and he was actively snagging his duffle when I came over to him.

“Got ’em.” He handed me my suitcase handle. “Do you want to try and go back for the duck?”

“Goose, and no. It’s fine. Listen, Baatar is taking us to a condo in the middle of downtown. We might be staying there instead.”

Henry followed me as we made our way toward the exit.

“Does he work with reclaiming fossils too?”

“No, he doesn’t care about fossils. He made his money in the art and information trade. Reaper and I used to work with him on snagging fossils from the market in exchange for...” I

kicked around how I wanted to phrase it, then settled on, “Helping him procure other goods.”

Henry lifted a brow. “So, you stole stuff for him?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Mkay.” Henry adjusted his duffle. “Sounds pretty straightforward.”

“*If* we happen to see what he needed while we were raiding someone’s stash for a priceless fossil, we grabbed that too. Art gets traded on the black market too.”

“You think he’s going to ask us to steal something for him?”

“Probably.” We stepped through the automatic doors, and I piloted us down the parade of cars waiting at the curb. “He never does anything for free. I have a feeling this condo and his knowledge of Blanco’s events are going to come at a steep price.”

“Whatever we have to do,” Henry said easily. “This mission is important.”

With that statement, I paused us on the sidewalk and turned to him.

“Listen, Henry. Baatar is, eh...”

“Forward?”

I rubbed at my stubble to summon the words I needed.

“To be polite about it, yeah. To be more blunt, he’s a horny fiend.” Henry snorted a laugh, and I continued. “I’m not policing what you do with yourself and your spare time, but we need to keep him as a working relationship. We can’t get distracted while we’re here.”

Henry’s surprise looked very similar to his frown of concentration.

“You think I’m gonna sleep with him?”

“I’m not saying that,” I corrected gently. “He’s a charming man, and he flirts. If he was someone you were interested in,

now isn't the time."

There was a stretch when Henry was studying me for something I couldn't place; then he came swinging with a curveball I didn't see coming.

"Have you slept with him?"

I guffawed. "No."

He baffled me further by asking, "Why not?"

"He's not my type," I parried. "Just consider what I'm asking. Alright?"

Henry went to speak, but I was saved by a horn honking a few cars away. Baatar had emerged from the side door and held it open for us, smiling as we made our way over. The driver of the Mercedes had popped the trunk and was ready to accept our bags, taking them from us without a word.

Baatar slid into the car, placing himself beside Henry so he could annoy me as much as possible.

"What do you know about Blanco's plans this week?" I asked over Henry, who was between us.

"He has an invite-only gallery this weekend that is extremely exclusive. He's holding it at a private venue downtown." Baatar placed his arm over the back of the seats and leaned back.

"Do you think he'll be showcasing any of his fossil collections during that time?" I asked.

"No, this is strictly canvas and clay, but he does tend to invite people back to his place for an after-party. He has a few places throughout the city, but his party pad holds some of his nicest shit he likes to show off." Baatar gave a half-impressed quirk to his eyebrow. "To his credit, he does have some nice shit. I'd like at least three things I've seen there."

"Can you get us an invitation?"

"Course." He smirked in a way that I didn't like. "Easy. It is formal, so we'll need to get you bumpkins something fitted."

“Like your suit?” Henry asked. “It’s nice.”

Baatar’s smirk I didn’t like got worse, and his mossy eyes stabbed into Henry with intention.

“You like my suit? Such a lamb. Feel the lining here. It’s silk.”

The back of Henry’s fingers traced over the lining presented. “Soft.”

“I think you’d look so good in a fitted three-piece. I can help with the measurements.”

“I can get us suits.” I verbally splashed cold water on him. “No measurements needed.”

Baatar puffed a laugh through his nose, but didn’t push the issue.

The slow trickle of traffic eased into a span of highway, taking us away from the madness of the airport and into the madness of downtown Chicago. I didn’t envy our driver as he navigated the congestion, the constant stop-and-go of the busy city streets almost nauseating in its slow crawl. The gray weather had made the wind sharp and biting, the smattering of people crowding around the sidewalks bundled in thick jackets to keep the chill away.

Baatar hadn’t been exaggerating when he said the condo he had prepared for us was in the middle of downtown, the building a new piece of vertical luxury in the packed city. We were dropped off at the resident entrance while the car was being parked, Baatar leading us through the beautiful building that still smelled like fresh-cut lumber. It absolutely did not surprise me that he picked a spot closer to the top, the view of Chicago’s sharp skyline blinking to life in the setting sun.

“Wow.” Henry dropped his duffle near the black sectional couch, stepping around the tall, narrow dining room table to peer out one of the large corner windows. “This is amazing.”

“Quite the view, isn’t it?” Baatar leaned on the marble kitchen counter. “Fridge is stocked with food and drinks. Fresh sheets on the bed, clean towels. You should be set for as long as you need.”

“Bed? Singular?” I asked. “You didn’t spring for a two-bedroom?”

“It’s a king-sized bed, Montana. You can share.” Baatar rolled his eyes when I picked my suitcase back up. “Relax, you prude. The couch folds out into a very comfortable bed.”

I dropped my bag and crossed my arms. “Alright. What is it you want for letting us stay here?”

“You wound me.” Baatar placed a hand to his chest. “You’re a friend, and he’s my future husband.”

“There’s a balcony!” Henry called from the sliding glass door, stepping out into the frigid wind. “Montana, come look!”

“He’s so cute,” Baatar cooed. “How can you stand it?”

“Henry,” I warned. “We’re high up. I wouldn’t go out there.”

My words came a little late, as Henry pulled away from the railing looking green. He came back inside quickly and shut the door, swallowing a few times.

“That was really high up,” he repeated my words.

“Yeah. Sit down and catch your breath.” I brought him some water and returned to Baatar, ignoring his amused smile. “What do you want, Baatar?”

“For staying at the condo, not a thing.” He crossed his ankles as he leaned his hip on the counter. “But for the invite to Blanco’s party, I do need a small favor.”

“Of course you do.”

“I need you to visit a former associate of mine to retrieve an item. They’re holding on to it, and I need it picked up at their place of business.”

“What item?” I asked, red flags already bellowing. “And is he expecting someone to be picking it up, or is this more of a ‘discreet’ extraction?”

Baatar, unhelpful as ever, smiled. “He’ll know what you’re after if you let him know I sent you.”

“Uh-huh. Is this ‘former associate’ someone who typically is armed? Or has bodyguards?”

“Nothing you and Henry can’t manage.”

“What can we manage?” Henry wandered into the conversation.

“Just a little errand. It’ll also give you an excuse to see more of the city.” Baatar winked. “It would be a crime to stay cooped up here all night.”

“You’re expecting us to do this little pickup for you tonight?” I balked. “We just got here.”

“It’s time-sensitive, I’m afraid.” Baatar pushed off from the counter, apparently done with the conversation. “I’ll text you the address. He’ll be there by the time you arrive.”

“Where is this place?” I asked, following him to the door. “What should we be expecting? Can you give us any details?”

“You’ll be speaking with Daniel. You’ll know him because he’ll be about this tall and has a tattoo of a dove on his neck. Normally, he’s wearing piercing blue contacts. You can’t miss him.” Baatar held his hand level to his shoulders to show me Daniel’s height, then gave me a pat on the back. “I’ll pick it up tomorrow. Have fun, you two.”

The door shut behind him, and I stood there glaring at where he had just been. My neck popped in three places as I rolled my head to the side and took a breath.

“That wasn’t really helpful,” Henry said. “Is he always like that?”

“Always.” My phone buzzed with an address, and I ran my hand through my hair. “I know this area of town. It’s not far, but I have a feeling it’s going to be loud and probably annoying.”

“Like a club?”

“Likely. Or a bar.” I didn’t appreciate the look on his face. “Why the hell do you look excited about that?”

“Could be fun.” He shrugged a shoulder. “I’m not used to going out, so this is kinda thrilling.”

“Fair.” I rubbed at my tired eyes. “I forget you haven’t had a chance to hate nightclubs and the youth yet.”

“Not yet.” Henry smiled. “C’mon, old man. It can’t be that bad.”

“I am an old man. A very grumpy old man who doesn’t like thumping music and drunks.” I unzipped my suitcase and tugged a jacket free, tossing it on.

“When’s the last time you went to a place with thumping music and drunks?” Henry followed me out, waiting in the hallway as I locked the door. We trailed down the hallway and arrived at the silver elevator doors, the button glowing green as I pushed the down arrow.

“Two thousand and one,” I said.

Henry whistled. “Long time ago.”

“Not long enough. Dalton got drunk off his ass and tried to jump a fence. Reaper had to unpin his belt buckle from the top because he was stuck with his ass in the air. Royal took over as DJ and got us kicked out. Baha tried to break up a fight and caused four more.”

Henry cackled. “I believe all of that.”

“It was...not fun.”

We stepped into the elevator and took the slow ride down, the tiny box silent for a few heartbeats.

“When was the last time you went to do something fun that didn’t involve the whole house?” Henry asked. “Do you ever go to a bar or club on your own? For recreation instead of a house field trip?”

“I don’t go to bars or clubs for fun.”

“Where do you go then?”

I glanced over at him and shrugged. “I’m usually working, Henry. I don’t have time for vacations.”



“You have to do *something*,” he argued, following after me once the doors opened. “What do you do for fun?”

“I work.” I put my hands in my pockets, pulling my shoulders up as the wind tugged at my jacket. “I focus on what needs to be done.”

“Always?” His brows lifted into a look bordering on concern.

“Let’s focus on the mission.” I fought a chill. “We can discuss my lack of a social life another time.”

“I think you should be open to experiences, Montana. I know this isn’t usually your scene, but you haven’t been in a club in over twenty years. It might be fun, and there’s nothing wrong with having a little bit after we accomplish our goal, right?”

“Henry...” I sighed, looking over at him to explain something he should already know: that we did not have time to screw around on a mission this important. We needed to be in and out, get back to the condo, and rest so we could hit the ground running tomorrow.

The moment I saw the hope dancing in his big, golden eyes, I felt like a total asshole. An old fart stomping on someone else’s idea of a good time. Logically, I knew our prime objective was very cut and dry, with no room for nonsense.

But we didn’t have anything else planned for the night, and if it was going to be a really sticky or hostile job, Baatar would have at least vaguely hinted at needing weapons or muscle. It sounded like busywork, and I was tired. Hell, I was always tired, so what else was new?

It had been a long time since I danced.

Or let myself relax even a little bit.

“Dammit,” I said through a sigh, pulling my attention forward as Henry’s smile broke across his face. “If we can find this Daniel guy quickly and get what we need without any bullshit, we’ll stay for a bit.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I lost the battle of holding my emotions in check and let a smile slip out. “It’s your first time in Chicago. We can have a little fun tonight. But we have to be up early, so we can’t close the place down. Fair?”

He was practically glowing. “Fair.”

Despite all my reservations and doubts, I inadvertently absorbed a little of his excitement. It planted itself in my chest and bloomed out, awakening some long-dormant feelings I hadn’t allowed myself to access in years. I couldn’t remember the last time I was looking forward to going somewhere that wasn’t a museum, dig site, or other work-related activity. Even hunting had lost its luster since I did it alone most of the time.

*Tonight might be fun. He deserves fun.*

The sun had set fully by the time we arrived in one of the many spots of booming nightlife within the city. Music vibrated from inside the thick walls of popular clubs, neon siren songs promising drinks and entertainment glowed across the entrances, and people milled around crowded doorways hoping to slip inside. Laughter and shouts of friends finding each other mingled with the ever-present horns and constant bass, and more than once, we had to dodge a gaggle of giggling twenty-somethings emerging from their Uber.

I checked my phone for the address again, passing one noisy bar after another, before finally realizing the absolute bullshit Baatar had put me in.

The sign in assaulting block text, backlit by red lights insulted me to the core, and I felt the urge to abandon our task just so I could punch the jackass who sent us here.

Henry squinted up at the sign.

“Is this it?”

I rubbed my temples. “Yeah.”

“Oh.” He tilted his head. “What’s a strip club?”

# CHAPTER EIGHT

---

I had never seen so many half-naked guys in my life.

To be fair, my human life was very short, and I'd only ever been to one non-strip club in my existence, but it was still worth noting. The only thing more distracting than the very attractive men flipping around on poles or wiggling their asses was the screaming parties of women waving dollars around wearing pink boas. Their leader, a woman with a crown, got most of the attention and held a dollar in her teeth.

It was a strange hierarchy I didn't understand. Human culture was truly fascinating.

Montana was not as entertained as I was watching the pretty men and screaming ladies and looked like he was battling annoyance-induced indigestion. We weaved around bodies as we made our way inside, Montana pulling me close by the arm so he could lean in.

"This place is big," he yelled over the noise. "We're going to split up to cover more ground. I'll stay on the lower floor; you go to the balcony area. You remember what to look for?"

"Guy this tall, dove tattoo." I indicated the height I was shown, then tapped my neck for the tattoo placement.

"Right. If you find him, text me. I'll come to you. Got it?"

"Got it."

"We're working," he told me, holding my gaze. "Don't get distracted. No lap dances. No VIP rooms. Stay focused. Can you handle that?"

“I’ll stay out of trouble,” I promised.

Montana let my arm go and floated off into the madness, turning more than one head as he tried to blend into the crowd.

The club was stacked on itself in such a way that the main stage could be viewed no matter where you were. A stage came out from the center for performers to catwalk down a row of tables, and a few smaller areas lined the perimeter with smaller, solo stages near circular couches. The second floor sat like a floating horseshoe with railings on the inside and small carved-out caves for more private seating arrangements.

Chest-rattling bass reverberated up the walls as a dancer made his way to the stage, the screaming women below screeching like horny harpies. Out of pure curiosity and a little bit of the same harpy vibe, I peered over the side to see what all the excitement was over. From the aerial view of the stage, the word “APEX” was proudly displayed across the floor, and a man dressed as a certain claw-wielding mutant in a white tank top and jeans was stomping across the lettering to the sounds of the harpies’ calls. I hadn’t noticed until that moment that everyone working at the club was in costume, at least for a little while, and wondered who would be making an appearance tonight.

Just as the tank top was beginning to rip in half, my attention was pulled to a swarm of people piling up the stairs, looking harpy-like in their mannerisms, but containing more than just pink-clad women. At their center was a man wearing clothing that looked suspiciously like sweatpants and a gym shirt, but also sporting a pair of sunglasses he didn’t bother removing once he was inside. One hand was pressed to the side of his head to cover the noise, the other holding a cellphone as he marched up the steps.

They rose up like a lazy tide, slowly swelling onto the second floor and spilling across it. I kept my post by the railing and scanned for any short guys with dove tattoos, while their leader yelled over the noise of the club to maintain his phone call.

“Tell him I won’t budge on the shark scene. It’s too badass to cut. What? Sharks can’t be endangered. They’re fish. I know what I’m talking about, bro,” Sunglasses at Night yelled, drifting across the top floor. “I’m an action star, so it’s gotta be epic, or I’m not doing it. What? No, Blanco’s thing is later this week. I’m just out with some people. What? I’m at fucking church. What do you think?”

Now that was interesting.

Not the fact that he was an idiot—that was evident enough with the sunglasses—but the Blanco remark had me very curious.

Mr. Idiot About Sharks led his entourage over to one of the private seating areas, barely waiting as someone moved the velvet rope out of his way. They vanished behind a matching curtain of deep purple, and I decided it was time to go see what he was about. He wasn’t short and was missing the tattoo required for him to be the Daniel of interest, but I wasn’t going to let a possible lead drop just because he was hiding behind a stripper curtain. That’s Espionage 101. I think.

“Private event, sir.” A thick, bald man held out his hand as I meandered over. His tight, black shirt threatened the word “Security” across one pec. “Can’t let you through here.”

“How can I get back there?”

“Invite-only, sorry.” He lifted his chin. “Move along.”

I took a step back as a tall woman in sharp eyeliner and matching vicious heels checked her watch with a very annoyed sigh.

“You’re not going to let him ruin my seats again, are you?” she hissed to the bald man, who matched her desperately tired sigh.

“I can’t control him, ma’am. Whatever he damages, send a bill to his manager.”

“I hate actors.” She swung her gaze over to me and scanned me with X-ray precision. “Are you the new Henry?”

I blinked, not expecting to hear my name.

“Uh. I’m *a* Henry.”

“You’re late,” she snapped, motioning for me to follow, and I did because holy shit. She was cool and kinda scary, so I didn’t dare say a word.

We marched across the second floor, her heels somehow making a solid noise against the overwhelming bass of the music and harpy wailing. I was led around the bar, through some double doors and into the much quieter areas behind the scenes. We passed down some steps and back onto the main floor, through a door half propped open, where the performers were in various stages of dress.

“You can put your clothes in here.” She tapped an open, empty locker. “Your costume is hanging up inside. Wig is by the mirror ready to go.” She turned, gave me another quick scan, and landed on my face. “You already have the contacts in. Good. Get dressed.”

“Uh.” I floundered a moment.

“Colin McBride asked for this specifically, and he paid in advance. I don’t like keeping him waiting, even if he is a jackass frat boy.” She checked her phone and added without looking up, “He tips well too, so get a move on, Henry.”

“The guy behind the curtain?” I asked. “I’ll be with him?”

“Don’t tell me you’re a fan of that idiot.” She rolled her eyes. “Actually, good. He loves it when he feels important. Use that.”

I eyed the costume hanging up in the locker, which, to be honest, wasn’t much of a costume, as it was a pair of pants and a fake sword. I didn’t know how to strip, or what the hell was going to be expected of me, but this seemed like one of those opportunities that lined up to work out great or be a total disaster.

So I stripped, swapped pants, strapped a fake silver sword to my back, and got ready to see how it played out.

Because of my time hanging out with Blaise, a seasoned drag queen who jumped at the chance to put someone in costume, makeup, or both, I had at least a base understanding

of how to attach a wig to myself. It wasn't the same quality as Blaise's, and I didn't have adhesives or tape, but I was able to secure it to my head with some clips and hope.

It looked like shit, but it got the job done.

The woman in sharp heels didn't seem to care or mind that my white hair looked sloppy and just gave my torso a once-over before motioning for me to follow her back upstairs. We moved with the same quick stride as before, only pausing when we reached the velvet curtain McBride was behind.

She turned, looked me in the eyes, and said, "If he gets handsy, feel free to put him in his place. He's been warned plenty of times, so get rough if you need to. Keep whatever tips he gives you."

"Got it." I looked at the curtain and then at her. "How do I strip, exactly? Is it like all at once? Or am I supposed to wiggle around a bit first?"

There was a long stretch of nothing, her face stuck in a look like when people wait for Royal to finish a bad pun. Her eyelids closed and then opened, the gesture too long to be a blink.

"Are you asking me how to do your job?"

"I've never done it before," I said. "And I don't know this character. I've never read the books."

"Oh my God, where the hell does Frank find you guys?" She placed her fingers on her forehead and inhaled slowly. "Listen, Henry. Just sit in the guy's lap, move your hips like you wanna dry hump his brains out, and add in some growly 'fucks,' and you're gold. Got it?"

"Got it."

She flashed an insincere smile that seemed like a snarl. "Good luck."

I gave her a thumbs-up, and she seemed personally offended by that.

The curtain was peeled away, and I started my brief career as a costumed stripper for an actor who might lead us to



Blanco.

I was pretty sure no one at home was going to believe me, and I hoped like hell Montana stayed downstairs.

McBride was sitting Jesus-style in the middle of his acolytes, each falling over themselves to talk to him or goad him into buying more alcohol. The messiah himself had his arms thrown back over the curved leather seat, sunglasses catching the colorful lights, lazy grin spread across his face. He pulled the black Bans down his nose and gave a whistle when he saw me, sending a wave of catcalls from the bodies surrounding him.

“Show me your law of surprise, baby,” McBride called out, curling his fingers in a grabbing motion. “Me first. I wanna check out your sword.”

I had a feeling he didn’t mean my prop, but it was hard to tell.

Some music began playing, manifesting from the magic of sexually charged fantasies and the speakers tucked up in the corners of the room. My last attempt at trying to seduce someone with my dancing had failed miserably, so getting back into the groove was difficult.

I wished I had Dalton’s mix with me.

From what I understood of the assignment, which was based on maybe ten minutes of watching the performers on the main stage and some of the grinding at the tables, I needed to not so much dance as to wiggle around in his lap. I adjusted the belt around my bare chest to shuffle my sword against my back and did my best to saunter.

McBride’s cocky grin aimed up at me turned into a surprised cough as I straddled his lap and sat down.

“Wow, okay,” he said around a strained throat. “Kinda heavy.”

“Grrr.”

“Did you just say ‘grrr’?”

“Fuck.”

“What the hell is going on right now?” McBride turned to one of his drunk posse members, the light clashing against his sunglasses and stabbing me in the eyes. “Dude, you’re really heavy. Aren’t you supposed to be like...dancing?”

He smelled strongly of a spicy, plastic scent that usually came out of a spray can. Each time he swiveled his head, the shine against the black lenses slapped me in both eyes, and I got to the point where I couldn’t stand it anymore.

I lifted my hips off him and pulled his stupid sunglasses off his face, tucking them into his hair. His eyes widened, blinking in surprise. The cocky annoyance warping his eyebrows fell into a state of shock.

“Whoa. Hi.” He swallowed. “Those contacts are epic.”

“Not contacts.” I kept my hips above him this time since he couldn’t handle it, swaying with the thumping beat radiating from the speakers.

“Oooh. It’s ’cause of the mutations, right?”

“It’s just my eyes. I wanted to ask you some questions. Grrr.”

“You’re, like...the worst Geralt,” he snorted. The weight of his hands on my hips stopped my swaying. “And I’d know. I’ve had about a thousand lap dances from grade-A cosplayers at this point. You got a nice body but damn are you bad at acting. I would know. I’m an actor.”

“I’m not Geralt,” I said. “I’m Henry.”

“Sure, man.” He bit his lower lip and shimmied his hips. “So what do I need to tip you, *Henry*, to get your mouth on me?”

“I’m not putting my mouth on you, but I’ll wiggle a bit if you answer the questions I have.”

“Oh, I want more than a wiggle, big guy.” McBride took one hand off me to dig around in his pocket.

“I don’t think you can handle much more,” I said honestly, remembering how strained he looked under my weight. “I might hurt you.”

Extracting a large bill from his pants, he unfolded it slowly and used two fingers to shove it under my waistband. I'd never felt someone do something like that before without invitation, and for the first time at that place, I felt horribly uncomfortable. It didn't help that McBride was smiling like he had accomplished something I wasn't aware of, and I couldn't help but take offense.

I knocked his stupid hat off his head and grabbed his hair, angling his head back so he stopped staring at the fly of my costume pants because it was creepy as hell.

"No touching," I reminded him, letting a little of my anger slip through. "It's creepy and rude."

The cockiness in his big eyes ballooned, pupils flexing and jaw tightening. Through the plastic body spray and bad breath, the sharp sting of fear caught my attention, as well as another musky undertone that made me cringe.

"Oh, man," he breathed. "You got it. No touching. I think I'm in love with you, though. You ever been on a movie set? I used to go on these auctions, and they had this guy in a leather suit—"

I had made it worse. Why was I so bad at this?

"I'm going to ask you questions." I tightened my grip, and he whined. I ignored how he smelled. "Can you handle that?"

"Only if you wiggle like you said you would. And maybe growl again."

I sighed and questioned a lot of choices I had made.

"Tell me about a guy named Blanco. Um...grrr."

# CHAPTER NINE

---

## MONTANA

**B**ecause I woke up so early in humanity's industrial development, I had the noise tolerance of a late-1800s farmer.

I didn't like blasting music. I didn't like high-pitched yelling. I didn't like volumes so loud I had to scream to be heard. It felt like I was drowning in a riptide of sound, and I was fully aware it made me a killjoy grandpa. Adding a long flight and worrying about Henry didn't help my attitude, as I had to endure blaring early-2000s pop music while navigating through an embarrassing strip club.

If I had to pass another version of Wolverine, I was going to start throwing punches. It was horrible and cheesy, and I had no desire to be stuck there hunting down some errand boy for Baatar. Somehow, through some fate I had crafted for myself, that was exactly what I was doing.

Drunks bumped into me, waiters fussed around bodies to get to tables, and I struggled to see much of anything with the dim lighting punctuated with multicolor strobe lights. By the time I finally parked at the bar to escape the madness, I had some gin on my shirt and the beginnings of a migraine.

"You one of the new guys?" the bartender asked me, leaning on an elbow. "I knew we hired a new Cavill and a cowboy. If you need the dressing room, it's around the corner."

"Does 'cowboy' qualify as 'Apex'?" I pointed out one of the tank-top men with fake claws. "There's like five of those guys and a cowboy?"

“We got firemen and like four Hannibals too, man. People like different stuff.” He put down a cocktail napkin. “I’m guessing you’re not a new guy. Whatcha want to drink?”

“Beer. Something dark, I don’t care.” I rubbed at the knot in my temple. “Say, you know a Daniel? Short, dove tattoo?”

The bartender cracked open a bottle and set it down. “He’s up after Deadpool. Ask for Tom Cruise.”

I swallowed some beer. “How do I get a private dance?”

“Go book him. Up at the front, they’ll help you out.”

He gave a passive “thanks” as I paid for the beer and tipped him for his time, and I got to work winding through the crowd again with my beer so I could rent a lap dance from a guy pretending to be a scientologist action star.

It was quite possibly the weirdest set of circumstances surrounding me obtaining fossil information. I wasn’t sure how that situation could possibly be topped.

The booking process for Daniel/Tom Cruise was simple enough but expensive, and I got a raised brow when I asked for a receipt. There was no way in hell I wasn’t going to demand Baatar reimburse me for this, so I was keeping track of every dime spent. Keeping that in mind, I asked for more beer as I made my way upstairs to the private dancing areas.

The top floor of the club was just as obnoxious as below, with everything being gray, black, or mimicking being crafted from metal bolts and testosterone. Despite being further away from the booming nonsense the DJ was throwing out, the music was still grating and loud. The only silver lining in escaping to the top floor was leaving behind the bachelorette party that was a few too many White Claws in and screaming for attention. Most of the private rooms were closed off by curtains and fairly quiet, except for one that was almost as loud and annoying as the gaggle below.

Whoever was entertaining inside had to be suffering some hearing loss from the hoots and cheers, and I winced in sympathy for the poor person. Someone left the room, the

curtain flashing just a snapshot of what was happening beyond the thick velvet blindfold keeping the erotic display hidden.

I didn't see much, but it was enough to make me linger for longer than I normally would if it was just pure curiosity.

A strong back was flexing, shoulders rolling as he braced himself over someone's lap. The low-rise pants hugging his hips were profoundly interesting, as were the dimples punctuating his lower back. There was a barely registered white wig on top, but my view was masked again when the curtain fell shut.

I finished the rest of my beer, suddenly extremely thirsty.

My private room was set further back from the one I had spied on, and I sat alone in a room big enough for at least twenty people feeling a bit like an awkward jackass. By some strange, uncomfortable magic, the curtain blocked out just enough of the thumping music to make it feel almost quiet. The muted sound combined with the solitude made me feel creepy, causing me to try and adjust my body several times. By the third time the leather rumbled in a pseudo-flatulent noise, I gave up and sat still until Tom Cruise arrived.

When Daniel dressed as Ethan Hunt slid past the curtain, I was almost a little disappointed he didn't rappel down from the ceiling. I think I would have actually enjoyed a dance if he did that, but I did appreciate the dedication to the costuming. The tight black shirt and jeans were paired with black gloves and leather jacket, making him unmistakably the character even if the dove tattoo broke immersion just a little bit.

"Hey, sweetheart," Daniel said in a low, fuck-me tone. "You want the full experience or just a taste? I have the theme music if you want the full Hunt fantasy."

"I'm going to be a very easy client for you tonight and ask that you just sit and talk." I gestured to the couch. "I appreciate the effort, though."

"You booked me for a full hour, so we can do whatever you want." Daniel took a seat close to me, sliding his

sunglasses down his nose. “We can talk. I can dance. I offer some other ‘off menu’ items if you’re curious.”

“Just talking. I’ll still tip you great for your time, I promise.”

Daniel leaned back, arm over the back of the couch and all attention on me.

“What’s on your mind, handsome? Boy trouble?”

“I came here to get something from you. Baatar sent me to collect something of his,” I said, not surprised when Daniel’s sweet smile dropped. The relaxed, flirty posture snapped back like a rubber band, and he sat up and glared at me like I had just insulted his carefully practiced deep voice.

“Are you serious?” His voice had changed, the sultry tone replaced with his authentic voice which scaled in the normal, tenor range I had been expecting. “He sent you to my *work*?”

“He’s an asshole, so yeah,” I sympathized. “He said it was time-sensitive. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here.”

“That’s fucking hilarious,” Daniel said wryly, jerking his arms out of his jacket to fiddle with a hunk of platinum attached to his wrist. After a few quick flips, the heavy watch slipped free, and he tossed it into my lap unceremoniously. “Tell him sincerely to choke on it.”

*Time-sensitive. Baatar, you complete asshole.*

“Ah.” I picked it up and slipped it into my pocket. “I’m guessing you two...”

“Don’t judge me, dipshit.”

“I’m not,” I said. “At all. He’s a bastard at times, so I hope he didn’t jerk you around too much. You can do a lot better than him.”

“Do a lot better than an incredibly rich art dealer that’s hot as hell?” Daniel rolled his eyes. “Sure, honey. Those are falling from the skies these days. Whatever.” His eyes flicked over me. “You wanna fool around a little? I’m in the market for a new sugar daddy.”



“No, thank you. I’m not on the market, as it were.”

“Fine. No commitment. But you do have an hour.” His hand dropped onto my knee and drifted up my thigh, the movement silky smooth and confident. I could see why Baatar hadn’t realized his watch had been stolen with how deftly Daniel’s fingers worked. No sooner had I placed my hand on his wrist to stop the advancement did the curtain fling to the side in a wave of violence.

Standing in the doorway of a total misunderstanding was the unmistakable glare of a very pissed-off, very slighted lover, taking in the sight of Daniel grabbing at my crotch.

“Goddammit,” I mumbled, my head pounding.

“What the fuck, Ben!” Daniel tossed his hands up like the man’s burning anger was just an inconvenience. “I’m working!”

“You said no more VIP bullshit!” Ben jabbed his finger at me. “Now I catch you with your hand on this cowboy’s dick?!”

“I’m not even wearing a fucking hat. What the hell is with this cowboy thing?”

“We were just talking, jackass!” Daniel repeated the eye roll from before with criminal ease. “My God, so dramatic.”

“You said you loved me,” poor Ben confessed in a watery tone, making the situation profoundly more awkward. “You said you’d just be mine.”

“I am, Ben. Just not at work.” Daniel waved vaguely at the universe around us. “And I’m at work, so...go home. Stop spying on me.”

My attempts to quietly slip out of the room while they tossed uncomfortable truths at each other was thwarted, as the farting leather cushions gave away my sneaky escape. In that moment, Ben’s crushed feelings decided I was the one to blame for everything wrong in the world, and he wheeled on me fast.

“How much did you pay him to feel you up, huh?” Ben managed to get his fingers hooked into my shirt when I tried to make an exit, his bulk not strong enough to push me around as much as he wanted. I lifted my palms, not wanting to hurt anyone I didn’t need to.

“Nothing like that. We were just talking.”

“Bullshit!” Ben’s wild eyes widened. “You don’t sit in a private room with that perfect creature and not want to have him for yourself.”

“That’s...oddly sweet, but I promise we just talked. Daniel, help me out here.”

Daniel, who was a demon twink that apparently held a grudge for me taking back Baatar’s watch, tilted his head to the side, and merrily chirped, “He’s got a nice dick. Let me suck it for free.”

This was the starting pistol for chaos.

Ben craned his fist back to try and knock my head clean off my shoulders. While I understood his heartbreak in his poor choice of men, I wasn’t going to stand there letting him vent his frustration on my face. His rage made him easy to navigate, and I dodged even with his fist still curled into my shirt. I lost a button in the process, but shoved him sideways to knock him off-balance after his punch swung wide.

Ben staggered and caught himself on the curtain, almost ripping the damn thing down. He yelled threats and demanded justice, all the while his harpy boyfriend giggled from the front-row seat of the madness. I did a quick scan for Security, found none, and rolled my neck.

“Kid, don’t do this,” I warned, tired. “Emergency rooms are expensive.”

“You think you can take me?” Ben lifted his fists. “Let’s go. I’ll tear your damn head off. I’ll make sure you never, *ever* touch my boyfriend again!”

“Not interested. Never was.” I showed him my palms again, trying for peace. “Ben, I promise you this isn’t the course you want. He’s not even that cute.”

“Get ’em, baby!” Daniel rallied from the peanut gallery.  
“Kick his ass!”

Ben charged at me with all the ferocity of a bull seeing crimson, and I braced myself to knock the poor man to the ground begrudgingly. His battle cry was brutally stunted as a flash of silver careened across the room, landing pommel-first against his nose with a horrible crunch.

Time froze as I tried to process what had happened, and Ben’s head snapped back from the impact of a fake sword breaking bone. A wail of agony sounded from behind his fingers, body hunched over in despair with blood dripping onto the carpet. Following the trajectory of the airborne medieval weapon, I pivoted to see a shirtless man wearing a white wig readjusting his shoulders after launching the object.

My mind did a couple of things very quickly:

I noticed in gratuitous detail the dusting of black hair over the man’s chest and stomach and how said hair was a little damp from dancing. My brain was helpful in hyper-fixating on the curve of muscle near his hips and how it flexed when he straightened his body.

I also took note at how low the pants were on said hips and decided I quite enjoyed that. The dollars tucked into his waistband fanned out like a grass skirt, flapping a bit when he moved.

It was right about that time that I had let my eyes float north to meet the man’s eyes—hammered gold and bright with the coiled tension of a bird of prey about to launch into the air.

That’s when the rest of my common sense and whereabouts tumbled apart like a kicked-over tower of blocks.

It was Henry. Henry threw the sword.

Henry was dressed as the slutty version of a fictional character from a Polish fantasy novel.

“What in the *hell* are you doing?” I asked, the bleeding boyfriend forgotten.

“Coming to the rescue,” Henry answered, like it was obvious.

“I don’t need rescuing,” I snapped. “Why are you dressed like that?”

“It all kind of happened really fast.” Henry adjusted his wig and tugged at his waistband. “Every time I move, I feel like half of my ass comes out of this.”

Embarrassment flooded me so fast, I didn’t know how to get angry. All my fire had traveled the wrong direction, leaving me spinning and a little dizzy.

Naturally, that was the moment Security decided to show up.

Two very large men crested the top of the stairs, noticed Ben bleeding everywhere, and deduced that the gobsmacked jerk out of costume was to blame.

“Hey!” The baldest of the two bouncers tried to take command of the situation. “You. Cowboy. C’mere.”

“He broke my nose!” Ben cried. “Call the damn cops!”

“He attacked my boyfriend!” Daniel screeched. “We need to go to the hospital, and I need the night off with pay!”

Seeing the blood and the manic harpy stripper dressed as Tom Cruise, Baldy curled his fists as he approached. Henry, moved by the Witcher spirit and still sprouting dollar bills out of his pants, came to stand beside me, snarling. His golden eyes dared the looming threat to take a swing, his jaw set and arms loose.

“We’re leaving,” I told the bouncer, my hand on Henry’s shoulder. “No need for more fighting.”

“You’re damn right you’re leaving. Right now.” Baldy reached for my arm, and I moved out of the way before it could land.

“We’re gone. Just—” A sharp force cracked over the back of my shoulders, the impact more jarring than painful. I stumbled a bit and caught the second swing of Ben wielding

the heavy fake sword. Blunt, dense wood smacked against my forearm as I held it up to block. It stung, and it pissed me off.

Henry yelled something, his voice getting swallowed by the new thumping rhythm of a changing club song. A thick forearm wrapped around his throat and yanked him back, Less Bald pressing him into a chokehold from behind. A serrated bite of anger ripped into me with enough promise of calamity that I had to grind my molars to quell the urge to growl.

Another blow from the fake sword swung down on me, and I yanked it from his grip like a parent ripping away a toy from a violent toddler. I flipped the damn thing in my hand and slapped him with the flat side, permanently sitting him down for the rest of the fight.

That left just me and Baldy.

When you're a man who'd been alive as long as I had, lived through the brutal history of a budding country climbing from one dark age into another, you learned how to throw a punch. I'd had over a century of practicing to make sure they land. This poor bouncer with a macho-man complex didn't stand a chance. My knuckles connected with the soft tissue of skin above the temporal bone, the blow rattling my arm and sending him collapsing to the ground.

With Ben and Baldy down, I wheeled to peel Less Bald off of Henry just in time to realize my assistance wasn't needed. The thick bouncer that had his arm around Henry was in mid-flip, his hip bouncing off the carpet as Henry rolled the slab of meat over his shoulder. The terrible costume wig died in battle, the fraying white hair tumbling to a sad grave beside the dazed man on the ground.

A flash of gold fury gleamed, Henry's muscles flexing from hip to shoulder as he coiled his arm back, clocking the bouncer in the jaw for one final, ending blow. As he stood over his defeated foe, shoulders heaving from catching his breath, he reached up and pulled the wig cap off his head so his brown waves washed over his shoulders. Somehow, the dollars in his waistband had all remained in place, which

spoke to how incredibly tight the damn things were against his skin.

Henry cracked his neck, looked at me with the raw flush of a fresh fight, and rumbled, “Did they hurt you?”

It was...

Well.

Um.

It was very attractive.

“No. I’m fine.” I tested my shoulder, forcing my eyes down at the felled men on the ground. “Where is the dressing room with your stuff?”

“Downstairs.”

“Let’s move. In and out.” I tilted my head to the stairs. “Lead the way.”

Henry stalked ahead, and it was mildly difficult to navigate the stairs and crowded club without looking at him. My eyes couldn’t be trusted not to wander, and I was already feeling a complicated mixture of lust, guilt, and a little dizziness. It was not my best night.

Henry disappeared into the dressing room once we made it downstairs, and I noted that the staff was starting to look frantic. No doubt their missing bouncers were being noticed, and my gut was telling me the clock was running down fast. Thankfully, Henry emerged with jacket on and boots barely laced. He gave me a nod, and we weaved through the crowd, pushing our way through to make it back outside.

The night air puffed out of us in steam clouds, our footsteps hurried but not too manic as we drifted away from the nightmare that was Apex. Henry gave a quick glance over his shoulder, his fingers closing around my wrist to stop us.

The fire burning inside the golden eyes hadn’t faded, only melted into a churning liquid state of concern.

“Are you sure you’re okay? I saw that sword break over your shoulder, and I wanted to rip that guy in half.”

“I’m fine.”

The heat didn’t ease, the coal resting in the yellow fire flexing.

“I want to keep you safe, Montana.”

He was honest. Always so damn honest. From the moment I met the man, he’d always been authentically him, a lost predator trying to squeeze into our lives and make us happy. Never once had he faltered in being the self-proclaimed guardian of the herd, even when he barely understood what was going on.

“Good,” I told him, annoyed that my chest was carbonated from the sentiment. “A good teammate always has the other’s back. But I promise you I’m fine.”

I eased my wrist from his grasp, and he bunched his brows for just a moment, like the lost connection stung.

“You get Baatar’s thing?” he asked.

“Yeah.” I pulled the watch out to show him. “It was this.”

“A watch?” He pitched a brow up. “Is it important somehow?”

“Aside from it being expensive and an excuse to be an asshole, I doubt it.” I put the thing away. “You handled yourself well in that fight.”

“That was not my best throw,” Henry admitted, sounding disappointed. “Don’t let Baha know how sloppy that was or he’ll throw me for a week.”

“There’s a difference between sparring and real-life application. All things considered, you did just fine.”

Henry stood, shoving his hands into his pockets, and smirked. “Thanks. You still up for getting a drink?” He pulled out a fold of bills and waved them teasingly. “My treat.”

“We’re going back to the condo and resting after that nonsense.” I continued walking, and he fell in step beside me. “What the hell was that by the way? Why were you... stripping?”

“There wasn’t anything to strip. It was just the wig and pants. Does taking off the sword count?”

“Henry, *why* were you dressed as Geralt of Rivia at a strip club? You told me you weren’t going to get into trouble.”

He blinked at me. “I didn’t get into trouble. You did.”

I opened my mouth to argue, then realized I reasonably couldn’t. Instead, I rubbed at my sore shoulder and said, “Touché. For the rest of this mission, no spontaneous costume changes. We need to be aligned.”

“You okay?” His eyes bounced to my shoulder.

“Fine. Got hit with a wooden sword. It’s the second time in my life I’ve had to say that, but at least we’re not at Medieval Times, and Dalton isn’t trying to overthrow the castle.” I smirked as Henry laughed. “We’re banned for life now.”

“I think we’re banned from Apex too,” Henry pointed out.

“I’m not too upset about that.”

“Maybe you’re not,” he joked. “But I made like two hundred bucks.”

I grunted, not wanting to relive the memories of what he looked like getting his fortune.

The noise of the clubs faded away as we made our long walk back to the condo, leaving us in the nighttime ambiance of a big city. The purrs of car engines passed by, bits of conversations floated past us, an occasional busy storefront bursting with life as the doors swung open. We had fallen into a silence as Henry took in the sights, lifting his head up to try and see the tops of towering buildings or admiring the iconic skyline painted in twilight.

I envied how new everything was for him, how fresh the world was. I had seen Chicago grow into the metropolis it was, been around for the boom that lifted it up from a tiny patch of dirt.

In his eyes I could see a wonder I had lost decades ago.



It was beautiful, and I was thankful I could be there to see it.

“Did you ever live here?” he asked.

“A long time ago, for a very short window. Reaper and I moved here during the '50s, but moved to Dallas after we found Baha around 1960.” I followed his gilded gaze across the skyline. “It’s changed quite a bit.”

“You traveled a lot.”

“We did.” I felt a cold scrape down my chest. “We liked traveling.”

“What’s your favorite place?” Henry’s fascination landed back to me, the city forgotten.

“Besides where we live now?” I paused as he nodded. “I loved Spain. We never lived there but we visited a lot. It was...” I stumbled a moment, lost in a conversation with a ghost. “Timeless. It has a way of pausing the best parts of itself.”

Henry’s eyes glowed like sunshine over rolling waves at dusk.

“Will you take me there?”

He had no idea what he had asked me, and my heart fissured, cracks upon cracks.

“One day,” I forced around a knot of ache. “We have a lot to do until then.”

I was thankful we had made it back to the condo, and I killed the conversation by ushering us inside.

My body was sore from the crack across the shoulders and the growing headache from the evening, so I was hellbent on getting into bed as soon as possible.

“You’re going to be sleeping on the couch bed,” I told him once we got inside. “I’ll help you set it up.”

“Couch bed?” He followed my lead of pulling the cushions and pillows off the thing, standing back as I reached into the belly and tugged the frame of the bed free.

From the depths of the couch, a metal bedframe unfolded from it like a fluffy accordion, a somewhat-thin mattress stuck to it with clean sheets already set. Henry made a little hum of amazement and gave the bedding a questioning prod. It took me a few tries to find where Baatar had stashed any spare blankets and pillows, but I tossed them to Henry after tugging them free from the bedroom closet.

“I’m going to bed,” I told him, feeling fully exhausted. “We’re getting up early tomorrow to get what we need for the party. Don’t stay up.”

Henry fought back a yawn and nodded, peeling out of his jacket. He tossed it onto the table beside the couch and bent to take off his boots.

I coughed. “You...kept those pants.”

“Huh? Oh. Yeah.” He kicked off his boots and ran a palm down his thigh. “I think they’re good luck.”

I pointed a finger at him, pinpointing all of my frustration into the jab.

“You are not wearing those outside this condo. They are stripper pants, and we need to be professionals.”

“Since I made money in them,” he said innocently, “doesn’t that make them professional?”

My finger was defeated, and I stared at him like the frustrating, harlot puzzle piece he was.

“I can’t tell if you’re legitimately asking me or if you’re a master at fucking with me.”

He shrugged and smiled. “You can’t deny they’re good luck.”

I was not engaging in whatever that was leading and walked down the hallway.

“Goodnight, Henry.”

“Night, Montana.”

I could tell he was smiling without turning around.

# CHAPTER TEN

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The couch mattress was not my favorite.

I was not an overly picky sleeper. Before I woke up as a human, my ideal sleeping situation was soft dirt or mud because it had a nice cooling effect during the really hot months. Modern human comforts were nice, and I was a big fan of really plush blankets and fluffy pillows, but I'd still find a nice muddy spot in my Albertosaurus form during the summer rains. There was a primal comfort in knowing that no matter what epoch you found yourself in, mud was still a creature comfort that could be enjoyed by all.

So, when I say that the mattress attached to the foldout bed from the sofa sucked, imagine that coming from a man who liked to sleep in slushy earth for fun.

I had layered so many blankets on the damn thing to try and dull the stab of the metal bar running through the middle of it, but nothing seemed to work. The constant annoyance kept me awake most of the night, and what little sleep I got resulted in me being sore and groggy.

I was pleasantly surprised by the savory smell of sizzling bacon when I woke up for the millionth time and sat up in bed to peer into the kitchen.

Montana stood in clothing crumpled from sleep, looking warm and frumpy. His old t-shirt was wrinkled, his cotton pajama pants unable to mask the curve of his ass. Morning sunlight rested a hand on his shoulder, dipping down his back

and slashing across his solid frame. Blond nonsense stuck out from where he had failed to rake the hair back into order.

He turned his head a fraction, pointing an ear my way.

“Good morning.”

I had forgotten how gravelly his voice was in the mornings. I had to stay in bed a little longer from the reaction that went with the sound.

“Morning,” I answered back after clearing my throat. “Breakfast smells good.”

“Did you sleep okay?”

“Not great,” I admitted, rubbing the grit of sleep from my eyes. “Weird not being home.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“Really?” I puzzled over that. “You get used to being away from everything important?”

Montana turned a bit more to answer. “It just gets easier is what I mean. You’ll find a temporary rhythm, but you’ll always sleep best when you’re home.”

I swung my legs over and stood, my body responding to the attack of movement by cracking bones. My muscles locked and refused to stretch as I lifted my arms and held them high, then bent to release the tension in my spine and shoulder blades. Part of my morning routine was yoga with Simon and Blaise, which had helped me shake out the knots of sleep more than once. I didn’t remember all the steps, but I remembered enough to unlock the stiffness in my back and free me from a couple of mattress-induced aches.

Montana nodded his head to the coffee pot when I padded over.

“Fresh coffee if you need it.”

I poured some coffee and sipped on it, watching the bubbles sparkle around the frying slices of pig.

“There’s nowhere to hunt out here, is there?” I asked, missing the morning breeze even when bacon was being

crafted. “I could go for some hunting to wake up.”

“We’ll be hard-pressed to find a forest to run around in big enough for us to keep a low profile in the middle of downtown Chicago.” He started cracking eggs into a bowl, doing the cool trick where he did it one-handed. After emptying the contents of the shells, he started hand whisking the mixture together.

The way his forearm tightened did very specific things to me.

“Do you hunt while you’re on missions?” I asked him, mesmerized by the muscles in his arm flexing.

“If I can. I’m pretty big, so I don’t get a lot of options.”

“What’s your favorite thing to hunt?”

Montana added a splash of milk into his egg potion and sprinkled in some salt.

“Elk.” He tipped the bright yellow liquid into the pan with a wonderful hiss. “They’re fast and massive. Moose too if I can swing it.”

My stomach roared, and I rubbed at it miserably. “I would love moose right now.”

“You ever had moose?” Montana lifted a brow.

“No, but I know it’s delicious.”

He huffed a sound that almost sounded like a laugh, but it was more of a humorous exhale.

“You’ll have to settle for eggs and bacon today.” Montana divided the yellow fluff onto plates and parsed out the stripes of heaven accordingly.

We relocated to the tall dining room table, the dark marble bright against a panel of sunlight.

“So, when we meet this Blanco guy, what’s the plan exactly?” I devoured some bacon on the way to the table and sat across from Montana. “How do we get him to take us to the fossil?”

“From what I understand, he keeps his very valuable pieces somewhere in the city. If he’s like most rich fossil collectors, his pride and joy is showing them off.” Montana paused to cover his eggs in some red sauce. “We need to get him to invite us to take a look at his collection.”

“How?”

Montana took a couple bites of food and finished before answering.

“I’m pretty good at talking fossils to rich assholes. I’ve been doing it a long time.”

“Dalton told me a little about it.” I took the hot sauce Montana had smothered his eggs in and examined the bottle. “Like how Yulong brokers deals with fossil smugglers while pretending to be a black market merchant. Then Royal helps make it seem like he’s rich by hacking accounts and draining funds.”

“All missions are different,” Montana said between bites of food. “I doubt Blanco is going to sell us anything. We’ll likely have to learn the location, then find a way to get it out without getting caught.”

A flood of movies came to mind with that exact plotline, and I felt my heart flutter.

“Like a heist?”

“No,” Montana said, deflating my enthusiasm.

“I’m pretty sure extracting a priceless fossil from a well-guarded location is a heist.” I dabbed some neon red sauce onto the fluff. “We can give each other codenames.”

“I already have a codename. It’s Hell Creek.”

“See?” I stabbed the eggs with my fork. “Now we have to do a heist.”

“You don’t have one,” he pointed out, eating half a strip of bacon in one bite.

“How do you figure out codenames?”

Montana finished off his eggs and leaned back in his seat.

“It’s based off of the location of our holotype fossils typically. I’m Hell Creek, Royal is Calgary, Baha is Egypt, and Dalton is Utah. Yulong is the only exception. He just goes by Dragon.”

I noticed a name left off and almost didn’t ask. I’d never broached the topic with Montana before, always resigned that it wasn’t my place to do so. I hadn’t known the man, but I was still very curious about him.

“What was Reaper’s?” I asked after a few moments of doubt. “Is it okay that I ask?”

A thin veil of sadness settled over him, the weight of it sagging his shoulders and shifting his brows down a fraction.

“Reaper was his codename,” he answered, his fork left on the plate. “His real name was Joseph.”

“His isn’t like everyone else’s.”

“It had been ‘DP’ for Dinosaur Park, but he got sick of us calling him...” He hesitated a moment, then laughed out, “Well, let’s just say he didn’t like the connotations of it.” The smile that tugged at his lips was all sorrow, and it stung to witness. “He changed it back to ‘Reaper’ right around the time Dalton and Royal started going into the field. It broke our naming convention, but he had a way of talking us into things.”

“Why ‘Reaper’?” I asked, treading carefully.

“No other reason than it sounded ‘badass.’”

I laughed, relieved to see him smile. “It kinda does. What’s the likelihood I could talk you into letting me be ‘Big Al’?”

“Zero.” Montana took a nibble of bacon. “I’m not calling you that.”

“Fine.” I scooped up some eggs. “We’ll let Reaper keep his rule-breaking name, and I’ll fall in line with you guys. Do you know what formation Albertosaurus was found in by chance?”

“Mmhm.” He sipped some coffee as I took a bite of eggs. “You’re Horseshoe.”



“Horseshoe?” I tried to argue in horror, but the spice of the red sauce attacked my airway with intent to murder. Sharp, stinging flavors clogged my throat, crawling up through my nose like fire and exiting it with the same bright red color. Each gasp of breath made it worse, and I started coughing from the pain of it all.

Montana passed some water over to me, and I gulped it down once I could catch my breath. Through the watery blur of tears in my eyes, I couldn’t tell if Montana was disgusted or horrified. He made a snort noise I couldn’t identify through my own misery.

“Don’t like Horseshoe?” he asked after a second, and I could have sworn he sounded amused.

“That’s so lame.” I cleared my throat and wiped at my eyes. “How the fuck can you eat that?”

“It’s not for everyone. Should have warned you it was pretty spicy.”

“Yeah, no shit.” I scrubbed at my eyes and drank more water. “Goddamn. My face is leaking.”

Montana stood and grabbed his plate, rotating his other arm slowly with a wince.

“Hey, are you still hurt?” I blinked tears from my eyes as he walked to the kitchen, rinsing his plate off.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine if you’re wincing.” I finished my bacon but abandoned the hell eggs, making my way over to him. “Let me see.”

“Henry, I’m fine.” He gave me a glance over his injured shoulder. “I can take care of myself.”

“Just because you can take care of yourself doesn’t mean you have to,” I told him. “A wise old man told me that once.”

“This wise old man will toss you out the window if you keep that up.”

“I can get you some ice. Or that lube stuff that heats up.”

Montana scrunched his face toward the middle and looked at me.

“Pardon?”

“The lube stuff. You know. For sore muscles. It’s cold at first, and then it heats up to help relax it?”

Montana continued to stare at me and turned the faucet off.

“The lube that relaxes muscles,” he repeated back slowly.

“Yeah. Baha gave it to me when I pulled a muscle training. Spicy hot?”

Montana shut his eyes a moment, then coughed. “Icy Hot?”

“Yeah, that. I can get you the Icy Hot lube and put it on you.”

He got back to his dishes and exhaled. “No, thank you, Henry.” The rumbling dance of his phone vibrating against the counter caught our attention, and the dishes were politely set aside in favor of the inbound phone call. The bunch of his brows and tiredness in his eyes told me it was Baatar.

Montana answered the phone “Yeah” in a way that sounded like an insult.

“How did it go?” Baatar asked from the speakerphone, the insult greeting ignored.

“You sent us to a strip club to get your watch back.” Montana set the phone down and got back to the dishes. “That’s how it went.”

“I heard from a little birdy that you two made quite the scene.”

“If that little birdy is Daniel, please kick him in the ass for me.” Montana set a plate into a drying rack hard enough to make it clack against the side. “I’m not doing you any more favors while we’re here.”

“No need, that’s all I wanted,” Baatar said around a laugh. “You’re so fun, Montana. Why don’t we hang out more?”

“When and where is the party this weekend?”

“Eight o’clock Saturday is when the gala starts, but the doors open at seven. There will be valet parking at the museum, and I’ll make sure both of your names are on the list under Smith, as usual,” Baatar explained.

“Which museum? Art Institute?”

“Field.”

Montana blinked, looking at the phone. “What the hell is the gala for?”

“Clout, of course. You think Blanco gives a shit about furthering the science and technology of historical preservation?” Baatar made a rude noise. “He donates a huge chunk of money to various museums to keep his PR up and get stuff named after him. This gala is more a museum-themed dick-measuring contest.”

“Great.” Montana dried off his hands and leaned a hip against the counter. “When is the best time to try and talk to him? Before or after the gala?”

“Right after everyone talks about how great he is and pretends to be looking at the exhibits, that’s when you should strike. He’ll be a few champagnes in and feeling like talking about himself more. You know the type.”

“Unfortunately.” Montana sighed. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You’ll see me before that. I need my watch,” Baatar corrected.

“No,” Montana countered firmly. “You’ll get your watch when we’re inside talking to Blanco.”

“You want me to show up to a formal attire gala *without* a watch? When did we fall back into the Cretaceous, Montana? What have we become?”

“If you come here before the gala, I’ll show you Cretaceous, little cousin,” Montana growled. My heart did a kick-flip back into my throat, and I had to sit down.

“Rude,” Baatar quipped back in a flat tone.

“See you tomorrow.” Montana tapped the screen to end the call and rubbed at the side of his neck. “You get enough to eat?”

I tried to answer, but the language part of my brain had been swallowed into the stupid animal part that just made me horny and chompy. My answer came out as a grunt because that’s all I could manage.

“We need to go get suits. Get ready and put your bed back,” he commanded, walking past me to retreat back to his bedroom.

I gave him a thumbs-up, not trusting myself to speak.

I also had to stay in the seat while the blood went back into my brain.

After wrestling my primal feelings back into their boundaries, I got busy wrestling the couch mattress into submission. It was a brutal fight that left me embarrassed and a little winded, but the thing was conquered, the cushions replaced, and my dignity was only slightly bruised.

The shower had kicked on beyond Montana’s closed bedroom door, and I sat on my newly vanished foe to answer my phone as it buzzed with Dalton’s face on the screen.

“Hey, Dalton,” I answered. “Everything okay?”

“You’ve been hanging out with Montana for a day, and you already answer the phone like him,” he teased. “Yeah, I’m fine. How was the plane ride? Did you puke?”

“No, but I got damn close.” I decided to omit the details about almost shifting and Montana’s secret emotional support duck. “I’m hoping next time it’s not as bad.”

“I wish I could say it gets easier, man.”

“How are my plants?” I asked, trying not to sound eager.

“They’re fine, plant boy. The radio’s on for them and everything. Where’s Daddy T.rex?”

“Shower. We’re going to get suits today for Blanco’s party tomorrow. We’re hoping to talk him into letting us see his fossil collection.”

“Oooh, fancy, fancy. Montana’s never bought *me* a suit. Hey, speaking of our hunky Papa Rex, I didn’t get to ask you how your, uh...dinner date went. He like your mix?”

My shoulders sagged as I dropped back against the couch, breathing out my defeat.

“He told me not to eat deer so close to the house and blew out all the candles.”

“Aaaw, no,” Dalton sang sorrowfully. “You brought him a whole deer? Man, you are serious.”

“I tried dancing, but—”

“As an Albertosaurus?”

“Yeah.” I paused at the choking noise coming from his end. “You okay?”

“Oh my God. You’re just so great.”

“It didn’t work, Dalton. I messed it up.” I sank lower into the couch. “He blew it off completely.”

“Aw, buddy. Don’t give up! You gotta try a different approach. Montana is old school, very classic: chocolates, flowers, that kind of stuff. He’s like a hundred and fifty years old, man. You gotta meet him on his level.”

“I was so sure a deer would work,” I said. “What’s better than a whole deer? Well. He did say he likes elk.”

“Elk is pretty great,” Dalton agreed regretfully. “Keep trying. Take him on a date. Like um...geez, what do old guys like to do? Shuffleboard? Take him shuffleboarding.”

“I don’t think he’s going to want to do anything while we’re on a mission, but I’ll try.”

“Good luck, Romeo! I’m cheering for you. Keep me updated on how it goes and about the mission, yeah?” I heard the change of tone, the quiet desperation leaking through.

“I will,” I promised.

“Thanks, buddy. Hey, I know you’re working on trying to break through the T.rex wall with Montana, so I left you a present in your bag.”

“A present?” I leaned over the couch and grabbed my bag, tugging it over to me. “What is it?”

“Something to hold you over with while you work your magic.”

I held the phone to my ear with my shoulder as I unzipped the duffel, digging around through my clothes.

“Did you put it in a side pocket or something?”

“Oh, no. It’s way too big for that.”

My fingers grazed over something soft near the bottom, almost velvety plastic that bounced as I pushed on it. The long thing was a mystery to me as I tried to dig it free, finally wrapping my fingers around a wider base and yanking it free.

The massive, sparkling, dark purple dick with a suction-cup base, complete with balls *and* veins, waved at me aggressively. The head had a note and bottle of lube strapped around it.

“Uh.”

“It’s called Rex,” Dalton explained with such joy that the dildo seemed to respond to it by swaying my direction to try and kiss my nose. “It’ll stick to the shower tiles so you can have both hands free.”

My brain was melting. “Uh.”

“Don’t forget to prep or you’ll hurt yourself. Love you, Henry! Think happy thoughts!”

The phone beeped with the end of the call, and I was frozen with the T.rex dick in my hand and static in my brain. My hand automatically floated to the note strapped to the pronounced head of the fake penis and plucked it from the rubber band. Dalton’s scrawling note explained how the thing

worked, with instructions (badly drawn but crude) on what to do with myself and how to stick the monster to the tile.

The lube was cherry flavored. Because why the hell not.

“What the fuck—” I whispered to myself, my mind still trying piece itself back together.

The bedroom door opened, and I accidentally slapped myself in the face with the waving dinosaur cock as I slammed it back into my duffle bag.

Montana strolled into the living room, having no clue about the giant dick named after his species that I was still clutching inside of my bag.

The smell of bergamot drifted in with him, his hair still damp and jaw freshly shaved. A bit of damp skin had caused the soft cotton shirt across his torso to stick to his stomach, and the fabric stretched across his shoulders looked strained.

God, he smelled good. I wanted to touch that damp spot and smell his wet hair.

My fingers curled, my imagination dancing with the grip I had around the Rex.

“Who was that?” Montana asked casually, checking his phone which was resting on the counter.

I floundered. “What?”

“I heard you talking to someone earlier.”

“Oh. Yeah. Dalton. He wanted to check on the mission.”

“Mm. Shower’s free.” Montana didn’t glance my way as he got to work typing on his phone. “Let’s try to be out of here within the next hour. We have an appointment.”

I stood, still holding the dildo inside of my bag, and forced myself to let it go so it wasn’t obvious I was hiding something. My duffle was rearranged in my arms so I could bear hug it, and I made my escape down the hallway.

“Don’t wear the Professional Pants, please,” Montana called after me, and I waved that I heard him. I needed to get into a cool shower, relax, and try and get my head on straight.

There was too many wild ideas running full speed through my brain, and having just been clutching an impressive phallic object didn't help that dumb animal instinct from gnawing at my subconscious.

Cool shower, get clean, and reset. There was a mission to focus on, and Montana needed me to be on point.

I swung the bathroom door open and inhaled the humid breath of Montana's citrus soap, and my cock shot straight up.

So much for the cooling down. I would need an ice bath to make this damn thing behave, and I was not in the mood for that nonsense. Shutting the door behind me, I tossed my bag to the ground and flipped the shower on, scrubbing my hand over my face in annoyance with myself.

There was a lot of reasons why my body responded so strongly to the dissipating fog of tempting body wash, namely the fact that I hadn't been touched in months and my last sexual encounter was a rushed blowjob in a club I wasn't supposed to be at.

But it was mainly the glorious imagination that human brains were capable of.

Dinosaurs didn't have imagination. We had instincts, primal drives that compelled us to act and behave. Learning to navigate human emotion and dinosaur instinct was the first lesson I ever had, and I understood quickly that it would be a balance I would be constantly adjusting throughout my time with this ape-based form I now had. While emotion and instinct battled each other in ways that were impossible to predict, instinct and *imagination* played together very nicely.

My human brain could provide embellished images of what it might feel like to have his hands on my body, tongue in my mouth, cock in my hand. I could pretend to know what his groans of pleasure sounded like based on how he growled earlier and breathe in the very real scent of his soap to imagine it stuck to his warm skin.

I loved my imagination.



The reality was that there was no way in hell that was going to happen, and I'd have rather willfully gotten onto a plane again before even suggesting something like that out loud.

My clothes were abandoned, and I grabbed my toiletries from my bag. The purple Rex damn near winked at me.

*The shower did have tile...*

*No. Absolutely not. Get cleaned up, calm your sex bone down, and get to work. Everyone is counting on you.*

I shoved the Rex dick aside and grabbed my toiletries, pulled my clothing off, and flipped the shower on to try and cool down. The warm water was relaxing; the trailing heat over my scalp and down my back melted me into a sense of ease. I tried to focus on washing, on what the day had planned for us, recalibrate to the mission and the reason I was there in the first place. The moment I thought I had escaped the sticky, cloying fantasy, my mind would be stuck to it again, a struggling bug swallowed up by citrus body wash and throaty growls.

I pressed my forehead to the tile, cold and solid, and pushed down on the throbbing reminder that I was very, very, very distracted.

It wasn't going away anytime soon.

And I was alone.

And the thing *had suction cups...*

Somewhere deep in my stupid, horny animal brain, the final thread snapped clean and ricocheted off my human consciousness.

I made sure to follow Dalton's drawing instructions and got myself prepped before reaching out through the shower curtain. I tugged my bag over and grabbed Rex.

The monster purple dick bounced in my hand, the veins ridged under my fingertips. I tipped the cup into the water to get it slippery, took a moment to line it up just right, and popped it onto the tile with a hard slap.

It stuck and held firm, Rex bobbing invitingly.

“This is insane,” I whispered to no one, palming a good amount of lube. “I’m a depraved, lonely man about to fuck a purple dildo named Rex. My *God*, why does that sound hot to me?”

I took a breath, turned around and let the thing touch me, testing out how it felt just to brush up against my target destination.

Not bad. Not as weird as I thought, if we’re being honest. With the heat of the shower, the silicone felt like skin even if the toy was shaped to be a fantasy. I lifted my chin against the water and shut my eyes, bringing my brilliant imagination back out to play. I was alone with an adult toy in a hot shower one moment, then paired with another person another. My mind painted the picture of Montana, hands on my hips, thick, not purple, sparkly dick sliding against me.

His breath was on my neck, teeth threatening to bite, commands for me to ease back against him, allowing me to ease Rex inside on his order.

It burned just right, the pressure perfect and filling, my breath stuttering from me as I pushed back. The jolt of pleasure that danced up my spine was telling, and I was thankful that I could enjoy myself without having to impress the real Montana with any sort of control.

I wasn’t going to last long with a massive cock in me and Montana’s scent all over the damn place.

One hand braced against the metal bar parallel to the soap dish; the other was wrapped around my straining dick. Finding a rhythm in a slippery shower was tricky for a few bucks, but I discovered the perfect balance after a slow start. My imaginary Montana was fucking me from behind, growling against my back, fingertips sharp against my skin. The hot water trailed over my skin, electrifying my senses as I swallowed down steamed breaths of bergamot.

Too many wild things sprinted through my head and ignited a fire that I couldn’t control, my body bright with

stimulation and coiled tight with the impending release. Montana's growl replayed over and over, changing tones and whispering into my ear.

I pushed back harder, faster, wanting so badly to be fucked by a wild, untamed beast like the one crawling up my chest and demanding satisfaction.

I wanted him.

I wanted my fucking fellow tyrannosaur.

I wanted Montana.

It happened before I could stop it, the deep rumble of my mating call resonating out from my chest and through my teeth, my vision splitting as my orgasm shook me.

Another wave, another pulse firing from me, and I damn near did it again as I clamped my teeth shut. The sharp tips of my canines cut my lip before they shrank back down, my knees wobbled as I slowed down from the violent thrusts, and I rode the last sparks of my release.

The realization of what had happened hit me like a bus.

I had made *the noise*.

Not a small, personal little grunt or even a mildly embarrassing "I'm clearly jacking off" noise.

I had bellowed. A real, "come fuck me" bellow I hadn't done in sixty-five million years.

My vision swam a bit as my body calmed down, my two sides battling for control as I pulled myself upright and was confronted with the second embarrassing slap of reality.

As Rex came off the wall with a wet *pop*, so did pieces of the cracked tile. Shards of white bathroom tile clattered to the tub, the spiderweb of destruction spiraling out from where I had fucked myself so hard it caused damage. I had been so flustered by everything happening at once, I dropped the sex toy into the tub with a violent thump, almost tripped over it, then hastily remembered I needed to actually bathe.

How the hell was I going to explain this to Montana?

How was I going to explain to the man I was sharing a condo with that I masturbated tiles off the wall with a sex toy *named after his dinosaur form*?

There was absolutely nothing “old-fashioned” about that level of romancing. I was fairly sure the man would have a heart attack or throw me out the window. I didn’t know a lot about the last hundred and fifty years, but never once was Dinosaur Dick Toys brought up.

So, I’d be keeping this very private.

My shower was frantic; so was the cleaning of the sex toy before it was thrown back into the duffle to hide away forever. I slapped the shower off, dried off as quickly as I could, and tugged my clothes on while brainstorming how I was going to lie if confronted about the noise I had made.

Goddammit, the noise.

I buried my face into my towel and groaned in agony. Even if I somehow managed to dodge the question about the tiles, the “come fuck me” bellow wasn’t going to be as easily discarded. That noise was universal. I may as well have leaned out of the bathroom and asked him through a megaphone if he wanted to rail me then and there.

I wish it was that easy. Being a tyrannosaur had its perks back in the day. I didn’t have to figure out how to buy chocolates. I could just bellow and fight off rivals.

Maybe he hadn’t heard it? There were a few walls separating us, and the shower was going full blast. There was a good chance that it only felt loud to me and that it hadn’t really made it that far.

I was probably overthinking and panicking for no reason.

Right?

I took a few calming breaths, centered myself as much as I could, and got all my lies in order.

I slipped in the shower and broke the tiles.

Noise? What noise? Never heard a noise. I absolutely was not doing sex stuff in the shower, and you’re a crazy old man

imagining things. Let's go get chocolate.

Done. Easy.

I tossed my towel over the rack and swung open the bathroom door, ready to face the world and the mission ahead of us.

And nearly ran right into Montana.

He had his palm braced on the doorframe, brows bunched like he was fighting indigestion, and had a creeping flush on his neck.

His throat bobbed.

"You made a noise."

"Uh." I froze, my brain turning into a cinderblock of panic. "Yeah."

*God. Dammit.*

"Are you..." Montana's eyes winced.

"I broke some tiles," I blurted, then pointed to them like an absolute jackass. "Like three of them."

Montana's ocean eyes bounced between me and the busted shower.

"Okay," he said slowly. "What happened?"

"I kind of...um." My hairline at the nape of my neck prickled, and I rubbed at it awkwardly. "I got carried away... doing...sssex stuff."

Montana's eyebrows lifted and tried to touch his hairline. Then he coughed.

So much for the carefully constructed lies that would save me from this exact situation.

"Just with my hands," I clarified since he hadn't asked. "Sex stuff with my hands." I shook my head quickly. "Sorry, this is really uncomfortable, and I hate it."

The splotchiness on Montana's neck had done a hostile takeover of his face, and he backed away from the doorframe like it was on fire.

“Sorry, Henry. I wasn’t trying to...I didn’t come to ask about the, um...”

“Yeah, no. It’s. No,” I stammered, verbally drowning. “Sorry for being loud. And breaking things.”

Montana coughed. “It’s fine.” He looked around for something, gave up on it, and then said as he left the room, “Finish getting dressed. We need to get going.”

I stood still for a little while longer, marveling in the new experience of feeling so bone-deep embarrassed that I wanted to melt through the floor. I had learned some very valuable things about myself that day:

I sucked at lying.

I did not like being embarrassed.

I would be keeping Rex.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

---

## MONTANA

It had been millions of years since I had heard that noise, but it was unmistakable.

The bellow had bled through the walls, raced up my spine, and unlocked a rusty, primal hook that had been sealed in place a very long time. I couldn't remember the last time I had felt compelled like that, moved out of pure instinct without my control. Before I had realized what was happening, I was standing at the bathroom door with my hand on the knob and my heart pounding.

I had raced over to do...what?

Storm in on Henry taking a shower? Uninvited? Invade his privacy because I couldn't keep my breeding instinct in check?

I felt like such an asshole, a completely gross animal. It took longer than I wanted to admit to peel my fingers from the doorknob and catch my breath. It took longer still to talk myself down from the primal heat ringing in my ears.

When the door had swung open, all of that came crashing back like a tsunami, rocking hard against the wall I barely had in place.

He was flushed, wet, golden eyes wide and smothered in a mossy, sage scent that made me want to bite.

Then I saw his embarrassment. The hot awkwardness in his gaze.

And goddamn did I feel like a monster.



I was prowling outside of the bathroom like a horny frat boy when he had every right to privacy. Yes, the bellow was... unexpected, and I needed to talk to him about inside voices when he...

How the fuck did he break tiles? What was he *doing*?

Goddamn, that was not helping the hot and bothered situation I was going through.

*None of your business, Montana. You gross old man.*

It didn't help that I wasn't sleeping well, my dreams haunted by a ghost I missed terribly, and my calendar was fast approaching a date I wasn't ready to acknowledge.

When my phone buzzed, I was in the middle of my internal self-loathing monologue and was happy to have the distraction.

"Yeah?" I cleared my throat.

"We have a problem." Ruben's voice helped stomp out any remaining embers left in me and sober me up.

"What kind of problem?"

"A Xiang problem," he growled. "They've informed me that there's a likelihood that one of our fossils is fake. That there's not actually two fossils but one, the other being a very expensive and well-crafted knockoff."

"They're just mentioning this now?"

"They casually dropped it into conversation about ten minutes ago." Ruben exhaled in the long, thin way of someone smoking a cigarette. "The fossils have been around for years, and Xiang remembers there only being one for a good twenty of them. It wasn't until the early nineties that this second one started making its rotation. Either the twin was a well-kept secret for decades, or it's fake. But they don't know which is which."

"Dammit." I rubbed at the headache forming between my eyebrows. "Any clue how to spot the fake? Any intel?"

“None.” Ruben paused and exhaled again. “I knew the twin thing was too good to be true. We’re never this lucky.”

“We stick to the plan,” I suggested. “Bring them both back and figure it out from there. I don’t know what else we can do.”

Ruben hummed in agreement. “Any leads on your end?”

“We’re meeting with our lead tomorrow night. We’re hoping to make contact, establish a relationship, and get eyes on the fossil soon after. You?”

“Xiang is pulling strings to make me seem like an interested buyer, but I have my own strings I’m plucking,” Ruben said. “I don’t trust that little raptor.”

“I don’t either, not fully,” I agreed. “They’ve left me in dicey situations more than once. They have only their best interest at heart, so watch yourself.”

“I can manage, T.rex. Worry about yourself.” Another long exhale. “I’ll call you in a few days. Let’s stay in contact.”

“Agreed. Talk to you then.” I hung up as Henry came into the living room, dressed, Baha’s jacket tossed over his hoodie, with well-fitted jeans and boots. He raked his fingers through his drying waves and nodded that he was ready. We left the condo in a silence so pregnant I felt sympathy kicks in the belly. The elevator hummed as we plummeted down at a snail’s pace, and I finally faced the situation with a long, pained sigh.

“Henry, I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable earlier.”

His lips thinned, and he bounced golden orbs off me before they stuck to the doors.

“You didn’t,” he said after a second. “I was just embarrassed about...all of it.”

“Let’s put it behind us and stay focused on what’s important,” I told him gently, ignoring the knot in my chest. Untangling it wasn’t a process I could do at the moment. “We can’t let a hiccup get in the way. Are we good?”

“Yeah.” He adjusted his shoulders and put his hands in his jacket pockets. “You think Baatar will be pissed off about the tiles?”

“The man is a walking bankroll,” I scoffed. “Tiles are cheap. He’ll be fine.”

We stepped off the elevator and into the city, the morning chill easing with the bright sun.

Henry peered up at the sky to examine the lack of clouds, the sun making his eyes glow.

“We’re getting suits today?”

“We are,” I confirmed. “We need to get them fitted, which takes time. There’s a tailor who’s going to do a special order for us so we have them ready in time for tomorrow. He’s a friend.”

“You know a lot of people here.”

“I’ve been coming to Chicago a long time.” I steered us around a corner and paused for some traffic. “Well before it was the city it is now. This tailor has known me a few years, not long enough to be suspicious of me looking the exact same, but will soon. This will probably be the last suit I get from them to keep our identities hidden.”

“That must be kinda tough,” Henry reflected somberly. “Not being able to keep human friendships.”

“It is, but it’s the way it has to be. Our lifespan, whatever that is, is way longer than a human’s. As far as we can tell, we don’t age and die.” I let the unspoken “but we can be killed” hang in the air a bit too long, my stomach souring. “We keep connections with people limited. It keeps us safe.”

“Royal told me you weren’t thrilled when he brought Blaise home. Same when Dalton brought Simon around.” Henry followed beside me as we crossed the street, the wind pulling at our jackets.

“I wasn’t,” I admitted with a huff. “I’ve always been very clear about our stance on human relationships.”

“You didn’t trust them?”

“I didn’t want Royal and Dalton to get their hearts broken,” I told him as gently as I had to each of his brothers. “But you know those two. They’re stubborn, and they love with their whole hearts.”

“Dalton is worried about Simon.” Henry watched the traffic roll by, his hair whipping across his lips. “He’s growing older.”

“We can’t stop time. All we can do is love Simon and be there for Dalton when it catches up to him.”

“Unless we find this fossil,” Henry pressed, optimism lifting his words. “Then Simon and Blaise can be like us.”

“Maybe,” I supplied carefully. “We don’t know yet. You know I love them and want them to be around forever, Henry, but we have to meter our expectations.”

“It’ll work.” Henry’s eyes met mine. “It has to.”

The solid gold resolution radiating from him made the tiny flame of hope flicker in me, and I gave his shoulder a squeeze. His passion for the family kept my heart warm, and his youthful determination of all things just and loyal burned deep and hot.

We arrived at the tailor’s right on time and were welcomed in by the silver-haired Jacob, brandishing decades of laugh lines. Torsos with fitted suits stood displaying Jacob’s handiwork, floating near neatly folded shirts, a menagerie of ties, and polished shoes. Rich, dark wood and soft lighting made the store comfortable and rustic, the smell of fabric as gentle as the soft touch of silk against fingertips.

Introductions were made and kept brief, and Jacob was quick to usher us over to suits so we could get to work discussing color schemes. One of the reasons I worked so well with the talented tailor was he had no room for idle chat; he wanted to get his customers fitted, colors picked, and shove us out the door so he could get to work. Time was money, and he’d been pouring both into his small shop for years. I was paying him handsomely to make us priority guests, but it would be worth the price tag.

Henry stood still, confused and amazed as Jacob had him try on several shades of brown coats, lifting different gold pocket squares and ties up to see how well it bounced off his unique eyes. Jacob gave no room for argument over which colors matched him best and dismissed Henry's question about black suits with just a wave of his hand.

"Brown," Jacob commanded. "Everyone wears black. You're not a spy. You're a gentleman."

"Oh. Okay." Henry glanced my way, eyebrows raised. I smiled and shrugged. Jacob was right, after all. There was nothing sneaky about Henry.

I pretended to look over suits as Henry held still for the measurements, his face a delightful theatre of emotions as Jacob ran a strip of plastic across Henry's shoulders, arms, waist, and inseam. I coughed to cover my laugh when Henry made a surprised noise, Jacob barking at him to hold still.

It was the small pleasure of my day, watching an Albertosaurus stand still while an old man ran tape up his thigh. Finding the joy in everyday things was what kept us young.

Henry was dismissed, looking a little taken advantage of and confused, but lingered close by while I went through the same process.

Instead of brown, I was told light gray suited me best, with accents of dark blue. I did my part by standing still, obeying Jacob's orders while I and his measuring tape got to know each other.

Once Jacob had what we needed, we picked matching shoes and left everything else in the hands of the tailor. Jacob was paid, and we were given instructions on what time to come back for our fitted suits before we left the small shop.

"That was a little more intense than I thought it would be," Henry said, smoothing his shirt down a little. "I wasn't expecting the...tape part."

"They'll be made to fit us perfectly. It's worth a little discomfort." I checked my phone. "We can head back to the

condo, and I'll do some recon about Blanco's contacts. Royal is running through more emails this morning."

"Do we have to go back?" Henry made a point to look around at the tall buildings and bustling streets. "I've never been to this city, and you know it better than anyone. Can you show me your favorite spots? Where you like to go here?"

"This isn't a vacation, Henry. We're working."

"We have time. Jacob said to come back tomorrow, and Blanco's gala isn't until tomorrow evening. We have the whole day. Besides, shouldn't I know at least a little about the city? What if I get lost?"

I pinned him with a look that I was quickly learning didn't make him squirm like the others. It was only mildly annoying that it made him smile.

"If you get lost, we have bigger problems. You're not allowed to leave my side, remember?"

"I don't plan to, but things happen," he argued. "Knowing landmarks would be pretty beneficial, right?"

He grinned as I sighed, my iron will rusting.

It had been a while since I had enjoyed the city. Having been visiting Chicago for the duration of its growth, I had seen all of its phases. I sometimes forgot how rich in history it was, how many wonderful food options there were, and all the fun tourist things there were to do while there.

I hadn't been anywhere just for fun in years. Not since well before Reaper died.

"We'll start with the basics," I told him, failing to keep myself from snorting a laugh as he smiled brightly. "We'll head to Millennium Park and go from there."

Henry stuck to my side as we got moving, practically skipping beside me.

"Will you tell me about what it was like throughout your time visiting? What changed and how it grew?"

“I’m normally told *not* to do that,” I admitted. “You don’t think it’s boring?”

“No.” Henry pinched his brows, offended. “History isn’t boring. It’s amazing. And you were actually *here* for it. When will I ever get a chance to talk to someone who lived through historical events like that?”

God did my heart do a little flutter. It was as fragile and soft as a bird’s wing, but it was enough to send a wave of something bright through my body.

It felt strange and bittersweet, like remembering a long-lost song. Faded memories connected to the last time I had heard that rhythm, felt that sweet hum of joy, surfaced, with a layer of grief clouding the picture. I didn’t have the strength to dust it off, to blow away the ache. I held on to the fluttering, enjoying the pleasure of it with a sting of guilt.

I had missed feeling that way. I’d missed feeling a tug of attraction, and I couldn’t make myself hate it.

I liked feeling something else besides misery, for just a little while.

The chill of the morning melted into a pleasant afternoon, the sky mottled with clouds and the wind losing its rage around lunchtime. We covered a lot of ground over a few hours. Henry enjoyed strolling through the city and didn’t mind the distance we traveled. I went on a little too long about the construction of iconic towers, what the Municipal Pier—er, Navy Pier—was like back when it first opened and waxed poetic about the criminal background the city was known for.

Henry spent his time probing for answers about crime bosses and mobsters, buying souvenirs for the family and asking to try basically any food available.

I got lost in the fantasy of normal life for a little while. I caught myself slipping, thinking for a brief moment that we could catch a theater production or visit the art museum. What a wonderful dream to be in, if not for that waking breath of reality.

We walked the boardwalk, Henry's arms full of bags which contained the precious knickknacks he had hand selected for each brother. Rolling waves of the water below whispered through the wind; the noise of the pier washed away.

He tugged a box of chocolates out from one bag, opened them up, and peered over the contents before offering them to me.

"They're chocolate caramel," he said, seeming hopeful. "I tried one. They're really good."

"No, thanks. I'm not a big sweets guy. They're all yours."

"Oh." He looked them over again, sighing as he popped one into his mouth. "Montana?"

I hummed that I was listening, watching the water.

"Did you come here a lot with Reaper?"

"We used to come here together often. But we got busy, and trips here were more work than relaxation." I strolled to a bench and sat, letting my legs rest. Henry sat beside me, bags piled on his other side and by his feet.

"What was his favorite part of the city? Where did he like to go?" He chewed a piece of chocolate in half, examining the stretch of caramel pulled from the bite.

The question took me off guard and jabbed at a tender spot.

"Why?" I asked, recalibrating when it came out hotter than I had meant it to. "What got you thinking about that?"

Henry chewed his bite, scanning the water.

"He meant a lot to everyone," he said after a beat, his gaze washing up over the shore and onto me. "The guys talk about him a lot. He was like their big brother. They said he laughed a lot and loved black-and-white movies, that he liked to grill steaks during the summer and got everyone hooked on Shiner beer."

The breath was knocked from me, and I held my silence.



“I didn’t get to know him,” Henry continued. “I only know him from what they tell me from the past. Each time they talk about him, I get to know him a little better.” He set the chocolates aside and leaned back against the metal bench. “You knew him best. I think I’ll get to know him the most from you.”

I eased the tension from my chest by clearing my throat.

“Why do you care? Not that...” I started over with a wince. “Sorry. That was poorly put. I mean to say—why do you want to know about him? You didn’t know him. He’s been gone...” I pretended to have to count, but I didn’t. “Seven years. Almost eight.”

Henry’s honest eyes reflected back something brutally transparent, a look of confusion and earnestness that cut me down the middle and laid me open.

“Because you loved him,” he said, like it was the most obvious thing in the whole damn universe. “Everyone loved him. He meant a lot to you, to my brothers. Of course I want to know about him.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to steel myself from the sting in my eyes, concentrating on the rolling sunshine over the waves.

“It hurts to talk about him,” I said after a time. “Sometimes it’s really difficult to get the words out.”

“I never want to hurt you,” he added in a soft voice.

“You’re not.” I swallowed down seven years of grief. “Thank you for asking about him. That means a lot to me.” My eyes fell shut as I gathered myself, the lake whispering calming nothings while the breeze grounded me in the moment. “He liked the Sears Tower. It’s Willis Tower now, but we watched it being built in the early 1900s, so it was special to him. We have a picture of us together on the observation deck.”

“Being up that high doesn’t make you sick?” Henry asked, sounding nauseated.

“I can stand it for a little while, but I think he liked the thrill. Joseph pretended it didn’t faze him, but I saw the death grip on the railing. The man was full of shit at times.” I smirked, my heart not so sore from remembering. When the ache didn’t feel so tight around my chest, I opened my eyes and took in the view.

Henry smiled, his hair messy from the wind. I felt a little lighter, like some of the hurt had escaped into the rolling waves.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

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“Shake a leg, Horseshoe,” Montana called from the bedroom. “We can’t be late for the party.”

“I hate that codename,” I reminded him from the living room, still fussing with the tie. What the hell were ties anyway? Why would anyone want a piece of fabric tied around their neck for fun? It was like a really pretty noose that I couldn’t manage to hang myself with.

Exploring Chicago yesterday had been so much fun. We ate tons of good food, and Montana had explained every inch of the city while we toured it. He was able to find old pictures from the 1900s of the city landscape and walked me through when the iconic staples of the skyline had been erected. We’d wound out the night back at the condo, staying up a bit too late talking.

Today was a boring day of hustling around grabbing our fitted suits, making calls and running through plans. The gala at the Field Museum was going to start soon, and I was failing to dress myself in the extremely nice clothing that had been bought for me.

“You remember the plan for tonight?” Montana’s footsteps came down the hall after his voice, the heel of his new shoes hard on the wooden floor.

“Be polite and let you do the talking,” I recited. “We’re entrepreneurs looking for opportunities, mostly in art and history collection, based out of Texas.” I cussed under my breath as I tugged the tie knot loose to start over.

“What historical artifacts do we specialize in?” he quizzed.

“Prehistoric and...um.” The word failed me, and I pulled the piece of bastard cloth from around my neck with a violent jerk. “Fuck.”

“C’mere.”

“I can’t get the knot not to look lumpy.” I turned to him, the tie falling from my hand. My brain had been drained of blood so quickly that I had forgotten how to human beyond standing prone and staring forward.

Montana was adjusting his cuff as he moved over to me, crisp white shirt perfectly tucked into belted slacks, the silver-gray vest making his waist narrow. His dark blue tie was perfect. His pocket square was perfect. His hair was styled swept back and perfect. When his ocean eyes lifted to examine how I was dressed, I fell into them and drowned.

“I think you can leave your hair down,” he said, bending to grab the tie that had fallen. Somehow, his shirt didn’t come untucked.

I stared at how the fabric hugged his thighs as he stood and swallowed down a breath of rich cologne.

I think I had made a noise, like a grunt, and Montana assumed it was me agreeing with him.

The tie was tossed over my head and pulled under my collar, the strips resting on my chest as he unbuttoned my vest. The gesture was mechanical and polite, which should have expelled the heat rushing over me like a wildfire, but only seemed to make it so much worse.

I barely registered what he was doing; I could only watch his brows resting in their natural, constant frown of concentration. Montana always looked like he was thinking of the next task at hand, plotting a million moves ahead while simultaneously solving a riddle in front of him. Today’s riddle was how to seduce me while fixing my tie.

He was smashing it.

Each end was tugged and measured, loops made and pieces tugged, until it was a perfect little knot of gentlemanly fashion that was tucked into my newly buttoned vest.

“There. It takes practice, but you’ll get it.” His wide hand smoothed down my chest, and my wrists were buttoned next.

“You should retuck your shirt. I’m not going to do that part for you,” he mentioned absently as my sleeves were fixed. “Shoes fit okay?”

“Beautiful,” I mumbled, my brain remembering a word.

“Good. We’re going to be walking a lot tonight.” The oceans I was drowning in lifted up to meet mine. “The word is ‘Neolithic’ by the way. Can you remember that?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Repeat it back for me.” He picked some lint off my shoulder. “Please.”

“Neolithic,” I whispered, forcing my brain to comply. “Prehistoric and Neolithic.”

“According to Royal’s intel, Blanco is a white male, late forties, short white hair, and has a flair for bright colors. He’s usually dialed into high fashion, so we should look for someone with a loud suit, lots of patterns, designs, stuff like that.” Montana stepped back and looked me over, then checked his watch. “Retuck the shirt. We need to go.”

The switches in my brain were all muddled and fuzzy, but I somehow managed to pilot my arms to comply.

“We’re going to get picked up soon. The driver is on the way. The museum isn’t far, but I want to get there a little early.” His jacket was picked up and placed over his broad shoulders. He looked like a dream. He looked impossible. “Remember, we need to not dive in with asking about fossils right away. The trick of this is—”

“My God,” I finally blurted, unable to take it anymore.

“What?” He paused, looking around like maybe he had missed something on fire.

“Montana. You’re fucking gorgeous.”

His concentration eyebrows floated up in surprise.

“Thank you,” he said slowly, like my compliment was completely outlandish.

“I’m serious. You look...perfect. Jesus jumping Christ, you look like a model. Like a suit model. Like the guy they model other guys to look like to sell suits because no one really looks that good in real life.”

Montana coughed politely in his throat. “Um. Okay. I don’t know what to do with that statement but...thank you.” He checked his phone and dropped it into his pocket before nodding for me to hurry. “Shoes. Let’s go.”

“I had to tell you that or I was going to explode,” I explained as I slipped my shoes on and grabbed my phone. “I feel better.”

“Let’s try and reel in that drive to say ‘Jesus jumping Christ.’ Might hit the ear wrong in this crowd.” He held the door for me while I hurried out, letting it fall shut before locking it.

“What is a gala anyway?” I trotted next to him to catch up.

“It’s a very boring party to celebrate something. In this case it’s to celebrate Blanco being a rich asshole donating to a museum to kiss people’s asses.” Montana punched the elevator button to bring us downstairs. “A lot of people standing around drinking and networking.”

“You don’t like them.”

“Hate them,” he confirmed. “I’ve been going to them for a century. Balls are worse—it’s a party,” he cut me off as I took a breath. “Balls are a type of party.”

“Oh. I thought—”

“I know what you thought.” He lifted a brow and cut his eyes sideways at me. “Not what I was talking about. Stop giggling.”

“I’m not,” I lied.

Montana’s serious face was in place, his tone matching.

“We have to be professional tonight, Henry.”

My giggles dissolved, and I coughed the same uncomfortable way he did when I called him gorgeous. “Sorry. I know.”

The doors slid open, saving me from the awkward pause that hung between his scolding and my giggling. Waiting outside was the driver Montana had sent for, and we climbed into the back seat of a sporty van with a car seat still strapped into the middle. There was no baby inside, but the empty plastic basket kept me from being able to smell Montana’s cologne the whole way there. I was a little sad about that.

The traffic getting to the hotel was insufferable, the city crammed with travelers enjoying Chicago on a Saturday night. Our driver played talk radio the whole way, and I got so insanely bored and tired I fell asleep until I heard Montana thank the driver.

I mumbled a thanks, blinking sleep from my eyes, and was dumped in front of a very presidential building with tall, white columns. A wide staircase led up to the front of the ancient thing, stark lighting from below made the iconic building alive in the sunset. Vinyl flags draped over the thicker walls next to the columns advertised a virtual look into the Devonian seas, bubbles framing the bone-plated jaws of a snapping Dunkleosteus. On the opposite wall, a similar flag displayed a soaring pterosaur boasting a peek into the Cretaceous skies.

I cooed in wonder. “Montana, look at that! Can we see that? Is that inside?”

“Professional,” he reminded me, leading the way up the steps. “Manage your excitement.”

“I can barely remember the Devonian seas. Do you?”

Montana shook his head. “No. That was millions of years ago, and we were likely fish at the time. They’re not known for long memories.”



My mind was excavating long-lost memories of lives I had lived, so far back in time that all of them tasted like water and sand. Blurry visions of sunshine under a lattice of waves and bubbles floated to the surface, the rough grit of dirt under a fin.

Hot air, a blast of light, gravity pulling down on my small, wiggling form.

“I remember crawling onto land,” I told him through the memory. “The trees were so tall. It was all bark, thin branches with needle leaves. It sounded like a thousand crickets singing.”

Montana had paused on the steps, watching me.

“Are you still talking about the Devonian?”

I nodded. “It was my first time tasting air. It was heavy. Like when you open an oven.”

“You remember pulling up out of the water almost four hundred million years ago?”

I nodded again. “Yeah. I ate a millipede. It tasted amazing.”

“Huh.” He sounded astonished. “Holy shit, Henry. I think you were a tiktaalik.”

I shrugged.

“We’ll talk about that later,” he added. Then we continued up the steps.

At the entrance of the museum, more well-dressed guests were drifting inside past a sign that politely announced a private event was happening that night. Through the doors, a man wearing a suit and a stony expression was checking people in with a tablet before they were allowed all the way inside. Montana gave our names, Montana Smith and Henry Anning, and we were welcomed to the gala officially.

It was incredibly hard not to smile or act amazed by the brilliance of the museum. The building stretched long, like a layered rectangle decorated in the same white magnificence as the outside. Tall columns supported wide archways, voices

bouncing off the tiled floors and floating up to the windows set into the ceiling. A sauropod skeleton was frozen in time, its neck and tail unrestricted by the lovely length of the beautiful building.

A buffet of food was being prepared in the heart of the building, the smell of steak and other wonders permeating up from the silver domes stacked neatly beside each other. Crisp, white tablecloths had been tossed over tall tables, gathered in the middle with golden ribbons and topped with glass flowers. A bartender standing behind a wide desk shook a shaker while some people mingled under a hanging Pteranodon.

“I wish we came here yesterday,” I told Montana softly. “I want to see everything.”

He rotated his wrist and checked the time, moving past the unoccupied ticket counter and toward the sauropod.

“We have just a little time before it starts. I want to show you one thing. Then we need to get back downstairs.”

“The Devonian sea thing?” I asked hopefully, sighing as he shook his head.

“You’ll still like it.”

“Is this one of those places you saw built? It looks old.” I followed him across the tiles and up onto the second floor.

“It is old,” he confirmed over his shoulder. “I came here when it first opened in 1893. Joseph and I were in line for hours to get inside. It’s gotten some upgrades over the years, but it’s basically the same.”

“Really?” I hopped up the stairs with him, smiling at a tall Quetzalcoatlus standing proudly near some displays. “Jackson is taller than this guy.”

“Not by much,” he teased with a little smile. “This way.”

“Were there dinosaur fossils here back then?”

“Yes, there were. That time period is the fossil boom, when paleontology took off as a cultural and scientific wonder. People had never seen us before. They’d never seen full skeletons of creatures that had died millions of years ago.

Henry, most people didn't even believe the earth had been around that long. They absolutely had no idea what had lived back then. Joseph and I woke up just a few years before it really took off."

We walked through a hallway lined with fossilized seabeds, tiny trilobites stuck in clusters, little plaques listing out their species and habits. The further into the exhibit we went, the more complex life grew as we traveled through Earth's history in a stroll. Small plants and bugs turned into simple fish, then bigger fish, squid, and curled shells, the Cambrian melting into Ordovician, then slipping into Silurian and Devonian.

A couple had the same idea as us to take in the sights before the gala. A stunning woman dressed in a red dress was wearing goggles, plugged into the virtual Devonian sea experience. She was laughing and looking around, her date steadying her with a hand on her back.

"Oh my god, it's lovely!" she was saying, gasping. "Honey, you have to see this. The details are amazing."

I sighed wistfully, watching her enjoying the lost blue sea while we continued onward.

"What did people think of us back then?" I asked Montana as we moved into the Permian, a smiling dimetrodon baring its teeth at us as we passed.

"We were monsters. Things from their imaginations come to life. So many thought we were fake, a hoax. It took a long time to dispel that."

It stung to hear "monsters."

"Oh," I said, feeling a little deflated. "That's not great."

"We're scary, Henry. We're big, towering things with too many teeth, or spikes springing out of our bodies. We were just tall skeletal beasts with no soul, looking very much like things of nightmares." He smiled. "Don't take it personally. I didn't."

"It didn't hurt your feelings that they thought we were awful? It's not our fault we have too many teeth or spikes. We

have personalities. I dunno about souls because I'm still kinda confused about that concept, but we at least had feelings, and mine are definitely hurt."

"That was a hundred years ago. It's different now," he said as we moved into the Jurassic. "The public opinion has drastically changed. We're in movies, kid's cartoons, books. They make stuffed animals of us now for people to cuddle with. We're hardly still scary monsters."

I had missed the sight of Stegosaurus, and I couldn't help but crack a grin at the outdated painting of the animal fleshed out behind its skeleton.

"You were hunting fossils back when they thought we were monsters, though," I pointed out. "If they didn't like us and thought we were scary, why did you want to find more? Why bother?"

Montana turned and walked backward into the Cretaceous with a smile.

"So they'd find more of us."

I had still been mourning my lack of Devonian sea experiences, but seeing the iconic bones of my last life before waking up as a human helped bring a smile to my face. Montana slowed down just a little so I could peer over the Triceratops and Daspletosaurus, a pang of longing briefly biting into my heart.

"I miss eating Ceratopsians and Hadrosaurs so much," I lamented. "Don't tell Royal."

"Me too, and I won't."

"This is pretty amazing." I pointed at the feathered dinosaur display. "Dalton would be so happy."

"C'mon." Montana smirked, tilting his head for us to continue. "Best part is this way."

"There's something better than this?" I presented the smattering of beautiful skeletons on display. "This is pretty amazing. It makes me hungry, though."

“Something better.” He checked his watch and rounded a corner. I followed in a jog, falling behind to peer a little longer at some Oviraptor eggs.

Around a bend and through a small hallway, I saw a glass case with a slightly deflated T.rex head yawning its teeth at the world, a mural of a more modern version of the beast painted on the wall opposite of it. Beyond the case, the unmistakable shadows of a ribcage hung against the wall in a crisscross pattern.

“It’s weird seeing your head in a case,” I told him. “It looks a little crushed. Is it the real thing?”

“It’s not my head, but yes, that’s the real fossil. Sue is one of the most complete T.rexes ever found.”

“Most complete head?” I asked.

“No, most complete specimen.” Montana put his hand on my shoulder to steer me into the next room with the shadows.

Sue in their complete form was prowling an elevated stage with an open maw, spotlights shining through their bones so they took over the entire room. They were massive, a mighty thing timeless in their predatory stance. They were so close that I could see the dents cultivated into the fossils from their large muscle attachments.

I was lost for a moment, body rumbling with the memory of the bellow, a burst of lights floating around in my belly.

“This is what I wanted to show you,” Montana told me from my side, his voice soft with reverence. “This is one of the most loved fossils in the world. Sue the T.rex. I wish you could see how people look at them when they visit. Sue isn’t a monster to them. They’re history made real. Sue helps humans understand who we were.”

“Who we are,” I corrected. “Who you are.”

He gave my shoulder a squeeze. “I’m glad you got to see them. Sue means a lot to me.”

“Did you help excavate?”

“No,” he said softly. “But I went to that site looking for more of us. We didn’t find a shifter there, but Sue is a good runner-up.”

“You feel a connection to them somehow?”

Montana considered this with a hum, his hand still resting heavy on my shoulder.

“I do,” he admitted after a beat. “Maybe I knew them in another life. Maybe we crossed paths. I always feel drawn to them, like I have to see them when I come through Chicago.”

Montana was watching Sue like the old bones would give him a welcome challenge at any moment, as if the rocks of their jaw would grind together and a bellow would rip across time. Sue was a proud thing, a beast from a world we could no longer access and had only fading memories to hold on to. When I stared into the maw of something that stood under the Cretaceous sky, I could feel myself remembering a little more what it had looked like.

I swallowed, faintly tasting the air from millions of years ago.

“I think I know why you’re drawn to them. They make you remember better. Like looking back at an old, faded picture.”

“You trying to read my mind, Henry?” He pulled a smirk out of nowhere and threw it my way. I wasn’t ready for it, and it stabbed right through me.

I weakly parried with my own smile, but I was fatally wounded by how handsome he was.

“You’re not that hard to figure out.”

Montana upped the ante by laughing, a move that was completely uncalled for by how astronomically beautiful it was. It was as soft and fleeting as a rock skipping over the lake, the gentle ripples fragile in their splendor.

“You’re the only one that thinks so,” he said after the ripples were set free, the smile still making his features glow. His ocean eyes were a sunset over the Pacific, bright and all-consuming, and I counted the waves.

“You’re beautiful when you laugh,” I confessed, drunk on the sea and lost in the memory of ripples.

I didn’t get an encore of that magical skipping stone, but I did get the smallest flush across his cheeks as he huffed a skeptical chuckle.

I was forever thankful he didn’t look away.

“Henry.”

My name was a whisper, his voice never timid but maybe a little off-balance. There was a crack in the wall. That small space between his grief and my affection for him was where I hoped something would grow, a flower sprouting from concrete. It needed hope to take root, and God, I hoped, I desperately hoped, that he could feel the sunlight warming the leaves.

I reached out to keep it steady, not wanting it to fall, not wanting him to collapse into something that would smother our tiny little bloom.

His suit was soft under my fingers, his cologne woody and rich, his eyes hooded as I drew in closer.

Breath on my lips, our noses touched.

My heart pounded; the euphoric moment was Cretaceous skies and skipping stone laughter wrapped up in one.

When I felt his hand on my chest, my heart stumbled and fell as he eased me backward. It clattered all the way down my ribs, cracking to the sound of him whispering, “I’m sorry.”

The ripples were gone. The Cretaceous sky clouded over with museum lighting. The bright ocean waters closed off and darkened again.

“Sorry,” I blurted, wounded and feeling hollow. The shell of myself felt blissfully numb.

“Don’t be.” Montana gave his head a shake. “We’ll talk. I promise we’ll talk. But tonight, we need to focus on the party.”

“Yeah,” my body said. I was lost somewhere in a cage of heartbreak and embarrassment. “You’re right.” Desperately

trying to salvage something of my dignity, I looked back to the dead T.rex that had witnessed my colossal failure. “Thanks for showing me Sue.”

“Sure,” he said, almost in a whisper. “C’mon. We need to get going.”

We left Sue standing in peaceful solitude, and I floated like a ghost through the death of the dinosaurs and into the rise of mammals. Had I not been in the throes of feeling my heart crumble into sad pieces, I would have likely enjoyed the sight of the animals I never got to know. We slept through the Ice Age and missed the brilliant chance of being a Giant Ground Sloth or a Cave Bear.

That part of the Field Museum didn’t have a chance at all to be appreciated. It’s hard to pay attention when a T.rex crushed you so completely.

Through the Ice Age, we emerged victorious back into the modern era to rejoin the humans at the party. More people had started to arrive, a zoo of suits and gowns drifting around in polite conversation. My stomach rumbled at the promise of food, and I began drifting that direction when my arm was captured by the elbow.

“We can’t eat yet,” Montana explained, turning me back around. “It’ll likely be served a little later. We need to wait.”

My appetite had died a sad death when my heart had been broken, so I only nodded that I understood.

I followed along as he piloted through the throngs of people we didn’t know. Waves of false scents like perfumes and cologne stuck to them in toxic combinations I didn’t enjoy. All I wanted was some of that steak and to go see the Devonian sea, but I knew better than to voice that longing out loud.

Through the milling populace, a handsome face I did recognize made eye contact with me. Baatar gave me his trademark smirk, slipping through the throngs like a viper as he snaked his way over to us. His ink-black hair was styled in



a slicked-back wave, his suit a deep royal blue with a crimson-and-gold tie.

“Well, well,” Baatar purred, looking us over the same way I had been eyeing the meat. “You two clean up *very* nicely.”

“Baatar,” Montana greeted like a bored cat annoyed with a dead mouse.

“I see you’re in a mood.” Baatar swiveled as someone drifted by with a tray of drinks. He plucked two, passing us each one before grabbing one more for himself. “Life is too long to hold grudges against old friends.”

“Uh-huh.” Montana dug into his jacket pocket and tossed a watch to his old friend, who snatched it from the air with his free hand. Not a drop of bubbling alcohol was misplaced.

“Henry.” Baatar’s voice deepened, eyes painting over me. “How do you like the party so far?”

I tasted the bubbling drink and enjoyed the pleasant promise of further numbing my aching chest.

“This isn’t at all what I thought it would be like.”

“What were you expecting?” Montana asked.

“Well, for one.” I made another sweep of the crowd and made a pass over the ceiling. “I don’t see one sex swing.”

Montana made a spitting noise as he choked on his drink, and Baatar’s face lit up with amusement. A woman in a white dress looked over at us and gave me a very confused look before leaving the nearby table. I think someone else laughed.

“Sex swings,” Baatar echoed, delighted. “What have you been teaching him about parties, Montana?”

“Why on earth would you think there would be...” Montana paused, skipping over the words as people passed us. “*That* here?”

“That’s what he said Blanco’s parties are like,” I explained, sipping more bubbles. “Sex swings, toys, and a room where this lady stands over you with a tarp—”

“Stop.” Montana shook his head. “Stop.”

Baatar drank his whole glass and set it down, grabbing a fresh one.

“I just figured people would be in less clothing.” I shrugged. “Because of all the sex.”

A guy gave me a weird look as he walked around our table.

“Okay.” Montana also finished his drink, rubbing at his face. “Who told you that the party was going to be a damn orgy?”

I noticed I was the only one not finished with their drink, so I finished mine and burped.

“Colin.”

“Who’s Colin?” Montana probed.

“Colin McBride,” I supplied.

Montana’s face twisted into something close to annoyance or maybe disgust.

“When?”

“*The* Colin McBride?” Baatar said over Montana’s question. “The jackass movie star that tried to get Baha to fuck a dinosaur gimp?”

It was my turn to look disgusted.

“What the hell is a dinosaur gimp, and how do you fuck it?”

“My God,” a lady said to us, horrified, and took her drink and horror with her as she walked away.

“Stop. Talking. So. Loud,” Montana said through his gritted teeth. “You’re going to get us kicked out before the damn event starts.”

Baatar slipped his phone from his pocket and tapped on it, then turned the screen toward me. Displayed across it was a picture of Colin, apparently a mugshot, which was taken after he tried to liberate a fossil from a museum because his dinosaur spirit guides told him to.

“This guy?” Baatar asked, and I nodded.

“Yep.”

“Henry.” Montana gave me a look of open disbelief. “When did you talk to Colin McBride?”

“At Apex. I gave him a lap dance.”

“Jesus Christ,” Montana ground out, rubbing his temples.

“Jesus regular Christ,” I added for him, so we’d be appropriate.

“Excuse me, ‘lap dance’?” Baatar set his empty glass down with a thud. “You’re letting him just pass out lap dances to movie stars without offering it to your very dear friends first?”

“Baatar, shut up.” Montana inhaled with his eyes shut, then opened them. “Henry. Are you telling me you gave Colin McBride a lap dance, and he told you that Blanco has sex parties? Am I catching all of that?”

“Mmhm. I heard him talking about Blanco, so he told me about the parties he always goes to. I thought that was going to be this party, but this one is nice too.” I sipped more alcohol. “I think it’s probably best there’s not fucking happening when there’s food. That seems unsanitary.”

I heard someone scoff and noticed that most people had migrated away from our table.

“I cannot believe I didn’t get to see that,” Baatar was still lamenting. “I thought we were friends, Montana.”

“We’ll talk about this later,” Montana told me, setting his jaw while he took in the vacancies around us. “Dammit. Baatar, when can we get close to Blanco?”

“When he’s not being swarmed.” Baatar nodded to where a congregation of people had clumped around a tall, lanky man with a shock of white hair gelled upright. He wore a neon, sky-blue suit that shone like foil, a spiderweb of purple traveling up the left side. The oval glasses he wore covered too much of his face and were tinted a little too dark for common sense.

I couldn't help but stare, trying to unpack it all. "That's Blanco?"

"That's him." Baatar put on the watch Montana had retrieved for him. "He's a narcissistic bastard who loves being the center of attention. You're going to have to time it just right."

"He looks stupid," I said, and Montana grabbed another glass off a table.

"Henry, why don't you hang back. Baatar and I will go wedge ourselves into the conversation."

"I can go," I insisted. "I have a good icebreaker. I can ask about his orgies."

Montana turned to me, a frown set hard on his face that made him seem so tired.

"Go explore the museum. I'll send you a text when they serve the food."

I was suddenly confused, my attention jumping back to the party at hand and back to him again.

"I don't have time for that. The party is happening right now. I need to be at your side in case you need help."

"I don't need help. I can handle this." Montana adjusted his suit and gestured upstairs. "Go look at the Devonian ocean."

"I'm your partner," I argued, lost as to what was happening. "I can mingle with people, gather intel—"

"It's better if you don't talk to anyone," Montana said, the words a slap. It stung down to my core, biting into the already tender pieces of me. For a few seconds, my breath couldn't find its way back to my chest, and I saw the guilt soften Montana's eyes for a heartbeat before sinking under a stony seriousness.

He left me standing there, feeling like the burden I was, a monster in a nice suit.

A jackass who had tried to kiss him and ruined everything.

It had been months since I had felt that lost, that clueless as to what piece of the puzzle I had missed. The last time I had misstepped, I had shifted and got lost in the woods for a little while so I didn't have to face the disappointment on my brothers' faces.

I couldn't stand seeing it on Montana's. It burned like I had inhaled poison, needling through my chest and biting into my heart.

It wasn't difficult to sneak away from the party, no attention given as I peeled away and moved like a zombie upstairs. I wanted to be away, hide somewhere familiar while my poisoned heart shriveled.

What did I do wrong?

Why was it so hard to get it right? To get *anything* right with Montana?

Why couldn't I be a good partner for him?

I heard the collective applause of the abandoned party as I walked through time, escaping to something that made more sense. The blissful blue hue of the long-lost oceans of a young earth surrounded me, my body remembering the oxygen-rich, bubbling cauldron of life that was the Devonian. With the party in full swing, the interactive experience was left hanging unoccupied.

I slipped the goggles over my head, the contraption a little bulky as it engulfed my skull and closed off my vision. My hands found the controller, the cursor a small hand with the ability to digitally grasp and wave around with my movements.

It took me a few seconds to understand how it worked, the device similar to something Royal had that we played rhythm games on. Small squares of options were listed for me to choose from, and my chest seized at the site of Sue grinning at me.

There was no way I could click on anything T.rex-related. The thought of it made my eyes go foggy, and I cursed that the drops couldn't escape the mask. The mask was too tightly strapped to my head to move easily, and my wrist clacked against the plastic when I tried to wipe my cheek.

A small ping acknowledged that my selection had been made, and I blinked a few more tears from my eyes as the virtual reality transported me away from the shitty one I was currently in.

I stood on a cliff, looking out over a landscape of open ocean, the waves never-ending and glittering in the bright sun. It helped me breathe to see a close approximation of a world I once knew, and I let myself walk into the fantasy. A loud squawk beside me made me turn my head, looking eye to eye with something unexpected.

*What the hell was a pterosaur doing here?*

They wouldn't be around for millions of years. The Devonian absolutely had nothing as complicated as a flying reptile. It was a time of oceans, fish, and big-ass bugs.

Seeing a pterosaur didn't make any damn—

Oh.

*Oh shit.*

The world pitched forward, and my equilibrium went with it. The earth was too far away, moving too fast as the virtual simulation of flight sprinted me into a panic. I was too emotionally rocky to handle it, my brain a fog of confusion, heartache, and anger. The very last thing I needed in that moment was to have a computer remind me how terrifying it was to be up in the sky *where I did not belong*.

I didn't belong.

I didn't belong.

Wrong. It was wrong. Nothing smelled right.

The goggles crashed against the display as I jerked it off my head, my lungs tight as I tried desperately to get air into them.

My skin was tight. My teeth hurt as they pushed against my gums. My vision warped and changed.

God, everything smelled so bad. Plastic and polyester. Fake. False. Wrong.

Nothing looked familiar anymore. The ocean wasn't comforting; it was wrong. I was in the wrong time.

Somewhere in my head, somewhere deep and buried, I was screaming for myself to stop. It was a distant, pathetic little human voice that was lost under a roar of fear rushing into my ears.

I had to escape. I had to get to...

I ran. I felt my body cracking and easing into the shape it needed to be in to feel safe. Whatever was surrounding my skin ripped and fell away, my eyes adjusting as I raced past vaguely familiar skeletons of animals I understood. My shoulder scraped the wall as I squeezed around a hall, growing so big I could barely fit.

It smelled like rocks. Earth. It smelled familiar.

By the time I got to the T.rex, it was dead. A skeleton. But a skeleton I knew. A grave, maybe, something to be respected and honored.

I was so scared and confused. I didn't understand why I didn't fit right.

I needed to find Him, but I didn't know how. He was somewhere else, and I was trapped. I didn't fit. I didn't belong there.

Lost, confused, and scared, I lay down by the skeleton and cried.

I cried for Him to find me.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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## MONTANA

I felt horrible.

I hadn't meant for the words to come out harshly, but they landed with a heat I hadn't been expecting. I could give myself a mountain of excuses, attribute it to the stress of the trip or even something as trivial as being hungry. If I was being honest with myself, all of those passable reasons why I acted like a jackass were pathetic.

I knew exactly why I had acted like such a damn fool.

That moment had been a defining one, and it had rocked me more than I had realized. Feeling his hand on my chest was an anchor, grounding me into the present instead of lost in a sea of planning, grief and memories. For a couple of heartbeats, I was standing still, no longer drifting like a ghost. His breath on my lips, the subtle heat of his body next to mine, the crisp bite of his cologne and herbal shampoo. The promise of a connection, a tangible, physical connection to a handsome man was a desperate breath I had needed so, so badly.

I was so lonely. I wanted to kiss him, feel him, lean into the possibility of being happy—

And that scared the absolute shit out of me.

I felt the guilt and the panic like acid.

I hurt Henry. I saw it in his honest, beautiful eyes.

He could do so much better than a ruined old thing like me. He could find someone not chewed up by loss and

imperfections, someone without a century of baggage and heartache.

I would need to make it up to him somehow, in some way. I would apologize and make it right.

I would show him that life would be better with someone else.

For the time being, I needed to focus, get my head back into the game.

Blanco was surrounded by vultures picking at his attention, fake laughing at jokes and fishing for conversation. The original plan had been to wait until after drinks, but the way the attendees had reacted to us sped up the momentum. It wasn't a large enough party for us to blend into the background.

They'd talk. The topic of orgies and ladies with tarps would start circulating, which meant we needed to strike.

Baatar, to his credit, was damn good at playing defense while we inched our way through the pecking order. He charmed, complimented, distracted people with polite conversation so I could slip ahead of them. Without him, it would have been a much slower process to weasel our way through and still seem casual.

Blanco held himself like a man born into status. A hundred years ago, he would have been a man who funded naturalistic expeditions to far-flung corners of the earth he expected no humans actually lived in, demanding a zebra pelt. A century later, he wore a suit that cost more than my truck and threw galas to keep people from socially bombing his art galleries.

His laugh reminded me of a man who used to sift for gossip.

Fredrick. That was his name. God, it had been years since I thought of that man. At least Fredrick had the honesty to admit he was a no-good gossip and didn't hide behind a wall of people.

Blanco stood with his weight on one hip, the other angled in like he was a ballet dancer stuck watching mediocre

performances. The snippets of conversations I could piece together seemed to be mostly complaining, and he waved away the free drinks offered to him like they were diseased. Baatar had been swept up keeping a gaggle of people entertained to create an opening for me, so I circled like a shark for one of the vultures to be dismissed or abandoned.

There was a shift in the sea, the crowd swaying to the right as Blanco floated over to the bar. The pocket in front of me parted, and I stepped through in order to get within his eyesight.

I had been a human for over a hundred years at that point and spent nearly all of my time in that form compared to the prehistoric one waiting under my skin. The way I viewed reality was from a human perspective; how I managed problems, cultivated relationships, and handled myself was all through the humanity that was part of me.

Every once in a while, something or someone, got the attention of my other side.

And it was rarely a good thing.

A stranger had been snaking his way to the same goal as I had, waiting for just the right time to pounce. We both moved at the same time, taking the chance to fill in the space with our presence in order to get closer. He turned his head to look at me in a way that wasn't the casual annoyance of a person scooting in to schmooze.

He was hunting.

His eyes told me to stay away from his prey, to back down.

The coldness behind the hazel eyes was like staring into an empty void, a darkness swallowing them that was nothing animal and all vicious human. It was the soulless stare that only a very specific type of person can have, usually those who act without empathy or kindness.

I felt my skin tighten, a wash of awareness trying to pull an eleven-thousand-pound weapon loose to keep him away from me.

Whatever he had seen reflected back in my eyes didn't bother him at all, and he motioned for me to go ahead when Blanco had an opening beside him.

My instincts whispered that he was wrong, off somehow, to keep my eyes on him, but I couldn't. I had to take my opportunity when it was presented and jump on the chance to get to Blanco. I moved quickly, sliding up to Blanco's left side, when I felt the trap snap closed.

The stranger, whoever he was, knocked my elbow so the champagne I was holding upended onto Blanco's shoe. The splatter was as loud as a damn gunshot.

About three people immediately bent down to clean it, but Blanco didn't even acknowledge the gesture. The large, Elton John glasses on his face were removed with one quick motion. His lips vanished into the scowl on his face.

"Blanco, I'm sorry to be meeting you like this—"

"Who the fuck are you?" His eyes flicked up and down. "I didn't invite you."

"No, you didn't. I'm Montana Smith." I tried for a handshake, but he didn't break his glare. "I'm a collector of Prehistoric and Neolithic artifacts, and I was hoping to discuss business with you."

"I'm not discussing business tonight. This is a party, Montana. And you just spilled shitty champagne on my Prada shoes."

"Let me buy you a drink for your trouble," I tried. "Maybe a bottle of less shitty champagne."

"You can fuck off for my trouble." He replaced his sunglasses. "Whoever you came with can fuck off with you."

Before I could open my mouth again, he was gone, turned away to get swallowed up by people waiting in line to kiss his ass.

The stranger floated with him, never once looking back at the damage he had caused.

My shoulders dropped as I let my breath leave me in a heavy burst. All this work to be told off and dismissed in two seconds. We had bought suits for this night. Hell, we had to make a sizeable donation to get on the roster, even after Baatar's help.

I had hurt Henry's feelings for nothing. Not even a chance of getting in with Blanco.

"I'm an asshole," I told Baatar as he came to stand next to me. "I was so sure I could get him to talk to me."

"You are an asshole," he agreed sympathetically. "But it's not because you were sure of yourself. I've seen you work your magic on pricks before. Blanco is just a very needling, self-centered prick. I had to meet him four times for him to even remember we had met before. He still doesn't know my name, and we do millions of dollars in business together yearly."

"Do you know who that guy is?" I nodded into the crowd and sent Baatar's eyes after my target. "Short guy, shaved head, and hazel eyes?"

He squinted. "No. Should I?"

"He knocked my glass when I got close to Blanco. He's why I spilled the drink."

"That doesn't shock me. This crowd can be ruthless."

I swallowed down the urge to tell him that this stranger wasn't exactly the same crowd he was talking about. I'd be amazed if the guy didn't have a couple bodies buried in a field somewhere.

"What's the likelihood he'll forgive me for the shoe thing?" I already knew the answer, but I still rubbed my temple as Baatar hissed through his teeth.

"Not great."

"I need another way of getting to his fossils." I set down the traitorous glass of champagne on a nearby table. "Where does he go for those after-parties you were talking about?"

“His loft downtown, but it’s invite only, Montana. You’re not going to be able to get inside without him knowing about it.”

“I wasn’t planning on being invited,” I said. “Do you have an address? Floor plan?”

“You mean break in? Too risky,” Baatar warned, his expression dire. “He always has people there. Blanco has these groupies that stay at his loft all the time. I’ve dropped by at all times of the day to do business, and there’s always a mini party brewing. Unless you can turn invisible, you’re not going to get in undetected.”

It was not the information I wanted to hear.

That nugget of information Baatar had been holding on to destroyed my backup plan and my backup plan’s backup plan. I hadn’t expected people to be at this guy’s place at all hours of the day. We were going to have to go back to the drawing board.

“I have to ask.” Baatar narrowed his eyes a fraction. “What happened between you and our sweet Henry?”

“Nothing happened.” I tried to leave it there, but Baatar rolled his eyes through my attempted dodge. “We had a... misunderstanding about our relationship.”

“You are desperately romantic, you know that?”

“Baatar, I’m really not in the mood. This has been a shitty night.” I pressed my fingers to my temple and rubbed away the slice of pain cutting my patience thin.

For a naive few seconds, I took his silence for acknowledgement that I didn’t want to keep talking about what had happened, but I was then presented with a small black-and-white photograph that was tugged out of the guts of his wallet. He held it out by the corner, the scrap delicate inside of a protected laminated jacket. Even across time, a different haircut and Victorian clothing, Baatar stared forward with the iconic stoic expression of a man standing still for a picture.

Beside him was a beautiful woman in a gown, a braid tossed over one shoulder. A small, cheeky smile played on her lips.

A knot of guilt formed in my chest. I had never known about her. I didn't think I had ever asked.

"She's beautiful," I eventually said.

"She was." Baatar accepted the photo back, sliding it back into his wallet. "We were married forty years. Nothing in the grand scheme of our lives, but it was a lifetime to me. My first love, but not my last."

"I'm sorry you lost her."

"Me too. I miss her dearly. I keep her in my heart and continue to love her until there's nothing left of me." He met my eyes, an inkwell of understanding I hadn't ever noticed before. "That's what we do with those we love. We remember them, keep them close, and continue to live."

"I wish it was that simple," I said, bruised and ashamed. "To not feel like a ruined man stained by mistakes and a permanently broken heart."

"Nothing is ever broken, my friend. Just changed." He slipped his wallet back into his jacket and gave me a knowing smile. "That shape of you now is just as valid. You can't expect this new version of you to need or want the same things as the previous one. Don't dismiss whatever your instincts are telling you."

"When the hell did you get insightful?" I pressed, annoyed with his unexpected sage advice. "You've been a sarcastic, insufferable flirt that constantly fucks me over for profit for over fifteen years."

"You didn't need my advice until now." He shrugged. "You're a friend."

"You fuck all your friends over for profit and make them get your watches back from scorned lovers at strip clubs?"

"Only my *best* friends." Baatar winked.

My head was throbbing with the overload of new information about a man I thought I knew very well, as well as the events of the night thus far. I gave both temples a quick rub with my fingers before pulling my posture back straight.

“I appreciate what you’re trying to say,” I told him, feeling too drained to continue. “But I have my own way of navigating things. And Henry, he’s...”

“Handsome? Sexy? A hot, thick cupcake with little hearts in his eyes for you who’s also immortal and a tyrannosaur? Did I miss something?”

“Baatar,” I warned.

“Montana,” he warned back.

“I need a real drink,” I mumbled. “Whiskey. Neat. Maybe a—”

The world paused.

Rather, the *human* world paused.

A sound I hadn’t heard since the sky had been ripped apart by a falling rock radiated out from the belly of the museum, rushing up my spine and seizing hold of my brain. It had been like the damn shower thing all over again, a primal urge that flipped an override switch in my mind and caused my humanity to take a back seat.

This time it wasn’t a mating call. It wasn’t a wonderful, *delicious* vibration that made me stupid and jump to conclusions.

It was fear.

It was the higher-pitched whine of danger, something wrong, needing help.

The crowd around us paused for just a moment, angling their attention toward where it had come from. Distantly, I managed to peer over the shoulder of the beast driving my body to take note that they were laughing, brushing the noise off as an interactive exhibit gone rogue.

But I knew that it was very, very real.



I moved, calm but quick, stalking in my slow human form because I knew I wouldn't be able to make it up the stairs in my other one. The sound was growing quiet again, like the last breath of something trying to hide, and I broke into a run once I saw the prehistoric entrance.

My bones wanted to stretch, to bend and expand, my body thrumming with the urge to grow and bellow back that I was on my way. I was coming. Whatever was causing him to be scared, I'd kill it. I'd crush it with my jaws and rip it in half.

I couldn't hear his call anymore. It had gone so quiet.

Goddammit, my tiny form was so useless. I wasn't moving fast enough.

A blur of time periods rushed past me, my sprint through the history of the earth a long stretch of madness keeping me from Henry. I couldn't smell him. I couldn't hear him.

When I rounded the corner into Sue's lair, I nearly bounced off the wall from recklessly speeding through the tight corridors and came to a stop in front of him.

Henry was lying beside the silent skeleton of a long-dead T.rex, the length of his body running from one end of the room and into the next. He'd wedged himself between Sue's display and the neighboring information across from it, tiny arms tucked under his chest like a cat. His nostrils flared when I entered, his golden eyes opening.

Standing there, taking in the sight of a grown Albertosaurus squeezed into Sue's exhibit like a theropod hot dog, caused several things to misfire in my head.

One, I couldn't help but wonder how the hell he did that.

Two, seeing the bones next to a living, breathing cousin was oddly surreal, and I marveled at the change some skin and muscles did to an animal structure.

And finally—*oh my fucking, God we needed to leave.*

"Henry," I said as calmly as I could, my body fighting between the equally powerful urges to panic at the severity of

the situation while simultaneously murder-eating the nebulous thing making Henry sad. “I need you to shift down to human.”

The big puppy tyrannosaur shifted his body from side to side, trying to work his feet under him to stand. His effort was ambitious and surprisingly nimble considering how thick of an animal he was. His hip rolled to the side, causing something to pop and break on the info center across from Sue’s fossils.

The noise made him lift his head in alarm, trying to crane over his shoulder to see the damage.

I cringed at the sound. “Henry! Stop moving!”

He looked down at me, maw opening and shutting as he whined.

“You’re too big to move around. And look,” I pointed at where his belly was pushed against Sue’s platform. “If you move the wrong way, you’re going to knock into Sue.”

A panicked whine, his body shuffling and trying to crawl backward.

“Henry! No. Hey. Look at me.” I waved for him to bring his face down to my level. “Lie down. Focus on breathing. We need to get you calm so you can ease back into human form. C’mere.”

A shorter, less sorrowful bellow escaped him, and he inched forward enough to push his nose into my stomach. His inhale was a rush of warm air, the exhale a blast of molten breath.

I placed my palm on his nose, the pebbly skin dry and familiar, and gave him a slow, careful pet down the muzzle. Our noses were sensitive, the gesture a calming feeling of family, of safety. It was hard to replicate as a small human, and for a very alarming but fleeting moment, I was saddened I couldn’t shift and place my muzzle against his properly.

Now that was...

Significant.

The thought of expressing that to him in my true form sat unnervingly well in my belly, considering that Joseph was the

only other tyrannosaur I'd done such an intimate thing with before.

It was the tyrannosaur equivalent of a nose kiss—like rubbing your nose together with someone. It was just as adorable but not something you sort of pass out to people you're not extremely involved with. At least I sure as hell didn't.

I had touched Henry's snout like it was the most normal thing in the world, and I shoved it into false reality that I was doing what was necessary to calm him down.

I knew it was a goddamn lie, though.

Henry breathed slowly, eyes falling shut.

"You're okay," I told him, feeling the calming sighs of a massive theropod against my suit. "You're safe with me."

There was another noise, something soft like a wistful sigh, before the familiar popping began from inside of his body. The muscle-deep sound of joints cracking and resetting, paired with the shrinking of bone and mass, was the most beautiful thing in the world when you had a giant *Albertosaurus* pressed up against a beloved fossil exhibit.

Henry shrank down to his human form, flushed and shaking, jaw set to keep his teeth from chattering.

"I'm sorry—I'm sorry, Montana," he managed, gripping his arms to hold himself still. "Pterosaurs and...it was high up. I got confused..." His eyes squeezed shut as I tossed my jacket over his shoulders. "I—I had to get to something familiar."

"I thought the interactive was of the ocean?"

"M-me too." He shivered, his body fighting itself. His hair was still a dark green, teeth a bit too sharp. "Instead, it just had...the ground...it..."

He shuddered, and I heard a very terrifying pop going in the wrong direction.

Henry exhaled as I placed our brows together, my hand on his hammering heart.

“You remember when I did this last?” I asked him, and he nodded against me. “You had just arrived at the house. You were scared. You couldn’t talk. You were able to keep yourself from shifting then. You can do that now. You’re here, with me, on the ground. We’re right here, right now. You’re safe.”

Henry’s breathing struggled, pulse racing, skin hot and slick with sweat. The hair across his skin was rough under my fingers; his breath smelled like champagne as it crashed against my lips.

“I wanted to find you,” he said in a rush. “I wanted to feel safe, and I couldn’t find you.”

“I know. I heard you call for me.” I swallowed the swell of protectiveness that was flooding my system. “You can always call for me. I promise I’m not far—”

“I do. I do all the time.” His voice shook; his body drew in closer to mine. “You leave for long stretches, and I miss you. I go out into the woods at home, and I call for you. I know you can’t hear me, but I always hope you answer.”

That blurted admission was a surgical strike to the heart, sliced open and twisted for good measure.

I tried to say something, tried to vocalize how poignant it was that he had called for me in the same way I called to a ghost most hunts, but the feeling of someone standing nearby slammed me back into reality.

I whirled and tried to shield Henry’s very naked body, assuming it was someone drifting in from the gala downstairs.

Baatar strolled over with a folded-up pair of sweats, a hoodie, some flip-flops and a hat. The Field Museum’s logo was on all of them, price tags still hanging on by small plastic strings.

“I figured you for a large.” Baatar swept a glance over Henry. “Looks like I was right.”

“My suit...?” Henry’s eyebrows had pitched hopeful, but fell as Baatar shook his head.

“Sorry, handsome. That lovely piece is in shreds. I gathered them all up and tossed them when I ran to grab you some replacements from the giftshop.” Baatar turned his eyes to me. “I assume you two want to make a hasty getaway.”

“You assume correctly. Henry, get dressed. We need to get out of here before someone sees you.”

“What about Blanco?” Henry tugged the sweats on first, much to Baatar’s dismay.

“We’re not going to get that invite tonight.”

“He didn’t like Montana,” Baatar unhelpfully added. “He spilled champagne on his foot.”

Henry’s head popped out of a hoodie. “And now he doesn’t like you?”

“Basically.”

“Definitely,” Baatar added again, like an asshole, and grinned as I cut him a look. “You know where the back exit is?”

“Yes, I can handle it.” I looked to Henry, who slipped on his shoes and gave me a thumbs-up. “Thanks for the assist, Baatar. I no longer want to punch you for the watch thing.”

“What are friends for?” Baatar said breezily, but I knew that was code for “I’ll never let you forget this, and I will cash this in sometime.”

We had to move carefully out of the prehistoric, keeping a swift pace while still being mindful of unexpected, wandering partygoers. The allure of Blanco had been strong enough to keep the party orbiting around him for the most part, but the rebuffed or ignored guests had started to drift out from the circle.

We held our position upstairs while I called Royal, watching the stragglers in case they started to drift our way.

“Hey, Boss,” Royal answered.

“Calgary,” I used his codename to let him know the situation was serious. “I need the fire exit alarms silenced and

any surveillance erased from the Field Museum.”

“On it now. You need it wiped for the whole day?”

“The past two hours to be safe. Just the area around Sue.”

Royal’s typing filled the silence for a few seconds before he spoke again.

“Should I look for anything specific?”

“You’ll know it when you see it,” I hedged. “How are we looking on the exits?”

“Exits are silenced. If you’re still by Sue, I can guide you to the nearest one.”

“No need.” I motioned for Henry to follow as we made our way down the fire exit stairs. The night air greeted us with a blast of cold, and I finally took a well-needed, calming breath.

“Oh—holy shit!” Royal said over the phone. “He shifted right in the middle of—”

“Erased,” I repeated. “All of it.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice. It’s being pulled from cloud storage too.”

“Good. Make sure the security is back in place in ten minutes.”

“Got it, Boss.”

I hung up after his confirmation and steered us away from the museum as quickly as possible without drawing too much attention. Henry rubbed at his arms through his hoodie, head down.

“What do we do now?” he asked after walking in silence for a beat.

I wasn’t sure if he had meant the mission or what had transpired between us, and I took the road of least resistance for the sake of my pounding head.

“I had hoped we’d get an invite back to his place.” I took off my jacket and handed it to him. “He’s known to throw after-parties when he has events. His loft downtown is where

he usually takes people, but it's apparently constantly occupied, so we can't try and break in."

He tossed the jacket around his shoulders and needled his brows in thought.

"We'll head back to the condo and reevaluate," I said. "We'll need to try and find a floor plan of the condo. If we can cut the lights, knock out the security system—" I paused as Henry caught my arm, golden eyes alive.

"Montana." He smiled, and I felt my heart thump. "I know how we can get into that party."

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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## MONTANA

“Are you sure you don’t want to change?”

Henry handed me my jacket back as we neared Blanco’s condo, the sharp wind stabbing through the light fabric of my shirt. The night had fallen into the old winter habits, forgetting completely that it was supposed to be early spring. The shift in the atmosphere flavored the air differently, a crisper scent sticking to the back of my nose. Henry’s breath left faint wisps, not committing fully to a fog, lingering for just a second before evaporating into nothing.

“I don’t want to waste time,” he said over his shoulder, taking the lead up zigzag pathways through perfect shrubbery. “It won’t matter what I’m wearing.”

“I think it might.” I scanned the light gray ensemble of museum gift shop attire, refusing to acknowledge how well it fit around his backside. “Blanco seemed like a guy who had an eye for fashion, which means his friends likely do as well.”

“We don’t need to impress them, just Colin.” Henry lifted his head up to take in the full view of the ridiculously large condo perched like a gargoyle over the garden. The building was closer to a mini-mansion than a condo, with all the hip, geometric angles that gave it a futuristic, pretentious aesthetic. A steady drumbeat was pulsing from the building’s heart, the tinted glass wrapping the perimeter black, fading into purple, then black again.

We strolled up the pathway through an open gate, around the garden with a heated pond that seemed to be home to three

magnificent koi fish and a school of cigarette butts. A woman strolled by in what I could only describe as a bundle of string wrapped around her body in a mild attempt at shielding anything private, and Henry and I exchanged looks of surprise. Not by the attire, but just how well she was handling the cold.

She didn't even shiver, and I was freezing. It was impressive.

When we approached the actual entrance to Blanco's bizarre abode, the string woman was waved inside by a slab of meat with a coat on. A group of people were crowded by the door, offering proof of an invite or getting ignored completely. Apparently, these after-parties were legendary enough that the locals in the know would creep over during the weekend hoping to somehow slip inside and enjoy the festivities.

As the door opened to allow the string woman in, a snapshot of the party inside burst free like a gunshot. Noise, music, laughter, and lights poured out for a second, and I felt a headache setting up shop at the base of my skull waiting for the party to get started.

Henry looked at me as I touched his elbow, but didn't hold my gaze long.

"Are you up for this?" I gave his arm a gentle squeeze and tried not to flinch as he retracted it.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

I fought the urge to try and reach for him again.

"We need a plan," I said. "When we get up to the door, we'll need to figure out a way to distract Colin or talk him into inviting us inside."

"I have a plan. C'mon."

He moved before I could continue, snaking through the crowd like a predator on the prowl. A pang of guilt kept me from reacting like I normally would, since going in half-cocked and unorganized was dangerous. It was obvious he was wounded, and I couldn't blame him. Despite my better judgment, I let him proceed with whatever idea he had.

His target was standing with a handful of professional groupies, all perfectly trained to laugh on command when Colin did his best attempts at being clever. I followed through the clouds of candy-scented vapes, ready to swoop in. I had failed at trying to impress Blanco earlier, but Colin was a much easier target. Colin didn't have a reason to hate me yet, and I was luckily not holding any liquid.

Colin was in the middle of telling an obviously embellished story about his interaction with Leonardo DiCaprio when he pushed his sunglasses down his nose. His eyes landed squarely on Henry, who had pressed through the groupies like he was meant to be there. The grin that slithered over Colin's face was the only honest thing I'd ever seen from the man, and it was so transparently horny that I almost cringed.

"Henry," Colin sang, surprising me. How the hell had he known Henry's name?

I knew Henry had...well.

Danced for him. Whatever that meant.

Wait.

*Did Henry actually know how to lap dance?*

My mind decided it was time to render that image right there and then, striking me stupid for a second. Henry grinding his hips and rolling his back in those tight, stripper pants—

I coughed, a little louder than I meant to, and felt heat creep up my neck.

What the *hell* was wrong with me?

Was I really that thrown off by what happened earlier?  
Was I that starved for contact?

"Colin," Henry purred. Actually *purred* in a seductive way I hadn't been ready for. "I'd hoped to find you here."

"I went back to Apex yesterday. Did you quit or something?" Colin's hand found a little cozy home right at the small of Henry's back.

It was not appropriate.

What was further upsetting was how Henry's arm looped Colin's waist, fingers resting right at the hem of Colin's toddler-sized shirt stretched over his torso.

"Yeah, I quit," Henry told him. "That place wasn't for me. I like to keep my options open."

Henry's fingers moved, sly and devious, running just under the shirt so a fingertip trailed across a strip of skin.

Oh. He was good.

*Henry* was good at flirting. No, not flirting—seducing. Henry, Mr. Sweet I Take Care Of Plants, was getting a movie star to eat out of the palm of his hand with a playful touch.

My mind ballooned in several directions at once. Who had taught him that? Why was he so good at it?

I wrestled with my emotions, sorting them in a silent rage as I watched Henry's middle finger run in a soft circle on Colin's hip. Colin had leaned over to listen as Henry whispered into his ear, a grin curling his lips. The man was butter, melting all over Henry with whatever was being promised.

I should have been impressed. Reflecting on the moment, I should have been professionally impressed that Henry knew how to play the man like he'd been taught. I'd flirted to get information before. It wasn't anything new.

I had never been that sultry about it.

Nor had I ever whispered something to someone and made them bite their lip in anticipation.

I hadn't realized how tightly I had been clenching my fists until I felt the bite of my nails against my palm, and I shifted my molars in annoyance with myself. Henry was doing his job. We needed to get inside, and he was playing the game.

It was fine.

I was fine.

My emotions were just too wound up from earlier with the surprise Albertosaurus in Sue's exhibit and the almost-kiss...

I was totally fine.

My bliss had been very well maintained and steady until it suddenly wasn't, and I found myself shoving through the ranks of Colin's entourage to slap his hand away from where it had been squeezing Henry's ass.

I was looming over a surprised human, who was going cross-eyed as I very threateningly wagged a finger at him.

"Not appropriate," I growled, my back molars sliding into a sharp point. "Do that again and I'll rip your arm off."

"Wow," Colin breathed out in a rush. "Yes, sir."

"This is Montana." Henry was introducing me as if I had already been mentioned. "As promised, he is a little intense."

"No kidding." Colin pulled his sunglasses down his nose and swept his eyes over me. "You ever been in a latex dinosaur costume before?"

I adjusted my jaw so my teeth would retract.

"You couldn't handle me, McBride."

"That's what he said," Colin snorted, reaching to touch Henry, then retracting his hand with a cough. He failed at making it seem like it had been his idea all along. "I'm getting you two drunk tonight. Hey, doorman! Me and my fans are coming in."

The herd moved with him as he began the migration to the door, and Henry fell into step beside me. With the heat of my anger starting to cool, the icy claw of embarrassment lifted to drum its fingers down my back. Henry wasn't looking my way, so he missed my glance.

"Sorry," I told him as we followed the flock of McBride's gaggle. "It just pisses me off to see someone acting like that."

"Acting like what?"

"He grabbed you." I sounded the correct level of offended, which Henry was not matching. "You're alright with random

guys grabbing you?”

“When I’m flirting with them.” He looked my way finally, eyebrows lifted. “Yes.”

“Speaking of.” I had to start yelling over the noise. “Who taught you to flirt like that?”

Henry shrugged a shoulder and said simply, “Boys.”

My demand of knowing “Which boys?” was swallowed by the all-consuming level of nightclub bass and electric nonsense as we entered Blanco’s lair. Colin’s groupies peeled off in seven directions. The condo, sprinkled with bodies dancing, mingling, and sitting perched on expensive furniture, greeted us like a kick in the head. The volume was intense, dipping low every so often as the track shifted to something else just as repetitive and harsh as the last one.

It smelled like perfume-soaked sweat stains and spilled wine. And someone had the absolute nerve to be eating fast food somewhere in the mix. The entire situation was an assault on my senses.

Even in the dark, obnoxious lighting, the place was a sleek kind of elegance that only a rich art guy could cultivate. I was more impressed by how clean everything looked despite the amount of drunk people wobbling around.

The condo was open floor, with plenty of room for people to wander around in without bouncing off of a dancing set of limbs flailing about. Hallways dipped off from the main living room connected to a marvelous kitchen, and I started my slow journey to go explore.

One of those rooms likely had the fossil inside of it. We had to find it.

Optimally, we had to find it before Blanco showed up and saw the asshole who spilled champagne on his shoe hanging out in his house.

Henry tilted his head my way as I touched his side, his eyes watching Colin.

“We need to find the fossil room,” I yelled over the noise. “Has Colin seen it before?”

Henry nodded. “I can ask him to show us, but he’ll be ‘inappropriate.’ He’ll absolutely start taking off clothing.”

“Let’s find it without him then,” I suggested. “How big can this place be?”

Henry lifted his eyes to the upper floor. “I’ll check up. You take downstairs.”

“Meet back here with whatever you find.” I caught his arm before he could peel away. “We good, Horseshoe?”

I had been hoping his goofy nickname would bring a smile to his face, his expression staying serious too long. It stung to see him flinch like it had been a slap, and he nodded with a detached, cold professionalism I didn’t like at all.

He left me standing in a storm of moving people, feeling stuck in one place.

It took an act of will to uproot myself from the ground and move, trailing to the first hallway bending off from the kitchen. Beautifully framed paintings—no doubt originals—adorned the walls leading to one of the bathrooms and master bedroom. I had been optimistic that something as rare and brag-worthy as a shifter fossil would be proudly displayed in the bedroom. Instead of such a treasure, I found more paintings, some rather phallic-looking sculptures, and two men chatting while doing lines of coke.

I gave the bedroom a sweep, politely declined the gentlemen’s offer of drugs, and tried another hallway. The next room that I had to visit was the most confusing pairing of things I had ever seen. I hadn’t batted an eye at the office space/painting studio, which was chic and smelled like acrylic. That one made sense and was almost pleasant, except that I had to pretend not to hear a woman crying about an ex under a desk.

It was the gym/sex dungeon that had thrown me for a loop.

Seeing a foldable treadmill parked next to one of those large X’s with the handcuffs attached had me standing in the

room longer out of sheer confusion. Who was this room for? Did he use it for both things at the same time? Was the kinky sex part of the work out, or was the treadmill part of the kink?

I'd never know, and that's what frustrated me the most.

I had to step around a neatly folded tarp next to the door, and I didn't stick around to meet the woman who used it.

My pocket buzzed, and I pulled my phone free to see if it was Henry. It was a notification waiting patiently for me to open and ruin my damn night.

The message from Ruben was simple, like a sniper shot to the heart.

*"Found the fossil. It's a fake. Up to you now, Jesus Rex."*

"Fuck." I turned the screen off and shut my eyes. The thumping beat of the music was a hammer against my skull, my pulse thick and jaw tight.

I knew it had been too good to be true. I *knew* two were too lucky.

I felt stupid for being hopeful about it to begin with, the cold realization that we were truly the only hope to finding something tangible steeling my resolve.

We *had* to locate that damn fossil, and I hoped to God it was real. If it wasn't—if these were both fakes—I didn't know how I was going to break it to the boys.

Or worse, if it was real, and we failed...

A pinch started to form behind my eye as I found myself back in the middle of a loud dance floor with nothing to show. There was no sign of the fossil, and the night was growing longer. It had been a good two hours since we had left the party back at the Field Museum, and I doubted that the gala would still be going this late. When Henry descended the stairs holding something in his arms, my heart did its best to lodge itself into my throat.

I met him at the stairs, my excitement waning with each step he took. He was about halfway down before I realized



what he was holding was far from the life-changing, priceless piece of ancient history we'd been charged with retrieving.

"Why are you holding a bamboo plant?"

This was the wrong thing to say, as Henry looked like I had personally offended his child, which he was holding against his chest.

"This is an *orchid*, Montana."

"Henry." I tried again, reining in the urge to roll my eyes. "Why are you holding an orchid?"

"He has a whole collection of plants up there that are dying. Look at this one. Do you know how rare and amazing this plant is, and this asshole has it in a *pot* with *soil*? It's under-watered. Its leaves are dying." Henry shifted the pot in his arms, lifting a frail leaf with the side of a finger. "See? What kind of monster keeps plants and just watches them slowly die?"

"You can't steal a plant out of Blanco's house." I nodded up the stairs. "Go put it back."

"If we can smuggle out a fossil, we can smuggle out a sun orchid on the verge of death." He squared his shoulders and hugged the plant protectively. "Did you find the fossil?"

"No." I felt my temples pounding, my nerves a bunched fist. "It's not here."

"It has to be," Henry yelled back as the music lifted in volume. "Colin said Blanco has fossils here."

"Colin is an idiot trying to get into your pants."

"He wasn't lying," Henry confirmed. "He's really bad at lying. I could tell when he talked about his bank account and dick size. If I can talk to him, I can get him to tell me where they were."

I checked my watch and reluctantly asked, "Where is he?"

Henry swept the crowd, zeroing in on something before cussing.

I followed his eyeline, peering over the bouncing dancing bodies to see where Colin was. He stood with his hand planted on a wall, yammering on and on to a very passively interested Blanco trying to walk past him.

“Shit.” I took Henry by the elbow and lead us away from the stairs, analyzing the best place to hide. Each of the rooms was a dead end if he were to walk inside, and the kitchen was too exposed.

“You think he’s still mad about the champagne thing?” Henry yelled over the music.

“I would assume so.” I made a point of looking at his kidnapped plant. “I think he’d be annoyed with that too.”

“What do we do?”

“We can’t leave without the fossil. If it’s here somewhere, we’ll find it.” I craned over my shoulder, grumbling as Blanco made his way further inside. The crowd moved like a flight of birds, swaying around him as he demanded attention with his presence. The lights around us brightened, exposing us further.

We couldn’t get caught now, not when we were so damn close.

Blanco had to have the fossil somewhere here, somewhere we overlooked. We just needed a little more time.

I pulled Henry with me as we slipped into the sway of the crowd, taking refuge in the mass of dancing people that had taken over the living room. The lights shifted, dimming further, the pulse of the beat slowing into a rhythmic wave rather than a hyper machine gun. People bunched together, dancing slowing to match the tempo, and I watched Blanco travel through the crowd.

Someone stopped him just a few feet from us, talking to him over the music, and I saw him begin to swivel his head around on a mission to find something—or someone. He looked annoyed, brows bunched, mouth set in a line that made his face look like a cartoon drawing. He knew something was out of place, that something was wrong.

I put my arms around Henry's shoulders and piloted him around, shielding him and his stolen plant with my back to Blanco's eyeline.

"Blend in," I told him.

The plant was moved to his hip where it sat with ease; his free hand slipped under my jacket to rest at my hip. The weight of it was glorious and familiar, as was the heat that bled through the fabric.

The beat was easy to follow, easy to move my body to, and we fell into step with the other people around us clinging to their partners. Henry flowed with me, relaxed and fluid, golden eyes peering behind me with focus even though he moved like he was captured by the beat.

Only Henry could move like sex while holding a heisted houseplant.

The ease with which he fell into the rhythm, the way he touched me as he danced, how he tilted his head back to absorb the trance of the music, provided all the evidence I needed.

"You've done this before," I said, not surprised when he looked guilty. "You've been to clubs."

"Just once," he confessed with a wince. "I was supposed to keep it secret. Dalton, Royal, and Blaise took me to a gay club a few months ago. Don't be mad."

"They were not supposed to be taking you to clubs."

"I liked it." He smirked. "I hadn't danced for a mate in sixty-five million years."

"*Mate?*"

"It was fun," he continued, leaning in closer to ease the strain on his voice. His breath touched my ear. The plant at his hip lost a leaf as he moved. "Do you dance?"

"I haven't in years." I adjusted my arms around his shoulders to account for our closer proximity and dropped one to rest near his hip below his plant. "Just how many 'mates' did you rack up that night?"

Henry considered it, gold rolling up and over before landing back on me.

“Does it still count if it was just a blowjob?”

I was thankful it was loud in the damn condo because the choked noise I made could not have been flattering.

“I don’t know,” I managed after recovering. “I can’t believe they took you to a club. And I can’t believe you’re a secret maneater.” I tapped the plant’s ceramic vase. “Who liberates orchids from abusive relationships.”

A smirk brightened his features, and I fell victim to mirroring it. I was happy to see it again. I had been worried I ruined any chance of it reappearing.

“I’m glad you got to know me better.” The hand at my hip tightened just a fraction; little bolts of lightning danced up my side. We had never found ourselves in a situation that allowed me the freedom to stare into his eyes in such an intimate way. I had known him a year and three weeks and never noticed until we were hiding from an eccentric fossil collector that there were flecks of caramel at the outer rims of his eyes.

It was a small piece of him I never noticed, completing the puzzle a little more.

The bright lights around us flashed into a striped pattern, casting a crisscross design across his features. Yellow, blue, and purple ran down his jaw and neck, slipped across his lips where his teeth pulled at the bottom one. Vibrations from the bass traveled up my feet to my hips, knocked my lungs around a bit, and jumpstarted my pulse. I got lost in the ridiculousness of the moment, us dancing together in some condo in Chicago, in the throes of chasing down the most important discovery of our lives, trying to keep a plant hidden while I got lost counting colored flecks in golden eyes.

In those precious moments, only a handful of minutes in years of grief, loss, and loneliness, I felt myself breathe.

I didn’t know when our heads touched together, but I shut my eyes as I felt his temple touch mine. The beat of the music was hypnotic and primal, the hand on my hip keeping me

tethered to the floor. Chestnut-colored waves tickled my neck as he moved, and I reached up to tuck the strand behind his ear.

Henry leaned into my touch, his fingers digging into my hip, eyes fluttering shut like the simple gesture had set him on fire. I was drunk on how easily he let himself get lost in it, how incredibly seductive he looked with his long hair falling over his shoulders when he tilted his head back. The heat of the crowd made a sheen of sweat stick to his neck, and I tasted the musk from him like it was a field of blooming flowers.

My heart hammered, temples pounding with the beat, the cooled fires of lust roaring to life, melting the guardrails I had in place. I watched a bead of sweat drop from his neck and dip down his clavicle, his throat bobbing, lips parting. My fingers dipped into the chestnut waves, docking at the base of his skull.

Henry made the most amazing gasp as I hovered my lips over his, something I locked away in the most private section of my brain. It almost sounded like a plea.

I could smell Colin McBride before I opened my eyes, the precious bubble around us popped by a wave of potent body spray and open-mouthed gawking.

My hand disembarked from Henry's hair, and I turned to glare at the buff movie star who was hovering at the edge of our privacy.

"Don't let me interrupt," he insisted, tiny shot glasses nested precariously in each palm. "I like watching."

I put a few inches between Henry and myself, missing the contact of his hand the moment it left.

"Has it been explained to you that's really gross if it's not invited?"

Colin ignored me completely, offering a shot to both of us. Henry plucked one from his fingers and examined it.

"Did you drug this?" Henry asked brazenly, analyzing the indignant face Colin made at the question.

“The fuck? No.”

“Good.” Henry tossed it back, apparently satisfied with the answer. When I didn’t make a move to drink my shot fast enough, Henry stole it and drank it before handing me the empty glass.

“Colin.” I set the empty glass back into his hand. “Where did Blanco go?”

“Outside to smoke,” he said as he shifted his shoulders in an attempt to dance. He was extremely terrible at it. “He’s got some art dealer guys with him, so he’ll be there a while.”

“Henry said you’ve seen Blanco’s fossil collection before.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty sweet. Guy’s got a lot of rare pieces.” He paused to drink a few shots himself and offered me another one.

“Where is it?”

Colin dabbed some spilled drink from his lips and lifted his chin. “He keeps the good shit downstairs in his showroom. It’s the door by the garage.”

I scanned the area he indicated, leaning around some dancing bodies to see an alcove by the front door I had missed. Two doors were nestled there, one with a keypad and one without.

“You know the code?” I asked him, snarling as he slipped his arm around my shoulders, and then Henry’s.

“Sure do. Why don’t we get to know each other better, and I’ll give you the grand tour.”

“How about I break your arm?” I said, my threat getting stomped on by the music and Henry leaning in to whisper in his other ear. Colin bit his lip, pretended his knees were weakened, and nodded enthusiastically.

“I like that idea.” Colin grinned.

“I don’t,” I said immediately. “I do not like whatever idea that was.”

Colin's arm slipped away from my shoulders, and he gave my chest a pat.

"9050." Colin winked. "We'll see you when you get back."

"The fuck you will."

"I'm going to distract him while you go see the fossils," Henry explained, the obvious statement soaring over Colin's head. "You'll have time to browse uninterrupted."

It was a solid plan, and too good to pass up, but I still hated it with everything in me. Colin's presence around Henry made me vicious, as was the notion that Henry had the skills to "distract" him in a variety of ways that made me want to kill something.

Colin blinked rapidly as I leaned in close to his face, jaw set to keep myself from baring my teeth.

"You act like a gentleman," I threatened the movie star with barely contained anger. "Or I'll rip you in half."

"Do that again," Colin pleaded with excitement shaking his voice. "When you're done with the fossil thing. Can I hire you full-time?"

"How is this backfiring on me?" I asked Henry, who gave me an amused shrug.

"I'll keep him tied up until you're ready." Henry spun them away from me, corralling Colin to keep him from trying to recruit me further. The pushy, growling thing in my brain was demanding I abandon my responsibilities to the mission, murder Colin, and do very, very specific things to Henry to get him to sigh against my lips again.

The sudden urge to act like a primal, mean animal driven by instinct and desire shook me, colliding with my century of control like a freight train. It was unnerving and exhausting, winding me and rattling me more than I thought possible.

I stood static in the bodies around me, counting down until I felt more in control of myself again.

The mission.

Find the fossil.

This was all that mattered.

Henry could handle himself, and he gave me the opening I needed in order to achieve what we came there to do. And if that meant he had to *distract* Colin to do so...

I rubbed at my stomach to settle the nausea and floated to the alcove with the basement door. A quick glance showed there were no cameras pointed my direction, and I sent a text to Royal that the security system needed to be wiped and disabled quietly. Within a few minutes, I was given the all clear about the cameras and any alarm triggers to outside authorities, and I punched the code into the pad.

A happy green light flashed, the heavy bolt beside the handle thunked, and I slipped inside without incident.

Beyond the locked door was a descending staircase lined with more original framed art between electric sconces, leading the way down into a carpeted gallery below the condo. The air was cooled into a carefully maintained environment to preserve delicate things. A few framed pieces were protected by thick walls of plastic or domed in glass; some artifacts made of precious metals and natural gemstones glittered under low light.

Blanco did have quite the spread of wondrous things, and had I not been there on borrowed time, I would have carefully cataloged what I could in order to hopefully get the items back to their original homes. I didn't have that luxury, and I mentally apologized as I bypassed the displaced goods on display in his basement while I sought after my goal.

When I saw it, my heart stopped. The world crawled, reality warping into something surreal.

The fossil was otherworldly and breathtaking, and it drew me in like a moth to an amber flame.

The extraction from the earth made the fossil's surface rough with sharp edges and chiseled craters, causing the amber to mirror the chaos resting within. Peering out from the transparent coffin, the beast was frozen in a silent roar



between two forms: half-feathered, half-scaled, mouth caught between beak and muzzle, eyes milky and dead.

It was one of us.

Whatever we were—whatever we had always been—had died trying to escape into safety and was sealed forever as evidence of our existence. Millions of years later, I stood before it, a creature it would never know, thankful it had died to give us a chance to live on in a way it never could.

“Please be real,” I whispered, meaning it with my whole heart. “Please God, be real.”

I hadn’t noticed the blood pooling on the ground until my shoe stuck to it. The sound of wet carpet giving under my footstep dispelled my reverie and pulled my attention to it.

The saturation of blood discolored the carpet to a messy black. The wide circle radiating out from Blanco’s corpse was still creeping, the smell just beginning to hang like hot pennies in the air. A surgical slit from ear to ear had killed him within a few short minutes, a subtle surprise still stuck on his lifeless face.

His killer looked about as interested in my presence as he had during the gala, but wore the same cold, dead-eyed expression that had sent up so many red flags as before. I would have been impressed he was able to slit Blanco’s throat without getting a drop on his nice suit, but the bloody knife still in his hand had all of my attention.

The killer put his phone away and adjusted the knife in his grip.

“You know what they say about that fossil,” he said coolly. “The owner always meets with a horrible fate.”

“So I’ve heard.” I stretched my hands out before curling them into fists. “I’m taking this fossil tonight. This is your chance to walk away.”

“I wish I could extend the same courtesy.”

The sound of the upstairs door opening made me take steps back, and I faced the stairway as his reinforcements arrived.

More suited men trailed down the steps, spilling into the basement like hungry sharks smelling blood.

“First you,” the soulless man near the fossil said. “Then we’ll make sure your boyfriend in the sweats disappears.” I tossed him a glare as he wiped his knife off on Blanco’s back. “We can’t have anything making its way back to whoever it is you work for.”

I set my jaw as the swarm of sharks bared their blades, feeling under prepared to deal with that amount of bite force in my current form. I had no weapons, not enough room to shift, and no one to help me.

Ice trailed down my spine. The dawning realization that I could not only fail my team but also fail to protect Henry made my heart crystalize into a sharp, painful knot.

I wasn’t going to let that happen.

I wasn’t going to let them live to hurt Henry.

Even if that meant there would be nothing left of me.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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“Leave the boxers on?” Colin sounded defensive, maybe even a little offended.

I finished unlatching the cuffs on the X-cross and motioned for him to get into position.

“It’s part of it,” I assured him, placating him with a smile. “Remember what Montana said. You need to be gentlemanly until he gets here.”

“We can still play a bit. And that’s hard to do when all my best assets are still put away.” He wiggled his eyebrows, moving the backward ball cap on his head from the force of the gesture.

“Oh, we definitely will,” I lied. “Just follow instructions and we’ll have a great time.” I gave the thing a pat and added for good measure a good, “Grrr.”

Colin reluctantly obeyed, stripping down to just his boxers and backward hat before mounting the X-cross like a pouty, horny brat. The cuffs slipped around his wrists and ankles fine, and I made sure to strap him in tightly enough to be comfortable but also keep him in place. When he was secure, I took his hat off, turned it around, and slipped it back onto his head with the bill facing out.

“So,” he sang, wiggling around in anticipation. “You finally gonna show me that big sword of yours?”

“I left that back at Apex.”

He blinked. “What?”

“You be good and wait right here.” I gave his chest a pat. “I have dinosaur shit to do.”

“Do you mean like...your actual sword? You know I don’t mean the actual sword, right?”

I leaned in, dodged a kiss he attempted to steal, and pulled the bill of his hat down to cover his eyes. Colin was too excited by the promise of sightless sexual teasing to hear the keys in his jeans being extracted and placed into my pocket.

“Ooh, kinky. I can get into this.” Colin wiggled a bit. “Wait, what do you mean ‘dinosaur shit’?”

I scooped up the poor sun orchid longing for a better life, borrowed Colin’s boots, and flicked the lights off on the way out. The party was still in full swing, music thumping and drinks flowing. The two shots I had to soothe my nerves warmed my stomach but did little to dispel the fleeting feeling of Montana’s lips next to mine.

I could still smell him on me, the woodsy scent of him sticking to my memory like a dream. It had been the second time I had danced for him, the second time I had felt so dangerously close to feeling his lips against mine. I was starving to feel him, and I wasn’t sure how much more I could take without dying of hunger.

With Colin out of the way and Blanco out smoking with his art people, I needed to get to Montana to see what he found. Above all else, the mission was the most important thing. I had to make sure we didn’t fail my family.

I’d have to deal with my starving heart later.

I slipped around the crowd, weaving through the glistening skin of the drunk dancers just in time to see the door to the basement begin its slow process of shutting.

Someone had gone in after Montana, but I hadn’t seen who it was.

If Blanco caught him in his secure basement, there would no doubt be hell to pay, cops called, and a lot of bullshit to handle. I dodged around some people stumbling away from the party and caught the door before it could swing all the way

shut. The potted plant at my hip was set down just inside to free up my hands, and I let the door ease shut behind me.

Voices were talking down below, a man talking and Montana responding. My belly filled with ice as I crept down the steps, seeing several sets of legs in a semicircle, blocking visuals into the basement.

Not good. This was *not good*.

Were they cops? Hired security?

I stayed low and moved slow, taking one step at a time to try and see more of what was going on. The last thing I wanted was to cause calamity, or start a fight when Montana was trying to defuse one. I had to play it just right—

The smell was a bolt of lightning coursing through me white-hot.

It hung in the air like a fog, visceral and terrifying, freezing my heart in place.

Blood.

Lots of blood.

Was Montana hurt?

Was he dying?

Whose blood was that?

Flashes of metal flicked in the hands of the people blocking me from Montana, and I felt my body light up from within. My jaw shifted, my teeth sharpening, my chest popping down each rib as I felt my throat and lungs expand.

And I fucking *bellowed*.

It wasn't a warning; it wasn't a bluff to scare them.

It was a fucking battle cry. I was going to rip them apart piece by piece until I knew Montana was safe.

I heard his voice, strong and loud over the rattling of my skull.

“Stay grounded!”

The stairs disappeared under me as I sprinted down them, the attackers surrounding Montana confused and terrified by the primal sound that stirred their flight reflexes. If I had the space to shift, to let myself grow into my *Albertosaurus* form, I would have cleaved the first man in half with my jaws and ate him out of spite. The basement was too small, too crowded with bodies, so I had to make do with the training Baha beat into me over the year and three weeks I had been a human.

I used my momentum to jump up and land both feet into one man's chest, knocking him back into a stunned, breathless stagger. My fall was controlled, my landing optimal for me to spring up and disarm a man rushing me with a knife.

Baha had taught me to aim for joints, to twist until I heard a crack, to not let up until my attacker was prone, disabled, or dead. I had to thin the herd; I had to get as many down as I could so I could make sure Montana was okay. My heartbeat drowned out the noise around me, my focus fixated on eliminating threats as quickly as possible.

The crunch of cartilage against my skull as I slammed my forehead into someone's nose was rewarding, and I sent him reeling backward with a throat punch before scooping up his knife. I readied myself for the next attack, glancing over to see how Montana was faring. Montana had blood smeared down his suit, teeth bared, ocean-blue eyes dark with a roaring storm.

He was a beast. Fast, precise, his blows like cannon fire, his strength raw and brutal. In a moment of dreamy fascination, I watched him shuck his jacket, stretch both arms out in two warmup punches, and crack his neck from side to side. Sweat made his hair stick to his temples, his chest heaving as he cocked his fist and knocked a molar loose from some poor bastard's jaw.

With one punch, the guy was down, a heap knocked senseless from a powerhouse of muscle and pissed-off tyrannosaur strength.

"Wow," I whispered, then remembered I was in mortal danger.

This realization came just before my shoulder connected to a pointy display cabinet as I got tackled from the side, the pain sharp. My well-earned knife was knocked from my grip; my head bounced off the ground and blurred my surroundings. For a few seconds, the room had plunged into water, muffled yells and commands losing all meaning. My head swam, but my body kept its muscle memory. The knife in my attacker's grip came down like a hammer, leaning his weight behind it as I caught his arms and tried to force him backward.

The son of a bitch was heavy, my shoulder pinched and burning, and the blade shook as it began to slowly descend. I yelled through my teeth, muscles strained, fingers slick with sweat as I tried to keep my grip. He bunched his shoulders and pushed down, vein in his forehead pulsing with effort, gaining ground faster than I could manage a retreat. The blade pierced through my hoodie, biting into the meat of my chest, and I screamed as he tried harder to stab me through the heart.

A look of horrified surprise shocked his face as an arm reached around his neck and jerked him backward. Montana walked him back, snarl showing teeth a little too sharp to be human, his eyes deadly. The prey in his grip fought for a moment, flailing in the tyrannosaur's vise, then fell limp with the finality of one solid *pop*.

I gasped for air, thankful to not be stabbed in the heart, and was lifted to my feet to meet a sea of worry.

"Henry," he was saying, voice hoarse and rough, his hands sliding over my chest to check for injury. "How bad? You're bleeding. How bad is it?"

I was lost in the waves, drunk on his face, and aching from pains I couldn't place accurately. Movement distracted me; a sound of shattered glass caused me to whirl. The fossil case was in pieces, shards tumbling down onto the carpet while a man was scooping up the amber and tucking it under one arm. The tool of destruction in his hand was matte black and deadly, the barrel aimed right for us.

Montana was a large man, a solid wall of might that took all of my strength to force to the ground. The moment my



brain registered the threat, the gun pointed at him, my drive to keep him safe outweighed everything else. I grabbed him, threw him under me and shielded him from the rounds of gunfire pinging off the walls. The gunman only fired three shots before fleeing up the stairs, fossil under his arm.

“Are you hurt?” I looked down at Montana, whose face was electric with surprise, cheeks flushed.

“N-no,” he stammered. “I’m fine.”

“Good.” With Montana in one piece and my shoulder still throbbing, I sprang up and ran after the thief, taking two steps at a time. The party was still raging, the garage door hanging open. Blanco’s garage wasn’t like the standard box attached to houses. It was more like the lower level of the stacked parking towers at hotels. Rows of beautiful vehicles were parked in spaces, all expensive, shiny and new.

The sound of a car engine roaring to life sent a spike of fear through me, knowing that if he got away, it would be hell trying to track him down again. We had nothing to go on, no idea who he was, and he had our very existence in his possession.

I didn’t think; I ran.

Or I tried to.

I went into a full sprint to catch up with the car peeling out of the parking spot, only to be pulled off-balance behind a sleek sports car before bullets rang out near my feet. I toppled, landing against Montana as he held my arm and stayed ducked behind the car with me.

“That was reckless,” he hissed. “Stay focused, Henry. Don’t get yourself killed.”

“He’s getting away, Montana! He has the fossil!”

“We need a car.” He peered over the hood as the sound of tires squealed down the ramp. “Fuck, I don’t know if I can hotwire any of these. Maybe Blanco has keys—”

“Keys,” I breathed, fishing Colin’s out of my hoodie. I clicked the button on the fob, causing a car parked just outside

the garage's wide door to honk in response. The Corvette was neon yellow, all thunder and muscle, with a bold black racing stripe down the side and vibrant colors that illuminated the cement under it.

"I need you to drive," Montana was telling me as we rushed to Colin's car. "Can you do that?"

"Absolutely." I swung the driver's door open and jumped in, bringing the beastly thing to life. It growled and purred, and I took a moment to appreciate the power it promised before cringing at the terrible music assaulting our senses. Montana practically punched the radio into submission and set the object he was holding onto the floorboard.

"You..." I swallowed, overwhelmed. "You brought the sun orchid."

"Drive, Henry," Montana commanded.

I shifted the car into gear and powered forward, firing down the ramp of Blanco's property, and rushed after the bastard who stole our fossil. The car he had taken was a fast sporty thing, zippy around curves, but I could see its taillights as it sped down the street. I followed, thankful the guy knew better than to try and drive further into downtown and opted to try and lose us on the tangle of highway ramps instead. I didn't want us risking a high-speed chase near any unsuspecting pedestrians.

The thief's car had the advantage of being nimble, able to weave and take last-minute turns with ease. Piloting a bigger car like the Corvette was tricky, but it was so damn fast. It took a few near misses and some well-timed lane jumps to get close. We ended up on a two-lane toll road heading south, the skyline of the city at our rearview.

"Get him off the highway," Montana said, his seat belt rolling off of him. "Muscle him off the next exit and get me as close as possible."

"Are you going to shoot out his tires?" I asked, doing a double take as he started peeling out of his clothing. "What the hell are you doing?"

“I’m going to stop the car.”

“By flashing him?” I glanced back at the road to make sure we weren’t going to crash.

“Remember he has a gun. Be ready to dodge if he tries to shoot out the window.” Montana chucked his vest and shirt onto the floor, lifting his hips off the seat to undo his belt.

“Wait, are you going—shit.” I dodged a car in the right lane, blowing past them at breakneck speed.

“Focus, Henry. There’s the exit,” said the disrobing man beside me. “Go. Now.”

I gunned the engine, driving up beside the car and swerving into his lane. The thief tried to push us back, our mirrors crashing together, but exited in a last-minute attempt to try and lose us. I followed, taking the wide, curved exit fast enough to make our tires burn and fill the car with the smell of upset rubber.

The road melted into a long stretch of scenic landscape, with naked trees starting to come back to life from the long winter. Tall manufacturing buildings and refineries took over the scenery, with tall, chain-link fences and empty parking lots. This late at night, the road was dark and abandoned, not worth installing streetlights when the work force was long gone.

Montana was completely nude, his window down and body coiled for action.

“Get me beside the car.”

“Jesus Christ, Montana. What are you going to do?”

“Shift.” He leaned out of the window. “Closer.”

“Shift? How?! We’re going almost a hundred miles an hour!” I gripped the wheel, knuckles white from strain, and looked at him like the insane bastard he was.

“With good timing, a steady car ride, and control.” He glanced at me. “Get me closer and watch for bullets.”

“This is nuts.” I did what he asked, sidling up closer to the thief.

Montana watched the car like he aimed to chase it down for dinner, then hefted himself up to start climbing out of the window. The window to the thief’s car rolled down, his arm craning out to try and take some shots. I tapped his car with mine, causing him to wiggle dangerously for a heartbeat before steadying again. The need to grab the wheel made him retract his gun, and Montana took his chance.

In one leap, Montana flew like a naked flying squirrel from our car, his body already expanding and rolling into his prehistoric form. One second, he was a well-toned, absolute unit of a man with muscles flexing and his round ass on full display. The next he was pushing down the top of a sports car with his massive T.rex claws.

The car dented under his weight, slowing down as the body scraped the road in a shower of sparks. It careened off the road, a barely functional pancake, and Montana dismounted like it was a wild skateboard. I pulled over on the side of the road, springing out to chase down the wreckage. Montana strolled off the road after it, his large body even more impressive when I was in human form.

His T.rex form was giant even by tyrannosaur standards. Thick leg muscles rolled as he walked, his pebbly skin earthy brown with shades of terracotta, his snout lighter and his feet almost solid black. Montana was an old bull, unmatched in power, and moved like nothing on this planet could stand in his way.

My tyrannosaur brain was *begging* to be released, to scrape the ground with my feet and show him my *I’m So Strong* mating dance. I wanted that bull for myself. He would be such a good partner, and I would be such a good provider. I could bring him deer. So many deer. He could rest, he could be safe, and I would guard our little nest so he could eat in peace.

Oh my God, I wanted to build a nest for him so bad. I started eyeing sticks. I needed color. Rocks! Colorful rocks!

Blue. I needed blue. SO MUCH BLUE to match his eyes.

I was dropped back into reality at the sound of a man screaming for his life.

The thief was still alive and was yelling like a hysterical madman as Montana ripped the top of the car open with his jaws like it was made of tinfoil. Gunshots fired up in a wild spree, making Montana grunt in annoyance. Once the shooting stopped, he used his snout to lift the car's crumpled nose up, essentially shaking the man out like the last piece of candy in a box.

The thief tumbled out, sprang to his feet, and ran like a bat out of hell down the road, screaming bloody murder.

Montana sighed, looked at me, and then nudged the car with his snout again.

I crawled inside the wreckage, sighed a long breath of relief to see the amber in one piece, then lifted up the prize.

Montana was shrinking back down as he walked to our car, climbing into the passenger side with some grunts while his vocal cords tried to get back to normal. I didn't need to be told twice and jumped into the driver's seat with our prize, a sore shoulder, and a renewed sense of needing to brush up on my nest-building skills.

"Should we go after that guy?" I asked as I turned the engine over. Montana shook his head.

"No," he managed, his voice slowly coming back. "Head back to the condo. We need to pack and get the hell out of here."

"Who the hell was that guy?" I whipped the car around and sped back the way we came.

"Trouble." He slid his pants back on. "Is the fossil...?"

"It looks fine." I passed it over to him. "We did it, Montana. We got it." The frown on his face made my stomach sour. "What? What's wrong?"

"Could be fake. Ruben and Xiang's was fake."

"They *both* can't be fake, right?"

“I don’t know. God, I hope not.” He let his head fall back against the seat.

“That was incredible,” I told him, still in awe. “How did you do that? Shift without panicking on the back of a moving car?”

“Control,” he breathed.

“You need to teach me how to do that.”

“Never,” he said immediately. “And never try that. Ever. I’ll murder you myself if you do.”

I didn’t argue because he looked exhausted, and I was still a little swoony.

I had to bite the inside of my cheek not to smirk at the memory of his glorious backside as I drove us back into Chicago.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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It took us a little longer to get back into downtown Chicago going the speed limit, and the little clump of traffic was annoying considering how damn long the night had been thus far. I only allowed myself to feel at ease and celebrate when we got back into the condo with the fossil in hand.

Montana set the thing on the table under the light, examining it closely. His body was hot from shifting, dark bruising peppering his skin where he'd been struck during the previous brawl. Small cuts slashed his arms where he'd blocked knife attacks, one particular one still trailing red branches of blood down his arm.

I grabbed my duffle and slung it onto the table, fishing for my first aid kit.

“Sit down. Let me treat your arm.”

“I'm fine.” He twisted his arm to look at it, then got back to the fossil. “We need to get this in front of Simon, but I doubt whoever was after this is going to give up on the search quickly.”

“We also have a stolen car, so that's not helpful,” I pointed out. “Seriously, Montana. You're getting blood everywhere.”

“Where is Colin? Did he see you go downstairs at the party?”

“No, he was strapped to the X-cross in the sex room.” He looked at me, bewildered, and I added, “I told you I'd keep him tied up.”



“When you said—” Montana’s eyes snapped to my hoodie, and his concentration face changed into one of concern. “Jesus, Henry.”

“What?” I looked down, surprised at the amount of blood staining the front of my Field Museum hoodie. A large wet circle bloomed out from the wound, dripping down in one long trail to the hem.

Somehow, I was the one that ended up with my ass in the chair, my hoodie getting tugged up and over my head in one swift motion.

“It’s not that bad—” I was trying to protest, but Montana couldn’t hear me. He hovered over me, prodding at my wound and dabbing it to clean off the blood.

“Do you feel dizzy? Lightheaded?”

“No, I think I just bleed a lot.”

“You should have told me you were hurt. If I knew you were hurt, I wouldn’t have run after that fossil. I could have gotten you to a hospital.” He was rambling, digging through my bag for supplies.

“Montana, I’m not that hurt. Why are you freaking out?” I stood up and tried to catch his arms when he attempted to push me back into the chair. “You’re the one tossing blood all over the fossil. I’m fine.”

“Henry, you got stabbed!”

“So did you!” My frustration peaked, and I stepped forward to try and get him to back off.

“Sit down, goddammit,” he said through his teeth.

“You don’t think I can analyze myself enough to know when I’m hurt?” I snapped. “You’re being a dick right now.”

“You rushed a car with an armed man inside of it without a plan, so I’m not exactly keen on you being aware of yourself right now.” He stepped in closer, jaw ticking. “You acted wild. Unprofessional.”

“Says the man that jumped onto a speeding car with his ass out!” I shot back. “It was cool as hell, but you wanna talk ‘acting wild’? That was unhinged at best and suicidal at worst.”

“I know my limits. I can control myself enough to push them.”

“Control.” I hated how bitter I sounded, how much I wanted to take the low-hanging fruit and prod at his temper. “Were you in control on the dance floor when you almost kissed me?”

“We’re not talking about that tonight.” He spoke like each word wrapped tape around his knuckles, preparing for the fight to come.

“No?” I inched closer, coiling my fists to keep my voice steady. “I think this is the perfect night to talk about it.”

“Henry.”

“You can’t stand there and pretend there wasn’t something there.” I swallowed, failing to keep my anger from bleeding into desperation. “I felt you close to me. I watched you dance.”

The brewing storm over the ocean had turned dark and deadly, pupils blown and breath churning in his wide chest. His strong jaw moved as he chewed on his legendary control, hair still a wild mess from the intense night we’d already had. Sweat and blood stuck to him, his cologne only a passing dream.

I welcomed the storm, I breathed in the blood and sweat, and I kept pushing at that control he had ground into oblivion.

“You don’t want this,” Montana spoke, voice a landslide threatening to crush me. “You think you do, but you don’t.”

“You don’t know what the hell I want.” I refused to break away from his stare, the stakes too high for a misstep. “I think I’ve made it very clear what I want. I brought you deer, chocolates, danced for you.” I shrugged dismissively. “And I saved your damn life tonight.”

Something cracked for just a moment, a fleeting look of confusion that passed over his eyes like a wisp before dissolving again.

The landslide in his voice was teetering, pebbles rolling downhill as warning shots.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Hurt me?” I tilted my head at the challenge. “You think you can hurt me?”

“Henry—”

My composure and common sense were torn apart by my pride, with my addiction to feeling Montana’s hands on me devouring the last remaining scraps. My body acted independently of myself, my brain in the back seat while I reached over and grabbed my duffle bag.

I didn’t even have to break eye contact as I grabbed what I was looking for, exhuming it from the hidden depths below my snailed socks. With the most dramatic effort I could muster, I lifted the giant dildo out of my bag and slammed it onto the countertop, suction cup down. The beastly thing shuddered from balls to tip, waving merrily as Montana’s ocean storm washed over it.

“This,” I slapped the tip to make it bob, “serves me just fine.” I crossed my arms as I leaned against the table, lifting my chin in defiance. “So, tell me again how you’re going to hurt me, Mr. Control.”

Lost somewhere in the folds of my subconscious, I recognized that I was acting like an irrational jackass who just whipped out a massive fake cock with the word “Rex” front and center and slapped it onto a table to prove a point. I could have gone my entire existence without Montana ever knowing that I had that thing in my bag and, up until that moment, never dreamed of ever telling him about it.

I was pissed. I was tired. I was bloody and beaten and pushed too damn far to turn back now.

I wanted him. So, so damn bad. This was my do-or-die, this was my rabbit, my shark, my pile of sticks, my street food

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This was my offering to the man I wanted.

A giant.

Fake.

Cock of Spite.

The man I wanted stared at my display as it slowly came to parade rest, my previous backhand not enough to dethrone the thing from the table.

Mr. Control looked at me, the raging storm behind his eyes causing my heart to thunder. My body was electric, arching sparks down my spine as the last bit of his reservation fell away.

I *might* have bitten off more than I could chew.

*Uh-oh.*

I rocked backward as the dam broke, his mouth crashing into mine.

I lifted up off the table as he pulled me into his kiss, my hands resting against his neck as he curled his fingers into my hair. His lips tugged at mine, devouring me like I was the last meal he'd ever have, teeth nipping just enough to send shockwaves through me.

I held on, pulling him closer, needing to feel all of him against me while he dipped his tongue into my mouth. My hip bumped the table before his hands grabbed my thighs and lifted me onto it, my legs squeezing his waist. Our mouths danced the way I had wanted to at the party, all-consuming and passionate, teasing in just the right places to make us moan for more.

I couldn't get enough of him, of how his hips felt against mine, how he breathed a sigh of desperation as I bit playfully at his bottom lip. I'd been wanting to bite him for over a year and planned on sinking my teeth into whatever piece of him I could.

The loose sweatpants that had served me well for the past few hours were now an unnecessary barrier, and I didn't resist as Montana's hand dipped under the elastic waistband to grab my ass. Excitement racing through my nerves made me clumsy, my fingers shaking as I tried to command them to unfasten Montana's belt. The attempt was mostly scraping metal with my fingertips while he had the much easier job of simply pushing cotton aside.

I was slid off the table and onto my feet, knees rubbery from his touch, one ass cheek properly groped but now abandoned. Montana's belt remained firmly in place, and I refused to let go of it.

Our kisses had slowed into a languid exploration, breathy and sensual, my body a floating mess of bliss with coiled desire just beneath.

"Shower," he muttered against my lips. "Let's wash off and continue in there."

My language skills had dissolved, so I grunted and allowed him to pry my fingers from his belt. A parade of feathery butterfly wings danced down my chest as I was led by the hand to the bathroom. The glass door was swung open and water turned on, and Montana made a point to look at the busted tiles of my previous sexual encounter.

Heat curled in my stomach and painted my cheeks red as he peered over his shoulder at me, something dangerous behind those ocean storms.

Steam fogged the glass as Montana hooked his fingers into my waistband and drew me to him, lips capturing mine again to taste me. Teasing fingers slid between the fabric and my skin, running along the band so his knuckles trailed down the hair beneath my navel.

I was overwhelmed with options on where to start. I wanted to touch all of him at once, taste him, explore him, and have him do the same to me all at the same time. My brain was throwing sparks as I tried to decide, fingers trailing down his chest and belly, refusing to commit. To further complicate how poorly my central nervous system was handling Montana's

tongue in my mouth paired with his fingers on my skin, Montana pushed his hand fully into my sweats and palmed my painfully erect cock.

His palm ran the length, moisture from the head slicking his movement, and I lost my breath and mind all at once.

I decided very quickly that my pants needed to go, and I shucked them off so he could get access to whatever he wanted. In a moment of clarity, driven by greed and drunk off the feeling of his hand, my brain remembered how to unfasten a belt buckle. The pesky metal and leather device blocking me from feeling Montana was flicked open, the button to his slacks popped loose and zipper slashed down.

I whined as he pulled away, his hand slipping free from me as he tested the water.

The chuckle in the back of his throat was heavenly, a sensual rumble that moved into the filthiest part of my brain and made camp there. His slacks and boxers were tugged down once he deemed the water warm enough, and I got to see him at full glory for the first time.

I had seen Montana naked plenty of times. We shifted and hunted together at home on occasion, and I had seen him recently leap fully nude from a moving vehicle within the past two hours.

Seeing him standing naked with his thick dick on full display, hard and proud, eyes sweeping over me like he was hungry for what I was offering, nearly made me burst before the fun began.

Montana stepped into the shower and tugged me in after him by the wrist, tangling me up with him under the cascade of warm water. The bliss of the shower with his hips against mine had me clawing at whatever part of him I could reach.

“Slow down,” he whispered into my jaw just below my ear, rotating me so I was under the water a bit more.

“Fuck no.” I pushed the water and wet hair from my face, smoothing them back over my skull. “If I don’t get to touch you, I’m going to die.”

“You’ll get plenty of chances.” His nose brushed mine. “We have all night.”

I felt like my heart was trying to escape through my ribs as I forced myself to calm down, to breathe in the steam and lean into his touch. The water washed away the blood and sweat from the evening, and I barely argued as Montana insisted we soap down instead of continue to grab at each other like horny teenagers on a date.

Considering I had woken up a fully grown man and never had the chance to be a horny teenager on a date, overflowing with untapped sexual desires and hormones, I was ready to experience everything associated with that fantasy. I was all shaky, greedy hands, and I didn’t really care to reel anything in.

The shower was a sauna of bergamot steam from his body wash, our bodies never more than a few inches away from each other, sometimes getting lost in a session of kissing instead of continuing to clean. With the last bits of the soap washed away, I reached for the faucet to turn it off so we could escape to the bedroom.

Montana took my wrist and guided me away from it, nudging me to turn around so my back was to him.

My heart hammered, cock jumping in surprise as he pressed my hands to the shower wall and eased my feet wider apart. A knot of anticipation closed my throat, and I had to swallow hard to force it down.

“I think I probably need to—” I started, my breath catching as his palms spread me open.

“You ever been rimmed?” His brow lifted as I turned over my shoulder, nearly fainting from the blood rushing to my dick. I somehow managed to give my light head a shake, and he asked, “Do you want me to?”

I think I nodded, or maybe begged, or I might have said nothing—I don’t know. The world kicked over into a dream filter as I watched Montana kneel behind me, the shower drumming patters across my hip and thigh.

I had to rest my forehead against the cool tile to calm my blood pressure as I felt his breath against my skin, and I hissed through my teeth as I felt him give me a playful bite on my cheek.

“Relax.”

“Uh-huh,” I groaned, exhaling as I felt the first few warning kisses near the center. The swipe of hot, wet tongue across my hole made me make a noise that would have been embarrassing if I wasn’t so incredibly turned on. An electric pulse shot directly from the point of contact to my cock, and I curled my fist to keep from touching myself.

The first pass was the only mercy I would receive, the obvious enjoyment I was getting from it a green light to do whatever he wanted.

Montana was relentless, enjoying himself completely on my sensitivity and fragile grip over my mounting orgasm. Each lap from his tongue was a shock of pleasure, my body wound so tight I felt like I was going to snap into pieces. I was tortured by this sexual deviant for what felt like years, my thighs shaking as my cock dripped from being ignored.

When it stopped, I sobbed out a cry for more, and he gave me a train of kisses from my hip to my shoulder as a reward. His hand snaked around my neck, leaning me back against him, his cock pressed between my very happy ass.

“I want you to fuck me hard enough to break tiles,” he growled into my ear. “Show me what you did to the other Rex.”

“Yes,” I breathed, reaching back to grab his hip, wanting more contact. “You’re what I imagined when I fucked that thing. I wanted it to be you. I wanted you inside of me.”

“Good.” He bit at my earlobe, a spark of our primal connection firing down my body. “You’re mine tonight, Henry. I know what you can take, and I’m going to make you scream for me.”

The water was shut off, and he guided me out when my legs wobbled a little. A towel wrapped my shoulders, and he



lifted his chin to the bedroom.

I followed the command, running the towel over myself for a quick dry as I padded to the bed. Distantly, I heard the faucet, some cabinet drawers opening and closing, and Montana reappeared, holding a bottle of lube in his hand and a condom between his fingers.

Seeing the surprise on my face, he shook his head to the unanswered question.

“Not mine. Baatar keeps this stuff stocked.”

“Lucky us.” I tossed my towel aside, waiting until he was closer to me before I sank to my knees.

Montana’s throat bobbed, the supplies in his hand tossed to the mattress so he could run his fingers through my hair.

The change of view was mesmerizing. I had never seen him from this angle, his stomach tight, chest lifting as he breathed, the thatch of curly hair above his cock dark blond with some gold mixed in. His thighs were hard under my fingers, the smell of clean water and crisp soap clinging to his flushed skin, a bead of moisture forming at the tip of his dick.

My own cock responded to the sight by sending a pulse of need through my hips, and I gave myself a slow stroke as I peered up at the man playing with my hair.

“Can I taste you?” I asked. “I want to put my lips around your cock.”

The bedroom light shifted around his jaw as he bunched the muscles, his hooded eyes storming and hungry. The hand resting in my hair tugged, his other hand guiding the wet tip to my lips. I took it as permission and lashed my tongue out to lap up the little bead that had been teasing me.

Montana hissed through his teeth, some a bit too sharp, and a rumble far too deep to be human floated out of his chest. The ancient language was millions of years old and not native to a human’s capabilities, but I understood it just fine.

My body was electrified, lifting me up from my haunches so I could properly worship the offering presented before me.

The primal part of me that spoke the same rumbling commands he was whispering was thrashing in me, a thunderstorm of raging, conflicting consciousnesses screaming for the same things but in different ways. The same pieces of my brain that wanted to feel Montana's cock down my throat wanted me to fuck, build a nest, and kill something to eat.

It was a very complicated process to navigate all of those feelings at once, and I had to pay close attention to making sure the tender, delicious thing sliding across my tongue wasn't about to get nicked by teeth edging a little too sharp from a greedy Albertosaurus half trying to claw its way out.

The firm definition of muscle at his hips each needed my attention, the skin lifting into goosebumps as I painted down them with my tongue. I had dreamed about biting into the skin at his hips for a year and took my time doing so, nipping and sucking along the way.

Montana's fingers curled in my hair as I sucked him down, taking my time to not only enjoy how he felt in my mouth, but also positioning my teeth correctly around him. A salty, bitter tang sat at the back of my tongue from his excitement, the taste of his skin mixing with it to create the most erotic concoction I had ever savored. A soft hiss sang from his teeth, jaw tight, the tickle of his coarse hair at the tip of my nose.

I hadn't felt the urge to try and deep-throat anyone until then, the skill something I needed time to develop. My eyes stung with the attempts, Montana's grunts of approval when my lips made it to the root encouraging me to keep going. The delicious bite of my hair getting tugged added spice to the delightful buzz of his cock hitting the back of my throat.

I eased back with a cough as he tugged me backward, and Montana pulled me to my feet so he could dive into a series of starving kisses. The taste of minty mouthwash across his tongue was a surprise, and I wrapped my arms around his neck to keep him from escaping as I fell backward onto the bed.

We crashed into the mattress with a couple bounces, my knee between his, groaning into his mouth as our wet cocks rubbed against our stomachs. I rolled with his waves,

shamelessly whining for more, grabbing his hips to encourage him to give me more contact.

“I could come like this,” I said in a breathless confession, chasing the high that radiated over my body. Tiny pulses of white-hot lust shimmered over me with each press of his skin into mine, his breath hot on my neck, thick shoulders rolling as he held himself over me.

“Not a chance,” he growled into my ear, slowing his hips. “I want you a whimpering mess by the time you come.”

“I already am.”

Montana extended his arms so he was looming above me, wet blond hair hanging in a wilted halo. He was breathing like he had just sprinted up the side of a building, skin flushed and eyes flooding mine. The waves of his eyes washed over me, the hunger in them the black tides under sapphires.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered, his tone something of awe. “You’re always so damn beautiful, but right now, like this...” His throat bobbed, and he pressed his cock against my hip and slowly stabbed it up in a slow roll. “Flushed, hard, messy...”

“You’re even more sexy than I always imagined.” I bit my lip, unable to keep myself from grinning. “And I imagined this a lot.”

Montana slowly lowered himself in a show of control and strength, chest and shoulders flexing. His lips hovered over mine, teasing and inviting.

“When I imagined you,” he breathed against my lips, “you were always fucking me. But tonight, I want you under me.”

My brain, having absorbed that information at full volume, melted into a sizzling heap of sexual fantasies.

Montana.

Imagining me?

He bottomed?

*Why had I never imagined him bottoming?*

“Oh my *God*,” I said out loud by accident. “Oh my God, you bottom.”

“Mm-hm.” He smirked, enjoying the torment he was putting me through, then dipped his chin to catch my lips, diving into a kiss to steal further questions from my mouth. “Can I fuck you, Henry?”

I nodded. “God, yes.”

“I’m going to get you onto all fours,” he promised, biting at my lip. “And you’re going to fuck yourself on my cock like you did that toy. Understand?”

My answer back was leaning up to kiss him deeper, my hand grabbing the back of his neck to hold him still while I got what I wanted. We rolled together so he could manhandle me from under him, my chest against the sheets and my hips pulled up. His knee knocked mine apart, one hand planted firmly on my hip in a grip that dared me to try and move.

I rested on one elbow to keep myself steady, then reached back to show Montana that I was ready for him with my fingers.

There was a pause, my spine tightening as a primal rumble vibrated down Montana’s body and rattled my chest. The sound connected the dots between my two consciousnesses, soldering the little pieces together to bridge the language gap in a patchwork of primal understanding and human intellect.

His control was slipping.

Not just the sexual drive and passionate side of him that had been rolling in the sheets with me.

It was something else.

I felt him adjust behind me, his grip on my hip tightened hard, and I peered over my shoulder to watch him.

Montana’s eyes had gone from a dark storm to an ocean bright with electricity, alive with lightning and desire. He drew in a hard breath and squeezed his eyes shut, blinking until the lights dimmed and he remembered to grab the condom and lube.

Watching him rip the condom open with his still sharp teeth made my dick jump, and my own teeth threaten to do the same.

Montana's knees dipped the mattress as he sidled up behind me, control cautiously back in place, and I shivered as his hand ran down my back.

The sheets smelled like him, soft against my elbows and knees, and I leaned back against him as he gave a teasing bump against my hole.

“Ready for me?”

Montana tapped the head of his cock against me, and I groaned out a long, aching, “Yes.”

Feeling Montana slowly breach me was euphoric in every sense of the word.

Slow pressure pushed into me; the wonderful sensation seared my nerves into a pleasant burn before melting into pleasure. Just like with our time in the shower, he was careful, reading my body signals with each step, before chuckling as I started to squirm.

“Different than toys,” I said in a rush. “Way different.”

“Is this the first real cock in you?” He squeezed my hip as I nodded. “You okay?”

“Please fuck me, Montana, or I'm going to explode.” I let my head fall against my forearm, stroking my dick with my other hand. “You're so close to the right spot. If you just—OH-KAY THERE.” I grabbed the sheets and wrung them tight as he snapped his hips.

Montana's laugh was evil.

He pretended to be such a stoic, stony authority figure with no desires for anything other than fossils and work—but really he was a sexual mastermind of getting men to beg while his thick cock was in them.

“Move your hips, Henry,” he commanded, refusing to give me more. “I want to see how you broke those tiles when you were pretending I was fucking you.”

“In my fantasy,” I panted, pushing up onto my palms, “I never thought you were good at dirty talk.”

“What was I like then?” He rubbed his palm over my lower back. “How did you imagine this would go?”

“Rough,” I admitted, throat hot with a knot of anxious truth.

“How rough?”

His hand smoothed over one cheek and squeezed.

“Not...not crazy rough, just—” My confession was interrupted with a crack of flesh meeting flesh, his palm slapping down against my ass in a whiplash clap. I yelped in surprise and pushed back against him, driving him deeper and riding the high of a sting.

Just as fast as it happened, he smoothed the hot skin with his hand and did it again, driving his hips forward each time I slammed back against him. My skin was tender after the next round, his hand squeezing the sore spot before switching cheeks. The sharp contrast between his hand spanking my ass and the deep penetration sending bolts of pleasure up my spine was intoxicating, a devastating mixture that had my body thrumming with excitement.

I gripped the sheets with one hand, pushing back hard, addicted to how he felt inside of me. His hips slammed into me, hands both soft and comforting as well as rough and demanding as he punished my skin and soothed it. I was drunk on it, in love with it, and voiced my happiness each time I pushed back into his cock.

Feeling his fingers through my hair made me lean my head back in response, and I hissed in delight when the familiar sting of it being tugged rippled over my scalp. Montana’s body dipped over my back, hips slowing to an aching pace, breath warming my skin. His fingers wrenched my head to the side, his hungry mouth demanding more from me while I shivered from the visceral contact.

Tongues and teeth, lips plump and raw, I caught his breath in mine while he tortured me with his primal kisses. I craved

more of him, more of his touch, his mouth, his hunger. Feeling him groan against my lips as I placed my hand on his cheek to keep him close made me dizzy.

In the heat, the rough intimacy, our brows touched, and I felt something change.

I felt his brows lift with mine, his body shiver, something desperate and just as ancient as sex tangle us together in that moment.

This wasn't just release.

I *knew*.

My heart chased after him, a fleeting spark in the darkness.

Montana eased back onto his knees, a heavy palm pressed down between my shoulder blades. My back arched, knees spreading wider, and I stroked myself as I licked my Montana-flavored lips.

Another whip-crack slap fell on my backside, hands gripping tight to the meat of my ass before he snapped his hips into a piston rhythm. Sparks chased each other up my spine, crackling and tingling, pulling everything tight on their way down. A vibration sounded from within me as the final cord snapped, and I felt my body pulse as my chest rattled from my cry.

If the shower had been a "fuck me" bellow, this one was a "I've Traveled to Heaven and I Want Everyone to Know" roar.

It wasn't until I took a breath that I realized I hadn't been the only one making that sound.

Montana's bone-shaking bellow faded just after mine, the sound making my toes curl as my orgasm shook me as much as his sound did. Montana's grip on my hips eased as he slowed, the pressure within me easing as he tilted back. I missed feeling him inside me instantly, but my body was dancing with feathery sparkles too much for me to complain.

My hips, unable to fight gravity any longer, slid down onto the bed, and I became a post-orgasm, Henry-skin rug across Montana's large mattress.

“Sorry I came on your bed,” I mumbled to him.

“It’s okay,” he said from behind me, sounding winded.

It took me a moment to summon the will and give-a-fuck to try and get up, my body in a Jello state of bliss. I started to roll over, slinging one leg out to find the end of the bed.

“I’ll change the sheets for you.”

Montana’s hand caught my thigh and gave it a squeeze.

“Don’t worry about the sheets.” He moved my leg back into place and dismounted the bed. “Stay just like that.”

“Kay.” I rolled my head to the side to watch him stroll to the bathroom, body the most loose and relaxed I had ever seen him. After a few moments, he returned with some towels and I tried to move again, thinking he brought them for the bed.

He made a warning noise in his throat, something like a growl, and I paused again.

“What are you doing?” I pushed up onto my elbows as he got back onto the bed, a warm washcloth trailing down my body.

The seas had calmed, a content smile tugging at the tips of his lips.

“Aftercare.”

I relaxed back into the mattress, resting my head on my folded arms as he cleaned and soothed my skin, which had a red pattern across both cheeks. After I was properly pampered, he dabbed my skin dry and leaned over to kiss my shoulder blade.

“You okay?” Montana asked, resting his chin on my shoulder as I looked at him. He mirrored my grin, and I felt like my pupils must have gone heart-shaped.

“I’m wonderful.”

I rolled over onto my side as he lay down beside me, his arms tucked under his head. There was a strange sense of pride when he didn’t hesitate to put his arm around me as I put my head on his shoulder.



My arm stretched over his chest, his skin warm and flushed under my touch, and I nuzzled his neck where his hair was still drying from the exercise.

“When you said you danced for me,” Montana asked after a while, almost hesitant, “do you mean when I first got home? In the backyard?”

I nodded against him. “Mmhm. I brought you the buck.”

“Huh.” His fingers trailed down my side. “So, you didn’t bring that for everyone? That was...”

I had gotten a little too distracted watching his lips since I was so close to him, so I had to blink and mentally catch up.

“It was for you. That’s why I brought a buck and not a fat cow.”

He hummed. “It was a nice buck.”

I beamed, hidden against his neck. “Thank you.”

“Can I ask...”

I angled back to look at him as he turned his head to me.

He continued, one brow raised. “Why ‘Cotton Eye Joe’?”

“You didn’t like it?”

Montana considered for a moment, seeming to struggle to find exactly how he felt.

After a couple false starts, he landed on, “It...was a unique choice. I was more curious what it might have meant for you.”

I shrugged. “Dalton made me the mix.”

The confusion fell into an eye roll, and he relaxed back into place.

“Of course,” he sighed. “That makes sense.”

I reflected back on the heartbreak I had felt when he left me standing there with that deer, my dance ignored, then again when I had offered him chocolates, only to have them dismissed without a chance.

A laugh bubbled out of me as I leaned into the curve of his jaw, finally having him in my arms, breathing in how sweet he smelled against my skin.

“I can’t believe,” I said through my snickering, “that the dildo is what finally made you break.”

Montana snorted, his chest bouncing as he laughed at my delight, his lips pressing a kiss to my hair.

“That wasn’t it.”

“No?” I tossed a leg over his. “Because my ass says otherwise.”

“It wasn’t the T.rex-themed dildo you slapped onto the table. Though...I want you to keep it.” The soft hand trailing down my side turned into a tease of nails across my ribs. “I think we should play with it at some point.”

I swallowed and shivered against his touch. “Noted.”

“I meant what I said.” Montana softened his voice into a whisper, lips still touching my hair. “That I don’t want to hurt you.”

The steady heartbeat in his chest tapped against my arm, and I held him a little tighter. My heart was drumming back just as loudly, but for different reasons.

“What was it?” I dared to ask, my heart thrown out to slaughter.

“For just a few minutes tonight,” Montana confessed like his soul was crumbling from the burden, “I could breathe.”

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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## MONTANA

It had been almost eight years since I had woken up with someone beside me.

I always dreaded it. Not the loneliness—that was part of my DNA as much as my ability to shift—but the guilt that would naturally accompany the post-bliss of a connection. I knew that if the day ever came when I would finally allow someone close, I would hate myself for it. I would feel like I was killing something precious, suffocating his memory under my needs.

Henry slept in a heap, a mess of brown waves spilling over his pillow. It was impressive how a man with the muscle mass he had could seem so soft in the morning light, his face relaxed in a peaceful sleep. One of his thick arms was tossed over my chest, shielding me from the chill of the night.

It pinched to know I didn't feel the clawing grief I had been expecting. A pinching that cooled into a cautious knot that sat just below my heart, nestled in the same place I kept the fragile, hopeful things that needed protecting. Amber stripes of sunlight peering through the blinds dripped down Henry's shoulders, his breathing slow and deep.

He was gorgeous tangled up in the white linens, his jaw dark with stubble, long lashes fanned over his cheeks. His full lips were parted, and I remembered how wonderful they had felt against mine.

How delicious they had tasted.

And how talented his mouth was in general.

How had this man gotten under my skin so completely?

How did I allow this to happen?

And why didn't it scare me like it should?

The melting comfort of smelling the citrus shampoo lingering in his hair had me closing my eyes again, letting myself daydream that we could stay in bed for a while longer. Outside of these walls was a reality demanding attention, plans that needed to be made, threats waiting in the shadows.

I wanted it to just be us, sleepy in bed together, ignoring the rest of the planet for a bit. I didn't even mind that my arm was falling asleep under him, only made a quiet note of the way my muscles tingled as I drifted back to sleep.

Enough time had passed that when I came to again, I was greeted with more sunlight and less Henry. The pillows and blankets had been fluffed around me in a makeshift nest, crowding me in like there was concern I would roll off the side. Three pillows had to be knocked to the ground in order for me just to move my arm, and I rubbed at my eyes to bring them into focus.

The smell of bacon hung in the air, the kitchen sizzling with promises, and my stomach bullied me into emerging from my fluffy nest. I grabbed my phone and tugged on some jeans as I made my way to the living room, hoping that the amazing scent of fried breakfast meat signified I'd be able to eat soon.

Henry was behind a skillet, flipping pancakes with just some boxer briefs on and his hair tied back into a messy bun. I stopped in my tracks, not just because he looked warm and kissable in the lack of clothing and messy hair, but because the man had made enough breakfast to feed an army.

Multiple stacks of pancakes rested on a plate nearby, next to a mountain of bacon strips, a canyon of scrambled eggs, and an entire loaf of toast.

Henry's golden gaze met mine, a cheeky grin flashing teeth.

“Morning.”

“That’s...quite the spread, Henry.” I eased past him to grab some coffee, scooting the eggs aside to get to it.

“I wanted to make sure you had enough to eat, and I couldn’t decide which was best—eggs and bacon, eggs and pancakes, pancakes and bacon, eggs and toast.” He shrugged, flipping a pancake. “So I just made all of it.”

“I can see that.”

The last pancake was added to the mountain, the whole thing wobbling under its own might, before the stove was clicked off and the pan set aside. I sipped my coffee, eyeing the amazing amount of food, half noticing that Henry was watching me with an eagerness akin to a puppy failing to keep his tail from wagging.

“Why are you grinning like a madman right now?”

“Because I want to kiss you.” Henry chewed on his lip anxiously. “But I don’t know your boundaries in the morning. Can I kiss you? Do you want to eat first? I can make you a plate.”

How the hell was this prehistoric predator, a five thousand pound killing machine, able to be this adorable first thing in the morning?

It should be illegal. It was uncalled for. I wasn’t prepared for it.

His eyes had become shining cartoon stars when I laughed, and I hooked my fingers into his boxers to tug him over. Henry melted into the kiss that was as warm and sweet as the nest he had put around me. A little drum of delight sounded off in my heart as he touched our heads together briefly, sighing with contentment.

“I’ll make you a plate.” Henry floated to the stacks of food in a haze, seeming dizzy from the kiss. My body was buzzing like it was waking from a dream, so I leaned against the breakfast bar to savor the feeling a while longer.

“I see your plant is doing better,” I said in order to fill the peaceful silence of our mutual contentment. “The leaves seem to have perked up.”

“It just needed to get out of that place.” Henry gave the orchid a glance. His attention was on making sure the monstrous amount of food he was stacking onto my plate wasn’t going to cascade to the floor. “This type of plant is particular. It needs a lot of careful attention and time.”

I didn’t know much about the specific nature of any plants, especially not very particular orchids, so this was all news to me. The plant was beautiful, even if it was struggling to survive. Tall stalks stood vertically up from the pot, fighting the weary urge to droop. Deep green colors in ombre hues of almost-white reached up to the top. Frail bulbs were tightly shut against the oppressive realities around it, surrounded by dead or dying leaves.

“You think it’ll make it?” I asked.

“It will.” Henry reached over to touch the bedding, then added a little water into it. “It’s strong. With enough love and time, maybe we’ll get to see it bloom.”

“I hope so.” I smiled to myself as Henry adjusted a leaf and washed his hands, bringing me my godly breakfast offering.

“This looks amazing, Henry.”

“It’s the only food I can make.” He smirked, snagging some bacon from the pile, and bit into it with a crunch. “I know we have a lot to do today, so we need to be fed and ready.”

“Yes, we do. First things first, we need to secure a way out of here—”

Our peaceful breakfast was halted by a rapid knock at the door, frantic and fast. Henry and I exchanged looks and walked away from our giant stacks of food.

“Montana,” Baatar called from the other side. “Open up or I’m using my key.”

The urgency in his voice got me moving, and I swung the door open quickly to let him inside. Baatar had a look on his face I’d never seen from him in the decades I’d known him.

Concern.

Worry.

Something was not only wrong, but terrifyingly so.

“What’s happened?” I asked immediately. “Are you okay?”

“I’m not the one in danger, Montana. Have you not checked your phone? Looked at the trending news on social media?” Baatar stepped past me, pulling his long dress coat off his shoulders. “You two need to start packing right now.”

It came as a cold shock that I hadn’t checked my phone all morning. I had gone from the comfortable nest Henry had made for me immediately to breakfast, ignoring my responsibilities as if I had the luxury to do so.

“I was distracted this morning,” I admitted, embarrassed. “I haven’t seen anything yet.”

Whatever tiny slash of shame I had been feeling was suddenly doused in salt when Baatar rotated his body to give me a look of bemused surprise.

“Oh, I can see that.” His head tilted to the table, which displayed our hard-won fossil from last night’s exploits as well as evidence of the other activity that monopolized my time and attention.

The massive, purple, phallic Rex was still standing straight up from its post, guarding the priceless amber shifter fossil with its intimidating size, ready for whatever might come its way.

I shut my eyes and inhaled through the sting of Baatar’s knowing little smirk.

“Well, I have about a hundred questions to ask, but I’ll save them for later.” Baatar tossed his jacket over the back of a chair. “Blanco’s death is all over the news. As is word that a fossil was taken from his home.”

“Christ,” I mumbled, thanking Henry as he brought me my phone. “That’s not good.”



“No, it’s not. It gets worse, Montana. I found out who it was you tangled with last night. Thank you, love.” Baatar accepted some coffee from Henry. “Love this look for you by the way. You play househusband well.”

“We’re not married.” Henry’s brow creased in confusion. “Just boyfriends.”

“Boyfriends!” Baatar sang, looking at me with a new electric look of delight.

My head was threatening to blow steam from my ears with the overwhelming heat of having my private life on display for goddamn Baatar.

I busied myself with checking the multiple notifications on my phone, my head swimming with a hurricane of embarrassment, worry, and the pressure of trying to run through everything at once. Royal had reached out about the news, sending me the scrambled surveillance video he could recover from Blanco’s estate. Baatar had sent over news articles about the murder, citing the passage about the vague description of the fossil.

There was even a callout that Colin McBride’s car had been stolen.

It was bad.

It was really bad.

The gears of planning were cranking at full speed, plans being formed in tandem with another, grinding through the success-to-failure ratio as I tried to piece together what needed to happen next. We needed a way out of the city that was low-profile, we needed a way to transport the fossil, we needed to get rid of McBride’s stupid car, and somewhere in there, I needed to talk to Henry about the “boyfriend” comment.

As the gears spun and worked, one almost overlooked notification made the whole machine come to a sputtering, grinding halt.

My phone hung the reminder of all I’d lost in a simple badge on the lock screen from the day before. I had missed it.

I couldn't believe I had missed it. I never did—not for over a hundred years. It had been a time of such wonderful memories turned into a quiet, personal day of mourning.

And I *missed it*.

I had missed Reaper's birthday.

The last time I had him all to myself, just weeks before I'd never see him again.

I had slept with Henry on my late husband's birthday.

“Montana?”

Henry's voice hit like a slap, and I blinked at him like I had been caught in the act.

“What?”

Those golden eyes cut through me, reflecting back a mirror of my pain.

“You two are in danger,” Baatar was saying, pulling me back into the moment. “The people who you were dealing with last night aren't known to let this kind of thing go. You stole the most sought-after fossil from them, Montana. They're looking for you.”

“Who are these people?” I turned my phone over and placed it down on its face, refusing to look at it anymore.

“They're a pro team of black-market heist experts.” Baatar took a seat at the table, elbow propped near the fossil and Guilt Dildo. “They extract the impossible by any means necessary.”

“Heist experts,” Henry breathed. “That sounds badass. I wanna do a heist.”

“How do you know about them?” I asked Baatar, ignoring Henry's fanboying.

“They're on my short list of people I do not fuck with.” Baatar pulled his phone from his pocket and started typing. “They're cutthroat, hired by the most assholeish of assholes, and will not stop until they have the fossil.” He displayed his phone, showing a grainy image of me in my suit from last

night, glancing over my shoulder as I entered Blanco's basement. "They are looking for you, Montana."

"Royal said they had deactivated the cameras." I almost reached for my phone but thought better of it. "It was a struggle for him to have grabbed anything."

"I have no doubt they did. But whatever the case, they're out for you." Baatar pocketed his phone again. "I have connections that passed along this intel as a courtesy, but that won't extend everywhere. We need to get you two in a car and on the road immediately."

"No flying?" Henry sounded hopeful.

"The airport is going to be crawling with cops," I explained. "If we show up with an amber fossil on our person right now after this story broke, that would be extremely suspicious. We need to drive."

"Exactly," Baatar agreed. "I've taken the liberty of having McBride's car towed out from the parking garage," he added with an understated bite of annoyance. "It'll be dropped off a few blocks from his home. You two should start packing. We need to move."

The fucking car. I had forgotten about the damn thing last night. My original plan had been to dump the fossil and Henry back at the condo, then go drop the car somewhere. God, I had really dropped the ball.

I had failed in so many respects.

"Do you have a car we can use?" I asked, scrubbing at my brow.

"I have some people that can get you one." Baatar checked his watch, then looked at us. "We're meeting them soon. Get packed."

I responded to the request on autopilot, my brain full of unhelpful white noise as I meandered to the bedroom to collect my things.

How had I missed it?

How had I missed *so much*?

I had been sloppy, distracted, swept up in a moment. I had allowed myself to throw my plans to the wind, ignored something deeply personal and important...for what?

My heart was in a knot of conflicting feelings. My brain did nothing to try and loosen it.

Had I made a mistake?

Was Henry a mistake?

And if he was...why did I feel so heartbroken over it?

I didn't so much as pack as I threw everything back into my bag in a haphazard mess, not caring about any sort of order. I had taken about the same amount of care with my wardrobe, tossing on the first pair of jeans and shirt I could find. My head hurt. My heart hurt worse, and I caused more friction within my mind as I tried desperately to concentrate on the matter at hand.

Whatever weird personal things I was struggling with needed to wait. We were in danger, the fossil was in danger, and I needed to focus.

I made my way back to the living room once I was packed just in time for Henry to extract Rex from the table. The loud, rubbery *pop* of the suction cup releasing from the table made me flinch, and he shoved it back into the duffle near some neatly spiraled socks.

"How do you want to handle the fossil?" Henry asked, still in the process of fitting Rex into the bag. "Do you have room in your suitcase?"

"Yeah." I set my bag down on the table beside the fossil and unzipped it. In the morning light, the amber took on a fiery hue. The tiny beast inside had a milky aura around the feathers; its eyes had lost the definition of life. The flecks of debris and bubbles suspended around it were much clearer now; tiny bits of dirt and a leaf paused by its wing.

The mid-transformation of this shifter was a brutal dance between forms, and I wondered what it had been running from when it met its unique end.

I placed it carefully within my bag, wrapping it up with sweaters and a belt to keep it secure, before burying it as deep as I could manage. This small thing held so much hope within it.

Henry was waiting by the door with Baatar, duffle over one shoulder, potted orchid resting in the nook of his arm, and three things of sealed, plastic containers stacked together containing breakfast foods.

“We didn’t get to eat much of it,” he explained when I looked at it. “I want to make sure we eat.”

“A peach, this one.” Baatar held the door open for us. “Let’s go, lovebirds. We have a bit of a walk.”

The morning had an unexpected chill. The last dying grasp of winter had blown in, biting at the tips of my fingers and tugging hard at my jacket. The sun did its best to keep things cheery, bleeding through the thick clouds in short bursts before being swallowed up by the gray. If the clouds had been more nefarious, we would have been trying to shield ourselves from an icy flurry.

Baatar marched us along, weaving us through side streets and shortcuts to keep us off any overly busy sidewalks. I had managed the foresight to wear something with a hood, and I tossed it up over my hair as we got further from the condo. Whoever these badass fossil hunters were, I didn’t want to provoke them. There was no way in hell I was going to allow this fossil out of my sight, but I didn’t want to make it harder than it needed to be.

My mind was a rough sea of torment as I moved silently, storming waves of guilt crashing against the constant, rocky dangers surrounding us. Somewhere in that madness, I had been seeking a lighthouse of reasoning, something to help ground me from the turmoil.

The guilt stung like a slow poison in my veins, my heart burning from tearing itself into smaller parts. It had been hard enough to allow myself to drop my control, to lean into the pull that Henry had on me. Holding him in my arms had felt so real, beyond the primal heartbeat of desire and into the much

more complicated, abstract need for connection. Lying with him, buzzing with release and comfort, feeling his breath on my neck as we drifted to sleep had been the single most wonderful thing I'd felt in years.

A chill went up my spine, a ghost passing through me.

*What the hell am I doing?*

"Where are we going exactly?" I shrugged my shoulders up from the cold I felt, failing to defend myself from it.

"I have a friend who deals in vehicles with low profiles and clean records. We're going to meet them at his shop."

"How good of a 'friend' is this guy? Enough not to be swayed by a possible bounty on my head? Or being linked to a murder?"

Baatar rolled his eyes, but there wasn't as much sass behind them as usual.

"Relax, Montana. You're being paranoid."

Not the answer I had been looking for. Of *course* I was paranoid. The situation was dire, and leaning on the good graces of people I hadn't personally vetted with my back against the wall wasn't ideal. I set my jaw to keep myself from further grilling him, but my guard was officially up.

He was being too unsure, too dodgy. I trusted Baatar; I knew him.

But I also knew that people with otherwise very sound reasoning could make mistakes. They could trust the wrong people.

And the worst could happen.

Henry's arm brushed mine, the touch a torrent of comfort and shame.

"You okay?" he asked in a low whisper, curious concern apparent on his handsome face.

There was too much to say at once, and I had a hard time wrestling out which answer to give. After a war of confessions, worry and guilt, I landed on a curt, "Stay sharp."

Henry's lips thinned, and he nodded, but nothing else about his expression changed.

Baatar's "friend" had a garage that spanned about three buildings, located behind a scrapyard that was littered in discarded, rusting metal. A few cars were parked along the side in various states of repair, strategically placed to help block any curious eyes trying to peek into the shop. The sound of pressurized tools whirring rumbled from within, clashing terribly with the loud music pouring from an old speaker system.

The buildings surrounding the garage seemed long abandoned, old graffiti sprawled across any exposed brick within eyesight. A guy on a bike lazily passed us on the sidewalk across the narrow street, openly watching us as we meandered closer to the open garage door.

"Wait here. I need to go talk to the owner." Baatar motioned for us to stay in the spot we were in, standing beside a truck that was missing its guts.

"I'm getting a bad vibe, Baatar." I finally cracked, unable to keep my thoughts to myself. "Nothing about this is sitting right with me. How well do you know this guy?"

"Montana, I'm not worried, and neither should you be."

"Have you worked with him before?" I tried not to shift my eyes over to the guy on the bike that passed us again.

"Not for cars, but other things, yes. Relax." Baatar tapped his watch. "Two minutes. Stay here."

I wrapped my fingers around my bag's strap and wrung it. Feeling the bite of the fabric against my palm helped ease the mounting tension in my belly. Baatar's body disappeared around a car propped up on bricks, the whirring tool noises still grinding away.

"I don't like this." I rotated around to take in the length of the street, watching for any movement. "We're sitting ducks here."

"Baatar isn't lying." Henry came to his defense carefully, as if maybe I was doubting his intentions. "I don't think this is

a setup, Montana.”

“I know he’s not lying,” I clarified, trying not to growl as I noticed the guy on the bike had stopped to take a phone call.

While watching us.

Something wasn’t right.

My stomach had been in knots since the morning. Seeing Reaper’s birthday as a missed notification along with all of the news coverage had put me in a state of heightened awareness. Intrusive reminders of failure rattled around in my head like shrapnel, destroying any hope of focus. All I could think about was keeping everyone safe, keeping the fossil safe, bringing it home to my team and their mates...

*Can you just handle this? Everything is already set up.*

*Trust me.*

A second guy on a bike rolled past, seeming to morph out of thin air. He gave us a cheeky little wink and a smile that was all teeth.

It was the last red flag in a stack of many, and I grabbed Henry’s arm, piloting him away from the garage.

“We’re not staying here.”

“What?” Henry fell into step with me, turning over his shoulder to look for Baatar. “What about—”

“He’s wrong. He’s got this one wrong, Henry. We can’t stay here.”

“You’re sure?” Henry blinked in surprise when I looked at him, my snarl softening when I realized I had brandished it his way.

“It doesn’t feel right. We’re going to figure it out on our own.”

“Okay.” Henry nodded, sticking to my side. “I’ll follow your lead, but I don’t think we should be outside long. Baatar said they’re looking for you specifically.”



“We’re going to the safe house we were supposed to go to before Baatar showed up.”

“Isn’t that pretty far away? We should go back to the condo—”

“I know what I’m doing, Henry.” I swallowed down the heat coating my words. “Sorry, just...I need you to just follow my orders right now.”

I think somewhere in the back of my head, where my logic had sat next to the soft, gentle feelings I had for Henry, I knew I was a mess. I knew I was slipping, that I was reacting like a wounded animal and not like a leader.

Not like a partner.

Nothing like I should have been. I had been shaken too hard, my center knocked loose, and the whole thing was crashing down around me, piece by piece. In those moments of chaos, where normally, I could find a light in the darkness and push through, all I wanted to do was shift and destroy. My tyrannosaur side was tempting, an easy default that could make it all go away.

I had been so swept up in the idea of just being feral and forgetting everything difficult in my life, I didn’t see the attack coming.

Henry caught the first blow, almost taking a knife to the throat—which had very clearly been meant for me.

The sound of the plant’s pot crashing to the ground broke my heart.

The sudden assault kicked me back into the present, my head swimming with the distance my mind had traveled. There were multiple attackers flanking us, and I was able to get a few solid hits in before we were quickly overwhelmed. Knuckles connected to my temple, splitting my vision into two and muffling noise into warped parodies. I felt my bag get torn away from my grip, and I let out a roar as I surged forward and tackled the man holding it.

His head hit the ground, his jaw cracking under my fist, but my body was yanked back and thrown to the ground by

several rough hands. I knocked a few back as I fought against their combined resistance, forcing myself up to see my bag attached to a man fleeing down the street.

No.

*Hell no.*

My bones began to snap, my skin tightening, vision red with anger as I brought my T.rex form forward.

I would hunt him down. Eat him. Take my fossil back and kill anyone in my path.

Nothing was going to stop me. Nothing was going to get in the way of my species's future, my *team's* future—

Gunshots iced my blood. Everything froze.

My body retracted its shifting process as I saw Henry hit the ground.

Not again.

Not Henry.

The hands holding me scattered, rushing away at the sound of the gunfire. I rushed to Henry's side, only then realizing he hadn't been alone when he slammed onto the ground. A man in a black mask slammed his knee up between Henry's legs and shoved him away, holding his side as he ran for his life.

Henry groaned and tried to stand, but I pulled him back down to the cement.

“Where are you shot?!”

“Go after the fossil!” he was yelling. “He's getting away! Go!”

“Henry!” I desperately tried to feel for any blood, pulling at his shirt, my heart pounding so hard I thought I would pass out. “Jesus Christ, please, please stay still. We need to get pressure on it. We have to get you to a hospital.”

Henry caught my hands and held me still, face close to mine so all I could see was gold.

“Montana. I’m not shot. I’m okay,” he said as calmly as he could, still catching his breath. “The guy fired shots, but I got the gun from him. I’m okay.”

I couldn’t speak, the relief washing over me so violently I felt like I was drowning in it.

Henry got to his feet, pulling me up, wincing as he grabbed his bag that had been slashed open at the side. A few socks fell out, and some of the shopping bags from his souvenir trip were torn. He shoved them back into place and tilted his bag so he could hold it shut.

We both stared down the street where the man with the fossil had disappeared.

The ache over my body throbbed where I had been kicked and pummeled, my knuckles raw from the punches I had landed.

But it was nothing compared to the pain of knowing I had let the fossil slip from my grasp. Finding it again was going to be like finding an amber needle in a Chicago-shaped haystack. We had no leads. No idea where these people kept their base or how fast they could move something out of the city.

I had failed so remarkably in so many ways.

I didn’t know how I was going to tell the team. What was I going to say?

Henry picked up his poor potless plant and sighed, looking at me with such loss.

“What now?”

I swallowed and whispered, “I don’t know.”

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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**M**y orchid looked so sad sitting in the sink.

Its roots stuck out in search of solid ground, naked and exposed, a few of its leaves missing from being dropped so violently. It had already been through so much sadness in its short life, and now it had been stripped away of any comfort and left to manage in a safe house sink.

Montana sat on the long, dated couch that was a little dusty from lack of use. The whole place smelled a little stale, like forgotten furniture and old wood, but it was a secure location we could use to regroup. It hadn't been too far from where we had been, maybe about ten minutes on foot going at a limping pace, and rested in a sleepy neighborhood with older people outside watering their gardens that were littered with gnomes.

Montana had called Royal once we arrived, his voice somber and serious as he had to confess what had happened. I couldn't hear the other end, but the way Montana had shut his eyes and listened while Royal spoke told me everything I needed to know.

The responsibility of losing the fossil was resting on his shoulders, even though I had been there to carry the burden.

I gave Montana space after the call, letting him stand on the back balcony alone for a while. Somehow I knew he needed that time to reflect and didn't try and approach him again until he sat back down on the dusty couch.

“Royal is going to run some intel on the information Baatar gave us about this fossil-hunting group,” he told me as

I sat beside him, taking the ice pack for his ribs.

“That’s good.” I watched his profile, the stony wall he’d thrown up glaring and worrying. “I think it wouldn’t be a bad idea to go back to where we were attacked. Maybe we can find some clues left behind.”

His eyes shut, brows creased as he crumpled into a frown.

“Out of the question. It would leave us out in the open.”

“I can go. You stay here and talk to Royal about intel, and I’ll scout the area. I slashed one guy on the side, so maybe he left a blood trail—”

“Henry.” Montana shook his head. “No.”

“I can keep a low profile. It’s the best lead we have so far.”

“They shot a gun at you.”

“*Tried* to. I got it away from him, remember?” I smiled, but the look he gave me made it fall immediately.

“Henry.” He took a long breath and set his jaw. “I’m sending you back home.”

I felt like a shell again. A thing void of myself, floating just above my body.

“What?”

“It’s too dangerous,” he continued, voice cold but trying to sound like an approximation of compassion. “I can’t risk you getting hurt.”

“That’s the risk we take on these missions. We watch each other’s backs. We keep each other safe.”

“Henry—”

“No, Montana.” I bowled over his attempt at sealing the deal. “You can’t cut me loose now just because things are getting complicated.” I watched him as he rubbed a knuckle over his brow, seeming so tired, so damn exhausted. “Something happened this morning,” I whispered, the frown on his face flinching into something else. “You saw something that threw you off.”

“The people we’re dealing with are more dangerous than I thought. I can’t focus on what needs to be done and worry about you at the same time.”

“You can talk to me.” I watched as he pushed off the couch, pacing over to the windows, a hand raking through his hair. “What happened this morning? Everything was fine, and then something changed.”

His shoulders bunched as he crossed his arms, head hanging a moment while he warred with whatever it was he was fighting against. A deep breath expanded his frame, and he turned to look at me when he finally decided to speak.

“Reaper wasn’t supposed to go on that mission. Did I ever tell you that?”

I shook my head, and he continued.

“We had been traveling for months, bouncing all over the globe looking for a lost sauropod fossil that had been snatched up. We had finally made some headway, got some solid connections with some dealers and collectors on some leads, but we’d decided to take a break. We were both exhausted, but he’d had a week longer to rest when we got the news to meet someone. I was supposed to go. I had set up the meeting.”

Montana ground his teeth, but his eyes still misted over.

“I asked him to go instead.”

“If you had gone, that means...” I trailed off when he nodded. “Montana, I’m sorry.”

“We walked into that situation because I told him it was safe. I made a mistake on who to trust, and he was shot twice in the chest and died on scene.” Montana swallowed, adjusting his arms tighter across his chest. “I had to go identify my husband’s body in a morgue. I had to deal with his body. I had to tell my team, our brothers, that he had been murdered. I can’t...express to you how deeply that changed me. How ruined I am.”

“You’re not ruined,” I defended, but he didn’t seem to hear me.

“Yesterday was his birthday, Henry.” He landed the sentence like a hammer, and it knocked the air from me. “I missed it. I’ve never missed it.”

I stood, desperate to comfort him, but stopped when he took a step backward.

“Montana, I’m...so sorry. I’m sorry,” I rambled.

“Not your fault,” he managed thickly, clearing his throat to settle himself. “It threw me off. It made me sloppy today, and I can’t risk that again.”

“Of course it did,” I said immediately. “That would screw up anyone’s concentration. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Montana shook his head like the idea hurt too much.

“It’s hard, Henry. All of this is fucking hard.”

“I know. I’m sorry. We’ll get through this,” I promised, forcing myself to stay still instead of going to him. “We’ll recalibrate. We’ll adjust.”

Montana sniffed briefly, rubbing at his eyes with a finger and thumb before soldiering on in an unhealthy way.

“What’s most important right now is the fossil.”

“Yeah.” I agreed in words only, my heart saying something else. “We know they’re in the city. I know you don’t want to go back to the scene, but I know we have a chance of finding a lead there.”

“Henry, you’re not hearing me. You’re going home,” he said again, firm and decided. “Royal’s getting a train ticket for you. You’ll leave tonight.”

“I’m not leaving you, especially not now.”

This time I did move, I walked over to him, even if his body language was screaming the opposite.

“You need backup,” I told him. “You need someone watching your back.”

“I can handle this myself. I told you that from the start. It was fine before we had people shooting guns at your head, but



now is a different story. You're not staying here."

"I know the risks," I shot back. "I'm staying by your side. I'm your partner. Boyfriends don't just bail—"

"We're not boyfriends, Henry!" Montana yelled, frustration boiling over. "This is...complicated and new. I know it's not fair, and I'm sorry. But we can't do that right now. I can't try and unpack these feelings, not die, and track down the fossil all at the same time. Do you understand? It's too much. I'm...tired, Henry."

I didn't know that feeling your heart break actually hurt.

It always confused me to see the little cartoon rendition of a beating heart crack in half, an overly adorable simplification. It hurt like he had reached in and plucked it from my chest, taken a bite out of it like an apple, and shoved it back into place backward.

My heart would never quite be the same again.

As a wounded animal, metaphorically bleeding out in front of the creature that tore a chunk from me, I lashed out in anger.

"Reaper went into a situation alone, and now you want to do the same thing," I spat cruelly. "You're being reckless."

"I'm being careful," he corrected, too calm to be genuine. "And taking out all elements I can't control."

"You're taking out elements you don't trust." I failed to keep my voice from wavering, but I didn't care. "You didn't trust Baatar. And now you're not trusting me."

Montana checked his phone robotically, not looking at me as he spoke.

"Royal sent you your ticket. You leave in two hours. Your ride will be here in a few minutes, so you can wait outside for it."

The painful fist in my chest tightened, and I had to move to breathe. I grabbed my duffel from the counter, the lining of its belly secured with a fresh layer of duct tape, and slung it over my shoulder.

I had to scrub at my eyes to see into my bag, and I grabbed the gift bag I had for him and set it on the coffee table.

At the front door, I gathered up the last bit of strength I had and looked at the man that had changed my heart forever.

“You told me you didn’t want to hurt me,” I reminded him. “You did.”

“I know,” he whispered, having the grace to look hurt himself.

I left him standing there alone, my chest in shambles, hurting more for him than myself in some odd, warped way. He was alone again, and I wasn’t strong enough to stick by his side. I loved him, more than anyone else I’d ever known in all of my many, endless lives, and I had never felt so completely lost.

I didn’t take the ride waiting for me. I wandered, vaguely aware of the direction I had in mind, my mind bullying me with replaying memories of the early morning. Montana’s sleeping face, the way he smiled against my lips, how grounding it was to feel his brow touch mine.

My tether was lost, and I was floating away.

A pulsing, rhythmic buzz in my pocket pulled me back, and for one horrible, hopeful moment, I thought it might be him.

When I saw Blaise’s name, I finally started to cry.

The weight of everything was too much.

My heartache. My failures.

The man I loved rejected me, and my best friend wasn’t going to live forever.

I answered, barely able to talk, folding down so I was sitting on a curb next to a flamingo mailbox.

“Oh, honey,” Blaise said once he heard me. “It’s okay.”

“Everything is fucked,” I sobbed out. “Blaise, I’m so sorry.”

“None of that. Listen, Royal is in there working his ass off to get intel. You know my baby. He can find anyone. He’ll get you a lead, and you and Montana will go take a bite out of their asses. Breathe with me a second.”

It took me a few tries, but my breathing eased into a less hiccupping mess as Blaise spoke to me. I reined in my tears enough to catch my breath and sat on the curb like a miserable, sad sack of heartache.

“Everything was going fine until today,” I said after sniffing back the last few sobs that threatened. “It all went to shit so fast.”

“It happens, Henry. When we were trying to find you, we lost your trail completely for days. Don’t lose hope. You and Montana make a great team.”

My chest throbbed, and I winced at the pain.

“He said we’re not boyfriends.”

“...What was that?”

“He didn’t like my dance or my deer that I brought him. Dalton made me a CD and everything,” I explained miserably.

“Yeah, I made sure to kick Dalton in the ass for that, babe. He played me the first track.”

“Then I shifted at the museum, and he kept me grounded, and when I danced at Blanco’s house, I felt him almost kiss me. Then, Blaise, he grabbed my sun orchid when we stole that car—”

“Are you talking in code right now?” Blaise asked over me. “Is ‘grabbed my sun orchid’ something the kids say these days?”

“I got mad when he wouldn’t admit that he almost kissed me, so I showed him Rex, and that pissed him off. Then we fucked in the shower, and I got to hear him bellow. It was a good bellow, Blaise. It was a *real* one, like a good bull bellow that made my heart so happy.”

“You are throwing a lot at me right now,” Blaise interjected softly.

“So I thought that meant...I thought it meant more than it did.” I rubbed at my tender heart, the pain flaring with each memory. “I know he’s scared. I’m scared too, but...what am I doing? This doesn’t matter right now. The fossil, your *life*, is what matters, and I’m sitting on a curb crying about a boy.”

“First off, crying about a boy is always important, especially if he’s being a jackass,” Blaise snapped back right away. “Yeah, the fossil is important, but we’re working on that. You can take a moment to feel your feelings and get through this. Don’t apologize for it.”

I nodded in agreement as I scrubbed my eyes, then realized he couldn’t see me.

“Yeah, okay,” I managed in a sad, hoarse grunt.

“You know I love you, right?”

I nodded again. “Yeah.”

“Okay. I need you to hear me on this, babe. Montana is widowed and probably unpacking a lot of feelings right now. He said he’s scared. Listen to that. I know you’re not the most patient person in the world, but you need to give him some time and space to come around and make peace with the fact that he might not.”

I groaned as my chest tightened, the idea of Montana slipping through my fingers almost too much to bear.

“You picked literally the most complicated man alive, Henry,” Blaise said around a sympathetic chuckle. “I’m sorry your T.rex chomped on your heart. It’s not fair. You want me to beat him up?”

That scenario cracked the wall of sorrow around me, and I snorted a laugh while trying to sniff back tears.

“I can take him,” Blaise added with an air of arrogance. “You just say the word.”

“Appreciate the offer.”

“Anytime. By the way. Can we talk about ‘Horseshoe’?”

Blaise cackled at the defeated sigh I let free.

“You don’t like it?” he teased, like the delightful bitch he was. “It’s so cute, though.”

“Fucking Royal took Calgary, so really this is his fault.” I laughed at his amusement. “I got the dumbest codename. I’m a thing people put on horse feet. The hell is that?”

“Horseshoes are considered lucky, you know.”

“I’m not feeling terribly lucky right now,” I lamented. “But thanks. I guess it’s not as stupid as I thought.”

“I think it fits you.” Blaise sounded wistful, almost proud. “Who else would be lucky enough to have me as their best friend?”

“True.” I smiled because I meant it.

“Hey, you wanna talk shit about people while you head to the train station? I have so much tea to spill about the last show I was in.”

The ache settling over my body was taking on new hues of hurt, melting from heartbreak to shame, to a bone-deep guilt as I took out the business card I had tucked away in my wallet. The pointy tips had bent inward, dog-eared and ragged from the journey.

Ruben’s name stared back at me. His number rested just below it.

*Are you happy here, Henry?*

Maybe time and space were a good thing.

“I think I’m gonna listen to music or something on the way to the station,” I lied.

“Okay, your loss. It’s pretty juicy.” He paused a moment before asking, “You gonna be okay, Henry?”

“I’ll be fine.” I smiled, even though my eyes were blurring from fresh tears. “Hey, you know I love you, right?”

“Of course you do. I’m amazing.” I could practically see him flipping his short hair back over his shoulder as he spoke. It made me laugh. It was a bittersweet feeling. “See you soon, Henry.”

“Bye, Blaise.” I hung up so I could wring the tears from my eyes. My entire existence felt like something rabid and mean had chewed on me for hours. My heart was shapeless goo, my limbs heavy and numb.

The only thing not pulsing with emotional wounds was my focus. My mission.

I knew what I needed to do, and I wasn't going to let anything stand in the way. Blaise and Simon were counting on me. Our species was counting on me.

I would see this mission through even if Montana didn't want me here.

Even though I was scared. And now alone.

I would find that fossil or at least find a solid lead and report it back to Royal.

After that, well...

It would be nice to be back in Canada for a while. I could let my heart heal before facing Montana again.

I pushed to my feet, grounded and ready to face what was ahead of me, and slung my bag over my shoulder. Where I was heading wasn't too far away, and the sun was starting to slip further into the late afternoon sky. The biting cold of the morning had warmed but still had its teeth, so I kept Baha's jacket zipped up as I trekked back where we had lost the fossil earlier in the day.

The street was mostly empty, the buzz of the nearby garage where we were supposed to have met Baatar's contact a few blocks away. Somewhere in the neighboring buildings, someone's dog was barking at a siren fading in the distance.

If I had been able to shift, I would have inhaled the scents of this modern jungle and breathed in the life around me. I could taste the air on the back of my tongue, know what lived beyond the fences, and hunt.

Obviously, shifting in a Chicago neighborhood during the day wasn't an option, even if it sounded amazing and would

likely dampen some of the human emotions crushing me to death.

I inhaled deeply and held it, not so much to try and smell my prey as it was to just feel my lungs expand. It was stretching the sore muscles around my heart and reminded me I was still alive. This hadn't killed me. I was still whole.

And I had work to do.

I dropped my bag and knelt by where we had been ambushed, scanning the dark cement for anything of use. Three bullet shells had been kicked to the curb, but otherwise, nothing gave any indication that we'd been in a scuffle recently. Something told me to keep pressing, keep hunting for a trail, so I stood and walked a slow line, replaying the fight over in my mind.

I remembered grabbing the knife from the ground after it was dropped, the blade connecting with the side of the man trying to wrestle me to the ground. The sensation of blade in skin wasn't my favorite, the cut too clean and surgical to feel right. Feeling hide tear under my claws or bone crunch in my teeth was one thing, but a human's body splitting under a tool of death was something else entirely.

I didn't care for it. It was gross.

My skin crawled at the memory, but it did steer me to where that assault had taken place. I squatted and peered at the ground, taking note of the deep, red stains of splattered blood.

Just like a wounded animal, the man had fled right after I had cut him.

And just like a wounded animal, he left a trail of blood behind.

It was the lead I was looking for, and I hoped like hell I'd live up to my codename and get lucky.

The trail was sporadic, a few drops here and there, moving from street to sidewalk into a narrow gap between an old gas station and across the street again. Tiny crimson dots ran around the back of a duplex and up the steps leading to the front door before disappearing altogether. Thick white curtains

were pulled closed on the front windows; the rug before the door advising people to “wipe their paws” had a few drops of blood smeared across a cartoon pawprint.

Backtracking around to the side, I noticed the entrance leading into a small patio had a back door cracked open, a sleepy cat peering out of it to watch the birds. Crooked blinds covered the neighbor’s windows, and I peered around quickly to make sure no one else was watching the stranger eying the open back door.

I flexed my hands and prowled up the steps as slow and quiet as I could, looking past the unamused guard cat into the house behind it. Wooden floors stretched down a hallway, a set of stairs to the left, and a kitchen empty of life sat in darkness. I pushed the door open wider, pausing to listen for footsteps.

The cat slow-blinked up at me, ears in backward annoyance that I was disrupting their afternoon birdwatching.

I mumbled an apology and stepped around it, putting the door back in place as it was. Soft creaks sounded under my feet as I crept inside, the home smelled like lemon scented cleaner and flowery fabric softener fresh from the dryer, with mild undertones of old blood. The metallic sting sat wrong in the air, cloying and sticky in the sweet mix of fake flowers and lemons.

I took my time moving further into the house, listening with each step, checking corners before passing them. The source of the bloody smell was in the kitchen, a wastebasket filled with bloody dressings and bandages. Fresh lemon smell across the floor and counters made it obvious it had been scrubbed clean of the mess, and I worried for a moment the trail would end there.

Just past the kitchen was a small area with a washer and dryer, bloody clothes draped over the washer with cleaner soaking into the ruined fabric. Blood and fake flowers, a combination that almost made me gag, and I had to cover my nose as I continued forward.

The living room was dim and quiet, a coffee table with a half-finished puzzle of a dolphin scattered in pieces across its



surface, and a man lying on a couch looking miserable, a little pale, and very familiar.

He opened his eyes as I stepped into the room, the recognition forcing them wider in panic.

“Shit,” he said, hand over his bandaged wound where I had cut him.

“Yeah.” I dropped my bag. “That’s an understatement.”

“Listen, man.” He tried to sound tough, his lip curling into an attempt at a snarl. “If you mess with me, you’re going to have a shitstorm to deal with. I have connections. I’ll make sure you get yours. I wouldn’t fuck with me, man.”

“You have connections?” I cracked my knuckles. “I guarantee my family is scarier than yours. You ever see a pissed-off drag queen before? Or a bull ceratopsian when his drag queen is threatened? Hell, don’t get me started on what a raptor’s claws can do to your guts.”

He looked like I was insane, which was rude.

“The hell are you talking about?”

I stalked over to him, catching his wild fist as he tried to take a weak swing and pinned it to his chest. He yelled through his teeth in pain as his wound pulled, the rage in his eyes shrinking as he noticed my eyes.

And my *teeth*.

Speaking around my molars as they sharpened was hard, as was the tension in my throat as I held my shift between human and tyrannosaur, nothing about me natural or correct.

But I sure as hell was scary, and I enjoyed watching the scared little mammal cower under my grip.

“Don’t mess with me today,” I warned, adjusting my jaw as it popped, breathing in the taste of terror. “I just had a nasty breakup, and I’m feeling fragile.”

“Wh-whatever you want! Please!”

“Good. Now.” I grinned, showing him more teeth. “Tell me where the fossil is.”

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

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## MONTANA

“These guys are bad business, Boss,” Royal said into my ear, not hiding his concern. “Essentially, you’re going to be dealing with antique mercenaries. These guys aren’t known to play nice.”

I blew the dust off the gun safe and punched in the code, swinging it open to take inventory of what I had.

“Any idea of the numbers I’ll be up against?”

“My guess is close to fifteen. It seems like the recent news thinned their numbers for ease of travel, and y’all’s attack took out a few of their guys. Still not optimal to go in alone.”

“I’m not planning on going in hot. I need to do some recon, hopefully track where they might be going.” I grabbed my handgun and checked it over, strapping the holster to my side. The knives fit against my forearm, and I tucked another in my boot. “Only a madman would try to take that many people alone.”

“I haven’t had any luck on bases of operation yet, no touch points within the city. I’m expanding my search and reached out to some contacts. Baatar didn’t have any idea on hideouts or anything?”

“No.” I tossed the safe shut again and locked it.

“Is he any good in a firefight? Could you bring him along?”

The gun felt heavy as I slipped it into the holster, the weapon not something I took any joy in using, even if it was

necessary.

“I wouldn’t ask him to. It’s dangerous. Let’s find where they are first, and we’ll figure out a plan.” I moved back to my computer, open on the kitchen counter, and scanned over the map of Chicago and surrounding areas. A spiderweb of roads and highways burst out from the center, threading out into wider gaps that stretched forever.

Staring at the seemingly endless possibilities of where the fossil could have been on that web made my heart heavy, sinking it further into my already bruised chest. My mind was as tangled and complicated as the winding roads of a major city and just as congested.

I missed Henry, which I had no right to feel. I had pushed him away, told him to leave. I didn’t get to then sense his absence like a cold void at my side while I wrestled with everything. That wasn’t fair.

It would have been nice to have him with me, scanning this web together, knowing that whatever was ahead of me, there was someone tackling this with me. I had missed that feeling more than I realized.

More than I wanted to realize.

“They need somewhere to stash things and be undetected,” I mused out loud. “Optimally, somewhere they could store large trucks or vans so they can smuggle things out of town easier.”

“It wouldn’t be in the city,” Royal mused back, agreeing with me. “That would be too risky, which confirms that they’re likely outside of Chicago.”

“Look for warehouses, something large and isolated.” I rubbed at the back of my skull, the persistent ache annoying. “Do some digging and call me back if you find anything. I’ll dig on my end too.”

“Got it, Boss.” The line went dead, and I set the phone aside, going in search of something to ease the sting of the headache. The medicine bottle in the cabinet rattled as I picked it up, the expiration date close but not passed. Tiny blue pills

danced out onto my palm as I shook them free, and I grabbed a glass for some water.

Henry's plant was resting in the sink, soil dusting the chrome from where it had stuck to the naked roots. The leaves had wilted a bit more, the poor thing trying to grow tall without any ground to stand on. It was alone, dying, after being rescued and loved so fiercely.

I stared in silent wonder at the one, proud blue flower that had opened despite it all.

My phone vibrated on the counter, clattering around in a tantrum to be answered. I was still staring at the flower as I answered, assuming it was Royal connecting back with some useful intel.

“Yeah?”

“This is me being respectful of your space like you asked and not demanding I come check on you both.” Baatar was doing a terrible job at keeping his temper in check. “So I won't insist, again, that I come help you. But I did go do a sweep of the area, and I didn't see any of the men who attacked you. Are you *sure* you are alright?”

“Yes, we're fine. Not hurt.”

“Good, then allow me to formally call you a total asshole.”

“Baatar—”

“Hell no. You're going to listen to me call you an asshole for a minute because you are, in fact, an asshole.”

I went ahead and took two extra painkillers to prep for Baatar's rant and moved to the couch to sit, as it was likely going to take him a while to explain the extensiveness of me being an asshole.

“I've known you for almost twenty years, and you bail in the middle of me helping you, get shot at, then refuse my aid after the fact. Not only did that hurt my feelings—a true feat, by the way, because I too am an asshole—but you also made me look like a chump. Unforgivable, Montana. No class. Not at all the way a tyrannosaur operates.”

“We have an etiquette manual now?” I drawled as I flopped onto the couch. “Also, you sent me to a strip club to get your watch back from an ex-boyfriend, Baatar. You consider that classy?”

“No, because it was funny,” he snapped. “There’s nothing funny about me having to calm down a stolen car merchant that you bailing wasn’t a sign you were running to the cops. And having handsome Henry get rained on by gunfire and you refusing to let me pamper him.”

“I know. I’m sorry about that. The situation felt off, and I reacted.” I massaged my temple. “I wasn’t at my best today.”

“You know how long it takes to make criminal connections that don’t cost an arm and a leg, Montana? A lot. I have to go to someone’s wedding now and bring a very nice present to make up for you being a paranoid shit. And it’s worth repeating that *you were shot at*, you fucking twat.”

I put him on speakerphone while he ranted, needing a break from having him whine directly into my ear. Resting near the edge of the coffee table was the crumpled gift bag Henry had left behind. The bag had been folded over itself in his duffle, turning it into a crescent with a thick middle. The logo of one of the souvenir shops we had visited on the boardwalk was among the various creases and wrinkles.

Baatar was continuing to spew negativity, so I hooked my finger into the handle of the bag and tugged it over. Henry had spent the better part of that day we had together on the pier picking out gifts for everyone. I hadn’t noticed what he had snagged for me, but if it was what I had expected, it was likely a punny shirt or maybe some Chicago-themed pajama pants.

I was likely not going to be able to keep whatever it was. Maybe keep it at the safe house as emergency clothing.

I pulled the bundle loose, a fluffy thing wrapped in paper and a small white box taped shut with a metallic sticker. The box was heavier than I expected, and I gave it a glance over before popping the top and peering inside. A round, glass orb stared back at me, hefty as I as pulled it from the safety of the box.

The snow globe was cheesy as hell, but it sent a knife through my heart.

It wasn't painted very well, and the thing looked cheap even though it weighed a lot, but the snow globe with Willis Tower standing tall around white, fluffy fake snow and sparkles almost brought tears to my eyes.

I knew it wasn't a gift for me.

It was for Reaper.

Henry had spent time finding this for my late husband, a man he never knew, but wanted to honor in some way.

I was a shaky tower of guilt and regret as I tugged over the paper-wrapped mystery, only one breath away from toppling over completely. I was compelled to see the thing that would break me, the last stone to slip free from the wall I had in place to keep me safe from happiness.

The final blow was soft and sweet, my fortress knocked down by a stuffed animal with a note attached.

A weighted, fuzzy brown bear had a bow around its neck, a note in Henry's clean, practiced handwriting sticking out from the middle.

*"Sorry it's not a duck."*

*- A*

I felt a ghost place a hand on my shoulder, a whispered tease.

*You big softie.*

"I'm an idiot."

"That's what I've been saying," Baatar agreed cheerfully. "But what specifically are we talking about?"

"I have to get to the damn train station." I shot to my feet, bear in hand, and snatched my phone from the coffee table on

my way to the coat closet. “I have to make it right. I have to apologize.”

“Are we still talking about me?” Baatar sounded off. “Because I’m not at the train station.”

“No. Henry.”

“What the hell did you do to sweet Henry?” Baatar rounded on me again, something new to classify me as an asshole.

“I have to go. Baatar, I’m sorry I fucked things up. I’m sorry I didn’t trust you. You’re a good friend, even if you are a jerk.”

“Oh.” He got silent for a moment, something I’d never heard from him. “You’ve thrown me off. I had so many more ways I was going to call you a twat, and you just ruined it.”

“I’ll make it up to you.” I pulled my boots on, swinging my jacket over my shoulders as I stormed out of the door. “I have to go for now.”

He began to protest as I hung up, only to notice that Royal was already calling me.

“Royal,” I answered as I jogged down the steps. “When does Henry’s train leave?”

“Boss, we got a problem.”

“What?” I stopped at the end of the stairs, eyeing the direction of the station. If I caught a cab there, I might make it time, but I would need to leave immediately.

“I found their location. It’s about an hour outside of the city, and I’ve sent the location to your phone and got a rental car ready for you nearby. The issue is that this place has trucks and a damn small aircraft. If they get that loaded onto a plane or a truck, it’s going to be a pain in the ass to find again.”

“Dammit.”

Of course the car rental place was in the opposite direction of Henry. I couldn’t wait; I couldn’t abandon the mission and my family to make up for my mistakes.



I also couldn't bear knowing I had ruined the only good thing I'd had since losing Reaper.

*Make it right, Monty.*

"Royal, I need a way to—"

"That's not the problem, Boss." Royal's tone sharpened, true concern piercing through me. "I pinged Henry's phone to check that he made it to the train station. He's not at the station. He's where the fossil is."

My mind came to a grinding halt, sparks bouncing off my well-formed plans and lighting everything on fire.

"What?"

"I tried calling him, but no answer. I don't know if they grabbed him or what, but...Boss, this is bad. You know how serious these guys are. Jackson is taking his plane there with Baha, but it's going to take a few hours—are you running?"

"Keep pinging his phone. Let me know if there's movement. Send me whatever you have on the layout of this place. I need to know the best entry points. Can you get into their security?"

I ran as fast as I could, dodging around a lady with a dog and some cars as I dashed across the street.

"Montana, you're not seriously going in alone, are you?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely I am. Henry's there. Nothing is keeping me from getting to him."

A scooter nearly killed me as I rounded a corner, but I was able to stumble out of the way and get called a few colorful names in the process.

"I believe a wise man once told me that facing that many people alone is the behavior of a madman," Royal reminded me, but it didn't slow me down.

"Can you get into their security, Royal?"

"I'm working on it now," he said with a very wary sigh. "I'm trying to get into their camera system to get eyes on Henry, or at least the gun situation."

The rental car location was mostly empty as I swung inside, the speakers overhead serenading me to “shake it off” as I marched to the counter.

“Keep trying,” I told Royal. “We need to be as prepared as possible before I get there. I don’t want to have to go in full T.rex, but I will if I have to.”

I hung up as the employee walked over, eyebrows raised at either my last statement, the fact I was panting from an obvious run, or the death grip I had on the weighted stuffed bear in my hand.

“Montana Smith. Give me something fast.”

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## HENRY

IF MY CODENAME WAS SUPPOSED TO BRING ME LUCK, I certainly wasn’t feeling it.

After politely asking the man I had stabbed during the scuffle where his fuck-face partners took the fossil, I smashed his phone and stole his car (which was parked in his cousin’s garage, who seemed like a nice guy with shitty relatives based on how lovely his duplex was) then proceeded to drive an hour south into Indiana. It had been explained to me in a panic that apparently, the mercenary group the jackass worked for moved their higher-profile items out to this location, placing them on trucks hidden with less provocative stock or flying them to the coast.

This fossil was especially sought after and would be likely tossed onto a plane, which meant I had to hurry if I had any chance of finding it in time. I had been expecting the place to be a small, low-profile building tucked away into the greenery expanding out from the highway.

I felt pretty stupid thinking it would be that easy.

The place was tucked away into the pretty countryside, but it sure as hell wasn’t a small, low-profile place. It looked like an old factory of some sort, with multiple levels, a loading

dock with running trucks, an airplane hangar behind it with a runway, and my personal favorite—men with rifles chilling out by the entrance.

Crap.

It was much easier to stay hidden as a human as I stalked around the perimeter looking for weaknesses in their security, but I wished like hell I could shift. I was used to hunting and stalking my prey as a dinosaur, not so much as a human. It took me longer to make my way through the woods safely without being noticed, and I mentally cursed as the sun started to sink lower in the sky. I didn't want to have to try and infiltrate this damn place at night, but it was looking that way.

I waited and watched, paying attention to any movement coming in or out of the place. None of the trucks had moved just yet, their trailers backed into the loading dock obstructing most of my view into the warehouse. From what I could gather, there was a good smattering of people inside, but the exact count wasn't solid.

The guys by the door rarely left, lounging but aware of their surroundings. I counted four cameras, one at each entrance and two near the loading dock. The only chance I had to slip inside unnoticed was from the side, but all the windows seemed to be shut and sealed.

Double crap.

It was hard to stay patient. Everything in me was screaming to move, to strike, to act before the fossil disappeared for good. My bottom lip was raw from chewing at it, my left knee soggy from kneeling on the moist dirt behind a large tree. It smelled like rain was closing in, the air cooling from the setting sun. Lazy yellow lights flicked on around the building, shining on the cameras staring down over the doors.

Somehow, quietly breaking in through the window seemed like my best bet, and I had begun to dig through my duffle to find a tool to use for such action. Within my snailed socks, sexy stripper pants, and spare underwear, the only things at my disposal were a toothbrush and some small toiletries.

Oh.

And the massive fake Rex penis.

Can't forget that.

"Wow, I'm really screwed," I whispered to myself, wondering what kind of a shot I had if I just shifted into my *Albertosaurus* form and went full monster mode on these people. They had rifles that would pop holes in me if I couldn't chomp them fast enough, so that was not ideal, but it was looking like my only real option left.

If I could at least stop them, keep them from leaving with the fossil and let Royal know where it was...

It would be worth it to save Blaise and Simon. Worth it to know that the rest of our species could live on with offspring that could shift.

"Let's make that Plan B," I told myself, not quite ready to die. There had to be another way in I wasn't seeing.

Right?

I wished Montana was there with me, and I hated myself for it. He had smashed my heart under his big *tyrannosaurus* foot, and I still wanted him with me. He'd know what to do; he'd have a plan we could follow. I would have likely messed up that plan by trying to do something cool and unnecessary, but at least we would have *started* with a solid plan, which was more than what I had currently.

He would make me feel safe. Like we'd make it through even if it was impossible.

I was lost in the memory of his smile, the fleeting sound of his laughter, when the back door to the building swung open. I ducked further behind the tree I had been camped near, peering over the side to watch as a man kicked a small brick over with his foot, placing it between the door and the latch. He skipped down the stairs as he lit a cigarette, talking on the phone with someone.

The door was open.

It was my chance. My one chance. I had to take it.

The only issue was that there was still a camera spying on the door from above, a red light warning me that it was on and recording. If I made a run for the door, someone would see me coming. If I was going to slip inside unnoticed, that camera had to go.

*Think, Henry. Think.*

The person who had exited the door was pacing around outside, back to the stairs, puffing on his cigarette like it was going to solve his life problems. I had to do something fast before he finished the thing, or my opportunity would seal up again.

The sun was going down. A truck engine rumbled to life on the other side of the building.

I took a chance, a wild, stupid chance, and hoped like hell my codename brought me luck.

I kept low as I dashed across the woods, flanking the back door to keep the camera from spotting me right away. Smoke puffed up in plumes from the man pacing in front of the stairs, yelling about relationship issues and how his mom wasn't taking his career seriously. For what it was worth, I agreed with Mom. He could do better than smuggle fossils and do crime.

If I was going to make this work, I had to pull this off without a hitch. The camera had to be obstructed, and I had to climb into the open door at the same time.

I had one shot, one object at my disposal.

And it wasn't known to be very aerodynamic.

As I ran up to the stairs, I cocked my arm back and hurled Rex like a Spartan spear, the girthy member soaring through the air like a phallic torpedo. The tip crashed into the lens of the camera, shroom slapping it to the side, before somersaulting with flair into the bushes.

The camera's neck bent, the view now aimed off center, away from the door.

I vaulted over the side of the stair's railing and slipped inside, pulling the brick in with me so the door locked tight. I felt bad for the guy smoking, but I didn't want to risk him following in after me.

I had made it inside, just barely, but I had done it.

Step one, complete. Step two, somehow find the fossil. Step three, don't die.

Through the back door, the building opened up into what used to be an industrial production of some sort. The place was structured with metal railings and massive, abandoned funnels and tubes, stained with rust and dust. It smelled like the place was barely maintained, only enough to keep it from falling into itself, and held the unmistakable smell of ignored mold.

Voices and music rippled through the building, bouncing off all the metal and warping the noise as it traveled. It was clear that the only real life was further inside, in the direction of the loading area.

The massive warehouse flooring with the stained tubes and funnels narrowed into hallways with offices, one of which held the security room with a few working monitors, a laptop, and a man eating a cup of noodles.

The window was smudged with dust and crisscrossed with metal grating, but I could make out what he could see on his screens. The camera I had knocked off center caught the smoking man stomping his way around the building. The others showed the front entrance with the armed guards, another with what looked like the loading bay, the trucks, and the massive storage room with countless crates, objects, and other treasures.

The fossil had to be somewhere in there, which meant that's where I needed to be.

Unfortunately, I was out of dildos to throw at cameras to keep myself hidden.

The security man with the cup of noodles set his dinner down as his hip crackled with electronic noise. A bright

yellow walkie-talkie clicked free from his belt, and he held the side button down to respond to the call.

“What?”

The voice on the other end was muffled with static but repeated, “We need to know what crate that crystal skull is in.”

Another bite of noodles was snuck in as he clicked around on the computer.

“Would that be classified under ‘mummies and archeology’? Or like under ‘fossils’?”

The radio chirped, and the static voice said, “It’s a carving of a skull, dumbass. Not an actual skull. It would be under ‘archeology, artifacts.’”

“Like I’d know that,” the noodle-hungry security man mumbled to himself, fishing around in a database on the computer. A long, self-pitying sigh fell from him before he clicked the button down to answer. “54-B.” He released the button, ate more noodles, and grumbled around them, “Jerk.”

They kept a database with their stolen goods categorized. If I could get my hands on that computer and find where that fossil was located in the hoard, I could hopefully snatch it before it was loaded up onto a truck or plane.

Maybe my codename really was lucky.

I just had to figure out how to get through Cup O’ Noodles first.

My hands tingled as I shook them out preparing for what I needed to do. His back was to the door, attention on a small screen, where a movie was playing quietly. The soft dialogue from a drama whispered scandalous nonsense between wet slurps of broth, and I crept around the corner into the office.

If I could grab him, choke him out until he fainted, I could tie him up, search the computer, hopefully take any weapons, and move into step two. Just one quick grab, keep him from yelling, and I’d be one move closer to the goal.

I crept closer.

He was eating chicken-flavored noodles. It smelled unhealthy. The database peeked over his shoulder as I drew in, a list of items with numbers beside them and tabs at the bottom. Near the middle, “Fossils” was clear as day.

Another slurp. More dramatic dialogue.

*C'mon, Horseshoe. You're lucky. You got this.*

I reached out to grab him.

And he turned around.

We stared at each other, both surprised and wide-eyed. He swallowed the noodles he was chewing. There was a piece of dried spice on his lip.

Some dramatic music played as a twist was revealed on screen, and we both flew into action. He sprang from his seat and grabbed my waist in an attempt to bulldoze me to the ground. My knees bent, and I pushed back, aiming my elbow strikes down into his back and kidneys. His knuckles found my ribs in a few sharp punches, and I brought my knee up into his belly.

The grip around my hips weakened as he pulled back, his hand reaching for his walkie-talkie. I grabbed for his wrist, shoving him backward into the desk, the monitors wobbling and his noodles splashing chicken-flavored water all over the place. A flash of metal caused me to retreat out of his reach, a knife materializing in his hand with a flick.

He aimed the knife at me, anger and fear dancing in his eyes, his other hand grabbing at his walkie-talkie with shaking fingers.

“You don’t want to do this,” I warned him, my molars growing sharp. “Trust me.”

“S-stay back.” He tried to sound threatening, but he was failing. “If you try to move, I’ll cut you.”

“You won’t make it that far.” I took a step. “And if you call your friends, they’ll all die.”

“I mean it!” He jabbed at the air in my direction. “I’ll use this! I’ll—” Something caught his attention behind me for just



a flash, confusion melting into shock before a brick bounced off his face.

The heavy rectangle knocked him out cold, his body tipping backward to slap his dinner over before he slid to the ground.

I swung around, arm thrown back to attack, and got stuck to the floor in surprise.

“Montana?” I blinked at him, stunned into almost sputtering. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Montana lifted his eyes from the unconscious security guard he had clocked with a brick, ocean gaze landing on me like cool waters over hot sand.

“Coming to the rescue.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY

---

## MONTANA

I knew better than to assume he'd be happy to see me, and from the cautious, pained look in his golden eyes, he was far from it.

His attempt at a smile was weak, a flower struggling to bloom under a cloudy sky.

“That’s my line.”

“Yeah, well. I left my sword at home.” I glanced down at my clothing. “I’m not wearing stripper pants either.”

“Messed up the whole shtick.”

Up until that moment, I knew exactly what I wanted to say when I saw him again. I had rehearsed the apology, the explanation that I was a mess with too much baggage, that I had been unfair and a terrified idiot. The entire drive there was spent speeding and mulling over how I was going to make it right again.

It made that all the more frustrating when I couldn’t seem to remember a damn word of it.

Instead, I cracked a lame joke about not being Geralt enough to borrow Henry’s line and stared at him like a helpless fool.

“There’s a database,” Henry said after a beat of silence, pulling his attention from me to the open laptop. “They catalog all of their goods. We should be able to find out where the fossil is.”

“See what you can find,” I said instead of anything I had practiced and busied myself with checking the unconscious security guard for any keys or weapons. “Royal has already disabled any silent alarms and has access to the cameras.”

“Oh.” Henry clicked around on the laptop, glancing at one of the screens. “Good to know.”

The guard yielded some car keys, a wallet, knife, but nothing much else of use. I pulled the body out of view from the dirty windows and tied him up with some electrical tape, making sure to gag him so he didn’t wake up screaming.

“Dammit,” Henry hissed. “The fossils are listed out in some sort of shorthand. I don’t know which one it is.”

“Do they have sizes? Countries of origin?” I leaned over the back of the chair, peering down at the rows of hyphenated numbers and letters. “Does it show any that have already been loaded?”

“A few big items on trucks.” He scrolled over to show the highlighted fossils lit up in green, the others still in red. “Yellow marks are the ones that left on a plane two days ago, but nothing has been added since then.”

“Thank God.” I allowed myself a breath of relief. “So it should still be in the warehouse.”

“It looks like they have them split into groups. Groups A and B look to be the most promising in value and matching size for the fossil. They’re located in different crates in the storage area.”

“The fact that this bastard has other fossils priced at this range means they’re smuggling items they absolutely shouldn’t have,” I growled. “I hate that we have to leave them behind.”

He looked up at me from his seat, determination creasing his forehead. “If we each take a section, we can save time.”

“I don’t like the idea of splitting up.” I nodded at the camera facing the storage area, which shared space with the loading bay. “There’s a lot of eyes out there.”

“They’re focused on the trucks right now. Looks like they’re loading something big.” Henry stood, pocketing the knife I handed him. “It’s now or never. We have to find that fossil before it gets loaded somewhere.”

I stared at the monitor, watching a group of men prepping a massive crate onto a bed with wheels to try and get it pushed into the back of the truck. They were struggling to get it strapped down, but they wouldn’t be distracted forever.

He was right.

We had to try. We had to find this damn thing before it was too late.

“I’ll take the crates in group B. You take A.” I dug out the earpieces from my pocket and handed him one. “Pair this with your phone and keep an open line of communication with me.”

“Okay.” He took it without question, pairing it faster than I could pair mine. “What do we do when we find it?”

“We sneak out. If we can avoid conflict, that’s what we do. We’re outgunned, and backup is hours away.” I pushed my earpiece into place and adjusted my holster at my ribs. “If things go sideways, take cover. Understood?”

“Got it.” Henry turned to go, then turned back to me. “Do we need a safe word?”

“Safe word?” I had to reel my mind back the proper direction. “Oh—if we run into trouble?” He nodded, and I said, “Yeah, that’s a good idea.”

“Let’s use ‘Sasquatch.’ That’s what Royal uses.”

“That is...enlightening. And weirdly not as strange as I thought it would be.” I tapped my earpiece. “Let’s go.”

We shut the door to the security room behind us and continued into the old factory, sticking close to the walls and keeping our footsteps as quiet as possible. Through a stretch of long-dead assembly lines stripped down to their metal skeletons, the warehouse exploded with life. Music played from a speaker near the loading area, some chairs stacked

around a table where a card game was waiting, their faces down to keep everyone honest.

The cement room stretched far across and surprisingly high, with several floors made of metal grating stacked with boxes, connected by narrow stairs and catwalks. Just peering up at the spindly bridges made my stomach turn, their construction not exactly sound.

With the focus of the group's attention still manhandling a giant, possibly stone figurehead onto a truck, Henry and I slipped over to the first row of crates lining the warehouse wall. Wooden crates were neatly stacked, packed with various cases, linings and padding to keep the objects inside safe. Across the sides of them in sprayed numbers was their serial codes, a massive alphabetical prefix leading the string of numerical identification. The bottom row of fossil crates started with A, but skipped immediately over to D.

We both craned our heads up to see the next row up, a mocking A glaring down from about three stories up.

"Fuuuuck," Henry whispered.

"Go slow." I let him take a breath before I touched his arm to get his attention. I held his gaze, making sure he knew I meant it when I told him, "You can do this. Keep your head down, go slow."

His stubble bunched as he set his jaw, a single nod given before he was slowly crawling up the steps. Across the room, someone yelled a curse that made me jump and reach for my gun. My heartbeat hammered, slowing down only when it was clear the yell wasn't aimed at us, but at someone who had stepped on a foot.

I exhaled about three years off my life and ducked into the lined boxes containing endless, stolen goods and got to work pilfering them. I kept to the other side of the boxes when I could, trying to hide myself behind the larger stacks as I began slowly peeling up the tops to rummage inside. Cases of bone were stuffed around hay and packing peanuts, pieces falling silently to the ground as I opened and shut each one as quietly as possible.

“Jesus,” Henry whispered into my ear via the Bluetooth. “I think these are titanosaur feet.”

“The amount of fossils they have is insulting.” I kept my voice low, but my temper was ringing in my ears. “Now that Royal has their location, I’m hoping we can try and find some of these later.”

Henry huffed as he strained to crack something open. “There won’t be a shortage of missions anytime soon.”

“Hopefully, the next one we go on won’t be so harrowing.” I shut a crate and moved to the next one, wiping some sweat from my temple. “When we get back home, we can plan out how we’re going to parse out leads.”

“Yeah, um.” Henry paused a moment; then the sound of sifting through materials started again. “I’m not heading home after this.”

It was my turn to pause, and I crouched down behind a crate to process what was said.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m heading to Canada.” He spoke in a whisper, but his voice was stone. “After all of this.”

“Canada?” I blurted back like a bewildered parrot. “Why Canada?”

“Ruben gave me his card before we left. I called him, and he got me a ticket.”

“*Ruben?*” I hissed a little too loud, and I silently cursed when the voices near the truck grew quiet for a second before getting back to arguing.

“Let’s talk about this later,” Henry said, his footsteps above creaking on the metal walkway.

“Henry, I need to talk to you. We have to talk before you leave. I just...I need to tell you—”

“Boys.” Royal’s voice came over the line. “Sorry, that sounded...personal. My bad. But heads up. I’ve got movement coming your way.”

I pressed myself against the crate and peered over the top, placing my hand over my gun as someone started meandering over to the cargo. He drifted over our direction, a gun clearly visible at his side, checking a clipboard. A walkie-talkie at his hip chirped, a voice crackling.

“Get the fossil loaded onto the plane. We leave in thirty minutes.”

“Copy,” he answered back, glancing at the pad before steering my direction.

I walked backward slowly, knees bent and body hidden behind a wall of boxes. If I ventured back too much, I’d creep out from cover and get exposed. A quick glance let me know that there was still plenty of people at the truck, and if I fired a shot, I’d be gunned down in a matter of seconds.

Sweat trailed down my back, my heart pounding as I coiled myself to strike, readying to try and grab him before he could make a noise.

He drew closer, eyes searching over the boxes, nearly looking right at me.

Before he immediately started up the stairs.

*Fuck.*

“Henry,” I whispered, my blood running cold. “Henry. Do you read me?”

Silence. The footsteps continued upward, then stepped off on the same level Henry was on, freezing my heart in place.

“Sasquatch. *Sasquatch!*” I whispered violently.

“Who the hell told you about ‘Sasquatch’?” Royal barked, horrified. “Dude, not cool! That’s a private safe word!”

I held my breath, my heart storming my ears, and watched as shadowy footsteps strolled along the boxes above me. The metal grating creaked, the structure wobbling with the casual, heavy footfalls. I couldn’t see Henry. I had no clue if he was well hidden or about to be exposed.



“Calgary.” I used Royal’s codename to bring him back on track. “I need you to cause a distraction.”

All the playfulness fell from his voice. “On it.”

The metal above wiggled, more steps shaking the level. A silhouette darted between two boxes, trying to escape sight.

The metal groaned in protest to the sudden movement, bits of hay falling between the gaps. It caused the stranger to hesitate, his shadow falling still.

“Who’s there?” the man above called out, voice authoritative and loud enough to carry. A few heads turned from the truck, and I pulled my gun free.

“Better come out now or it’ll get worse,” the voice promised, one careful footstep advancing.

The shadow that had moved between the boxes shifted, and I crawled closer to it so I could try and peer up through the tiny gaps in the metal.

Gold eyes peered down at me, alert and wide. A knife blade caught a dim shine in his hand, and he exhaled slow.

I shook my head at him. *No. Don’t.*

He shut his eyes and adjusted his grip.

“Last chance,” the stranger called out, stepping closer to where Henry was tucked away.

A blaring wail sounded from all directions; a buzzing horror accompanied by flashing lights. The fire alarm screamed danger, barking out an electronic siren to clear the area. The sudden and violent noise took everyone by surprise, spurring a few men to haul ass outside to check for smoke while the others ran inside to see what was causing the issue.

I took my opening, even though it was stupid and dangerous as hell, and sprinted for the stairs. The metal shimmied under me as I swung up the stairs, knocking me off-balance enough to stagger to the side and catch the railing with my ribs.

Gunfire sounded off just as some wood exploded near me, the crate cracking and splintering from the bullet.

“Don’t hit the merchandise!” someone below screamed just as another shot was fired, pinging off the metal and flying sideways into another box. The stranger on Henry’s level took a step back and fired at me again as I bounced up the stairs, causing me to duck to avoid getting brained by his shot. I returned fire twice, cracking two crates near his hip.

His shoulders squared as he lined up another shot, only to have his balance rocked hard by a shaking platform. Henry gripped the railing and jerked to the side, a whiplash sounding through the air as a cord snapped loose. This bought me time to make it to the level, but the whole row now was seesawing, crates toppling and sliding sideways. My footing slid, my elbow catching the grate and knocking my gun free. I swung for it, almost getting shot for the effort.

“Watch the merchandise!” The screams below turned frantic, a scream bouncing off the walls as a crate slid free. The box tipped and dove, wood splattering out as cases slid across the floor, spilling artifacts all over. An unmistakable sound of pottery breaking made my stomach turn, knowing that whatever it was had to be ancient and now forever lost.

The gunman on our level fired wildly to keep me from advancing, turning another crazed shot at Henry, who luckily slid behind a box to keep from getting hit. I knew the movements were too sporadic to be a real attempt at hitting us, and my suspicions were confirmed as he reached into a crate and grabbed a plastic case by the handle.

He tucked his tongue up and whistled loud, my heart leaping from my throat as he flung the case hard over the side of the crumbling railing. Below, the frantic person screaming about merchandise caught the case with both arms, opening it quickly to confirm the contents.

It was only a flash, but I saw enough of the amber fossil to know what it was.

“No!” Henry rushed the railing, then paled, his eyes wringing shut from the extreme height and wobbling platform.

He looked sick, his jaw flexing, and I knew the hell he was fighting.

When the gunman turned his focused attention back on Henry, his aim wasn't as reckless and wild as it had been before. It was sharp and deadly, a predator going for the easier target: the one with his eyes shut.

Something happened in my chest, a splitting shift I hadn't been prepared for. My muscles tensed and flexed, the delicate bones in my throat hardening and lifting as my chest expanded with four deep pops.

Somehow, in some half shift powered by anger and blind fury, my throat managed to reach between my human and T.rex form and summon the ability to let everyone in the room know how absolutely pissed off I was.

It wasn't so much a bellow as a screaming roar, a sound caught between a man enraged and a dinosaur ready to attack.

I lifted myself up with the railing and brought both boots down, snapping the final cord on my side of the failing catwalk. The whole thing dipped viciously down, the pale-faced, terrified gunman sliding my way. He tried to grab me, tried to take me with him as he fell, but I grabbed the rail and shoved him off the side just as a crate toppled after him.

“Montana!”

I followed Henry's voice up, swallowing so my throat could relax back to normal. Henry had managed to get one floor up from the unstable railing, holding his hand down to me. I reached up for him, the floor jerking hard as another cable snapped.

Henry lay on his belly and tried to lean down more, and I swung my hand to try and reach him. We were inches away from touching, nowhere near close enough.

“Fuck this,” I told him, holding desperately to the now-swaying metal structure. “Henry, go after the fossil!”

“Hell no!”

“It’s more important! Take the stairs before they fall!” I cursed as a crate almost clobbered me on its journey to the ground, landing in a spectacular splat. “Go, dammit!”

Henry’s cheeks flushed, the fear in his eyes solidifying into hammered gold resolve. He pushed himself forward, hooking his legs onto the metal railing, and hung suspended upside down above a failing catwalk, both arms out to catch me.

Henry, the man so scared of a simulation of a flight he shifted in the middle of a damn museum, was Spider-Man-ing in order to save me.

How could I resist that?

I pushed up as hard as I could, grabbing hold of his forearms just as the metal I was on finally gave way. It crashed into the floors below, taking them out and smashing down into the poor crates on the bottom floor. Henry grunted as he held me, gritting his teeth from the strain as he pulled me up enough so I could grab the side. Once I had a grip, he let go, exhaling and crawling back to safety.

“That.” Henry breathed. “Sucked.”

“We don’t have time to talk about how awesome that was,” I told him, pulling him up onto his feet. “We need to move.”

“How?” Henry waved at the stairs, which were half demolished and hanging in pieces. “There’s no way down.”

Henry was trying to catch his breath, but held it as the sound of an airplane engine kicked up outside.

“Oh no.”

“Henry.” I caught his shoulders and squeezed. “We need to get to the fossil, and you’re not going to like what I’m about to propose.”

“What?” he swallowed, looking pale again. “Why?”

“We’re going to need to jump.”

“Fuuuck that, Montana,” he groaned, head shaking. “Not happening. I will puke and die on the way down.”

“No, you won’t. Listen to me.” I took a slow breath, hoping he’d do the same. “You are faster than me in your Albertosaurus form. You have to make a run for it.”

“Montana, I can’t,” he pleaded, daring to peek down before shutting his eyes again like the height slapped him.

“Yes, you can.”

“You know I can’t! You said shifting like that takes control, and I don’t have...” He trailed off as I placed my hands on his jaw and moved him closer to me, our brows connecting.

Out of reflex, or desperation, or maybe something much more wonderful, Henry put his hand to my heart the same time I placed mine over his.

“You can,” I told him, his heart dancing against my touch. “I trust you, Henry. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you that sooner. You’re amazing, a good partner, a strong hunter, and I know you can do this.”

“You really think I’m a strong hunter?”

His voice was soft, almost teasingly sweet, and I nodded against him.

“The best.” I ran my thumb over his jaw. “I need you to be fast. Jump, shift, and *run*. Get to that plane. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Okay.” His throat clicked, eyes flickering open to look into mine. For a few heartbeats, all I could see was the rich color of endless sunrises, a warmth I missed, and I knew I’d never let go of him again.

If he’d let me.

Henry pulled back, the sunrises fading, and he looked over the side of the railing like a knight readying for battle. Calm, collected, ready to face the challenge ahead.

My brave, strong hunter.

My Henry.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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I wish I could say I swung over the side of the railing, shifted without incident, and did all of that with a superhero landing so epic everyone in the room applauded, wept, and came all at the same time.

I scaled the railing almost like a total badass, but hesitated the moment I leapt, and my foot caught the edge, sending me into a sloppy spiral that caused me to start screaming.

It wasn't so much a scream as it was a panicked howl, akin to a cat dying of sheer fright. My world was a flipbook of sky, floor, sky, floor, so rapid and nauseating that my body took it upon itself to react with all stimuli at once. True to my codename, I was lucky enough that the reaction involved shifting. My body twisted and expanded out faster than I had ever felt, like springing into a full marathon when you've only been jogging your whole life. It pinched and hurt, a muscle pulled weird as my tail sprouted, which made the landing...

If we're going to be diplomatic, we can say "awkward."

My landing was awkward for everyone involved.

My clawed feet landed on the ground with a slipping scratch. The momentum made my top-heavy frame pitch forward and bounce off the cement.

This was also the time my stomach caught up to the party because it evacuated everything I had onto the remaining men staring at this monstrosity of nature falling from the sky. The volume and force in which my panic-puke hit the humans

knocked them backward, and I continued to flounder outside in a full idiot-sprint.

A few yards from the loading bay, past the trucks and under the wide, night sky, a metal aircraft hangar had its doors thrown open. Rumbling out from its depths was a small, white aircraft, similar to Jackson's but with the sleek aesthetic of a newer model. It drifted like a duck across water, the engine purring and propellers invisible from speed.

In the belly of that metal creature was my purpose, the reason for the hunt, and all that mattered to me. It was loud and deadly, a machine made of material my jaws weren't evolved for, armed with spinning blades that could butcher me, and the ability to take to the sky so I couldn't reach it.

It was impossible. I knew it was.

But I had faced much worse. I'd faced towering titans whose feet rumbled the earth, fought armored foes whose horns would have punctured through me like paper, and won against any set of teeth that ever came for me. I wasn't going to let some modern monster stand in the way of my brothers leading a happy life.

Of living with us as immortal shifters, able to sire chicks and continue our species. I was made for this fight; I was made to face the impossible.

And I was going to get that damn fossil.

The night air was electric as I bellowed my war cry, charging with all my strength as the plane began to steer itself across the long airstrip. Montana was right about me being faster—I was half the mass of his beefy T.rex form, built of agility and speed over sheer might. I could chase my prey down and take their quick turns, snagging them with my jaws before crushing their fragile bones.

The pitch of the plane's engine lifted as it began to pick up speed, warning me that it was about to gun for an escape.

I was determined not only to catch it but kill it. I had decided at that moment that plane would answer for the horrible flight I had taken before and all the ones I'd have to



take after. I'd likely never get another chance to murder an airplane, and the thought of it delighted me to no end. The pavement was rough against the padding of my feet as I tore across the strip, the plane picking up speed quickly.

There was no way I'd catch it once it got into a full run, so I flanked it and aimed for the only tender spot I could see that wasn't guarded by spinning blades. The juicy wing flexed its back flaps, flipping down as the engine mocked me with its machine roar.

I wasn't going to be able to kill it immediately. It was too fast. It would get away before I could rip its throat out.

But I had played this game before.

It was tag.

Only this time I wasn't playing nice.

My legs burned as I ran, pushing myself past my limitations in order to close the gap enough to reach my target. I opened my mouth wide and chomped down on the flimsy metal flap, jerking my head hard to tear something loose. It tasted terrible: dirt, fuel and paint. Metal bit into my gums and scraped against my teeth, sparks hissing from the plastic veins inside. The machine made a horrible noise, a high-pitched whine as its flap nub wiggled around.

My legs cramped and forced me to slow down, my breath sawing from my nostrils as the plane continued to shoot down the runway. I chased, my legs screaming, my teeth still holding the prize I had torn away from the plane. I watched in growing horror as the machine began to lift off the ground, taking to the sky and beyond our reach. A groan left my throat, still pacing after it in a feeble hope that I could catch it.

I thought I had failed. I thought Montana had put his trust in the wrong hunter, that my bite hadn't been good enough.

My tag hadn't been good enough.

But I was lucky. And strong. And I *was* a good hunter who was a master at tag.

The plane tried to fly for all of a minute before its flap nub blew sparks and smoke, tilting the body sideways and dropping back down in about the same graceful way I had fallen from the top of the railing. It careened like a wounded, bloated bird and crashed into the earth, cracking its wing and sliding across the dirt.

If I had the ability to cackle as an Albertosaurus, I would have because damn did it feel good to win. I took that thing down in one bite, and now I would rip out its guts for all the theropods that never evolved the ability to fly.

I rushed its smoking corpse, ready to finish the job, when the creepy-crawly little humans piloting the thing spilled out like ants. Four of them leaked out, one holding a bundle I knew was important, and started making awful pop noises.

My excited dinosaur brain had forgotten about what made those pop noises, and I was reminded in the worst way that guns existed and they hurt. Stinging bites hit my nose and shoulder, some of them hard enough to cut, and I recoiled back in surprise. My metal prize was dropped as I bellowed out, the biting bullets slicing my feathers near my throat, which was going to damage how well they fluffed out.

Blasts of light danced around the fallen plane, the humans yelling as they continued to fire. I called out in outrage and pain, unable to advance without the risk of getting seriously hurt. It was an old habit, a cry for help, hoping like hell a mate would come running.

And oh, did he ever.

Montana called back, a rumbling roar that moved through the earth more than it did the sky. It vibrated like a focused earthquake, radiating out from his huge form as he stomped across the strip with all the malice and anger of a million-year-old predator king.

It wasn't just a normal, angry bellow of a hunter scorned.

It was totally a boyfriend bellow.

It was the best sound I had ever heard, and I might have forgotten I was being shot at and shook my pretty feathers out

for him to see. Sure, I was bleeding, and I definitely had vomit breath, and my gums were bloody from chewing on metal, so I wasn't at my best.

But when your T.rex boyfriend stalks over, ready to murder some stupid humans shooting at you because you asked him to, you try and look glamorous for him. That's just the rule.

Montana's T.rex form was handsome to me, but a walking nightmare to the jerks shooting at me. Seeing Montana barrel toward them with his maw open made at least one of them have an accident, the sharp scent of which caught the air as they screamed in terror. The guns were abandoned, each one running wild in different directions. Montana zeroed in on the human holding the bundle and stalked after him, and I rushed ahead to block his path. The poor man tried to pivot to the left, then the right, but I easily followed, hissing and snapping at him as Montana kept advancing from behind.

I had hoped that the guy would get the hint and drop the bag, but he instead decided to chuck it at me as I leaned down to stop him from moving with my snout. The bundle hit my nose and made me snort, and I didn't chase him as he screamed into the wooded area for God to save him.

As carefully as I could, I nudged the bundle with my nose and pushed away the cloth it was wrapped in. Why the hell they had taken it out of the case was beyond me, but the amber fossil caught the light of the moon as I knocked the last bit of cloth from around it.

We had it back. We won.

Blaise and Simon would have their chance at immortality.

We could further our species with the next generation of shifters.

My chest swelled with pride, lifted with hope and happiness, a feeling I hadn't felt in my dinosaur form before. It was wonderful, beautiful, and made me chirp like a chick again.

Montana inspected the fossil with a sniff, seeming satisfied with how it caught the light. He moved his attention to me, sniffing for blood and injuries, rumbling with concern at the crimson on my feathers. I puffed them up to show I was fine and very fabulous, nothing to be worried about because I was too strong for stupid bullets.

To prove just how tough and badass I was, I trotted over to the piece of the plane I had torn away and snatched it up again. Montana watched, likely very impressed, as I strutted over to him and dropped the metal prize I had torn off. It was a dented heap of a trophy, chewed-up and stinking of fuel, but it was a testament to my hunting prowess.

When he didn't go for it right away, I nudged it over and fluffed my feathers again, then clawed at the dirt for good measure.

*See? I am very strong. I bit a plane. I can keep you safe.*

I chattered a bit, showing him my green feathers.

*I'm going to build you such a good nest; you don't even know.*

Montana's blue eyes flexed, his nose flaring as he came to inspect how manly my pose was. Instead of circling me to give me a full once-over, he skipped right to nuzzling his nose against mine. His snout was wider than mine, his maw bigger with scars around the lips.

His dry, warm skin was bliss against my narrower snout, and I breathed in his wonderful, rich scent along with the crisp, spring air. I wanted to breathe him in forever, wanted to feel his touch under the moon until we died of happiness.

I sighed as Montana moved away from the touch, carefully stepping over to the fossil and inspecting it again. He lowered his mouth down and scooped the fossil up into his mouth as gently as he could, holding the rock against his gums and tongue. With a glance at me to follow, Montana began walking away from the wreckage and past the factory, his gaze sweeping the area for any remaining threats.

I scouted ahead, trotted past him to chase away anyone who dared challenge us at this point. The smell of the humans was faded. Likely, the majority of them had fled the moment they saw a T.rex or got thrown to the ground with Albertosaurus vomit.

I couldn't blame them. That would have been a deal-breaker for me too.

Past the factory and through a patch of forest, we emerged near a long strip of road next to an expanse of tilled farmland. A car was parked just off the road near a tree, and Montana made his way over to it before carefully releasing the fossil onto the ground.

I shifted back down to my human form the same time he did, forgetting until that moment that I had been nicked by some bullets. My skin pulling while it had cuts hurt like pouring salt into a wound, and I put down a string of curses that would have made Baha proud with the language diversity.

"Let me see," Human Montana demanded as I paced around cussing, dabbing at my cut ribs and neck.

"Those assholes!" I wiped away some blood with pained annoyance. "We should go back and eat one out of spite. Damn! It feels like bees stung me with knives on their asses."

"It's not deep enough to be a threat. Just going to hurt for a while. Stop wiggling."

"It hurts!"

"You were shot," Montana said slowly. "Of course it hurt. You're lucky your dinosaur skin was thick enough to have only been cut. If they pulled out rifles instead of handguns, we would have been in some trouble. Here." He handed me a duffle and dug around in his bag before producing a tiny bottle of mouthwash. "Get some clothes on."

"To disinfect the wounds?" I asked, giving the tiny, emerald bottle a shake.

"No." Montana motioned to his mouth. "For the...you know."

“Ah.” My cheeks lit on fire with the heat of a thousand suns. “Can we pretend that never happened and that there’s still a shred of self-respect left for me to hold on to?”

“It happens to the best of us, Henry,” Montana said, tugging some jeans on over his gloriously bitable ass.

I wasn’t sure where we stood yet, or what it was that we were to each other after that nose nuzzle and my totally badass feather fluff, but I still held out hope that I would be able to bite that perfect ass one day.

“You’ve tripped over a railing and then became a barf-breathing dragon to a bunch of unsuspecting fossil thieves?”

Montana paused, followed a train of thought with his eyes, then shook his head.

“Fair. Never mind.”

Any sense of feeling like a badass, plane-killing hunter drained from me, and I busied myself getting dressed while using the entire little bottle of mouthwash. Montana was busy sending messages on his phone, thankfully not paying attention as I rinsed and spit about a dozen times.

“Baha and Jackson have landed,” he told me over the hood of the car, wrapping the fossil up in one of his shirts. “They’re going to meet us at the safe house. Let’s move.”

My duffle was as heavy as my mind as I hefted it up, the past few hours starting to settle into every joint in my body and crease in my brain.

“Montana?”

He reemerged from placing the fossil into the back seat, pulling something else free I didn’t see until he had made his way around the car to stand in front of me.

The weighted stuffed bear I had given him had a blue orchid flower slipped into its ribbon collar, carefully clipped and just barely open.

“Don’t go to Canada,” Montana said. “I want you to stay.”

Hope settled into my heart like a brick, a heavy burden.

“Please tell me it was a boyfriend bellow back there.” I rubbed at my arms, feeling vulnerable and a little cold. “Because if that was a ‘we’re just friends’ one, I think I’m going to have to leave the country a while. I’m really hoping the end of the fight, with the feathers and metal piece I bit off the plane, makes up for the whole ‘barfing on people after falling like a drunk goose’ part.”

The hope that sat on my heart like a mountain broke away into a thousand fireflies as he put his hand to my neck, and I leaned into the lips of the man who had made those fireflies soar. I pulled my arms around his shoulders and kissed him, needing his touch like I needed air. The weighted bear was soft against my back as he held me, peppering my lips with kisses.

“I’m sorry, Henry. I was an asshole to you,” he whispered against my lips. I shook my head, but he continued, “No, I was, and I’m sorry. I haven’t felt this way about someone in a long time, and it scared me. You’re an amazing person, and I will do better to be a good partner to you.” A smile spread against mine, our noses brushing together. “It was totally a boyfriend bellow.”

“I knew it.” I kissed him a thousand more times, loving the way he felt in my arms, the thunder of his heartbeat against mine as our chests touched. “We should tell everyone we got the fossil, and we’re safe.”

“In a minute,” he whispered, holding me close. “I just want to stay like this a while longer.”

“I’ve waited sixty-five million years for you to hold me.” I breathed him in, shutting my eyes to solidify it to memory. “We can stay like this for as long as you want.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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## MONTANA

“**Y**ou look like shit.”

“Good to see you too, Baha.” I moved aside to let them into the safe house, having beat them there by about ten minutes. To be fair, Henry and I both had seen better days. We were dirty and bloody from rolling around getting shot at, but at least we were in one piece.

I saw Baha scanning the living room and kitchen and answered his unasked question.

“Henry’s in the shower.”

“Wounds? Injuries? Anything broken? Sit down. Stop acting like you’re in charge here.” Baha pulled a chair out and pointed for me to sit. “Jackson, go get Henry.”

“Baby, I’m not doing that,” Jackson said around a laugh, shutting the front door behind him. “I draw the line at pulling a man from the shower.”

“He had minor cuts. That’s why he’s in the shower.” I took a seat so Baha could inspect me, pushing my head from side to side and checking for anything popping out or bruised. There was some poking and prodding, demands to stand and contort myself to prove I wasn’t hiding some life-threatening injury, before Baha was finally satisfied. Once he was convinced I wasn’t actively dying or bleeding, his attention finally switched to the fossil.

Jackson gave a low whistle as he looked it over, carefully rotating it around to see all angles of the little beast inside.

“It’s amazing something so small has such an impact over us.”

“It’s scraped up.” Baha touched the surface and cringed, wiping his hand on his jeans. “Why is it slimy?”

“Sorry. I had to carry it in my mouth for a little bit.”

Jackson laughed at Baha’s obvious outrage, and I was called all manner of things in mumbled Arabic.

“We’ll just keep it wrapped up in this for now then.” Jackson snickered, tossing the cloth back over the fossil to keep Baha from touching it again. “My plane isn’t too far. Once Henry’s out of the shower, we’ll get everyone loaded up. I brought some sleepy pills for you all to take since you theropod types get all sick when you fly.”

“You two take the fossil. Henry and I are going to hang back a bit.”

Jackson’s smirk turned into a blink of surprise, and Baha had gone from deeply offended at touching my spit to openly suspicious.

“You don’t wanna go home?” Jackson asked. “I figured you’d be sprinting to the car after the week y’all had.”

“We have some things we need to finish here.” I tilted my head to the fossil. “You two can manage to get that safely home without us.”

“You trust us to take the most valuable piece of history known to our species, the only thing capable of creating more of us, back to Texas without you?” Jackson repeated carefully, his own suspicion starting to creep in. “You sure you didn’t get your bell rung, Montana?”

“I have full confidence in you both.” I smiled at Jackson, looking rather pleased. “I wouldn’t suggest it if I didn’t trust you with it.”

“I think you just don’t want to get on a plane,” Jackson teased, but I could tell he was touched. His cheeky grin had a bit more lift to it, green eyes shining. “We won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t.” I rolled my eyes at Baha, still pointing narrowed eyes at me. “What?”

Baha gave me a once-over slowly, grabbing his bag off the table without taking his eyes off me.

“I had to pull Blaise out of the plane twice before takeoff. He said he wanted to come with us to kick your ass for making Henry cry. Do I need to kick your ass in his place, or is that all resolved now?”

A sting of guilt spiked and faded.

“That’s why we’re hanging back. We need to figure some things out.”

I got the famous Baha grunt, a noise that could either be a sign he was annoyed, pleased, sad, or ready to punch you in the face. It was a nuanced sound I’d learned to decipher over the decades, but this one was new.

Relieved.

I got a clap on the arm and nothing more, Baha taking his leave out the front door without looking back. Jackson, who was also decently versed in Baha’s complicated grunts and growls, was nodding in agreement.

“For what it’s worth, Montana, we kinda all were hoping things would land this way.” He tossed me a wink.

“Thanks, Jackson.” I took his hand and pulled him into a one-armed hug, patting his back. “Don’t keep him waiting.”

“Likewise.” He touched the brim of his cowboy hat, glancing down the hall at the sound of the shower turning off. The fossil was gathered into his arms, wrapped up like a swaddled infant, and he shut the front door behind him as he left.

The smell of steam and vapor of woody soap lingered in the hallway as I approached the bathroom door, melting any ache or exhaustion from my limbs. Henry emerged with his long waves tossed back, wet with clean water and a citrus tease, torso patted dry with his chest hair stuck to his skin.

Across his narrow waist, riding scandalously low, were the ridiculously sexy pants he had worn during his brief career as an exotic dancer.

“You kept those,” I said, my brain too busy sizzling to be more intelligent with my commentary.

Henry feigned innocence, shoulders shrugging casually.

“Oh, these old things? Why, do you like them?”

“Big fan.” I reached to tug him over, but he pushed my hand away.

“Sorry, no touching the dancers.”

“That’s a shit rule,” I snapped back, a laugh barking out of him at my response. Steam rolled off his skin as he leaned closer to me, fresh-cut wood and orange slices smothering my senses.

“Let me dance for you,” he purred. “And I’ll think about changing the rule.”

“Counteroffer.” I stepped in closer, almost touching him, but I kept my twitching hands to myself. “Skip the dance, come to bed with me, and fuck me in those pants like I wanted you to do the first time I saw you in them.”

Henry exhaled through his lips, pupils flexing as they bounced from my eyes to my lips and back.

His throat tightened as he swallowed, voice thick as he whispered, “Deal.”

I ghosted my lips over his, his breath hot against me. “Great.”

Henry groaned as I leaned away and started for the bedroom, apparently no longer liking the “no touching” rule.

“It’s your rule,” I said over my shoulder. “Not mine—” I was spun around and practically tackled onto the mattress before I could finish teasing him, surprised not only by the suddenness of his attack but the strength he had to manhandle me so easily. My laugh was smothered by his mouth, jovial noises melting into hungry moans.

Henry kissed me like I was being conquered, tongue staking its claim over mine, teeth nipping my lips after sucking them into his mouth. The wet tips of his hair fell around me, tickling my cheeks and neck, drowning me in the sweet scent of his shampoo.

The scandalous pants dipped low as he straddled me, his skin still damp from the shower as I pushed my fingers past the waistband to squeeze at his hips. Firm muscle rolled under my grip, his body coiled strength waiting to be released. Knowing what he was capable of, how well he could utilize his power with those hips, sent an arc of excitement cracking from the base of my spine to the tip of my toes.

It had been a long time since I had trusted someone enough to fuck me.

Years.

Too many damn years.

God, I had missed it, resolved that I likely wouldn't have the strength to allow someone close enough to try again.

My stomach was butterfly wings and floating sparks as I tugged his hair, breaking our kiss. Henry hissed through his teeth in delight at the sharp tug, grinning down at me as I caught my breath.

"Lube and condoms are in my bag," I told him. "Front pocket."

Henry leaned back on my hips, his stomach flexing and chest lifting as he breathed in. The clear outline of his cock pressed against the skin-tight pants was already torture, but his slow dismount and stroll to my bag was enough to almost kill me.

"You're being a brat," I told him as I pushed my jeans off, needing to get rid of anything else that might get in the way.

"No, I'm not." He plucked the items needed and leisurely strutted back over like he was casually shopping for naked men on display. "I'm just taking my time. I think I was told before to go slow."

“Henry,” I warned. “If you don’t get over here and fuck me like I asked, I’m going to go get Rex and do it myself.”

“Rex was used to slap a camera, so I’m all you got.”

“Well then, get over here and...” My brain caught up to the conversation, and I pushed myself up on my elbows. “Slap a camera?”

Henry either was being cagey or too focused on the task at hand to respond because he crawled back onto the bed without giving me a real answer. My curiosity to the weird thing he just said was blasted into insignificant dust as he popped his pants open, pushing them down just enough to let his straining cock spring free.

My body reacted to the promise, a pulse tensing and relaxing again.

Henry made a gesture for me to roll over, and I complied, breathing out anxious excitement when I felt him lean over me. Warm breath tickled my neck, lips touching my nape, shoulder, and trailing down my spine.

Candy sweet kisses of feather-soft lips sent a chill through me, my skin electric with goosebumps. Henry treated me with little delights all the way down to my lower back, ending the trail with a kiss on each dimple above my ass.

“You’re going to need to prep me before—” I hissed, looking over my shoulder to catch him grinning down at the bite mark he left on my ass cheek. “Did you just bite me?”

“Finally,” he sobbed out in bliss. “God, it’s better than I thought it would be. Like biting a perfect peach.”

“That’s a little—ow, dammit, Henry!”

“I had to do both!” He sighed happily at both red bite marks on each cheek, then popped the cap of lube open with his thumb. “You can’t blame me, Montana. You have a perfect ass.”

“We’re learning things about each other today.” I dropped my head back down as I pushed my hips up. “Like you have a thing with biting.”

“It’s very specifically biting your ass exclusively.” He gave each mark he left a squeeze. A wonderful little spark crawled through me from his touch. “And I don’t think you get to critique my ass habits when you rimmed me the first time we showered together.”

“Wasn’t a critique, but touché.”

My heart cartwheeled through my torso as I felt the cool drops of lube on me, my body remembering to relax as the first few touches against me tested the boundaries of my comfort. I flinched when Henry pushed a finger in, breathing out as he ran a hand across my lower back.

Gentle, careful, my body slowly waking up after years of ignoring that part of myself. Only a few times since Joseph’s death had I let myself have an anonymous tryst with someone, always the top, always riddled with regret and grief, and never longer than a few hours. I had refused to let someone know me like this, give myself over to be vulnerable and exposed to someone else.

I had never wanted to.

It felt liberating to have that again, to know that I could trust, that I could let Henry have me in a way that fulfilled me.

It didn’t take long for me to remember how much I enjoyed feeling someone in me, his fingers relaxing and loosening me enough to crave much more. By the time I was ready for him completely, I was panting and groaning, my cock aching to be touched.

Henry was panting and flushed when I rolled over onto my back, his dick leaking with precum from getting me ready to be fucked. Watching him sheath himself with a condom, golden eyes bright under hooded lids, made me feel feral and starving.

“Don’t take your time,” I commanded in a rush. “Hard and fast.”

My hips were dragged closer to him, my knees lifted up and pressed down, and Henry did exactly what I asked. My

head snapped back against the pillow at feeling him enter all the way in one firm thrust, breath rough in my throat as I groaned.

His first few thrusts hurt just right, the sting and pressure smothering the frail shreds of anxiety or apprehension clinging to the back of my mind. A wonderful pleasure bloomed from the glorious rocking of his hips, sharp pulses racing down my legs into my toes, my back arching from the intensity of it all.

I was hungry for him, starving for more, and I reached down to grab his ass and feel it flex under my palm as he fucked me. Wet, chestnut waves stuck to his neck, his chest shining from the effort, the musky scent of his body tangling with the woody soap, intoxicating and delicious. Henry panted and moaned shamelessly, palm braced against the headboard to anchor himself while the other held my knee in place.

The mounting tension in my body curled white-hot and fierce, and I sobbed out in pleasure as I felt the release building.

I reached for him, fingers slipping into the wet tangle of hair behind his head and pulled him down to me. Our brows touched, sweat, heat and passion connecting us, and I looked into his beautiful, golden eyes, and I finally let go.

I didn't feel a scratching, animal roar at the back of my throat this time. I didn't feel the need to bellow out in a blind state of pure lust.

As my body danced with the bone-melting pleasure of all of my buttons being pushed at once, ecstasy pulsing from me in waves, I called out as a man falling head over heels.

I called out my boyfriend's name.



# EPILOGUE

HENRY

New Year's Eve, Present Day

“Are you allowed to drink?”

Blaise gave me the coldest glare he could summon at my question.

“I’m doing dinosaur shifter hormone therapy. I’m not pregnant.” He made a grabby hand at the flutes of champagne, and I passed him one with a laugh.

“Okay, sorry. Do you feel any different?” I continued to pour glasses, checking the clock for time.

“A little,” he admitted, testing the champagne. “I’m having crazy dreams and have been craving weird foods lately.” Blaise paused, looked at the flute, and then at me. “Shit, maybe I am pregnant.”

“Lance said that was normal,” Royal reminded him, snagging a flute. “Your hormones are going to be a little goofy while everything takes effect. Not pregnant.”

Blaise hummed like he wasn’t convinced, but leaned into Royal’s kiss anyway.

“Do we have any more deviled eggs? I’m starving,” Simon commented as he strolled over. “I can’t seem to eat enough right now.”

“See?” Blaise presented Simon like he was a winning piece of evidence. “We might be carrying dinosaur babies.”

“What?” Simon asked around a cheek full of food. Dalton blew into a paper horn that uncurled with a kazoo noise.

“Dinosaur butt babies!”

“Dalton,” Baha warned, pulling the New Year’s Eve hat he was wearing up and letting the elastic band around his chin bring it back down on his head with a pop. “Fucking gross.”

“You’re not pregnant,” Lance chimed in, snagging a flute as I passed him one. “I promise you’re not. But you’re going to feel weird for a while.”

“Hey, is Ruben going to come tonight?” I asked, reaching behind Dalton to pass Baha and Jackson drinks.

“He said he had something annoying to take care of, and he can’t make it.” Lance slipped his arm around Yulong’s waist. “It was nice of you to invite him, though, since I know he and Montana don’t get along well. Speaking of which...” He started looking around. “Where is Montana?”

“We only have ten minutes before New Year.” Jackson checked his watch. “Should we wait for him?”

“He’ll be here,” I promised. “He said he would.”

“New Year’s resolutions,” Yulong called out. “What are we doing next year?”

“Vacationing more,” Jackson said, his arm around Baha’s shoulders. “We’re going on a cruise, one without an auction.”

Baha grunted. “Never going to a fucking auction ever again.”

“We’re heading to Canada to go on the fossil trail,” Royal chimed in, Blaise tucking himself against him. “Hit every museum along the way.”

“For our anniversary,” Blaise added, batting his eyes at Royal. “Cause we’re so cute and perfect.”

“Touring Asia.” Lance lifted his glass. “Mongolia and China, then we’ll see after that.”

“Some old stomping grounds,” Yulong added, kissing Lance’s temple as he blushed.

Simon cleared his throat, cheeks a little red.

“So, we’re, um...planning on starting a family this year,” he said sheepishly, laughing as Dalton blew his paper horn again. “We have a surrogate we’re talking to, and Lance is going to be helping us with making sure the right genes are passed along.”

“Are you serious?” Royal set his glass down, eyes wide.

“With Dalton?” Baha looked at Simon like he was insane.

“You’re gonna be Grandpa Baha!” Dalton grinned, blowing his horn in Baha’s face.

“Mazel Tov!” Jackson yelled.

“Oh my God!” Royal pushed them both into a hug, dancing them around in a circle while laughing.

“Congratulations, you two.” Yulong lifted his glass to them. “I can’t wait to teach them to throw knives and cuss.”

Royal paused the dance, still hugging Simon and Dalton. “Hey, cussing is my territory. Right, Henry?”

“Fuck yeah.” I smirked, pouring Simon a new drink after his was spilled from the dancing. Royal’s hug-dance had turned into a duet between him and Dalton, Simon sneaking away to safety to accept the glass.

“I’m guessing Simon told everyone the news?” Montana stepped over to the kitchen, cheeks still red from the cold.

“You knew about this?” Baha jerked a thumb over to them. “You really think the world needs another half-Dalton?”

“Let’s hope it’s mostly Simon.” Montana snickered as Royal joined Dalton in blowing paper horns at Baha, somehow manifesting one just to annoy him. I hadn’t noticed that Montana had one hand behind his back until he brought it around, holding out a new, beautiful moth orchid. A trail of yellow blooms hung in an arc, delicate and gorgeous.

“I thought maybe it could keep your sun orchid company,” he said softly. “Yellow and blue look good together.”

Forgetting the room was filled with our family, I pulled Montana over by his scarf and kissed him because he was so damn handsome and he bought me flowers.

“Ugh, you guys are gross.” Blaise threw a party hat at us. “You’re gross and cute and gross.”

“Montana, he has a literal forest,” Baha complained. “We have plants all over the damn house. Where is he going to put that?”

“There’s room,” I argued once I was done kissing my boyfriend. On the windowsill, beside my miltoniopsis and flowering cactus, was the perfect, tight fit for the new addition to the family. The sun orchid had taken a while to get healthy again, but was big enough now that it needed to sit on the counter instead of the window.

“See?” I wedged it in, the ceramic scraping the sides a bit. “Perfect.”

“Perfect,” Jackson echoed, smiling as Baha rubbed at his temple.

“Countdown starts soon, guys,” Yulong announced. “Let’s go outside and talk about how we’re going to all be weird uncles soon.”

“You’re going to be such a good grandpa, Baha.” Dalton was saying, hugging Baha lovingly, refusing to let go as everyone began migrating outside. “A sweet, old, mean grandpa.”

“You’re a fucking idiot,” Baha mumbled, dodging Dalton’s mohawk as he hugged him back and they walked outside onto the patio.

With the kitchen calm and no more drinks to pour, I picked up my flute and leaned against the counter.

“You had therapy this afternoon, right? How did it go?”

“Good.” Montana took his scarf off and draped it around my shoulders. “It’s been really good. Thanks for getting everything put together while I was out.”

“Anytime.” I glanced outside as a wave of laughter sounded over everyone, more paper horns getting passed out. “You doing okay? I know you said holidays could be hard sometimes.”

“They used to be.” He gave a weak smile. “They’re getting easier with time.” He shrugged one shoulder. “And with grief counseling I should have been doing for a while now. I miss Joseph. I always will. But I won’t let honoring him keep me from living my life and being happy.” He swallowed, emotion

denting his features for a heartbeat. “I know he’d want me to be happy.”

“That’s something me and Joseph have in common.”

His smile strengthened. “You’re too good to me, Henry.”

“It sounds like everyone is going to be pretty busy,” I said, nodding to the gang outside. “Guess that means you’ll have less people to take on missions soon.”

Beautiful ocean waves washed over me, Montana’s smile a sunrise over calm waters.

“Good thing I have a good partner then.”

“Where to next?” I adjusted his scarf around my shoulders. “I hear there’s been some fossils taken from Argentina recently. Royal has a lead on a black market dealer in India we could go scope out too.”

“Spain,” he said softly. “I want to take you to Spain. Show you some places I love.”

My heart fluttered like a baby bird, delicate and small.

“I’d like that,” I answered back just as soft. “I’d go anywhere you want.”

The patio started to sing something, possibly the best attempt at “Auld Lang Syne,” but most of the words were replaced or missing.

“We should probably join them for the countdown,” I said, surprised when my flute was taken from my hand and gently set aside.

“Not yet.”

Montana took out his phone, pushing a few buttons before a song began to play out of the small, Bluetooth speaker sitting in the kitchen. The melodic voice of a man confessing how easily he fell in love pouring out in a slow, swooning croon. A hand was placed at the small of my back, my other taken into his, and Montana pulled me close to slow dance to the soft sounds of confessed heartache.

It was the best dance I ever had.

I leaned my head against his, breathing in his soft cologne, marveling at how lucky I truly was.

In the cold Texas night, at the cusp of a new year, our family started chanting the countdown on the patio of our home.

Montana touched my chin, bringing our lips together.

“I love you,” Montana whispered against my lips at the sound of fireworks lighting up the night sky. Blasts of color painted the room, but all I could see was the rolling ocean tides. “I love you so much, Henry.”

My throat was tight, my chest gripped with an explosion of joy that rivaled the neon lights erupting outside.

“I love you too.” I swallowed, putting my forehead to his. His heart was slow and steady against my palm. “So much.”

The blissful music we had danced to fell away, replaced with the violent blast of upbeat chaos that was “Cotton Eye Joe.”

Montana’s smile made his eyes dance, and he snorted a laugh.

“Dalton made the mix,” he confessed, and I heard a symphony of paper horns outside matching the beat of the song.

“Perfect.” I kissed him again. “It’s perfect.”

A new year dawned on the RELIC house, promising so much on the horizon.

New adventures.

New lives.

New loves.

I couldn’t wait to see what happened next.

*The End*



# DEAR READER

Dear Reader,

I hope you are someone who has read the whole series and this is the lovely ending you were hoping for. I've been madly in love with these guys and their stories for years, and it has brought me such joy to bring them to you.

If you're someone who just snagged this book and hasn't gotten to the others yet, I hope you do, and I hope you love them.

I would be remiss if I didn't note that this story was written in 2023, and paleontology is an ever-changing science. As we discover more fossils and continue to understand the complex nature of these extinct animals, there's a *very* high chance that some of my dinosaur portrayals will be incorrect.

Did T.rex have lips? Feathers? Did they bellow and rumble the earth? Did they have a proclivity for standing like a flamingo while it rains? Who freaking knows – but one day we will. If you're reading this story in the future and something hits wrong, know I followed the current understanding of tyrannosaurs to the best of my abilities but did take some creative license with a couple things. Albertosaurus probably didn't have feathers, but I wanted Henry to have them. I wanted Montana to have a mating call. I wanted them to be uniquely themselves.

I hope that makes sense, and you can tell how much I love paleontology and storytelling.

I'll see you on the next adventure.

- Maz

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***Find the Jinn* is the first contract in a trilogy of death, pining, dark magic and a grumpy fish named Kevin.**

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maz Maddox has always wanted to be an author.

Well, almost always.

At first she wanted to be a dinosaur, but that turned out to be extremely difficult. Giving up on her dreams to be a towering Allosaurus, she discovered her love for amazing stories and started writing her own.

Maybe one day she'll try the dinosaur thing again.

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