

R'iyah Family Archives: Volume 3

A MAGE'S GUIDE TO WICKY

AJ SHERWOOD

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MAGE'S GUIDE TO WICKY

R'iyah Family Archives 3

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CHAPTER ONE

WICKY

“Bel,” Wicky said in all seriousness, “I need you to sleep with me.”

Bel paused in pouring his coffee, looking at Wicky with a sort of fascinated interest. Then he nodded, lips pursed. “Yeah, I see why you waited until Nico and Garen were out of the house to say that.”

“They’d have murdered me. With prejudice. I wouldn’t have been able to get a second sentence out.”

“It’s good you know. So what’s the reason?”

This was why Wicky loved Bel. He stayed rational, never assumed anything, and he was a good friend who would hear him out. Wicky was aware that he didn’t really operate on the same wavelength as everyone else, so it was good that he had more than one friend who would put up with his craziness.

“Here’s the thing. I think someone’s searching for me.”

Bel came back from the kitchen island to sit with Wicky at the dining room table. “You sure?”

“I feel the residual magic around my house. I’m unfamiliar with the type, but it’s not able to penetrate my wards. I don’t think it’s hostile, it doesn’t have that...vibe? If that makes sense.”

“It does, yes. Why is someone searching for you? Any intent in the spell?”

Wicky shrugged his ignorance. “No clue.”

“Who?”

“Again, no clue.”

“Which direction is the spell coming from?”

Wicky once again shrugged.

Bel gave him an exasperated look. “You’re seriously not helpful.”

“I’m roadkill on the information highway, man. All I know is that it’s consistently happening while I’m asleep. Not every single night, but about four times a week. If I’m home, it tends to happen sometime after midnight—around one, I think. Time varied when we were working in different time zones. It used to happen multiple times a day, but it’s slowed down to just once, now.”

Bel let out a low whistle. “That’s...something. Seeking spells are draining, no matter what magic system you’re using. Whoever is doing this is really, really driven to find you. Not to mention pretty damn powerful to keep doing this over and over.”

“Right? My thought too. I kinda want to drop my wards and see what happens.”

Bel’s coffee almost sloshed out of his cup as he jerked, alarmed. “No way in hell are you doing that! Just because the spell doesn’t have a dangerous vibe doesn’t mean it’s safe to drop your wards for a night!”

“I realize I’m crazy, but I’m not that crazy.” Wicky paused and added more truthfully, “Yet. The curiosity is slowly getting to me. This has been going on for a good month now.”

“Wicky.” Bel put his head in his hand, talking to the table. “For the love of god. You’ve been sitting on this for a month?”

“Well, you were busy.”

“I seriously want to smack you. Mobius, even if your master is an idiot, you could have sent me a text or something.”

Wicky’s familiar-smartphone in his front pocket let out a forlorn beep, as if sad at the scolding.

Bel lifted his head, those ruby eyes pinning Wicky in place. That expression always made Wicky feel like Bel could see everything about him—which wasn’t an entirely comfortable feeling. “Tonight, I’ll go to your house. I’ll stay over until we figure this out.”

Wicky beamed. “You’re the best, Bel. Thanks.”

“You will not be the one to tell my familiars that we’re doing a sleepover, either.”

“It’s like you don’t trust me.” Wicky pouted, trying not to laugh.

“I trust you to word it in precisely the wrong way to get Nico to chase you around the house.”

“You’re really a killjoy sometimes. You know that, right?”

“I’ve been accused of that more than once.” Bel sipped at his coffee, clearly thinking hard. “We need to put in for a stay of missions. I don’t think we should be tackling anything while you have someone actively searching for you.”

“Yeah...probably not.”

“Let’s do that first. Nico and Garen are still out on a run.”

“I’m surprised Garen runs with Nico.”

“About three times a week. Nico has to slow his pace a touch to give Garen a chance to keep up with him.” Bel shook his head in fond amusement. “Which means sometime around midafternoon, he gets antsy and goes for a second run.”

Wicky thought about this. “You know, I’ve heard of second breakfast, but second run?”

“I realize how it sounds, trust me. There’s a reason I don’t join them.”

“You choose life?”

“I do. Those two would run my legs off.”

Bel pulled out his phone and called their supervisor. Wicky listened with half an ear as Bel reported the situation and asked for verbal permission to hold off on any assignments until they could figure this out. He didn’t know how to tell Bel that half the reason he hadn’t mentioned this before was because the situation felt so weird. It wasn’t like Wicky was a R’iyah mage or anything. He wasn’t important enough for someone to be searching this desperately for him. Some part of him kept hoping it would all die down and go away. Ostrich-

in-the-sand kind of thing. After a solid month though, curiosity had taken over. Which was why he was so relieved Bel had willingly jumped in to help. Wicky had zero chance of figuring this out on his own.

Tuning back in to Bel, he heard a lot of ‘I don’t know, sir’ being said, which apparently frustrated their boss because Bel finally handed the phone over to Wicky.

Wicky took the phone, repeated what Bel had said, and ended up doing the same refrain of ‘I don’t know, sir.’ This didn’t appease their super one bit, but that was precisely why Bel had asked for time to figure this out.

Tesfay finally growled, *“Fine. You’ve got two weeks. Try to solve it before then, and keep me updated.”*

“Yes, sir.”

Click. Wicky handed the phone back to Bel with a shrug. “We’ve got two weeks.”

“Hopefully that’s enough time.” Bel took the phone with a frown.

The front door opened and two sweaty men came in, Garen panting for breath, Nico barely looking winded. As expected. Bel waved them in closer.

“I’ll let you shower in a minute, but we’re off missions for the next two weeks. Wicky needs our help.”

Garen was immediately concerned, coming to stand next to the table. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“Someone is magically searching for me,” Wicky explained. “No clue who.”

“Are they able to penetrate your wards?”

“Nope.” Of course that would be his first question. Garen was all about defense.

“How long has this been going on?”

“About a month.”

“When does the search happen?”

“When I’m asleep. Bel said I’m not allowed to drop my wards to figure out who it is,” Wicky tacked on helpfully.

Garen’s expression was beyond exasperated. “No, you certainly are not.”

Aww, Garen did care. Wicky felt loved.

Nico looked between them. “So...how are we doing this, then? Also, what’s the goal? Make it stop?”

“What he’s failed to tell you”—Bel’s tone was martini dry—“is that this person has been searching for him consistently, about four times a week for the past month.”

Both men let out a low whistle.

“Okay, this person is pretty damn determined then. So...I take it if we can figure out where they are, we go to them? Or contact them somehow?” Nico looked between Bel and Wicky again, expression an open query. “’Cause I’d really like to know why they’re so desperate.”

“Me too.” That was the hell of it. Wicky really wanted to know *why*.

“Initial game plan.” Bel clapped his hands together. “Sleepover. I want to be up and awake tonight when the spell starts. Assuming they try tonight. Otherwise this will be a succession of sleepovers.”

“I’m game for that.” Nico smiled like an eight-year-old invited over to play. “Can we play *Curses!*?”

“Ooooh.” Wicky loved that game. He’d only gotten to play it twice. It was a game that required the right crowd to really pull it off. This? This was the right crowd. “I’m game. Um, on second thought, should we tell Zia? I know she’s out for her sister’s wedding right now, but...”

Bel gave him that look that said Wicky was deliberately being stupid again. “I invite you to imagine what will happen if you do not keep her in the loop.”

Wicky imagined it. “Uh...I would immediately depart from this world?”

“If you know this, are you deliberately not telling her to tempt fate?”

“You know, when you put it like that, not telling her sounds really stupid.”

Bel just shook his head and rose from the table. “I’m packing an overnight bag. Let’s get Thai for dinner and then head to Wicky’s house. I want to be well settled in before night actually falls.”

While they were packing, Wicky called Zia. She’d left a week earlier to help set up for the wedding, which was why she wasn’t nearby now to give him hell for this. Actually, calling her long distance had distinct benefits—she hadn’t yet created the right magical spell to enable her to reach through the phone’s speaker and strangle him.

Zia answered, tone distracted. The noise in the background sounded like multiple people having conversations all at once, overlapping with each other. “*What?*”

“Friend, bosom companion, love of my life—”

“*I am honestly afraid to ask what’s on fire.*”

See? She did know him well. “I have encountered a booby trap of frustration.”

“*Please do not touch the booby trap.*”

“You have no idea how much willpower that’s currently taking, but you should be proud of me. I told Bel about it so he could help me unravel the mystery.”

“*Gimme a min.*” There was a clatter, the sound of a door opening and closing, and then the background chatter abruptly died down. “*This sounded serious enough that I found a quiet spot. Tell me, what shit have you landed in now?*”

Wicky explained. It was a good explanation. He was very proud of it.

For some reason, Zia didn’t seem to like it. “*There are too many doers and not enough thinkers in this group.*”

“That’s every group,” Wicky pointed out.

“Why the hell did it take you a month to bring this up?”

“Umm...I wanted to see what would happen? Why is everyone yelling at me about this?”

She just growled, like a stepped-on lion having a bad day.
“What a fucking week this is turning out to be.”

“It’s only eight-thirty on a Monday morning.”

“Wicky. Listen. I need you to be an adult for a minute.”

“Being an adult is a little outside my pay grade right now though.”

“I’m being serious. I want you to swear to me that you will follow Bel’s lead on this.”

“I can absolutely follow directions.”

“I can’t believe you just lied to me like that.”

“I felt like a lie would make you feel better. No?”

“Ugh, forget it. I’m calling Garen. He can be in charge of you.”

Okay, now that wasn’t fair. “What about Nico? Nico can supervise me.”

“I said be in charge of. Not aid and abet.”

Damn. Well, it had been worth a try. He sobered enough to try a real reassurance. Zia really did sound stressed and upset about this. “Whatever this person wants, they can’t get through my shields. I promised Bel already that I wouldn’t drop them without him saying so, and the trio is staying with me until we figure it out.”

“I have never been more thankful we met those three than in this moment. Okay. You guys keep me updated. I want minute-by-minute commentary tonight if this person strikes. Do not mess with me on this. If my sister wasn’t getting married in four days, and I wasn’t up to my neck in dress alterations, I’d already be on my way up to you.”

He knew she would. Zia always had his back. “Naw, don’t do that. We got this. I promise I’ll call tonight and put you on

speaker if something happens.”

“Good. Do. I got to get back to the sewing machine. Talk to you later.”

Wicky hung up and mused for a moment. He supposed he could see why having someone search for him like this would be dangerous. He didn't know their intentions, after all. But why him? It wasn't like he was some bigwig. There wouldn't be anything to gain from getting to him, right?

That, more than anything, made him want to drop the wards. Just to figure out *why*. The mystery was seriously eating at him.

It was a dirty, rotten shame he'd just promised to behave.

CHAPTER TWO

WICKY

They had lots of fun hanging out while waiting for midnight to roll around. Everyone put concentrated effort into not only staying awake, but alert. They ate some lovely Thai, played a couple of board games—playing *Curses!* with Nico alone would have been hysterical, but get Bel in the mix and it became a laughfest—and honestly, Wicky was having so much fun he almost forgot their original purpose.

Wicky carried dishes to the kitchen so he could conveniently forget they existed in the sink. “Should we watch a movie next?” he asked over his shoulder.

“*Monty Python and the Holy Grail!*” Nico suggested brightly, already turning for the living room.

Garen followed from dining room to living room—which involved all of three steps since the rooms were directly connected—and asked, “How many times have you seen that movie?”

“Why are you asking such mean and complicated questions?”

“Tig, I literally saw you enact the *entire movie* once while we were on vacation. You even did the sound effects! You can’t possibly still be entertained by the movie when you know it that well.”

Now then there were fighting words. Wicky and Bel both paused in the archway of the dining room to see how this argument would pan out.

Nico whirled in place, remote in hand, and stabbed a finger in his lover’s direction. “The only reason I did that was because you’d never seen anything Monty Python and I was trying to convince you to watch it.”

“Well, it backfired,” Garen informed him drolly, a sardonic look on his face as he headed for the nearest couch. “I tried

watching the movie. I got maybe fifteen minutes in before giving up. You were more entertaining.”

“Sacrilege!” Nico howled, fainting dramatically so that he landed sprawled over the couch, complete with an arm over his eyes.

Bel leaned in and said for Wicky’s ears only, “I haven’t seen any Monty Python either.”

“I’m with Nico on this. That’s just wrong. *Holy Grail* is the most famous, but there’s others we can watch too.”

“If it’ll shut Nico up, fine. I really do not—” Bel snapped his head around, ruby red eyes flaring as they stared straight up.

“What, what, what?” Wicky poked him in the shoulder. You never knew with Bel why he reacted like that. Sometimes it was serious. Sometimes he just got distracted by shinies.

“I think...this is what you’ve been talking about.”

All joking immediately stopped. Wicky darted for the nearest window and stared up. His ward didn’t only go around the house—he’d set it around his property line—but that didn’t mean much. Craftsman houses didn’t have a lot of yard space. He was within spitting distance of his neighbor, only a driveway and a narrow strip of yard separating the houses.

“What?” Nico demanded.

Wicky’s eyes weren’t as sensitive as Bel’s—those demonic eyes could see through anything. Still, Wicky could see *something*. The spell was strong, pure red, and strangely looked like string? Or some kind of thread. It hit Wicky’s wards and flinched back, unable to either penetrate or attach itself.

Then it retreated before dissolving into wisps of wind.

“That was interesting,” Bel murmured.

Wicky knew that tone; Bel’s brain had gone into hyperdrive. He turned, only to find Nico with both hands on Bel’s shoulders, like he was poised to throw the younger man

down and cover or move him as necessary. Familiar's instincts at play.

"Bel, share with the class," Nico pleaded. "Garen and I can't see a damn thing. What just happened?"

"Wicky's long-distance stalker paid another visit." Bel's eyes were narrowed, synapses firing at full speed. "I'm not surprised you can't see it, it's faint even on the magic spectrum. This spell isn't supposed to be visible. It's gone now, but that was interesting. I don't know much about Asian magic, but I can recognize the type. That was definitely Asian."

Garen came to stand at his other side, brow cocked. "You sure?"

"Yeah. It's like the difference between realism and abstract art. You might not be able to duplicate or completely explain what you're looking at, but you can recognize the difference, right? I've been exposed to just enough Asian magic to know it on sight."

See? Bringing Bel over was paying off already. He knew so much more than Wicky did. Wicky knew shit. "What else did you see?"

"If I'm not mistaken, that was purely a seeking spell. Whoever sent it wants to locate you. I saw nothing that indicated this is an attack." Bel pointed dead west. "The seeker is from that direction. I can't figure out how far—nothing about the spell indicates distance. From the strength of it, I would say not that far? I can't imagine a seeking spell could be that strong over a long distance. No farther than a few states away is my best guess right now."

Garen looked at Bel like he was trying to tell a joke and failing. "A few states away is not that far to you?"

"Seeking spells are designed to go a really long distance," Bel explained with a shrug. "Like, three-hour drive, minimum. This one had the look of something farther than that, so my guess is somewhere over an eight-hour drive."

“Huh. Learned something new today.” Garen rubbed at his chin, a hint of stubble making a rasping sound. “Alright. We’ve got a better idea of what’s going on, sorta. What’s the best way to approach this?”

Bel wore his Thinking Face. “Wicky. We had missions this past month, so how did you avoid them finding you before this? I mean, I know how I missed it—I was dead asleep and in a different room—but what did you do?”

“I put up a personal ward wherever we sleep,” Wicky answered. “Someone snuck up and attacked me once when I was still new to this career. I’ve taken safety precautions ever since. Don’t you?”

Bel pointed to both Nico and Garen. “Safety precautions. I mean, I have basic protections up around my home, but hotel rooms? No need.”

“Yeah, okay, fair.” Nothing sane would cross those two. But Wicky didn’t have either a Nico or a Garen, so he had to fall back on the mundane, not-fun options like wards.

“I really do not like the idea of giving this person direct knowledge of where Wicky lives. That seems a no-brainer. That said, we do need to get him outside a ward and let the seeking spell connect. First, to draw this person out. Second, so I can latch on to the thread myself.” Bel’s smile was not nice. Downright evil. His demon mischief might be leaking through. “A seeking spell is a thread. Both ends can seize it.”

Bel was scary. Thank fuck he was on Wicky’s side. Seriously. The idea of latching on to the spell was exhilarating, though. Wicky was all for turning these tables.

Nico rubbed his hands together with anticipation, already grinning. “So Wicky’s bait.”

“I am *sexy* bait,” Wicky corrected loftily. “How dare you.”

Nico pulled on a faux mournful face. “I’m sorry, friend. I didn’t mean to insult you.”

“You are forgiven,” Wicky intoned magnanimously.

Garen being Garen, he got them back on track. “So you’re suggesting we go toward the seeker, dead west, then wait in a defensive location for this person to reach out again. Then you can take hold of the spell yourself, and if they don’t come find us, we find them?”

“Only way I know of to end this,” Bel said. “If it helps, I didn’t see anything nefarious about the spell to suggest ill intent. And if it’s red, then...red is the color of fate in Asian countries. It’s used for, like, weddings and religious ceremonies, that kind of thing. The fact that the seeker’s spell presented as a red thread tells me a lot.”

Oh, now that Wicky had not known. “Really? Red is a good color to them? ’Cause red normally means booby trap or something icky for us.”

“In Asian magic, red is good luck and fate,” Bel confirmed with a nod. “They actually have a belief that two lovers are connected by the red string of fate, although depending on which country you ask, it’s connected in different ways. In Japan, the red string is tied to the lovers’ pinky fingers. I think in Thailand’s version they’re tied by the wrist. I’ll have to look this up, I might be remembering details wrong. Anyway, red is good.”

Red was good, huh? Well, that confirmed Wicky’s gut feeling that this seeking spell wasn’t evil. Still, left him very, very confused on the purpose.

Nico threw an arm around Wicky’s shoulders, hugging him close. “Dude. Did you hit on some cute Asian and fail to exchange numbers with them before you guys parted? Is that why they’re having to resort to magic to find you?”

“I wish I had that kind of action. My love life is dead, bro.” Although having a cute Asian in his bed sounded great to Wicky. Where could he find one? Without, you know, using some kind of app or online dating service, ’cause those places be scary.

“We can figure out why and who as we go. Right now, we need to put preparations in place.” Bel was already taking his

phone out. “I’ll report my findings, see if I can find a good location for us to go so we can start our bait and trap.”

Something about the word ‘report’ rang a bell. What could it be? Report...report...

Oh shit.

Zia.

He had totally forgotten to call Zia.

Wicky wrapped his arms around Nico’s waist. “Brother. Friend. Don’t you want to call Zia and give her an update?”

Nico looked down at the arms holding him, then back at Wicky’s face. “I won’t protect you from Zia. Even I’m not that brave.”

“Nooo. But it all happened too fast—I didn’t have time to call her!”

“You can try telling her that. Who knows, she might even believe you.”

“Be my witness,” Wicky pleaded. “She’s stressed right now, she’s not going to take this well.”

Nico jerked his chin toward Garen. “Get him as a witness. Garen she believes.”

“Awesome idea.”

Wicky abruptly switched targets, going straight to Garen and latching on. He gave Garen his best smile, all blinding teeth.

His friend just looked at him for a long moment, then sighed. “Fine. Call her first, put her on speaker. I’ll back you up. Let’s go to the other side of the living room so we’re not interfering with Bel’s call.”

“Okay!” Garen was a bosom buddy to keep Wicky from descending into the jaws of hell alone.

Wicky was an adult, and he’d promised, so he made the call. Then he promptly handed Mobius to Garen like they were playing hot potato. Garen took the familiar and sighed again,

like he thought Wicky was being ridiculous. Which was fine for him to think, but he'd never had Zia mad at him before.

"What's happening?" Zia demanded by way of greeting.

"Were you sitting on your phone?" Wicky asked incredulously. "I don't think it even fully rang once! You're normally asleep at this time, too."

"Of course I was. You said it normally happened around this time, so I waited up. So, what's happening?"

"Uh...it might have already happened?"

"WICKY."

Wicky ducked behind Garen before protesting, "It happened in seconds. I didn't get a chance to call before it was over!"

Garen was a true friend and backed him up immediately. "It really was quick, Zia. I think it lasted all of ten seconds. Bel got a good look at it, though."

"I can't believe you're making Garen vouch for you like this."

Really? She should have expected it from him.

Zia growled something that Wicky chose not to examine too carefully. *"Fine. Garen, tell me what happened. What did Bel see?"*

"Basically, it's a seeking spell. Bel said it's distinctly Asian in design but he's not sure which nationality. Strong, too. He thinks the seeker might be relatively close? What he described was a red thread reaching out."

"Oh, really? A red thread? Then the seeker's intentions are likely good. Red's a good color for Asian magic."

Of course Zia knew stuff like that. Of course she did. Why were all of Wicky's friends smarter than him? Only Nico was his fellow bonk-bro.

"I can't say I'm relieved to hear this, but I do feel a bit better. We're not dealing with an attack, at least. Not an

outright attack, anyway. I can guess what you four are going to do next. Bait and trap?”

Wicky stared at the phone suspiciously. “Since when do you read minds?”

“Oh, please, like that’s even much of a guess. Just don’t bait them at your own house. That’s all I’m asking.”

“Zia, we’re not that stupid,” Garen assured her. “Bel’s already looking for a good spot. We want to travel closer to the spellcaster, make it less obvious where Wicky’s house is.”

“Thank you all for being sensible. I can’t rejoin you yet—I’m still in wedding mode over here—but keep me posted. The second I can feasibly get out of here and join you, I will.”

Wicky heard the frustration in Zia’s voice and knew it wasn’t directed solely at him. She sounded ready to tear her hair out. “Your sister is driving you nuts, isn’t she?”

“She hasn’t hit Bridezilla level yet, but she’s flirting dangerously along that line. I will be the happiest person in the world when this thing is over.”

“I can fake this as a larger emergency than it actually is,” Wicky offered. “Make it sound really bad so you have an excuse to run for it.”

“And this is why I love you and you’re my best friend. I might take you up on that offer. For the family’s sake, I’m trying to stick this out and actually make it through the wedding. Don’t be surprised if I abandon ship at the reception and join you guys, though.”

“Roger that.”

Garen gave Wicky a sideways look as he gravely said, “I’ll keep you posted.”

“Thank you. Apparently Wicky is too distractable.”

Hey! Well, okay, he might be. A little bit.

Garen said bye and hung up before handing Mobius back to Wicky. Wicky pocketed his familiar and turned to see how Bel was faring. Bel sat at his dark wooden table, one leg crossed

over the other, taking notes on the notepad that normally hung on Wicky's fridge.

"Yes, sir," Bel said, still scribbling a note. "Yes, sir, I've got it. We'll head that way tomorrow. Thank you, sir."

When Bel hung up, Wicky eyed him hopefully. "We've got a location?"

"We've got a location. Pack up, we have a safe spot on a training base to try some experimentation. We are heading due west."

Wicky just had two questions. "Matt? Victoria?"

"On their anniversary trip right now," Bel reminded him. "It's just us."

"Ah, okay. Eh, I'll be fine with just you three for backup."

"I swear to god," Garen muttered as he left the room, "if something happens, I will make him eat those words."

Wicky was not worried. He was faster than Garen, after all.

CHAPTER THREE

WICKY

The next morning, they hopped in Wicky's SUV, as it could accommodate four grown men better, and headed out. Wicky started out driving with the GPS navigating them dead west. Bel's chosen location was in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, which was almost precisely eight hours away if you didn't include pit stops. That probably wasn't the precise location for his stalker, but it should put them in the general neighborhood, making it easier for them to hop in the car, speed off, and catch the seeker in the act.

In theory, anyway.

It was a long, boring drive—anyone who drove through Iowa could tell you how boring it was—so Wicky's mind wandered. Unsupervised. Never a good thing.

He addressed Nico, who was in the passenger seat. "You guys have done road trips together before, right?"

"Sure, several times. Why?"

"So do you guys have sexy times in the back seat while the other person's driving? To, you know, pass the time?"

From a glance at Nico's expression, one would think Wicky had just handed him a survival guide to road trips.

"Wicky!" Garen groaned. "Do not corrupt him like that. It's going to be hell on me if he and Bel are getting it on in the back seat and I can't watch or participate."

"It's not like I'm trying to corrupt him—"

"Lies," Bel drawled. "Lies and slander."

"I was just asking!" Wicky might have also been stirring the pot, but that was neither here nor there.

"Are we sure you don't have demon blood in you?" Garen grouched. "Because that was evil."

It was. A little. Wicky was proud of himself, too. He knew Nico. Now that the idea had been planted in Nico's head, he'd totally try it at some point.

To change the subject, Wicky pointed at the snack bag at Nico's feet. "Gimme Snickers."

"How many?" Nico reached into the bag of fun-sized candy.

"I dunno, like two?"

Nico handed him five.

Wicky looked down at his hand in confusion. "How is this two?"

"I was already at three when you said two, so I just kept going. It's two plus your charisma score."

"Uh-huh. Well, now you get to open one for me."

"Fair."

Wicky munched on chocolate and focused back on the road. God, Iowa was boring to drive through. Nothing but cornfields. They were only a few hours out from the destination. He just had to be patient until they got there.

Nico suggested a Monty Python reenactment since they never had watched *Holy Grail* last night, which Wicky was perfectly happy to do. In short order, Bel and Garen were laughing at their antics in the back seat, which of course only encouraged Wicky and Nico.

The last hour and a half of a road trip was always the worst. All he wanted was to get there. If Wicky was tired of sitting, he could just imagine how jittery Nico felt.

After what felt like another decade, they finally made it to Cedar Rapids. Wicky made the final turn into the parking lot of the MAD training facility, which was already prepped with layers upon layers of protective wards. Any kind of attack would have a hard time penetrating. The instructors on hand were used to seeing all sorts of crazy shit and would be quick to react if something went wrong. Short of marching onto an army base, they couldn't be more protected.

A stern-faced woman who was probably a dictator in a previous life met them at the main door of the building. She undoubtedly ate gravel for breakfast and only drank whiskey. She had that vibe to her. When she smiled, Wicky got the impression of painting a smiley face on a bare sword.

“Welcome, Agents.” Even her voice was rough. A cheese grater sounded smoother. “I’m Agent Barrymore. I understand you’re here to catch a stalker.”

“We are.” Bel took point and shook hands with her. “I’m Bel Adams. Thanks for helping us out with this. We didn’t know where else to set this trap.”

“We’re happy to help,” she assured him, smile deepening.

Okay, so despite his first impression, she seemed nice...? Wicky decided to gamble and held out a hand. “Wicky. Thanks for this, really. The mystery has been driving me crazy.”

“Oh, so you’re the target?” She looked him over from head to foot and back again. “Interesting. When you learn why you’re being targeted, do tell me. I’m very curious.”

“Me too, trust me.” Phew, okay, she was nice. Wicky would bet she kept many a recruit in line with that resting bitch face of hers, though.

“You said in your initial email that this only happens at night? In that case, why don’t you come in. Our cafeteria is good. You can relax and have dinner before we need to get to work.”

Food? Wicky got food? Fooooood. “Sure.”

Like most government facilities, this place was boring from an architectural standpoint. All the buildings were grey and blocky, no more than two stories tall, with minimal landscaping around the base to soften things. At least the smell coming from the cafeteria was promising.

‘Cafeteria’ proved to be kind of a misleading term. It was more a food court, really, with five mini restaurants and a kiosk in the middle that offered sandwiches and salads. Wicky went straight for the pizza because he needed cheese to fortify him for tonight. Nico’s insane metabolism had him right with

Wicky. They agreed to each buy a large and swap half so they could both get the variety they wanted.

Then they sat down with their goodies, joining the other three. Agent Barrymore had opted for a sandwich and a salad, as had Bel, but Garen was digging into what looked to be decent sushi. Do-gooders. It was like they were worried about calories or something.

“Why do people eat salads?” Wicky mused. “Lettuce. I don’t get eating lettuce. It has no real nutritional value and it leaves you hungry thirty minutes later.”

Garen snorted. “You and Nico are definitely related. I’ve heard that exact argument from him. But then, you both have insane metabolisms.”

“It’s because they’re constantly running around getting into stuff.” Bel’s eyes twinkled with unspoken laughter. “Mischief-making burns calories.”

“This is true,” Nico agreed.

Barrymore eyed Wicky as she stabbed her fork into lettuce. “Is your stalker because of mischief, then?”

“I have no clue why I’m being stalked.” Wicky gave her a two-fingered salute. “Scout’s honor. It just started happening one day. Whole thing’s been confusing. It took Bel to tell me that the seeker’s Asian.”

“The seeking spell actually has a physical manifestation,” Bel explained. “A red string. It’s definitely Asian magic but I can’t tell what type at a glance.”

“Oh, sure,” Barrymore agreed easily. “Anything like that is definitely Asian.”

Wicky couldn’t let that pass. “Wait, is this common knowledge?”

“So’s eating lettuce,” Garen said. “And you’re confused by that too.”

Wicky shot him the bird. Some friend he was.

“Asian seeking spells have more range than western seeking spells,” Barrymore continued, ignoring the byplay. She was probably used to kids cutting up in class and ignoring the nonsense. “It’s because of how they’re designed. You said you’re eight hours closer to their location?”

“Yup.”

“Hmm, that might be enough to get you a better lead.”

Wicky’s attention sharpened on her. “But you don’t think we’ll be able to actually find the seeker from here?”

“Like I said, they do generally have better range.” Agent Barrymore shrugged, a hand splayed. “I give it fifty-fifty odds you can catch the caster from here. Frankly speaking, we don’t have a large population of Asian-Americans in Iowa. My bet is they’re in a different state and city.”

Oh. Damn. Wicky hadn’t considered that angle.

“But at least from here we can get a jump point, have a better idea of where to go.” Garen didn’t seem bothered by this information, just thoughtful. “It’s no loss for us to stay here tonight. We need a better lead anyway.”

“I’m also more prepared for what to expect.” Bel gave Wicky a reassuring nod. “I still hope to follow the spell to your seeker, but at the very least I can grab hold of it long enough to get a better look.”

Honestly, anything would be an improvement over the past month. Wicky briefly considered what this situation would have looked like if he’d been forced to troubleshoot it with only Zia. Without Bel’s eyes, this would have been so much harder. Blargh, he wasn’t even going to think about it.

They chatted a bit while lingering over dinner, killing time. Barrymore turned out to be deadpan funny. Wicky had decided he liked her by the time dinner was over. They bussed trays, went out, and then walked to the farthest practice area on the compound. Might as well put a buffer between them and students.

They still had time to kill, and Nico was beyond antsy after spending so much time in the car. Wicky decided to be a friend

and shoot fireballs at him so Nico could have fun dodging them.

For some reason, both Bel and Garen stopped him. What? It wasn't dangerous. Nico was dodging just fine, wasn't he? Still, they were rather insistent he stop, so instead Wicky and Nico sparred for a while. Even without fireballs, limbering up felt good.

It was midnight now—or almost—the night sky inky black with stars twinkling overhead. Definitely chilly, too. Wicky was glad for his windbreaker and kind of wishing for something thicker. It might be cold enough to snow out here. He could see his breath in front of him.

The designated area was definitely for dueling practice. Each practice area had its own wards, separate from the center's wards, to make it more adjustable. Wicky used to train in places like this as a student, getting combat ready with his magic. He'd once burned a practice ring right to cinders. Ah, good times. This circle didn't look any different than the dozens of other rings he'd been in before. Probably fifty feet in circumference, warded against damage, the concrete underneath cracked from abuse and years of use. Nothing special about it.

This would hopefully be the right place to bait and trap, though. Wicky had his fingers mentally crossed for that.

He stood near the center of the circle, Bel at his side, looking up at the sky. Bel did take down the wards around this particular practice area, otherwise being here was a moot point, but other than that there was nothing to do. Midnight dragged past, and still nothing.

“I realize we drove all the way out here for this,”—Nico gestured to the area they stood in with a casual sweep of his fingers—“but what if they don't do anything? Do we wait for a few hours, give up, go to a hotel for the night, and try again tomorrow?”

“Only thing to do.” Garen eyed his lover sideways. “Unless you have a better suggestion.”

“No, no, no. I’m not the brains of this operation. That’s Bel’s job.”

Bel abruptly snapped to attention, a spell tumbling off his lips so quickly he damned near tripped over his own words. Wicky was right there with him, staring hard at the sky. Bel always saw something faster than the rest of them, that was a given, but any second now he should be able to see— Ah, there!

“Caught you,” Bel murmured in satisfaction, hand up like he was actually physically holding something.

The nearly translucent red string twined around Bel’s finger, and Wicky stared at it in fascination. Even with Bel holding it, the end wriggled, reaching toward Wicky. Determined little thing, wasn’t it? He came in closer for a better look. The magic was strong, even over this kind of distance, which didn’t surprise him much by now. Even having a chance to study it like this, Wicky didn’t grasp much more than that. The type of magic was so foreign to him that he couldn’t begin to analyze it.

A frown twitched Bel’s brows together. The expression didn’t look thoughtful, it looked...like Bel was questioning his own eyes.

The spell faded abruptly, the red string disappearing, twirling away like a puff of wind. Wicky pointed at it and objected, “I thought you were going to hold that?”

“Yeah. I thought I was too.” Bel stared at his hand for a moment more before turning to face Wicky dead on. His expression looked a bit shell-shocked. “Wicky. Two things.”

He braced himself. Or tried to. “Hit me.”

“First, I believe the caster is an air elemental. The powering force behind the spell was wind.”

Wicky let out a low whistle. Not many mages in the world dealt solely in one element. Not even Wicky could claim that, despite having a strong affinity for fire. Elementalists were known to be powerhouses, stronger than most mages. They

could use other magic types, of course, but their true strength was their element.

Okay, seriously, why the hell was an elementalist looking so desperately for him?

“Which leads me into my second point. This person is not anywhere nearby.” Bel pointed dead west again. “Your stalker is using an insane amount of power to fuel this spell. They’re literally thousands of miles that way.”

“Wait.” Garen threw up a hand. “*Thousands?* As in—”

“Not even in this country.”

Holy...shit. A seeking spell that went past a country’s borders? The United States wasn’t a small country, either! Um. What was Wicky supposed to do with this information? Although it did rather explain why the caster always searched for him after midnight. Time difference.

Wicky’s mouth moved even though his head was spinning madly. “I guess we need to get on a plane.”

CHAPTER FOUR

SUN

What just happened?

Sun stared at his perfectly nice seeking spell, the red string now fading in his hand, his confusion mounting. To say he was perplexed was an understatement. He'd never in his life felt a seeking spell react like that. Someone had grabbed it—physically grabbed it. He'd have sworn that was impossible if he hadn't just felt the tug.

The clack of a cane on wood brought Sun's head up. Grandfather walked out onto the back porch, dark brown eyes narrowed in suspicion. He'd clearly been working, as he still wore a dark leather apron, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, greying hair stuck to his forehead with sweat. Perhaps he'd come back to the house for something, as he should have been at work, not here.

“Sun.” He paused, both hands on the cane, staring at his grandson as if he already knew the answer. “You did it again?”

With no defense, Sun just sighed, staring out over the yard again. This yard was his grandmother's pride and joy, full of herbs arranged in aesthetically pleasing beds. Right now, he saw none of it.

His grandfather sighed as well before coming in closer, easing himself down on the edge of the porch to sit next to Sun.

“I understand why you keep reaching for him. Of course you want to realize the future you saw.” Grandfather put a hand on Sun's shoulder. “But you've already landed yourself in the hospital once from magical exhaustion.”

“I promise I won't push myself to that extent again.” Turning toward his grandfather, Sun tried once more to persuade him. “I can't just sit here. I need to go.”

“Sun...” Grandfather's expression was pained.

“He’s got wards up around himself in defense. Of course he does—any sensible mage would. I can’t penetrate those wards. I’m sure I’ve scared him by trying over and over. I can’t make any kind of connection with him like this. Until my thread connects to him, I can’t find him. All I know is that he’s somewhere east of me because that’s the direction the thread always goes.”

His grandfather saw the point Sun made and frowned off into the distance for a long moment. “I hear what you’re saying. You make sense. But Sun, I can’t in good conscience send you off into a foreign country without knowing what kind of reception you’ll get there.”

“You keep saying that like I’m marching off to war. I’m just going east.”

“If someone could go with you, I’d feel better about this, but...” Grandfather slumped in on himself, posture almost defeated. “Your grandmother is still unnerved at what you saw. Your mother’s not much happier about it. I can’t let your father go with you, or your brother, as I need them here. You understand, right?”

Sun understood that his entire family was far too overprotective. That much he got. “It’s like all of you don’t even trust the very spell you ordered me to do.”

“Of course we trust—”

“Then why are you keeping me from my destiny? You either trust it or you don’t. He’s either my future or he isn’t. Which is it, Grandfather?”

Grandfather winced and refused to look up at him. “I can hear your frustration.”

“He’s getting frustrated too.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“Because someone caught my spell just now.”

Grandfather’s head snapped up, eyes wide. “What?”

“You heard me.” Sun was still reeling a bit from that too. “It wasn’t him, the spell didn’t actually connect, but I think the

person who caught it was near him. Whoever it was, they actually *held* the spell—physically—for a good minute before letting go again.”

“That’s insane,” Grandfather whispered, still shocked. “The very ability to do that is... They’d have to see the spell coming to even have a prayer of catching it before it reached its target. Do you know what kind of eyes that would take?”

“Probably someone of demon descent.” Sun couldn’t think of anyone else offhand.

“And to physically hold...I don’t know of a spell in the world that can manage that!”

“So whoever it is not only has very good eyes but amazing spell-crafting ability. My destiny has someone very capable helping him. Grandfather, do you not understand what this means? He’s actively searching for me now. He’s enlisting help to do it. Even if you won’t let me go to him, he’s coming to me.”

“But you said he was in a different country.” Grandfather’s mouth turned down into a deep line. “If you go with him, you’ll rarely be home again.”

That was the main sticking point—not Sun traveling to a foreign country by himself, or looking for a man he couldn’t even put a name to. It was him leaving and living the rest of his life away from his family. The idea didn’t really bother Sun, truth be told. At a whopping twenty-one years old, the idea of living in another country and seeing something more of the world sounded great to him. To his family though, you’d think it was a death sentence.

He wasn’t even the only grandchild, so why they were being so clingy with him was mindboggling. And frustrating. He’d come back to visit regularly. It wasn’t like planes would cease to exist after this.

Sun felt like he’d been arguing this over and over for the past month. He didn’t know what else to say to get his point across, what else he could do. His family’s strong resistance to

him leaving Thailand was like this wall he kept beating his head against.

Still, he tried again. “Grandfather. Whether you like this or not, I’m going to go.”

Grandfather opened his mouth on an objection.

“Unless you want me to turn out like your uncle?”

Wincing, the elder shut his mouth again.

Sun pushed the point further, not letting up. “Great-Uncle never found where he was meant to be. It eventually drove him into a breakdown. I know where I’m supposed to be—or who I’m supposed to be with, at least. I can find him. Denying that future will only put me in the same shoes as Great-Uncle. Is that what you want?”

“Maybe you can convince him to immigrate here.” Grandfather looked briefly hopeful.

Sun immediately dashed it. “I wasn’t here. In the vision, I was there, with him.”

“You could at least try and convince him!”

Ugh, this was useless. The argument was almost scripted by now. Sun wouldn’t get anywhere with words. They were past that point.

He gave up and stood, finding his sandals and slipping them on.

“Where are you going?” Grandfather asked, tone worried.

“Out. I refuse to rehash this argument with you.”

Sun didn’t look back as he left the garden, coming around to the front of the workshop. He threw his leg over his blue-and-white motorbike, revved up the engine, and took only the second necessary to put his helmet on before driving off.

The streets of his hometown flew past him as he drove. Chiang Mai was a city that never changed in many ways. It didn’t take much of his attention to stay on the road, so Sun let himself think.

Arguing with his family was useless. He was trying to be respectful of his elders, which was why he hadn't just gotten on a plane already. The frustration was climbing to the point that he might very well do it, though. Two things stopped him. One: his spell being caught this afternoon. That told him a lot, right there. Two: the spell hadn't gone as far as his previous attempts. His spell couldn't latch on to a destination, but Sun could guesstimate some on how far it reached based on the power draw.

Now, sometimes his seeking spell hadn't gone as far. The man he was trying to find moved around a lot, often not in a place for more than a few days before going somewhere else. He seemed to have a very active job. At first, Sun had tried to do seeking spells at different times of the day, but he couldn't seem to nail down where this man actually lived. In the end, he settled on a time that worked for him, just to avoid exhausting himself. This was the first time his target had changed locations and then reacted to Sun's seeking spell, though. It gave him the impression that the man was now actively hunting Sun in turn.

If he was going to come to Sun, then preparations needed to be made. Namely, getting travel paperwork in order, vaccinations, and whatnot. Well, as much as he could. Sun didn't even know what country he'd need to immigrate to. All he knew right now was 'not Thailand,' which was extremely unhelpful.

Part of him wanted to try the seeking spell again, just to see if he could actually connect this time. The man's ward had been down, after all. But no, it was probably back up again. He'd also sworn to his parents that he wouldn't try the spell more than once a day. Sun had even meant it. He didn't want to land back in the hospital—turns out magical exhaustion was owww—and letting himself do it more than once a day was a slippery slope. Better not tempt himself.

Mentally, he sent a thought to his future: *Come to me. Come and I promise, I'll be ready for you.*

CHAPTER FIVE

WICKY

Wicky had gone west.

Okinawa, to be precise.

Without Zia—and she'd had a lot to say about that. Wicky had a feeling he'd be in trouble later. That was also a later-him problem.

They'd made arrangements with the base in Okinawa, which was a stunningly beautiful location. The base sat right on the water, part of it actually extending over the water, the blue-green ocean a perfect complement to the mountains rising in the distance.

Wicky got out of the car and stretched with a groan. Thank god they had finally gotten there. It had taken a twenty-two-hour flight with a four-hour layover at Haneda Airport, then another short flight to the island before driving here. The base was like a city in and of itself. Kind of impressive, honestly.

Nico got out and immediately stretched, head hanging down over his shoes. “Guys. I’m so stiff my muscles have lodged a complaint with HR.”

This after running twenty miles before getting on the plane to begin with. Wicky had to shake his head, mostly in bemusement. Were they absolutely sure Nico was purely human? Maybe he had, like, roadrunner or something in his ancestry.

“Let’s throw our bags into a hotel room,” Garen suggested, already heading for the trunk of the taxi van. “I want sleep.”

It was midnight here, but with the time difference, that likely meant his seeker would cast the spell at about...noon local time? Was he doing the math right on that? Well, in that ballpark, anyway. They had time to sleep and get breakfast before they had to get back to their mystery.

Did they sell pancakes in Japan? No, wait, they did. Those were always in anime and manga. He could totally score pancakes somewhere.

The base had a hotel for visiting relatives and friends, so that was where they chose to stay. It was a simple matter of checking in, hauling themselves inside, and crashing. No one even tried to wake up before eleven the next morning. Jet lag was a serious thing.

After some solid sleep and a shower, Wicky felt like he could possibly be a human being instead of a zombie this morning. The base was actually like a mini American city in many ways, so there was a family restaurant on site that offered diner-type food. They unanimously chose to walk across the street to the diner for breakfast. Lunch. Whatever. Wicky got his pancakes and was a happy man.

Noon came and went with no spell appearing, so it was time for plan B. They'd talked about this on the plane ride in, but Wicky had to double-check. While Nico paid out for them, Wicky stood outside with Bel and Garen. "You really want to try a seeking spell with me from here?"

"I realize it might not go anywhere," Bel admitted. "We don't have the same kind of reach as your stalker does. But we're closer, and we gotta try. If they're in Japan, then we're golden, we should be able to find them. Maybe. If they're not, then we need to know so we can change locations again."

That made sense. Wicky's real thought was this, though. "I think we should let the spell connect now."

"Wicky." Garen groaned. "No. Telling them precisely where you are isn't an option. Once that spell of theirs connects, it won't let go."

"But if it connects, then Bel can read it as easily as the stalker can and we can find each other. Meet in the middle."

Nico stepped out to join them, throwing an arm around Wicky's shoulders. "You're really getting impatient to find this person, aren't you?"

He so, so was. Wicky wanted an end to this, one way or another. It was like reading a mystery book only to find out the last chapter had been ripped out, leaving you cliff-hanged on whodunit. The curiosity might well kill him at this rate.

Bel just gave him The Look. As far as Wicky could tell, that expression had been created and patented solely for Nico, but Wicky got it too when he was about to do something stupid. “You are not letting some stranger put his hooks into you. No.”

Dammit. It had been worth a try.

They trooped across the street. There was a greenway there, just a walking path. It was as good a place as any to experiment. Bel had already given Wicky the right spell to use for this—basically an adjustment of the seeking spell—so Wicky used that. It felt very open-ended, but magic was about intent, so hopefully this worked.

“Cherche celui qui me cherche.”

The spell zoomed out, reaching, reaching, reaching... reaching some more...then fizzled out without making any contact whatsoever. jiggled

Wicky made a dying plane noise, with the appropriate hand gesture, that ended in an explosion sound as he jiggled his hand. “Well that crashed and burned.”

“Southwest,” Bel murmured thoughtfully. “We’re not in the right country.”

“What’s southwest of here?” Nico looked between them, already ticking things off on his fingers. “China, Taiwan, what else?”

“Philippines, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore. I think those are the main ones.” Garen quirked a brow at the two mages. “Can you narrow that down any?”

“Heh.” Bel shook his head. “I wish. I’ll say this. I think Taiwan might be the next logical stop—shit!”

Wicky whirled, eyes on the sky. Bel reacted immediately, getting his spell out just in time to catch the red string before it could connect. Wicky watched the thread twining around Bel's finger, his heart in his throat for a moment. Damn. That had been close. Had he and his stalker really been looking for each other at the exact same time?

Garen's hand rested on Bel's shoulder as he asked cautiously, "You got it?"

"I do. I think our stalker just did us a favor." Bel focused intently on the string, red eyes narrowed with concentration. "I can't get a firm fix on him. My magic doesn't have the same range. But...he's farther out than Taiwan. I would bet my eyes on that. Garen, quick, get me a map."

Yanking his phone out, Garen quickly pulled up a map and showed it to Bel. Wicky was right over his other shoulder to see the screen too, Nico crowding in with him.

Without touching, Bel traced a line along the screen for a moment. "Vietnam or Thailand would be my guess. Maybe Laos? Somewhere in that area. It has that kind of distance to it."

Bel let the spell dissipate, still frowning thoughtfully. "Why don't we fly into Bangkok?"

"It's got an international airport, so why not?" Even as Garen said this, he looked at Bel like the blond wasn't saying something. "What did you read in that spell?"

"It's not so much what I read as...a gut feeling?" Bel turned to Wicky, handing Garen's phone back as he moved. "Wicky, I have to ask. What do you feel about this situation?"

Wicky had no clue why Bel wanted to know. He had no problem answering, though. "Mostly curiosity. I want to know why someone is so driven to find me."

"So you're not upset in any way that they're disrupting your life or pulling you on this wild chase?"

"Uh...no? I mean, I can see why you ask, but honestly, I'm just curious. Something powerful has to be motivating this person. Why?"

“It’s not like I can tell motivations or emotions through this spell but...” Bel paused, mouth forming words only to dismiss them. He seemed to be phrasing this very carefully. “This time the spell looked better formed. Determined. But also hopeful? I think the caster has figured out that you’re now trying to come to them. It didn’t look so much like a seeking spell to me as a pointing arrow. ‘This way.’ That’s what the spell looked like. Someone pointing us in the right direction.”

“Beckoning,” Nico murmured thoughtfully. “The spell was beckoning us in the right direction. That’s what you’re saying.”

“You said that so much better.” Bel gave his familiar a quick smile. “Yes. That’s what it looked like. I did some reading on the plane, researching this, and the red string is really meant to be a seeking spell only, not something more. It’s used sometimes to find missing family or soulmates. That said, I don’t know how or if Asian mages call for familiars. I haven’t read anything that suggests they do. On the other hand, elemental mages are a totally different beast no matter what culture they come from. It could be he needs a familiar.”

Wicky’s head damn near imploded at the implications. “You’re saying that...I might be a familiar?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t. Its just the only explanation my brain is producing for why he’s searching for you, over and over.”

“Hold on,” Garen objected. “Wicky’s a mage himself. Can another mage be called as a familiar?”

“I would have said no if you’d asked me even a year ago, but *carus*”—Bel quirked a speaking eyebrow—“how many mages have two familiars?”

“Er. Good point.”

“It could well be that this person has been trying to summon Wicky only to be thwarted by his mage shields, so they’ve resorted to trying to find him first.”

Wicky’s brain spun like a gerbil in a wheel. Only the wheel was off track and the gerbil was dead.

A hand smacked him between the shoulder blades. “Breathe,” Nico ordered. “Breathe, friend.”

Wicky sucked in a breath. “Hot. Damn. You trying to break my brain, Bel?”

“It’s just a thought. I could be wrong.” Bel spread his hands in an open shrug. “But like I said, I can’t think of any other reason why a person you don’t know, in a foreign country, would search for you so persistently.”

Honestly, Wicky couldn’t think of any other reason either. There could very well be one, it just wasn’t obvious to him. Well, aside from his soulmate reaching out for him, but Wicky didn’t think the universe was that mean, to match someone up with him.

The real question was...if Wicky really was someone else’s familiar, would he be alright with that? He knew very well what that would entail, having one himself. His hand moved to his jacket pocket, where Mobius was resting, as he considered the ramifications. A lot would likely change if that was the case. Hell, his whole life might get turned upside down.

He looked up at the three men in front of him and knew, without a shadow of a doubt, how much they loved each other. How firm and encompassing their connection was. It went past a familiar-mage bond, which wasn’t a shallow relationship to begin with.

If Wicky could have what they did, would he take the chance?

Funny, he didn’t need to even really think about it. Of course the answer was yes. Was it maybe a little terrifying, too? Well, yeah, but it was more exciting than anything. Wicky was a daredevil by nature, after all. Meeting someone destined for him like this just put a thrill in his love life.

Of course, if he was someone’s soulmate, it still meant turning his world upside down, but honestly that was okay too.

Bel looked up at him, a little worried frown pulling at his mouth. For his sake, Wicky grinned. Feeling a little too giddy, he tried to keep it from looking demented.

“If I’m a familiar, I’m a familiar. We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. Right now, I think we better retreat to our hotel rooms. I need a shower and plane tickets to Bangkok.”

CHAPTER SIX

SUN

Sun went through his usual routine of waking up, taking a shower, and throwing on clothes, then took a minute to do a seeking spell. His family had kept him so busy yesterday that he'd not been able to follow his afternoon habit. Over the past few days, the seeking spell had reported that his quarry was coming closer and closer. By leaps, no less, which hinted at plane rides. His excitement had grown with every day. He'd almost come out of his skin yesterday, wanting to do the spell and being distracted every time he found a minute. He was desperate to check now.

Standing on the patio outside his room, Sun spoke the simple spell, hands palm up as he crafted his magic, calling upon the wind. It ruffled his hair and clothes, greeting him like a friend, before following the shape of the spell. The thin red string formed at his pinky and shot out, going in the direction of its target.

Sun bit at his bottom lip, nearly bouncing on his toes, eager to see how close his man had gotten. The spell reached—and then stopped abruptly, latching on. For once, he felt the connection, knew precisely where his destiny stood, and elation shot through him like fire.

A silent scream of exultation built up in the back of his throat.

He was here.

The man Sun had been searching for was *here*, in Bangkok.

Sun stood there in the sunlight in pure disbelief for about three seconds. Then he exploded into action, grabbing a duffle bag from the top of his closet. He threw in two changes of clothes, a toothbrush, and a razor, then zipped it up before dashing out of the room. He called for a taxi as he moved down the hallway, then immediately looked up plane tickets. Flying was the fastest way to get from Chiang Mai to Bangkok. Going by plane would only take an hour versus the

almost ten-hour drive it would take to get there. Now that his destiny was so close, Sun wasn't spending all day in a fucking car to get to him.

A plane was leaving in just over two hours—perfect. He could get to the airport and through security in that amount of time. He bought the ticket without hesitation.

His family was all at work in this moment, as they went early to start production on their signature product line, pain relieving balms, and Sun blessed the convenience. If his family had been around to see him just then, they would have been sure to stop him. He probably should call, though.

He crammed his feet into his shoes, got down the stairs to the ground floor, and hopped into the taxi before calling his mother.

“*Sun,*” she greeted, somewhat absently. “*We could use your help this morning, can you come—*”

“Mom,” he interrupted, unable to bank his excitement. “He’s here.”

There was a digestive pause. “*The blond man from your vision?*”

“Yes. He’s here. In Bangkok.”

She sucked in a startled breath. “*How did he get here?*”

“I told you he’s been coming closer.” Sun had been doing his best to lead him here, too. “He must have arrived sometime yesterday or last night. I’m going to him.”

“*Wait, Sun!*” Alarm sounded in her voice. “*You can’t just go to him. We need to discuss this as a family first.*”

“Why, so you can block me again? No. I’m done with this. He’s come all this way to meet me. Now that he’s in the country, all your usual arguments are moot. I’m going. I’m just calling to tell you that. Bye.” Sun hung up with satisfaction. After two months of his mother trying to prevent him from leaving, it felt good to hang up on her.

Sun might have been a bit frustrated with his family.

It felt like it took a decade to get through security, board the plane, and actually fly the short hop down to Bangkok. Sun was antsy the entire time, unable to focus on anything except maintaining his grip on the red string. His thoughts kept spinning through what he could say once they did meet. Should he apologize first for being a creepy stalker? It probably looked pretty wrong without context. Yeah. Maybe apologize first.

Once Sun landed, he was off the plane as quickly as he could manage it. The thread leading him was stronger now, directing him somewhere nearby. A hotel, maybe? Grabbing a hotel near the airport made sense if the man had gotten in late. Sun flagged down a motorbike taxi once he was out of the airport, pulled the duffle bag's strap around his shoulder to rest on his back, and directed the driver to get him to the nearest cluster of hotels.

Sun needed to offer a bit more direction, but they didn't have to go far. Five minutes later, he tapped the driver's shoulder and pointed to the curb. This was close enough. He'd found the right hotel. He paid the man, then hopped off, striding through the main doors of the hotel.

Excitement beat in his heart like a war drum, and his stomach was twisted into origami knots from nerves. Sun had absolutely no idea what to say. He was trying to keep his nerves steady, but his hands still felt jittery. So much hope, anticipation, and determination were all wrapped up in this moment.

All Sun could do was follow the red string leading him straight through the lobby.

Thirty seconds wasn't a long time by anyone's standards. A lot or nothing at all could happen in that amount of time. Sun's memory of his snippet of the future, of that glimpse of what it would hold, was solid as iron. He'd never forget it in his lifetime. Sun thought of it so often, daydreamed of it, in fact, that he sometimes lost what was happening in the present.

He looked past the people that crossed back and forth in the hotel lobby, disbelieving his own eyes. The trimly built man

wasn't smiling this time, but he otherwise looked the same as in Sun's vision. Dishwater blond hair in a casual sweep over his forehead, skin darkened by the sun, his hands up and gesturing as he talked to the smaller blond man at his side.

Sun's heart beat a heavy staccato against his ribs as it sped up, his breath shaking in his lungs. It was real. He was here.

The shorter blond said something, pointed toward...Sun, it seemed like. He barely noticed, everything in him focused on going straight for the man he'd been searching for. The one he'd yearned to meet for years.

The one person his magic had chosen to show him.

Sun crossed the tiled floors as if he were floating through a dream. He moved on autopilot, the motion of putting one foot in front of another lost on him, deemed unimportant. He was moving toward the man of his future, that was all he was focused on.

"That's him?" his blond said with keen interest. "I mean, I think I see the string but I'd need your spell on it to be absolutely one hundred percent on that. Bel, you sure?"

"Dead sure. Trust me, no mistaking it, he's got the red string in hand. And look at him, he clearly recognizes you. Er, somehow."

"Is it alright for me to get close?"

"I see nothing dangerous about him."

A foot away, the surreal feeling was still strong. Sun couldn't quite wrap his head around this reality. He had to touch the man, had to verify whether this was real or if he'd truly lost what was left of his sanity. With a shaking hand, Sun reached up those few inches, fingers like gossamer wings as he lightly touched the skin of the blond man's cheek.

Warmth. Solid warmth. Deep brown eyes looking straight back into his.

Thank Buddha.

"You're real?" Sun breathed, disbelief warring with pure joy in his chest.

“Yeah,” the man answered, voice strangely emotional. “Yeah, I’m real. Rather, *you’re* the one I’m not sure is real. We’ve been hunting you for days. You led us on quite the merry chase, man. I started to think I’d imagined this whole thing.”

Abruptly realizing he was touching someone he didn’t even have a name for, in a crowded hotel lobby, Sun retracted his hand. He didn’t back up, though. He wasn’t losing this man now that he’d found him. Sun kept looking him over, hungry for every detail.

“I’m Wicky,” the man said, then jerked a thumb to his companion. “This is Bel, my teammate and the man who helped me find you. What’s your name?”

“Sun. Sunee Chatophkin,” he answered. “Wicky?”

“Chadwick. I go by Wicky. Sun, uh, we have a *lot* to talk about. Starting with why you were magically searching for me from a different continent.”

“Ah.” Sun, for all that he’d been searching so desperately for this man—Wicky—didn’t actually have a good plan for this moment. How did he even begin to explain? Still, an explanation was owed, and he could only hope that Wicky was amenable enough to hear him out. “Yes, I’ll explain and answer any questions you may have. I, um... This isn’t the place to talk about it.”

“Okay. You pick a place, we’ll follow you.”

Sun had never blessed those English classes in school so much. He was able to understand what they were saying. He was hungry to understand every word coming out of Wicky’s mouth.

Two other men abruptly joined them, coming to stand on either side of Bel. One of them was tall and stocky, his mahogany skin in sharp contrast to the white shirt he wore. The other stood a little shorter, dark hair in a casual curl over his forehead, and he eyed Sun with interest.

“I caught part of this,” the taller man observed. “But I’m making sure. Is this him?”

“Yup.” Bel touched a hand to his own chest. “Bel Adams, R’iyah mage. These are my familiars, Garen and Nico. This is...I’m sorry, say your name one more time?”

Sun took in both men with amazement, not quite sure what to make of this knowledge. Two things surprised him. One: he hadn’t known the Americans were accepting enough to allow polyamory like this. Two: he’d never heard of someone having multiple familiars. Even having human familiars was far outside the norm. He mentally shook the thought off as something to ask more about later. His hands lifted in a *wai*. “I’m Sunee Chatophkin. Sun, please. I’m pleased to meet all of you.”

“We’re relieved to meet you,” Garen said sincerely. Also with an aggravated look at Wicky. “We’ve been searching for you for days now. I thought Wicky was going to come out of his skin before he oh-so-smartly dropped his shield and let you connect with him. But why were you searching for him?”

“That will...take some time to explain. This isn’t the place for it. I...” Sun turned a little, thinking fast and hard. Where to go, where to go? The hotel had an outdoor seating area in the courtyard, he’d passed that coming in. That was probably the best option. “Please, this way. We can sit outside and talk comfortably.”

“Alright, you lead,” Wicky encouraged with a smile.

Sun badly wanted to grab his hand, make sure Wicky didn’t disappear on him. His own hand was halfway to Wicky’s before he checked the impulse. He couldn’t help himself, though, from glancing often over his shoulder to make sure Wicky was still with him.

The courtyard was empty, none of the guests choosing to sit out here. It was a warmer day, but there was plenty of shade overhead and fans spinning to keep the air cooler. Sun went for one of the wooden chairs and settled there, hovering at the edge, unable to really relax. Everyone else found seats as well, forming a rough circle.

Sun was relieved when Wicky sat right next to him, easily within arm’s reach. He was anxious to keep him there until he

knew enough to be able to find Wicky again without resorting to draining magical spells.

Not sure where to start, Sun asked uncertainly, “Are you familiar with Thai magic at all?”

“Not one little bit,” Wicky replied. “If anyone would be, it’s Bel.”

Bel snorted. “I know just enough to get myself into trouble.”

“Then yeah, we’re clueless.”

Sun gave a nod, figuring he should start with a basic explanation. “I’m not familiar with your brands of magic, either. I’ll keep it short and sweet. We use talismans and rituals to accomplish our magic. Once we’ve been trained and reach adulthood, we call a spirit familiar to us to act as a guide. On the cusp of that summoning, we do one more ritual—a seeking. It gives us guidance, I suppose you could say. We are able to glimpse very briefly into the future so that we know what path we are meant to walk. It’s never more than thirty seconds, sometimes as short as fifteen. It only gives us a hint. In my family, the results of that seeking are mixed. I performed that ritual four years ago. In it I saw...you.”

Wicky’s eyes flared wide, and he pointed a finger toward his own chest. “Me?”

“You,” Sun repeated, voice husky with emotion. He looked at this man who was so patiently sitting and listening to him and felt his heart ache with the hope that his vision might become reality. It all depended on how Wicky felt, though. “You were standing in the doorway of a house I’d never been in before, sunlight coming in from behind you. You looked back toward me, a hand extended, urging me to take it and come with you. Just as I touched your hand, the vision closed.”

I’m pretty sure we were lovers was not something Sun could say in this moment.

“So...you’re saying, I’m in your future?”

“Yes.”

“Not casually but, like, *in* your future.”

“Yes,” Sun confirmed again. “As what, precisely, I don’t know. That we’ll have to figure out on our own. But I wasn’t in this country anymore. I could tell that from the vision. I was with you, wherever it is you are.”

“America, generally, although the jobs take us all over.” Wicky rubbed a hand over his jawline, eyes narrowed in thought. “That’s quite the vision there, Sun. I’m really not sure how to feel about it. I mean, your magic decided to pair you up with me—sorry about that, really, I’m a little crazy—which is cool and all. I kinda know how that goes because of these three.”

Bel, Garen, and Nico all snorted, as if amused.

“What gets me,” Wicky continued thoughtfully, “is why it thought to pair me up with this really cute Thai man I’ve never met before. Like, not complaining, really not. Just not sure why. Am I your familiar?”

“What?! Oh. I guess I can see why you ask. No, you’re not.”

Wicky nodded. “Okay. I kinda figured. I mean, surely if I was a familiar, I’d have been summoned straight to you? Or been driven to stay right next to you the second I saw you. Or felt a bond, something. But nada. Still, figured I should ask.”

Also, Wicky thought him cute? Sun was more than flattered. He felt his cheeks heat and had to glance away for a moment. “As I said, the vision is only guidance. So I’m on the right path. What we choose to do from there is up to us.”

“I guess what I’m wondering is, are you willing to immigrate to the United States just based on that vision? You said you felt like you were with me.”

Sun nodded immediately, sure of this. “Yes. I was with you. If that’s where you work and live, then that’s where I need to go. Um. If that’s...alright with you?”

Wicky’s hand landed on his shoulder as he leaned in, saying seriously, “At least buy a man a drink first before offering to move in with him, yeah?”

It was too much all at once, wasn't it? Sun deflated, not sure where to go from here.

"Wicky, don't tease," Bel cautioned. "He's not used to your wacky sense of humor yet."

Oh. He was teasing? Sun perked back up, hopeful again.

"I think this will be easier to explain if we tell you that Bel summoned me." Nico lifted a hand slightly. "I'm his first familiar. We're accustomed to the idea of magic putting two people together for its own purposes."

Sun blinked and looked between them, intrigued all over again. "Was this expected when you summoned him?"

"Yes. Everyone in my family summons a human familiar. Garen, no, I didn't expect that. Garen was our choice." Bel shot a sweet smile at his other familiar, getting one in return.

Taking this in, Sun realized now what Wicky had meant earlier. So that's why he could take this with such aplomb. He'd seen this play out before. "I am...not as accustomed to this idea. My family isn't either. Usually the visions show us a place. Never a person, not like this. My grandmother saw herself performing a specific task."

Wicky asked with growing interest, "So you didn't expect to see a person?"

"No. Which is why I do not know what to do next, really. Most of this hinges on what you choose. I cannot force anything on you."

"I agree with that, but it also depends on what *you* want to do. That street goes both ways, you know?"

Sun wanted to hug him for that sentiment alone. This man was a walking green flag, wasn't he? "Whenever my family have followed the vision, they became happy and fulfilled people. I want to fulfill it."

"Okay." Wicky nodded, accepting this. "Then, I guess, come home with me. Uh, well, I say that, but there's probably a lot we gotta do first to make it happen."

“Starting with convincing my family. They are very against the idea of me emigrating.” Sun sighed, the sigh coming from the depths of his soul. “I am afraid that with you here, I have quite the fight on my hands.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

WICKY

Sun and Wicky had a lot to talk about, so Wicky invited him up to his hotel room for privacy. Garen assured them they could pop in if needed, but the trio chose to give them space to work through some things. Bless them for it. Wicky had a lot of emotions to sort out. This whole situation felt surreal on some level. He almost couldn't believe he was the main character in this crazy script. On the other hand, he felt kind of...giddy? Relieved? Filled with wildly inappropriate thoughts of what this might mean? Really, Column D, all the above.

He had the mystery solved, which was great, his curiosity finally satisfied. Now he had all the feels from the answer. Namely, how was he supposed to react knowing that magic had decided he needed to live with this stunningly cute man? Also, what were the appropriate sacrifices to thank the gods of fate for this chance? Because Wicky was so, so tapping that if he had the opportunity.

He should probably do the adult stuff first, though, before he got completely carried away. The Carried Away feelings were already threatening to ambush him and suck him under.

Wicky unlocked the door, saying to Sun over his shoulder, "I've gotta report this in real quick. Really, it's just an email to my super—"

"Super?" Sun repeated in confusion.

"Ah. Supervisor." The abbreviated version of that likely didn't make sense to a non-native speaker.

"Ohh."

"Yeah, so just give me like two minutes."

"That's fine."

Wicky toed off his shoes at the door, then heaved Sun's bag onto the desk near the window before turning and really

looking at him. Damn, he was cute. Wicky had always found most Asian men cute, to be fair, but Sun really fit the bill. He was maybe five six, slender and wiry, and it was interesting to think that small frame housed incredibly powerful magic. He was a little on the pale side, like he spent no real time outdoors. He also looked like he'd torn out of his house in a hurry, his hair kinda ruffled, as if he'd washed and run. Wicky didn't think it was intentionally styled that way.

Why the hell had his magic put them together? Wicky was really baffled on that.

Sun caught him looking and paused in toeing his other shoe off. "What?"

"Trying to figure out what you did in a previous life to deserve me," Wicky answered truthfully. "It must have been a doozy."

This amused Sun, his eyes crinkling up in a smile. "Maybe I rebelled against a government."

"You know, it's possible. That would make sense of this. Here, sit, let me ask a few questions before I report in." Wicky grabbed a chair, plopped himself into it, then leaned in with his elbows on his knees. "First, you are an air elementalist?"

"I am. I haven't been working as one long. I only graduated from college a few months ago. I mostly help with the family business and do some freelance work. What do you do for work?"

"I work for the government. MAD—the Magic Activity Division. We're like first responders for magical problems. Bel, Garen, and Nico are all my teammates." He should probably put the warning out here now, huh? Yeah, that'd be responsible of him. "To be honest, it's really Bel's team. See, he's of demon heritage; his red eyes can see just about everything. He's the one dispatched to fix most problems. The rest of us battle things back to keep him safe while he works."

"Is that right? That sounds dangerous. Do you think I can join you?"

Wicky blinked at him. Look at that, Sun seemed eager. Did he like danger too? Also, how was he somehow even hotter than before? “I’m sure you can. MAD would be crazy to turn someone like you down. If you come with me, you’re going to be drawn into the team too. Which means a lot of dangerous assignments and magical shenanigans.”

“You say that,” Sun pointed out, brow quirked in wry amusement, “but you’re smiling. You’re the type who likes danger.”

“Well, yeah, that’s why I’m in this career. Are you okay with this, though?”

Sun shrugged as if this was no big deal. “Considering the type of magic I have, danger is par for the course. That’s how you say that, right?”

“Yup.”

“I always knew I’d be in dangerous situations. I expected it. But will you really be able to bring me in? I’m not American.”

“Oh, trust me, they’ll weep tears of joy to have you. Uh, but they will ask what you are to me. Which is a good question. What am I to you?”

“Friends, at the least. I think you’d be a very fun friend to have.”

At the least, huh? Wicky could roll with that and everything it implied. “Okay, second question: Is it just you? Do you not have a familiar?”

Sun shook his head. “No. Those of us in Thai magic will summon a spirit familiar after completing training. But a familiar is no real use to an elemental. I didn’t call for one.”

“Gotcha. Kinda figured since I didn’t see one with you, but then again, most people don’t realize I have a familiar at first.”

As if this was his cue, Mobius let out a sad chirp from his pocket.

Wicky glanced down, exasperated. “I was getting there. Hold your horses.”

Pointing to the pocket, Sun asked uncertainly, “What...?”

Lifting Mobius free, Wicky held it up so Sun could see it. “This is my familiar, Mobius.”

Sun blinked at the phone. Mobius lit up his screen in a wave of light, his version of a friendly hello. “A smartphone? Very unusual.” He held up his hands like in a prayer and gave a slight bow. “*Sawadeekrab*, Mobius. I am Sun.”

“*Sawadeekrab*,” Mobius responded in kind.

Wicky damn near dropped his familiar out of sheer shock. “He speaks!”

Sun looked uncertainly between them. “Have you not heard him speak?”

“No, you don’t understand,” Wicky explained, still staring at Mobius in shock. “I’ve spent *thousands* on voice packages to get him to talk. He says maybe five words a year. Most of the time he’s texting me. I’ve never heard him speak so willingly.”

“Want to talk to Sun,” Mobius prompted, already impatient with this conversation.

“The world’s ending.” Wicky flopped dramatically over the table. “That’s what this is. The world is coming to an end.”

Mobius gave a little impatient jitter, vibrating in Wicky’s hand. “Sun, *pha pom bai*.”

Wicky damn near dropped his familiar again. “Since when do you speak Thai?!”

Sun was trying not to laugh, but he was kinda failing, his face rippling under the effort and giving the game away. He reached forward and took Mobius from Wicky’s hand before settling again on the edge of the bed.

Not willing to let this go, Wicky shook a finger at him. “Years we’ve been together. Years! You never spoke to me without it being a dire situation. It’s because he’s cuter than me, isn’t it?”

Mobius said something else in Thai that Wicky didn't have a prayer of understanding, but it made Sun list sideways, a sweet, carefree laugh breaking free. Damn traitor familiar. Wicky flopped back over the table. "Betrayed! Betrayed on all sides!"

His familiar utterly ignored his dramatics and kept chattering to Sun, who didn't seem to mind one bit. He held Mobius with both hands and spoke comfortably in return. They made such a darling picture. Wicky was quite content to sit there and watch them awhile, but he really should report in. Before the yelling started.

With a sigh, he pulled out his laptop and got it connected to the hotel's Wi-Fi. Opening the browser, he tried to think of the best way to explain this very wild situation. *A ridiculously good-looking mage from Thailand decided he wants to follow me home, can I keep him?* was probably not the best opening line.

Alright, time to figure out how to phrase this in official language. Or try, anyway. He wasn't sure there was an official language made up for situations like this. Wicky tried to get his brain into a more sober frame of mind—which, ouch, grinding gears on that—and started typing.

Eww, no, that opening line would get him in all sorts of trouble. Delete. Delete. Try again. Yeah, okay, that might work better.

For some reason, Grammar Check wanted him to change "don't fucking cry" to "don't fuck cry" and Wicky would like to know what drugs Grammar Check was on and if they'd be willing to share.

Wait, was that the new Eat, Pray, Love? Don't, Fuck, Cry?

Actually, on second thought, "fuck" shouldn't be in an official email to his boss, huh? Yeah, he'd better change that.

Wicky typed, deleted, typed, got to the end of the explanation, and was no longer sure he was even making sense. Reading it through, he pursed his lips. Hm, yeah, not his best work. You know what, fuck it. He copied and pasted it

over into a new email and then sent it to Garen to fix. Garen knew how to spin stuff and make it sound all fancy. This was apparently beyond Wicky's skill level.

He did feel like he was forgetting to do something, though... Oh shit. Zia. He'd promised to update her once they found the mage. Uhhh, damn, okay, the crazy explanation could go to her. She was used to deciphering his insanity anyway. He pasted it again in another email and sent it winging in her direction.

There! Everyone updated, for the most part. All good.

Wicky grabbed the armrests on his chair and made little grunt sounds as he scooted closer to the other two. Sun paused mid-sentence as he came in closer, amused all over again.

"Are we too far away?" he asked.

"You were." Wicky stopped before their knees actually touched, satisfied. "Now. Questions for you. You're speaking English really well, but how comfortable are you in it?"

Sun answered with a grimace. "I am okay at it. I learned it in school. Very stiff. When I had the vision, I knew I was likely going into an English-speaking country, so I doubled down when I started college and really studied it. I am, mmm...conversational."

That kind of explained why Sun looked like he was phrasing things in his head before speaking. Wicky would have to do the same, not throw a lot of idioms at him. Sun was already going through a lot in order to follow Wicky to America. He wanted to make this as easy on the man as he possibly could. Which was an emotional HOLY SHIT he hadn't processed completely yet, thanks for asking.

"Teach me Thai," Wicky offered. "I'll meet you halfway. Yeah?"

Sun's expression softened into a warm smile. "Okay."

"Good. Language lessons can start in a bit, but read me in. Uh, I mean, tell me more about the situation. You said your family won't like this?"

Sun's smile dropped into a resigned expression. "The reason I kept reaching out to you over and over is because they would not let me go."

What Wicky understood about Asian cultures could maybe fill a thimble, but he did know that parents had a lot of control over their children. If they didn't want their child to do something, then odds were, the parents got their way. Sun must have been fighting with them for months over this.

Wait a second. "Did they change their minds now that I'm here?"

"No. They still do not want me to go."

"But you're coming with me anyway?"

Sun's jaw flexed, expression one of resolve. "I am supposed to go with you."

It wasn't easy going against cultural norms. Wicky was absolutely impressed by Sun's determination.

"Sun, I have to ask, what do you want out of this?"

"Out of going with you?"

"Yeah." Wicky had to ask because of that red string. Of all the spells to use to find him, that had been Sun's choice. If he wasn't Sun's familiar, then that begged the question: Was he this man's soulmate instead? Or something like it? Or was he jumping to conclusions?

"I want my future." Sun's smile turned a bit crooked. "The scrying spell shows where I must be in order to achieve happiness. I will be happy with you. That's all I can really say right now."

That did and didn't answer the question. Sun obviously wasn't ready to share, so Wicky dropped it.

"Alright, fair enough, but...I should warn you. I'm more than a little crazy. I like to refer to myself as a free spirit because it sounds better than out-of-control nutjob. I might drive you crazy if you live with me."

Sun shrugged as if this didn't bother him too much. "We all drive each other crazy, as you put it. If you go too far, I promise to smack you on the back of the head."

See? He'd already figured out how to handle Wicky. Man would be fine.

"I do want us to go back to my family's house," Sun continued, searching Wicky's face as if seeing how he would take this. "So they can meet you. I think this will go better if they can meet you."

"I mean, that's fair. We weren't sure what your intentions were either until I met you. It's fine if we go. Where are they?"

"Chiang Mai."

"I literally have no idea where that is."

Sun jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "North. An hour's flight."

"Is that how you came to me so fast? You hopped on a plane?"

"Yes."

Wicky kind of figured. After all, he and the trio had gotten in pretty late last night. Sun must have done his seeking spell first thing this morning to figure out so quickly where Wicky was.

"Can I ask?" Sun canted his head in curiosity. "It was only this morning my spell could connect."

"Yeah...I got yelled at for that." Wicky wasn't the slightest bit apologetic about it, though. It had worked, hadn't it? "I was tired of making it harder on you and Bel both. No need to keep wards up at this point. I was pretty sure we were close by coming to Bangkok. Like, maybe in the wrong country, but a lot closer still. It would speed the matter up if you could meet us halfway at least. So I didn't put my ward up last night. Bel had a lot of words to say about that this morning. None of them were clean. Why am I getting the judgey look?"

"You are a risk taker. Aren't you?"

“How I roll. Behaving is boring.” Wicky grinned without apology.

“If your familiar had hair, it would be grey by now.”

Mobius gave a forlorn beep of acknowledgment.

Wicky just shrugged. Them’s the breaks. “I would like to point out that my insanity has worked in my favor so far.”

There was a knock at the door.

Wicky pirouetted to the door, threw it open and intoned grandly. “Enter!”

Garen came in, laptop in hand, a look on his face like he was trying to be patient with his younger screwup brother. Which, Wicky had to admit, he fulfilled that role amazingly well.

“Wicky.” Garen pointed at his laptop. “What were you trying to say?”

“It’s not that bad!” Wicky was already defensive of his gobbledygook. He’d rewritten parts of that three times; it couldn’t be utter nonsense. He’d deleted the ‘fuck,’ too, hadn’t he? “You at least got what I was trying to explain, right? You’re just bitching.”

“I am standing here, in this room, because I legit have no clue what you were trying to say.”

“Uhh. Shit. I just sent that to Zia.”

Garen lifted his eyes to the heavens, clearly praying for patience. “With the time difference, she won’t have read it yet. Let’s fix this and send her an updated version before she can. I’m very relieved you didn’t send this to Tesfay.”

“Yeah, me too.” Good job there, instincts. He would reward with cookies later.

Garen sat at the table with him and rephrased the entire thing. In other words, deleted all of Wicky’s hard work and started from scratch. Which would be insulting if Garen hadn’t decided to just write it for him. Such a good bro.

Taking the laptop from him, Wicky reviewed what he'd written and, yeah, fine, it did make more sense than his gobbledygook. Wicky cheerfully sent it to both Zia and their super, then closed the laptop. There, official stuff out of the way.

Deciding to catch Garen up while he had him, Wicky said, "Sun's family is in Chiang Mai, which is an hour's flight from here. He wants us to go up and meet them. The family's been fighting him hard about this whole thing."

"Ahh." Garen didn't need to think about it before shrugging in assent. "That's fine. We'll get tickets for tomorrow and fly up. Sun, does your family speak English at all?"

Sun shook his head ruefully. "No. We all learn English in school, but they haven't spoken a word of it since graduating. I'm sure they've forgotten it all."

"You're speaking it fine," Garen observed.

"I am just recently out of school. It's still fresh in my head."

"He also studied it more after he got the vision," Wicky tacked on. "Because he figured he'd be in an English-speaking country. But this does pose a logistical problem. How do we convince your family if you're having to interpret for all of us?"

Mobius piped up. "I'll interpret."

Garen did a double take. "Since when do you talk?"

Aggrieved all over again, Wicky whined, "He's been talking ever since Sun came in and said hi. Am I not cute enough? Is that the problem? He speaks *Thai*! I didn't know he could even do that!"

Mobius gave an evil laugh.

Some familiar this was. He was just being a little shit. Of course Sun was no help, as he was laughing again.

Being practical, Garen moved the conversation along. "If we got earbuds in and all connected to you, could you interpret

what they're saying for us?"

"Yes," Mobius answered calmly. "Will interpret what you say too."

"That'll help a lot. I'll buy stuff and hook us up, then." Garen gave the phone in Sun's hand a very strange look. "So...does this mean after this trip you'll talk with us more?"

Mobius gave that evil laugh again.

"Figured. Had to ask."

This did beg a question in Wicky's mind. "If your family isn't okay about this, and you left in a hurry, have they been blowing up your phone?"

Sun unlocked the phone and showed him the screen. The messages and phone calls were in the double digits. Ouch. Sun grimaced, trying to smile, but it looked forced. "I put my phone on Do Not Disturb."

Well, that explained why it hadn't been going off every second.

"Maybe call them," Garen suggested, not without sympathy. "Before we all just show up at their door."

Sun didn't look at all enthused over this idea. His expression was pained, but he sighed. "Yeah. Okay."

CHAPTER EIGHT

SUN

Sun wanted to call his family about as much as he wanted to staple his hands together, but needs must. He chose to call his grandfather, who would be the most levelheaded about the situation. Which, granted, wasn't saying much. His grandfather wasn't really in his corner on this.

He got situated on Wicky's bed, braced against the headboard, and made the call. Wicky lounged on the bed next to him. He'd claimed he would stay by as moral support, but Sun suspected he was also testing how well Mobius could interpret, as he had an earbud in his ear already.

Still, the moral support was appreciated.

For Mobius's and Wicky's sakes, Sun put the call on speaker so he didn't have to repeat anything. He saw no reason in trying to make parts of this private. Wicky would hear it all shortly one way or another. If not in this phone call, then when they went in person to his parents' house.

Grandfather sounded like he was about to come out of his skin, he was so vexed. "*Nong* Sun! Where have you been?"

"I found him."

Stunned silence. Sun let those words hang in the air for a moment before even trying to follow up.

"He's in Bangkok. He's come to me."

Someone hijacked the phone.

"Sun," his father said, "we have you on speaker now. Your mother and grandmother are also listening in. You found him? Is that what you said?"

"Yes." Sun eyed his own phone warily. Should he brace for an explosion or not?

His grandmother went with the practical question. "What's he like?"

“Um, well...” Sun darted a smile at the man lying patiently next to him. “He’s very good-looking.”

Wicky visibly preened.

“He’s an American, and a mage. Wicky is his name. He works for the American government and has come here with three of his teammates.” Sun didn’t know what else to say without going into all the wrong details. How did he capture the essence of this man? Saying *he’s patient, kind, and has a wicked sense of humor* just felt so flat in comparison to reality.

“An American agent?” Mom didn’t like the sound of that, the frown evident in her voice. “What does he do?”

“MAD—Magical Activity Division,” Wicky answered easily. Mobius used his speaker to interpret, the Thai overlaying Wicky’s own voice in a rather credible copy. “Think of us like magical troubleshooters for when shit hits the fan.”

“That sounds dangerous,” Mom fretted.

Sun lifted his eyes to the ceiling and asked the heavens why his parents were so overprotective. Seriously, why?

Dad didn’t sound happy. “Son, why don’t you come back home today. We need to talk about this properly.”

That conversation would just be a joy and pleasure. “I’ll come, and bring them with me so you can meet them. But I want you to understand that I’m not staying. Resign yourselves to that now. I’m leaving with him.”

“Sun!” Mom protested. “You can’t just go home with a strange man you’ve barely met!”

“A strange man that my magic chose to show me? A strange man who has been patient and kind about this very weird situation we’re in? A strange man who chose to cross an *ocean* to come and meet me? Yes, I very much can.” Okay, he could have been more patient than that, but dammit, Sun was quickly running out of patience. “All of you, stop this. You’re acting like the world will end if I leave home. I’m *supposed* to leave home.”

“Just...” Grandfather blew out a breath, sounding aggrieved. “Just come home. We’ll talk about this more then. Have Wicky come too.”

“Alright. We’ll fly back tomorrow. Bye.” Sun hung up, trying very hard not to feel like that impending conversation wasn’t a dark cloud hanging overhead. The effort rather quickly failed.

“I do see their point,” Wicky said. “If I didn’t know me, I’d be worried too. Did that make sense?”

Sun snorted and turned a little to face him better. “It did. I think the reason I’m so frustrated with them is because this is a mess of their making. That’s how the phrase goes, right?”

“Yup.”

Good, the American idioms sometimes went over his head, but that one had made better sense than most so it must have stuck. “They’re the ones who were insistent I do the ritual. It took effort and preparation on my part—more than most, since my magic doesn’t like doing Thai ritual magic. Still, I did it. But because it didn’t give them the results they hoped for, they want to ignore it now.”

“That’s wishy-washy of them,” Wicky agreed. “I understand their caution, but this is a bed they made, and they have to lie in it. Besides, I can tell you really want to go.”

“I am too protected in their house,” Sun explained with a long sigh. “Pampered. It makes me itch.”

“Gotcha. I can’t sit still either. Hence my job. Uh, this does bring up a question though. You said before you’re recently out of school? I can’t put an age to you by looking.”

“I’m twenty-one,” Sun answered forthrightly.

“Really? Wait, didn’t you say you did that ritual at eighteen?”

He no doubt wondered why Sun had sat on it for as long as he had. “Yes. I promised I would not act on anything until I graduated from college, which I did in February.”

“Ahhhh. Which happened recently. Okay, timeline now makes more sense. What’s your degree in?”

“Communications. I thought that best, all things considered.” Sun splayed his hands in a shrug. “It’s not like you can teach an air elementalist much in a formal school.”

“Heh.” Wicky’s snort was of wry agreement.

Since they were talking of ages, Sun himself had to ask, “How old are you?”

“Twenty-eight. We’re not too far apart in age.”

Far enough apart that Sun had to ask formalities, though. “In Thai culture, when someone is older, you call them *phi*. Either alone, or with their name. P’Wicky, for instance.”

Wicky’s head canted to the side as he absorbed this information. “Yeah? Ah, right, Asian cultures like the formalities. I don’t care either way. Call me as you like.”

He was so easygoing, this man. If it had been just a two-year difference or thereabouts, Sun might have dropped the formality. But with Wicky seven years older, the idea of leaving it out made him twitchy. “I’ll put *phi* in, then. Um, can I ask your friends’ ages?”

“Oh, sure. Bel’s younger, he’s twenty. Garen is thirty-one, and Nico is thirty-three.”

So, much older, then. Bel was the only one younger than him. Sun would adjust his speech accordingly. The real question was Mobius.

Looking at the smartphone in Wicky’s hand, Sun inquired, “*Nong* or *phi*?”

“*Nong*,” Mobius replied without hesitation.

“*Nong* is younger?” Wicky glanced between them. “What does that mean exactly?”

“Literally a word to mean younger. We combine it with other words like…” Sun had to think about this for a second to come up with an easy example. “*Chaai* is brother, but we never say it alone. It’s *phi-chaai*, older brother. *Nong-chaai*,

younger brother. Our words for families and people are very precise. Mobius is young?”

“I summoned him about nine years ago,” Wicky explained easily. “He’s my techno hermit crab, we just buy him a new casing whenever something new and shiny comes out. Keeps him up to date, you see. So yeah, he’s not very old. I’d love to blame some of his behaviors on teenage rebellion but he’s not old enough for it yet, so we must still be in the stage of childhood antics.”

Mobius giggled, the sound high and childish, and notably did not disagree.

There was a tap on the door. Wicky once again danced to the door and flung it open.

“Enter forthwith!” Wicky intoned in grand, rolling tones, like he was a king speaking to his subjects.

Bel entered, a curious look on his face. Sun had learned why he had blood-red eyes, but it was still taking some getting used to. Those eyes made him feel like Bel could see everything about him. It wasn’t an entirely comfortable feeling. Still, he seemed nice, and he’d certainly taken this very strange situation and rolled with it.

“How did the conversation go with family?”

Sun just groaned, head slumping forward.

“About as well as expected,” Wicky answered, sitting up and crossing his legs. “That is to say, nope.”

“Not an auspicious beginning.” Bel came forward to sit on the bed with them.

Sun had no idea what auspicious meant, but he took the general meaning from Bel’s expression and tone. “I do not expect this to become better once they meet him in person.”

Bel’s lips pursed in thought. “I know it’ll be hard going against their wishes. Sun, you sure about going with us no matter what?”

“Yes.” It would be hard—Sun wasn’t going to pretend otherwise—but staying in Thailand was not an option. It just

wasn't. He could not live someone else's life, and the vision had been perfectly clear that this was not the country he should stay in.

"Alright, then. I figured that would be your answer. If you're really coming with us, then we need to start the paperwork."

"Paperwork?" Wicky had the blankest expression, as if he couldn't fathom what Bel was referring to.

Bel looked him dead in the eye, deadpan in the extreme. "Visa, Wicky."

"Ohhh, that paperwork. In my defense, I'm not allowed to do paperwork anymore. Zia banned me for life."

"That's why Garen and I took over. We don't trust you with it either."

Wicky didn't look the slightest bit embarrassed by this. Sun eyed this reaction and had to wonder, why did he get the impression that despite being younger, Sun would have to be the responsible one in this relationship...?

"I can't very well start paperwork without information, but I know how to fast-track a visitation visa in Thailand at least. Sun, can you sit with me and get that started?"

"Of course." Sun pointed to the duffle bag next to the door. "I brought my passport and immunization records with me just in case."

"Good thinking," Bel said. "Let's grab Wicky's laptop and start in."

"Oooh," Wicky crooned, batting his eyes at Sun in a truly ridiculous manner. "You're a responsible person too."

Seeing where this was going, Sun pointed a stern finger at him. "I will not do your paperwork for you."

Bel patted Sun on the knee, smile twisting up on one side. "Voice of experience here. Don't say words you'll eat later."

Surely he wasn't doomed on this point already. Or, well, from the way Wicky was cackling, maybe he was at that.

CHAPTER NINE

WICKY

Like hell was Wicky going to come all this way and not see something of Thailand. What a waste that would be. Sun agreed to play tour guide and took them first to see the Grand Palace, as Bel was very curious about the architecture. No one else minded seeing it either, so they toured that first. The palace was stunning, the pitched roofs edged with gold, the spikes on top a danger to any balloon that wandered too close. The grounds were immaculately kept; even Wicky could appreciate the sight. Talk about intricate too—almost every statue in the place was crafted down to the most minute detail.

After the tour, Sun gave them the exact opposite experience and went straight into one of the more famous street markets in Bangkok: Chatuchak Weekend Market. It was sort of like a flea market on steroids. The shops were established, offering everything from paintings to pets to plants, with food stalls mixed between.

Place smelled amazing. It made Wicky's mouth water.

With Mobius interpreting in his ear, Wicky had no trouble understanding what was being said around him. The overlay of English and Thai was headache inducing at moments, though, no question.

Sun pulled them into an open-door restaurant and directed them in front of the counter, which displayed a very large selection of meats, vegetables, and other things Wicky didn't recognize. He looked around for a menu and basically only saw a small list with prices.

Eh?

Nico leaned around Garen to see better. "So this place offers...what? Exactly?"

"Stir-fried rice dishes," Sun explained. "And curry. You can tell them what you want and they'll make it."

Hold them horses. “Wait, you mean we can detail precisely what we want to eat and they make it custom?”

“That is not how things work in America?” Sun’s head canted in confusion.

Oh, this sweet summer child. “You are in for a very rude awakening, my friend. You can customize things some, but not a lot. Mostly you pick from the menu.”

Sun sat on this for a second, looking even more puzzled. “And people are okay with that?”

“More like we don’t know any other way of doing it.” Garen shook his head before regarding Nico. “How you doing over there, Tig?”

“Too many choices,” Nico whimpered. “Choices overload. Heeeelp.”

“How about I just order for you?”

“I love you and will have your babies.”

Garen snorted. “You’re so easy. Okay, I’m going to ask just three questions. Pork or beef?”

“Pork.”

“Spicy or not?”

“All the spice.”

“Lots of veggies or not a lot?”

“Lots.”

“Got it.” Garen gave a nod and pointed Nico to a table. “Go sit and hold a table for us.”

Nico was perfectly happy to bounce over to a table and sit. Wicky felt him on the whole overloaded thing, though. He didn’t even know where to start. Seriously, how did someone order when literally everything was a possibility?

Sun’s hand found the small of his back and he leaned in to murmur, “Should I order for you as well?”

Look at him, being so cute and thoughtful. Wicky gave him puppy eyes. “Please? Same thing as Nico.”

“Pork, spicy, lots of veggies? Thai spice is hotter in some ways, that okay?”

“Still okay. I’m fine with spice.”

“I’ll get you bubble tea too.” Sun nodded then stepped forward, greeting the lady who had been patiently waiting on them, and started rattling off an order.

Wicky left him to it before turning and joining Nico at the table.

Because everything was custom, Wicky expected it to take a while, but actually their orders came out pretty quick. They got it spread out over the table, and the first bite made Wicky do a little happy dance in his chair. Damn, that was good. Perfect level of spice, too.

“Tasty?” Sun asked.

“Really tasty,” Wicky assured him. But his eyes were on what Sun had ordered. “What is that?”

“Massamun curry. It’s one of my country’s best dishes. You have not had it?”

“Uh, no.” Wicky had probably seen it on a menu before, but that was the extent of his knowledge.

Sun put a bite on his spoon and offered it to Wicky.

Oooh, he was the type to share. Awesome. Wicky promptly took it, nodding as the flavors settled in. It was this perfect blend of sweet, sour, spicy, and salty. “I so need to order that next time.”

“It’s good.” Sun smiled, obviously pleased Wicky had liked it.

They ate with gusto, which rather killed conversation, until Wicky slowed down to savor the rest of his bubble tea. He regarded Sun, who looked so calm but had to be worried about things. Wicky tried to put himself in Sun’s shoes for a second.

“We need to talk logistics,” Wicky told him, still trying to think outside the box. “But for now, I guess it’s obvious that you’ll live with me.”

Sun nodded as if that was a given.

He really needed more details on that vision of Sun's. Maybe do that when they got back to the hotel, yeah? "I guess, while we're here, pick up things you want to take with you?"

Bel said, "I've got Asian friends stateside, and they'll be the first to tell you we don't have many Asian markets in our area. The few we do have are small, so if there's something you like, or spices you like to cook with, I'd grab them now and in bulk."

Sun took this advice with a slow nod. "Okay. But I'm limited on what I can carry."

"You're not," Garen corrected gently. "All of us only have a single bag. We can buy more luggage and you can use our second bags as your own."

"Really, you have four more suitcases to fill if you want." Wicky grinned at him.

That did seem to deflate a worry, and Sun relaxed into a smile that he gave all of them. "Thank you. You're really nice to think of this. I wasn't sure how to take all I want with me in two suitcases."

Wicky made a buzzing noise like a wrong answer in a game show. "No, don't even try. What you can't afford to take in a suitcase, we'll ship."

Ever practical, Garen tacked on, "Don't bring a lot of clothes. You're heading for much colder climates, my friend."

"Right." Sun brightened and perked up visibly. "Snow. I've always wondered what snow was like."

Should Wicky tell him that snow was only pretty the first day he saw it? And he'd likely curse it for eternity after that? Naw, he didn't feel that mean.

There was shopping to do, so they left the restaurant and got busy. The market was beyond crowded, which made sense; it was a Sunday evening, after all. Wicky found his attention drawn to all the bright, shiny things, and there were a lot of them. He'd worry about getting lost and separated from

everyone else, but they had a Bel. Bel could find anyone in any crowd.

Sun, though, was perhaps worried about losing him. His hand kept finding Wicky's arm, holding on to it as they walked. Or at least, that's what Wicky thought the first time it happened. By the third time, though, his suspicions arose. Sun was just holding on to him to keep from being separated... right?

They went into a spice shop of some sort, Sun buying three large bags of spices—after checking with Wicky to see if they sold them in America, and Wicky had never heard of them—then paid out. The girl at the register kept giving him and Sun interesting looks, like she found them cute or something, which made no sense to Wicky. Was she shipping them together or something?

Mobius buzzed in his pocket and Wicky fished him out to read the text: *She thinks you're a couple.*

“You think so too, huh?” Wicky muttered. Wicky would personally be one hundred percent okay with this because Sun was a really good catch, but he wasn't sure what kind of odds he was looking at.

For some reason, Sun looked a little irritated as they walked out.

Wicky poked him in the shoulder. “What?”

“That girl thought you were cute.” Sun gave a look over his shoulder to frown in her direction.

Was he...being possessive right now? Wicky didn't know how else to interpret the look on his face. He seriously looked agitated. Jealous. What the ever-loving hell? Seriously?

It wasn't wrong for Wicky to see that expression and get his hopes up. Was it?

Mobius piped up. “*Fujoshi.*”

“Eh?” Sun looked over at him, brows screwed up in a quizzical manner.

“Mobius and I thought she’s a *fujoshi*,” Wicky elaborated, still trying to come to terms with what he was seeing. “I think she’s shipping us together.”

“Ohhhh.” The jealousy sloughed off his face, replaced with a certain satisfaction, as if this pleased him. “I didn’t see her looking at me at all.”

“Oh, she did.” Dammit all to hell and back, he really did look pleased that someone thought they were together. Wicky’s hope ballooned in his chest, growing larger with every second.

“Wait.” Sun regarded him quizzically, brow quirked. “You know what a *fujoshi* is?”

“I blame Zia for that. She consumes BL series.”

“Zia?”

“One of my best friends. She’s also a team member.”

“Ahh.”

“That looks like pretty art,” Bel said, pointing ahead to a stand full of things that looked very eye-catching. No pastels here, no sir, just bold colors and a lot of gold embellishments.

Sun looked torn, like he wanted to go in but wasn’t sure about it.

Nudging him forward, Wicky encouraged, “Go on.”

“No, but,”—Sun gestured a little helplessly—“I don’t have a lot of money with me.”

“I do, come on.” Wicky urged him forward again. “This is seriously the only real time you’ll have to buy things. Don’t hesitate because you’re not sure about decorating my house, either, I don’t care. Decorate as you like. I want you comfortable there.”

That seemed to be the main reason. Sun’s worry dropped and he grinned at Wicky, closing in long enough to give him a quick hug before following Bel inside the store.

Nico caught Wicky’s shoulder before he could follow, leaning in to murmur near his ear, “Bro, you might want to

talk more with Sun later.”

“Why?” Wicky replied, eyes still following Sun’s back, tracking him. “Because he’s borderline acting like we’re dating?”

“You caught that, huh?”

“Kinda hard not to. I think he didn’t tell me everything he saw in that vision.”

“I’d bet the same. It’s not that he’s saying a lot, it’s the body language.”

Yeah. Yeah, that was what tipped Wicky off as well.

It really begged the question: What exactly had Sun seen to act like this?

CHAPTER TEN

SUN

Sun had left his bag in Wicky's hotel room, so he naturally went back with him that night to get it. He had vague ideas of getting his own room, something close to everyone else. Unless Wicky hinted that Sun could just stay with him. He'd be perfectly fine with that.

He paused in the entryway of the room, half-turned to speak with Wicky and offer, "I can—"

Two hands caught him around the shoulders, turning him around abruptly and backed him against the cool wall. Sun stumbled over his own breath, not sure what Wicky was playing at. Wicky kicked the room's door shut, all the while keeping his eyes locked on Sun's.

Um. What? What had Sun done to earn that look?

"Tell me," Wicky murmured. "What else did you see in that vision?"

Oh shit. Had he said or done something that hinted at the rest...? "I told you what happened in the vision."

"You left out things, I think." Wicky leaned in a little, dropping one hand to brace on the wall right next to Sun's hip, keeping him caged there. Wicky had been teasing, playful, a walking comedy act since Sun had met him—right now, he was faced with Agent Chadwick. Not that Wicky looked angry, necessarily, but he was very intent, eyes locked on Sun's. "What are you not telling me, Sun?"

Shiiiiia, he really had said or done something. Sun really didn't know if it was a good idea to say this, though. He didn't want to put pressure on Wicky—far from it.

When he didn't talk, Wicky pressed forward. "You've been acting most of the day like we're dating. We were lovers in that vision, weren't we?"

He really shouldn't underestimate this man's intelligence. Sun let his eyes close for a second, just breathing. Clearly the moment for omission had passed. Wicky had figured it out anyway.

Opening them again, he looked steadily back into those deep brown eyes. "I can't say for sure. It's just a very strong feeling I had."

Wicky didn't let up, didn't even twitch. "Why?"

"When I say 'vision' I don't mean that I saw something in a looking glass. I was *there*. I stood in those shoes, in that house I'd never been to before, and saw you. I felt what I was, who I was, in that moment with you. It was the feelings I had, the expression on your face, the tone of your voice, the combination of all that together."

He searched Wicky's face earnestly, not sure how he'd take it. This was a lot to accept at once. That was why Sun hadn't said anything to begin with. Besides, telling someone to do something rarely went over well.

Strangely, Wicky didn't look at all upset. He stared off blindly into space for a few seconds, then he gave a slow dip of his head, like he was in agreement with whatever he'd just concluded.

"P'Wicky?" Sun really wanted to know what he'd just decided.

"Yeah. Magic is such a matchmaker some days. This also makes sense of why *else* your family is uncertain about this. It's not just you immigrating to another country. It's having a relationship with a man they don't know."

Really couldn't underestimate this man's intelligence. "That's the main thing. Yeah. Um, I didn't want to tell you because I don't want to force you into anything—"

Wicky held up a hand, stalling him. For some reason, he was smiling, expression a touch wicked. "Sun. When we told you that Bel called for Nico, we didn't mean as just a familiar. He knew when doing the summoning spell that whoever came to him would be his husband in the future."

Due to unforeseen circumstances, Sun's brain has left the building. We apologize for any inconvenience at this time. Do try again later.

Wicky snickered, eyes crinkling up in amusement. "You should see your face. I am perfectly comfortable with the idea of magic putting us together. I'm not at all irritated or upset or whatever. I do understand why you didn't want to say anything, too. But Sun,"—Wicky closed in a little more, eyes fixated on Sun's mouth—"you gotta understand, the idea of having you as a lover is never something I'll be upset about. My only question is, are you okay with this?"

How could he not be? Wicky was precisely who Sun had hoped for, dreamed about. He'd been so incredibly kind and patient since their meeting, so charming. How could he even possibly be upset? "The vision showed me who my soulmate is. I'm far, far from upset about that. I just wish...I wish I'd gone to you. I feel like I wasted time arguing with my family."

Wicky closed in even more, head tilting as he leaned in for a kiss. "Then let's make up for it."

Kiss me was the desperate refrain going through Sun's head. His eyes were glued to Wicky's lips, and he wanted nothing more than to know how they felt, how they tasted. The very air was charged, every brush against his skin magnetic, pulling him closer to this man.

He lifted up a little on his toes even as Wicky leaned down, meeting him in the middle. Warm skin, hot breath, a hint of stubble—it was this gestalt of sensations that tipped the scales from anticipation to pleasure. Sun dove into the kiss with enthusiasm, hands finding purchase at Wicky's waist, fingers tangling in his shirt, wanting Wicky closer, to be pressed as firmly against him as he could manage.

Wicky fed off Sun's mouth like a man denied food for months only to be faced with a banquet. Sun felt consumed by him, deliciously so, knees growing a trifle weak under the onslaught. Sun tried to give as good as he got and felt like all he was doing was being swept along for the ride instead.

As much as he enjoyed kissing this man senseless, Sun could feel himself getting hard and wasn't sure how much he could ask for. How far was Wicky willing to take things tonight? Sun had spent years yearning for this man, while Wicky had only known about him for a few days. It didn't compare.

He pulled back from the kiss, panting for breath, feeling warm and flushed. Hoping that he and Wicky were on the same page. "P"—are you—I mean, do you want to—"

"Draw me a line." Wicky's voice was deeper, huskier than usual, eyes intent on Sun's. "You tell me how far you want to go tonight."

"Don't stop." Sun didn't know how else to answer. "I don't want you to stop."

A grin lit up Wicky's face. He pulled Mobius from his front pocket and said, "Privacy mode."

Mobius gave a little ditty that sounded remarkably like an assent, and then the screen went dark.

Wicky tossed his familiar onto the table nearby, framed Sun's face with his hands, and dove back in. Sun liked the kiss, he really did, he just wanted clothes *off*. Sun's hands moved to Wicky's pants, pulling at the button and zipper, then tugging the hem of the shirt up. Wicky broke the kiss long enough to pull his shirt over his head, throwing it aside, hands immediately reaching for Sun's shirt as well.

They helped each other slip off pants and boxers, the clothes making plopping sounds as they fell to the floor. With everything off, Sun got a good look and, damn, this man was fine. As expected of a federal agent, he was toned, the tan lines obvious. He was clearly a man who spent a good portion of his life outdoors. Sun got to have all of this to himself? He must have saved a country in a previous life.

Hot fingers wrapped around his cock, tugging upward in a sensual glide, and every other thought evaporated like it had never existed. Damn, that felt good. Sun's head tipped back,

eyes slipping shut so he could focus on the sensation. Wicky knew precisely how to touch.

He definitely needed to return the favor.

Wicky let out this little purring sound as Sun gave him some loving attention. The hunger and heat in the man's eyes were everything, a pure desire that spoke to Sun's own. Hearing the way his breathing changed, seeing the open pleasure on his face, was all so perfect. Sun could think of only one thing to make it better.

"Take me?" he offered, not sure how Wicky would respond.

There was no hesitation or doubt in the answer. "Yes."

Great answer. Sun grinned into the kiss before pushing Wicky back, walking him backward toward the bed. His lover went with a smile of his own, expression one of wicked anticipation. Wicky sprawled out in the middle of the bed without a trace of shyness. The man was good-looking and apparently knew it.

Sun climbed on top of him, legs straddling his waist, and found a likely spot to kiss under Wicky's jaw. Wicky's hands trailed slowly up his thighs, a warm caress, as Sun sucked kisses down his chest. Skin to skin like this felt good, and he was eager to learn every sensitive spot, everything that Wicky enjoyed. He used his ears and fingers to register reactions, trying to find out what was good and what wasn't. Wicky's breath stuttered as Sun used the flat of his tongue to lick down his happy trail.

"You and that mouth of yours are dangerous," Wicky gasped. "I like it."

Sun lifted his head to grin at him, mouth open to tease—only to cut himself off as Wicky got hands under his arms and abruptly flipped them. Sun's back hit the mattress with a soft bounce and honestly, being manhandled like that kind of did it for him. He liked it. A lot.

Wicky's mouth homed in on a nipple, teeth grazing the sensitive flesh, and Sun shuddered under him, nerves lighting

with pleasure. He really, really liked that. Wicky didn't linger there, sadly, moving his way down. His large, warm hand held Sun's cock steady as Wicky licked it from base to tip. Sun groaned, fingers twisting into the duvet, because that wet heat felt divine. Especially when Wicky took the tip into his mouth and sucked it in. Hot *damn* did that feel amazing.

Bless that man's mouth. Bless it.

"P'," Sun managed to get out, "—why are you teasing?"

Wicky lifted his mouth free with a pop. "Honey, I hate to tell you this, but I'm evil."

Oh, was that right? Sun chuckled a little, surprised he was even laughing while in bed with someone else. Sex before had just been about getting off, nothing more. He liked it. He liked being able to joke and laugh in bed.

"Okay, I'm braced for evil."

"Are you braced for sex, though? I didn't bring condoms or lube."

Sun had. He was an optimist that way. He rolled free, reaching for the pants he'd discarded on the floor, and pulled two foil packets from his pocket before handing them over.

"I do love a man who's prepared," Wicky purred.

Sun found himself on his back again without any warning, Wicky drawing up his leg for access. Sun snared Wicky's mouth in a kiss as two calloused fingers coated in lube slid into his hole. He kissed Wicky harder, needing an outlet as those fingers scissored inside him, hitting all the right spots. The push and pull opened him, the burn of the stretch made his head fall back. It felt good but he wanted, he needed something else.

Perhaps Wicky was getting just as desperate, as he slid his fingers free, shifting to position himself over Sun and in between his legs. Two seconds later, a hot, hard dick pushed into him. Sun's breath stuttered at the burn of penetration, his whole body alight under the sensation. It was delicious, precisely what he wanted, the heady mix of pleasure and pain the perfect cocktail.

Hands slid into his, fingers twining together as Wicky pulled back, thrust in and yes, that was perfect, that was exactly the right angle. Sun wrapped both legs around Wicky's waist, changing the angle a little more, wanting him even closer. Wicky's next thrust in was harder, hips slamming into Sun's and it was—

—*glorious*.

The slap of flesh against flesh was like a staccato beat, a base percussion mixed with their panting. Sun felt the sheet rub against his back, his fingers gripping Wicky's tight enough to cut off circulation, his only purchase. Wicky's eyes were locked on his, those beautiful brown eyes intense with hunger.

Sun needed, absolutely needed to come, but he loved this moment so much. He wanted to come but he didn't. He wanted to stay suspended in this moment, to be fucked like this all night.

Leaning in, Wicky got his mouth on the column of Sun's neck, roughly sucking a hickey into the skin. Sun tilted his head a little, giving him better access, as that felt good, too. He'd never had someone put a hickey on him before and he'd had no idea that it would feel like this, feel so pleasant. The change in angle made Wicky's dick graze all along his inner channel in the most blissful way too.

A hand left his, traveling down, and Sun immediately used his fingers to tangle in Wicky's thick blond hair. Fingers wrapped around his dick once more, stroking firmly, and that final push took Sun right over the edge. A moan stayed trapped in the back of his throat as he climaxed hard, his ass clamping down in reaction. He could feel Wicky groan against his throat before his hips slammed once more into Sun and stilled.

Sun lay boneless on the bed, panting for breath, honestly not sure if he was going to pass out or not. Darkness ate at his vision and he felt truly lightheaded. It didn't help that Wicky stayed draped over him for several seconds, also breathing hard.

“Sun.”

He had to gather up two brain cells, rub them together for a little friction, then give it a second before he could coordinate his mouth enough to manage a word. “Yeah?”

“Date me.”

Wasn't that a given...? Then again, maybe it wasn't. Sun had always assumed they would, but he liked that Wicky wanted his consent. That it really was their choice. He turned his head to kiss Wicky's forehead, his heart warm with growing affection. “*Daai si.*”

“That's a yes, right?”

“That's a yes.”

“Good.” Wicky kissed his shoulder, voice heavy with emotion as he said, “I promise you, I'll do everything in my power to make sure you never regret this moment.”

Man, Sun's magic really had known what it was doing. “I promise you the same.”

Sun meant every word.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WICKY

Wicky might have been a bit giddy last night. Just a touch. Look, no one could blame him for being giddy when he was suddenly handed a really cute boyfriend. Right? He and Sun had made love until the wee hours of the morning before collapsing into an exhausted heap of limbs under the covers.

As Wicky had drifted off to sleep, the thought occurred to him that he couldn't assume anything with Sun. Too much had hit them both at once. Sun seemed sure of himself, but Wicky wanted it perfectly clarified before he got his wires crossed. He'd had a habit of doing that with previous people he'd dated, and like hell would he repeat that with Sun. The uncertainty niggling at him would have kept him awake longer if he hadn't been exhausted. Sleep had sucked him under before he could even think to fight it.

The next thing Wicky knew, the smell of coffee was wafting in front of his nose. His nose wiggled, reporting findings of magic bean juice nearby, and it was enough motivation to get his eyes open. Mostly. Okay, one of them opened in a slit, but it was still progress.

Ooh, look, a cup of motivation right there in front of him. Lovely. Wicky accepted the offering and slurped at it. Even doctored the way he liked it. Yum, coffee in bed. Could he have this service from now on, please and thank you?

As he downed caffeine, his ears started to wake up too. A person had handed him the cup. All hail the person!

More sips. Synapses now firing, ears back in operation.

Sun and Mobius were chattering to each other in Thai. Sun was half-dressed at this point in shorts, clearly having showered already as his hair was wet, and he looked yummy. Oops, looked like Wicky had left a few hickies on him last night. Well, a shirt would cover most of them.

Alright, brain cells were engaged. Good, good, he was now fit for human society. Wicky threw the covers back, although he didn't get out of bed, just gestured Sun in closer.

“You're awake now?” Sun came to him, grinning a little. “I thought for a minute you were a breathing mannequin. You do not wake up well.”

“Never have.”

Wicky caught Sun's hand and pulled him in so that Sun sat on his lap. He enjoyed holding the man, but he also had questions this morning, so he wanted to start there.

“Sun. I'll give you three options. Which do you want to be: *a.* boyfriend, *b.* lover, *c.* husband?”

Sun blinked at him, expression taken aback for a second. Then he snorted a laugh. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Is it because I gave you coffee in bed?”

“That was a nice perk, but no. You said we could date last night but I want more than just dating. You can only choose *a.*, *b.* or *c.*”

Sun's dark eyes twinkled madly with unvoiced laughter. “Is life with you always going to be like this?”

Wicky saw no reason to lie to him. “What, full of random questions that have nothing to do with logic? Probably.”

“Then I choose *a.* For now.”

“I'm perfectly okay with being boyfriends.” A little knot of uncertainty riding in Wicky's chest relaxed at this. He really preferred knowing where he stood in a relationship. Misunderstandings were a *no* in his book.

There came a loud knock on the door. “You guys up?”

Trust Nico to ruin a moment. Then again, considering how many times Wicky had interrupted them, he kind of had it coming. “We're up!”

“Good, come down for breakfast. We only have two hours before our flight leaves.”

Erk, was it that late already? Damn, no wonder Sun had fed Wicky coffee.

Wicky got up, showered, then went down and had breakfast in the hotel’s dining room before coming back up and repacking his bag. He and Sun met everyone in the lobby before checking out. They had to catch two taxis to get them to the airport, but it was an easy thing to do. Taxis of all types swarmed Bangkok’s streets. Also made it easier to haul Sun’s extra luggage and all his goodies from yesterday.

They got to the terminal with thirty minutes to spare. Wicky held hands with Sun while waiting, perfectly content to sit there and bask in the presence of his boyfriend while Sun called his family to update them on their arrival time.

Nico sat at his other side, poking him in the shoulder with a finger. “Soooo, couldn’t help but notice that happened.”

Not above bragging, Wicky beamed. “I asked him. He chose boyfriend.”

Bel leaned around Nico to see his face. “What were the choices aside from boyfriend?”

“Boyfriend, lover, or husband.”

Those ruby red eyes stared at him for a long second. “Wicky. Do you have any other speeds aside from dead asleep or full steam ahead?”

“Uh...no?”

“No wonder you and Nico get along so well.” Bel just shook his head, smile fondly exasperated. “Well, I’m glad you two are communicating properly. Now, how do you want us to handle arriving there? Do you want to go in with Sun alone to meet the family? It’s not really our business, after all.”

Eh, yeah, it might be awkward for them to have the whole argument going on, huh? “How about you let us go in alone to start with. Like get a hotel or something nearby. If things go well, you can come in and meet us for dinner.”

“That sounds like the best plan,” Garen agreed. He leaned around Bel to continue, “We don’t want to overwhelm his family or muddy the waters any.”

Yeah, that would be no bueno.

They started calling for boarding, so Sun used that as an excuse to get off the phone, and they all shuffled on. Wicky relayed the plan to him as they walked down the ramp, and Sun looked relieved at the offer. This was bound to be awkward and tense, no matter how they played it, so of course he didn’t prefer to have witnesses. Who would?

The second they got settled in their seats, Wicky started pestering him. “Crash course on how to greet family, go!”

Sun startled. “Uhh...okay, let’s start with greetings.”

“Good a place as any.”

Sun started him on the prayer-like gesture, which he called a *wai*, and the bow that went with it. Apparently, there were levels of politeness/formality depending on how high you placed the *wai*, which was interesting. (Wicky had a feeling he’d screw that up, but hopefully people would give him slack because he was obviously not Thai.) Then Sun drilled into Wicky’s brain and mouth how to say *sawadeekrab* properly. That took a minute for him to wrap his mouth around.

By the time they landed, Wicky at least knew how to say hello, thank you, and sorry without Mobius’s help. He’d take the win.

Sun’s family home wasn’t far from the airport, so when they landed, it wouldn’t be much of a jaunt over there. They separated from the throuple upon landing, Garen charitably taking Wicky’s and Sun’s bags so they didn’t have to keep track of them, then the three of them headed for a nearby hotel. Sun insisted on stopping by a liquor store before going to his family home. Personally, Wicky felt like the upcoming conversation would go better with alcohol, but apparently this was a cultural thing too. You brought gifts when meeting the parents, and buying a light-colored liquor—like a white wine

—was a symbolic way of saying ‘hey, I’m here for your child, I’mma marry him, okay?’

Gotta love culture.

Wicky bought three bottles, because the upcoming conversation called for at least that much, and then sent a prayer winging upward. Please let this go well. Pretty please.

Was it bad that he wanted Zia for backup right now? The nerves were getting the better of him.

The taxi took them straight to the house. Wicky got out and looked around with interest. The place was well-maintained. Clearly a gardener lived here—you could barely see the house for all the trees, flowers, and shrubs. It kind of looked like a cottage out of a fairytale, to be honest, and the architecture of the house was distinctly western. None of those pitched, angled roofs here, no sir.

Sun led him through the front door, which had a slender bench to one side and a cubby of shoes on the other. Wicky took that as a silent hint and took off his shoes when Sun did before following him inside.

Definitely a family home. It had a very lived-in feel, with plenty of pictures on the walls. The floors were tile, looking a little worn in places, the walls a white-washed paneling. It felt like the family had been in this house fifty years at least.

Mobius’s interpretation spell kicked on in Wicky’s ear as Sun called out a greeting.

“We’re here!”

People appeared from everywhere: two elderly people with greying hair, a middle-aged man and woman, and one rather handsome man who looked like Sun’s elder brother. They all regarded Wicky with curiosity and Sun with a mixture of apprehension and exasperation. Yeah, so no one was really happy about how the youngest child had behaved in the past forty-eight hours. Go figure.

Trying to set them off on the right foot, Wicky lifted his hands in a *wai*—bit tricky with the liquor bag still in his hand—and gave them a smile. “*Sawadeekrab.*”

From Sun's smile and nod, he had done that right. Yaaaay.

Wicky wished he could relax, but honestly, the hard part started now.

Sun introduced them one by one to Wicky. "My grandfather, grandmother, mother, father, and this is my older brother, Kim."

He'd been told to address everyone as Grandfather, Mom, et cetera, so he wasn't surprised that he wasn't given names right then.

"This is Chadwick Santora, Wicky." Like Sun was throwing down a gauntlet, he tacked on, "My boyfriend."

Oh boy, here we go. He just had to say that, didn't he? "Honey, before we start a fight, how about we crack open the wine? This whole conversation would go better with alcohol."

Mom looked him over carefully, brows beetled in confusion. "I'm sorry, are you...speaking right now?"

It probably did sound weird with the overlay. Mobius was using the speaker to interpret Wicky's words, so the Thai was coming a beat after Wicky spoke. He lifted the phone free of his pocket and showed it to her. "This is my familiar, Mobius. He is interpreting for me. I only know four Thai words. Sorry, I know it sounds weird."

She looked at the smartphone, confusion growing. "A phone can be a familiar?"

"Mine is, at least."

Mobius gave a shimmer of light, then spoke directly to her. "*Sawadeekrub, Mae. Pom Mobius.*"

"Oh!" She gave him a nod of her head in return, still confused. "*Sawadeeka, Mobius.*"

"Treat him like a person," Sun advised them all. "Mobius has the same intelligence and feelings as a person."

Mobius gave another happy shimmer of light across his screen. "Sun, *pom raku mung.*"

Wicky had no idea what he'd just said, but it made Sun grin at him. "Same. Here, P'Wicky brought us liquor. Let's sit and drink while we talk."

Lots of reluctant faces here, but they were willing to at least move the conversation away from the front door. Sun took the bottles away from him long enough to crack them open and pour some glasses. Wicky kept a sharp eye on the family and saw the new reluctance when they realized it was white wine, the gesture not lost on them.

Kim, at least, seemed to be taking this more in stride. He led Wicky to the couch and encouraged him to sit while Sun poured glasses.

"P'Wicky, I'm not as against this as the rest of the family. I just have a few questions to ask. Why did you come?"

Perfectly reasonable question. Wicky was happy to answer it because he felt like he could make some headway here. "I could tell someone was seeking me. I ignored it at first because I had missions back to back. I didn't have time to figure it out, but eventually it gnawed at me. I had to figure out who it was, why they were so persistently looking for me. I enlisted a friend's help to trace the red thread back."

Kim's head canted to the side, surprise drawing his eyebrows up. "You can see it? I'm surprised, I thought western magic worked different."

"It does, and yes, I can. Red string is the sign of fate, right? I know from Bel's experience what it means when magic draws people together. I couldn't ignore Sun's attempts to find me. If he couldn't come to me, I'd go to him. That was my thought process as I followed his seeking trail west."

The double echo of his own voice and Mobius interpreting for him was still weird, but Kim seemed to follow fine without getting distracted by the English.

"You are an unusual man. Most would be afraid, I would think."

Should Wicky explain to him that he found things like magically booby-trapped caves great fun? Yeah, probably not.

That might scare the fam. He just smiled and shrugged instead, choosing silence as the better part of valor in this case. They could figure out just how crazy he was later, when he had Sun safely stateside with him.

Mom came over to sit down, plopping onto the couch catty-corner to him, and gave him that look that mothers around the world had perfected. The look that said she was mad and not going to budge. “*Nong* Wicky, I do not think my son should go with you. He should not leave his family and go to a foreign country with a man he does not know.”

Well, and what could Wicky possibly say to that?

CHAPTER TWELVE

SUN

Sun was more than irritated with his family just then. He could see from his mother's face that she had every intention of resuming the argument she'd been using against him for four years, but this time campaigning against Wicky.

He wasn't about to let this happen.

Since Wicky was right there in the living room with him, he decided to use that to his advantage. For once, he could give them a visual. Sun gathered power, spoke the simple seeking spell, and threw his hand out.

A thin, glowing red line shot out from his pinky finger, heading straight for Wicky's hand and tying there. Wicky startled visibly, the drink in his hand almost sloshing, eyes going down to his own finger first before shooting back up to Sun's face in question.

Glaring at his mother, Sun bit off, "Argue *that*."

She stared at the glowing red line and her face fell. Still not a happy woman, but she had no ready argument against something so obvious.

For that matter, every person in the family wore that expression, torn between acknowledging the obvious and battling their own instincts. What they wanted was to keep him safely home.

Sun was an air elemental. He was not meant for a life of comfort and ease. He couldn't stand the idea of being safely insulated, which was why he was so eager to go with Wicky. Aside from knowing they were meant to be together, Wicky also promised action.

Sun knew better than to say any of that in this moment though. Those were precisely the wrong words to use to get his family to agree. No, what he had to emphasize was this: the string of fate that bound him to this man.

“Sun.” Grandfather waved a hand. “Dismiss it. You’ve made your point.”

Had he? Sun eyed his parents some more, not trusting that, but after a moment he did release the spell.

With a long sigh, Grandmother sipped at her wine, then set it down on the side table. “I do not like this. I speak for all of us when I say this. Still, we have always honored the tradition. If Sun’s vision said he must go, if the red string ties him to this man, we shouldn’t argue.”

Finally! Sun could kiss his grandmother for saying that. “So you’ll stop arguing with me about this?”

“I don’t see how it will do any good. Even if we try to forbid you from going, you’ll go.” She gave a sad smile. “And you should.”

Relief poured through him, so strong he almost felt like he breathed it in. Sun went to her and bent to give her a hug, the angle awkward but the motion sincere. “Thank you.”

She gave him a pat on the shoulder. “There’s no use arguing. I just want to ask some questions, understand what you’re walking into. *Nong Wicky*, where do you live? With your family?”

“Ah, no.” Wicky gave Mobius a nod, like it was a prearranged signal, before moving off the couch and coming to her, kneeling nearby and showing her the phone. “This is my house. I live a street over from the rest of my team. I bought the house last year.”

“Oh! It’s charming.”

Sun was curious too and peeked over his boyfriend’s shoulder for his own look. It was a cute house: white with green trim and a bright yellow door, the trees in the front yard old and established.

“It’s a very old house,” Wicky said, a smile on his face. “A hundred years, in fact. I live in a town called Plymouth in Michigan. It’s small—I think the population is only five thousand people—and one of the safest towns to live in. Beautiful too. It’s very charming. Also near the airport.

Grandmother, you're welcome to come visit and see for yourself. For that matter, will it make you feel better if I promise to bring Sun home at least once a year so you can see him?"

She gave Wicky a pat on the cheek, smile warm. "You have a good heart. Yes, this will make me happy."

"Then we'll do it. I don't know if we can schedule the same days every year—my team's kind of a magical disaster first responder thingy—but once a year, I promise. Oh, and don't worry about Sun being in danger." Wicky turned to speak to everyone, smile reassuring. "Bel—he's my teammate—is a rare type of mage. Very specialized. He literally has an entire team to protect him. The higher-ups don't take risks with Bel. If there is something dangerous going on, they give him soldiers and other mages as backup. Sun will automatically have the same protections because of that."

"So he'll be active in the field but never at real risk?" Dad put a hand over his heart, breathing out. His relief was apparent. "That does make me feel better."

Why did Sun get the feeling that, while not a whopper of a lie, Wicky had embellished the truth a little...? Not questioning it. Nope. Not saying one word.

"You are so sure they will accept Sun into your team?" Mom did not look as convinced about this.

"Oh, positive," Wicky answered easily, almost blithely, as if this was a forgone thing. "I emailed my supervisor about Sun after we met, told him what was going on and that I'd be bringing Sun home with me. I think my super cried tears of joy. It's really hard finding someone with Sun's skill set and magic who's willing to join MAD. He said that if Sun's willing, he can go right to agent training the second we get home."

Wicky had told him about this on the plane, and Sun hadn't even needed to think about it. Of course he'd join. As soon as they had a second to respond, Sun would assure Wicky's supervisor that he was willing and start the paperwork for that training.

“I never thought my child would be an American agent,” Mom muttered, expression a little perturbed.

Granted, Sun hadn't seen this coming either. When he'd first received the vision, he'd tried to prepare for any eventuality, but he hadn't thought of this one. Not that he was complaining—he very much wasn't.

Wicky looked at them and gave a hopeful smile. “Three of my teammates are here. Want to meet them?”

Grandmother didn't hesitate. “Yes.”

“Then I'll call them in.”

Sun was reasonably sure that meeting the other three teammates would put some more fears to rest. At the very least, it would allow his family to get a better grasp of how his future would go. Who he'd be with.

It helped that Bel, Nico, and Garen were all well-spoken, charming men. They'd need that charm shortly.



Garen, Nico, and Bel came over to meet the family, then settled in for an easy conversation. Sun belatedly realized just how smart Bel was. He claimed he didn't know much about Thai magic, yet within fifteen minutes of meeting Sun's grandfather, he was able to sit there and have an in-depth conversation about magical theory.

Sun could only dream about having that kind of intelligence.

Wanting to further put his family at ease, he suggested to his new teammates that they do a bit of sparring, to showcase how capable they were. Everyone happily agreed and they headed outside to the warded cement pad the family used as a training ground.

As soon as everyone took their places, Wicky immediately began casting. Sun felt his jaw drop, stunned.

He hadn't expected...this.

Godzilla was in his training yard.

He craned his neck back, looking up and up at the fifty-foot magical monster standing above him. The spell was amazingly well done. Wicky had crafted this? He acted like such a prankster most of the time, so it was hard to reconcile this kind of magical craftsmanship with him, but damn, he must be astonishingly good if he could create something like this.

Behind all the jokes lay a very brilliant mind. Sun had to remember that.

While Sun had proposed this in order to show off his new team to his family, he was aware that this was also the first time his possibly-new-teammates had seen him in action. Bel, Garen, Nico, and Wicky would be watching him just as carefully. With that in mind, he decided to put on a bit of a show.

Lifting one hand, he called the wind to him, shaping it on the fly into sharp scythes that cut through the air. They sliced through Godzilla's skin, magical sparks flying instead of blood. The monster roared in pain, head thrown back—seriously, just what kind of spellwork had Wicky done?—before trying to stomp forward.

'Trying to' because Wicky hit it with a very strong fire tornado that threw it back two feet.

Sun pursed his lips in a silent whistle. Damn. He claimed he wasn't an elemental, but that kind of firepower was right in the realm of one. Well, now Sun had to up his game.

He hit Godzilla again, this time with wind shaped more like spears, sharp in impact and able to go straight through. The monster yelled again, then tried to swipe at the four of them with his tail.

To his surprise, Garen darted toward the tail with arms up in a guard position. Was he insane?! No one could stop—how?! Sun stared as the tail's impact did drive Garen back a good three feet, his boots sliding against the cement floor, but it slowed enough that it didn't hit Bel, who stood behind him. Nico was a blur of action with his light saber, coming in to lop the tail off completely before the monster could retreat.

Shiia, those two made a great combo. No wonder they were both a demon mage's familiars.

A hand he was coming to know well landed on his shoulder. Wicky leaned in and asked quickly, "Can you cage Godzilla in place?"

"I can, for a few seconds." About fifteen would be Sun's guess.

"Do it."

This might be overkill, but considering it was Godzilla, maybe not? Sun had been taught how to make wind barricades, but he'd never had cause to actually use one outside of a training hall. Well, here went nothing.

Sun formed a whirling dervish at Godzilla's feet, not letting the monster's movements distract him. The wind whipped around the monster in a huge circle, rising to its chest area and holding there. Sun could actually lift it all the way above Godzilla's head, but then no one would be able to attack. Everything would ricochet off if they tried.

Bel came to stand closer to his elbow. "Damn. Just damn. Sun, glad you're coming over to our side."

He shot the man a quick smile. It was nice to be appreciated.

Nico cackled like a madman even as he dropped to a knee, pulling a gun out, while Wicky readied a spell—a fireball the size of his palm. Both of them let loose at practically the same time, firing directly into Godzilla's open mouth. That seemed to be the weak point. Godzilla let out a strangled cry of pain before stumbling back, but the wind barrier Sun kept up around him threw him forward again. That impact seemed to be enough to take him out completely, as he vanished abruptly in sparks that flew to the sky.

Even if it was a magical construct, its fighting prowess had been on par with the mythical monster. A team of five could take that down in ten minutes?

Nico came in closer and threw an arm around Sun's shoulders. "You. I like you. You're dangerous."

He turned a grin up at the man. “I can say the same. I will like fighting alongside you very much.”

“Aww, you say nice things. I’m definitely keeping you.”

Sun had the feeling that once he got to know Nico a little better, the two of them would be really good friends.

An elbow nudged him. Wicky jerked his chin to indicate the family that had all been watching this play out. Many a dropped jaw over there. Mom looked ready to faint, she was so pale.

“I think we might have given them too good of a show,” Wicky observed.

Yeah...it really did look that way. Oops?

“Well, regardless, they now know how combat ready we are.” Garen shrugged this off, holstering his weapon. “And I am super glad to know just how powerful you are, Sun. You’re a very welcome addition to the team. Looking forward to working with you.”

He accepted the handshake Garen offered, both content and filled with anticipation. “Same here. Just what did you do to block that tail, though?”

“Oh, that? I’m part gargoyle.”

Come again?

Sun listened as Garen explained, then watched as he demonstrated. It seemed his new friends had a lot of surprises. Sun’s family came out to join them and asked their own questions. Then, with the heat beating down on them, they chose to retreat inside and find something to drink before picking the conversation back up.

The rest of the day went well—surprisingly so. The conversation stretched over into dinner, then into dessert afterward. Sun left Nico to tell the story of how he’d been summoned as a familiar by Bel, taking the distraction so he could retreat to his room and start packing. He wanted to leave before his family could rethink the whole idea and start the argument up again.

Kim followed him into the room, leaning up against the doorjamb while watching him pull things out of drawers.

“You really are dating him?”

“Yes, P’, I really am,” Sun answered patiently. He’d gotten this question at least three times from different people over the course of the afternoon.

Kim let out a thoughtful hum. “I know you said that it felt like you two were a couple in the vision, so you were expecting it, but I’m surprised he just jumped in feet-first like that.”

“Honestly, I am too, a little. But I think P’Wicky is the type to go with the flow. I didn’t even ask him to date, he asked me.”

“Huh. And you’re really fine with packing up and going with him?”

Sun gave his brother a long, speaking look.

“Okay, fine, that was a stupid question. You’ve been arguing to go for three years, after all.” Kim’s lips lifted into a sad smile. “I’ll just miss seeing you on a regular basis.”

“I know. I’ll miss you too, but at the same time, I’m ready to go. I’ve waited years for this, P’Kim.” Sun didn’t know what else to say. It had been like this itch under his skin that he couldn’t scratch, the need to go. To be where he was supposed to be. Really, Sun felt like he’d been super patient waiting this long. If his family hadn’t objected so much, he would have left the same month he’d gotten the vision.

Kim looked around the room. “How much will you take with you?”

“Not everything. Especially not the clothes. They told me the climate is very different in America and that I’ll need to buy all different clothes there.”

“Ah. Well, I’ll go grab some suitcases.”

“Thanks, P’.” Sun let him go, focusing back on his room. There was a lot here, and some of it was childhood memorabilia that he had no interest in taking into his adult life.

He'd take things that would be hard to replace, like the books and his DVD boxsets. Those would be nearly impossible to find in America.

Actually, now that he was looking at everything in his room, he had to wonder, would six suitcases be enough? Sun had the feeling he might end up shipping things after all.

Well, the logistics were something he could figure out. It wouldn't hamper him much. All he could really focus on was that he finally, finally got to leave.

Nothing could make him happier.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WICKY

There was a sexy man cooking in his kitchen. Damn, how had Wicky gotten so lucky?

Sun had some kind of K-pop going on his phone—he claimed he liked Korean music better than Thai music—and he was humming along as he chopped up vegetables. For a moment, Wicky just stood in the doorway of the kitchen, watching his boyfriend cook, and smiled. Then he took a picture for bragging purposes. Look, Sun in an apron was too adorable to pass up. With his sleeves rolled up, house shoes on, and that apron almost wrapping around his waist twice, he did things to Wicky. No lie.

The sound of the shutter going off drew Sun's head up and he shook his head in exasperation. "You took another picture of me?"

"You're very photogenic."

"Uh-huh."

Sun didn't believe him. Look how smart he was.

They'd been home three weeks now. Which meant, aside from indulging in having a live-in boyfriend, they'd been focused on real-life stuff. Wicky had helped rearrange furniture to make room for Sun's things, gotten the ball rolling on training courses, citizenship papers, et cetera. They'd fortunately had no missions since coming back, so Wicky hadn't needed to leave Sun alone here. He didn't think it would be fair to leave Sun home alone barely two weeks into living in a new country. Sun had dived right in training immediately, but he still had four weeks to go. Tesfay really had almost cried tears of joy when he saw his new minion in action.

Having Sun here was more of a gift than anything. Wicky hadn't realized just how quiet the house had been until he put another person in his space. Not that Sun was noisy—Wicky

was the chatterbox between them—but he had a way of filling any room he occupied. Just the quiet noises he made while cooking or studying, it all felt immensely satisfying to Wicky. Really, the decision to go find his distant stalker had proved to be the best decision Wicky had ever made in his life. If he'd known Sun was on the other end of that seeking spell, he wouldn't have waited a whole month to track him down, either.

Ah, hindsight.

Sun seemed to be settling in just fine but Wicky didn't want to assume that. He came in for a back hug, resting his chin on Sun's shoulder, although he had to slouch a bit to manage it. Sun was a good four inches shorter. "How you doing, hon?"

Sun's hand came up to hold Wicky's arm to him. "I'm good. I do get overwhelmed sometimes. It'll take a while to adjust to this whole new culture I'm living in, but I expected that."

Wicky had expected that too, but that didn't mean it made anything easier. "I want you to tell me if you're struggling."

"I will, I promise, but I'm not right now." Sun put the knife down before turning in Wicky's embrace, wrapping both arms around his waist and looking up at him with a smile. "There's nothing I can complain about. Your house is comfortable, the town is a good one, and everyone on your team has been very welcoming. They are nice. I don't know why you're afraid of Zia."

Wicky snorted. "That's because she adores you. She thinks you're the cutest thing ever. Just wait until you piss her off."

His boyfriend gave him a saccharine smile. "I don't do things like dive into magically booby-trapped caves for fun."

"I really shouldn't have told you about that." Wicky kicked his past self.

"I'm glad you did. I am now braced for the future." Sun got that light in his eye, one of affection but also a warning. "You can do crazy things for fun, I won't stop you. But if you get hurt, you will never hear the end of it."

You know, pissing off Sun might be worse than pissing of Zia. The realization dawned and left Wicky with the distinct impression that he might need to consider the pros and cons before doing future shenanigans. Not that he'd stop—he'd just have to make sure it was worth it.

Sun smacked a kiss against his mouth before turning back to the cutting board. "Don't distract me, otherwise dinner will never get done."

"Yeah, okay. What is for dinner?"

"Papaya salad, rice, and Tom Yum soup."

"Ooooh."

Wicky had eaten those things before. They were mucho yummy. He had really lucked out with Sun; his boyfriend was a very good cook. Wicky's version of cooking most days was a food delivery app.

He set the table, as that was a safe way to help. The food was done quickly, so they sat and ate, and it was delicious as always. Since Sun had cooked, Wicky did dishes. It was only fair, after all, and while he disliked doing dishes very much, it was worth it when someone else cooked.

Despite what people thought, he could adult too. Sometimes.

It was awfully quiet in the house now, so he wasn't sure where Sun had gotten off to. Maybe he'd be up for watching something? Wicky was adamant about learning Thai, and Sun had told him that watching at least an hour of a Thai show a day would help develop his listening skills, so they tried to watch something together every day. They were mid-season on *KinnPorsche* and Wicky was really enjoying it.

He came through the living room, looking for his boyfriend, and caught a hint of Sun on the couch. Just the top of his shoulder. Was he tired? He must be if he was lying down... Oh. My. God. How cute was this?

Sun was indeed lying down, but he apparently had gotten cold. He'd snagged Wicky's hoodie from somewhere, put it

on, and was now snuggled in it. The hoodie was a good two sizes too large for him, which only upped the cuteness factor.

Wicky put a hand over his heart and reeled. The cuteness! It was blinding! How could anyone be this adorable?

Okay, wait, he couldn't have a heart attack from this yet—he had to get a picture first. Wicky whipped out Mobius and started taking twenty thousand pictures. He did silence the shutter sound first though, as he absolutely wasn't waking Sun up if he was that tired. Mobius helped by auto adjusting the light and focus to get the best picture ever because, frankly, his familiar adored Sun just as much as he did.

Wicky was torn about whether to get Sun to do this more often. On the one hand, adorable boyfriend. On the other, he might die from happiness overload. Hmm, decisions, decisions.

The sound of *Cello Wars Lightsaber Duel* started to blare from Mobius's speakers. Wicky silently swore and sprinted into the back room to avoid waking Sun. Nico was calling. Of course Nico was calling; he was the only one with this kind of atrocious timing.

Wicky hissed in greeting, "You nearly woke up Sun."

"Why's he sleeping at six? That's too early."

"He's still kind of adjusting to the new time zone, I think. Whatcha want?"

"Bel's hosting a game night on Friday, having some friends over, that kinda thing. Why don't you two come? It's a great way to introduce Sun to more people."

Wicky didn't even have to think about that. "Oh, sure. We need to bring anything?"

"Whatever snacks you want to contribute and your sassy self."

"I can totally manage both of those things. Hey, Nico, has Bel ever stolen a hoodie from you and taken a nap in it?"

"He has, and the cuteness about ended me. Why?"

“Sun’s napping in one of mine. I took a hundred pictures before you called. I really want to use one of them as a lock screen on my phone.”

“It’s your funeral. I tried that and Bel about combusted. He seemed to find it embarrassing or something.”

Nico and Wicky both had no shame factor. Their genes of shame were shriveled up things that could only be found with a microscope. Wicky personally would have no issue having other people see his sleeping face, but he was aware that Sun and Bel didn’t agree with that opinion.

“You’re still going to do it, aren’t you.”

Not a question, but Wicky answered regardless. “My fragile willpower can’t resist. Besides, I think he likes me enough to not kill me for this.”

“You just like it when he chases you around.”

“Why do you have to say the obvious like that? Anyway, mark us down as coming. I’ve got to go take another hundred or so pictures before he wakes up.”

“Uh-huh. You do that. If he asks later, I know nothing about this.”

Wicky just snickered and hung up. There was nothing wrong with teasing his boyfriend. Everyone needed a hobby, right? And it got the blood pumping when Sun chased him around.

Like the Grinch, he tiptoed back into the living room, camera poised and ready, mentally cackling as he went.

EPILOGUE

SUN

The day of their first case arrived a lot faster than Sun had anticipated. He'd been out of training a whole two days when they got the call. He'd been in the shower, actually, when Wicky told him he'd gotten a call from Garen and they had to go. Now. Apparently some part of the world was on fire.

Sun had twenty minutes to finish showering, throw things into a suitcase, and get out the door, which left him feeling scrambled. Was he forgetting anything? Badge, wallet, passport, luggage, Kindle—no, that was everything. He kept feeling like he'd forgotten something, though. Maybe forgotten to do something? No matter how Sun racked his brain, he couldn't begin to think of what.

From the front door, Wicky called, "Sun, come on!"

Oops, it looked like everyone else was ready to go. Sun hurried through the living room, mentally writing off whatever it was he'd forgotten. It was too late now.

Wicky stood in the open doorway, sunlight pouring in around him, giving him something of a glow. The sunlight turned his skin bronze and highlighted his dirty blond hair, making him even more handsome than usual. Wicky was definitely the sun's child. He had a smile on his face, one of glee, his hand beckoning to Sun.

"Come on, let's go."

Sun stumbled to a halt with his hand just in Wicky's, taking in the sight of his lover, the vision clashing with reality. It was here. The moment he'd seen of the future, it was *here*, now. This very instant. Sun felt time crawl to a stop, breath shuddering in his mouth as he looked at Wicky, the moment crystallizing anew in his mind.

"Sun?" Wicky's head canted in question. "You've got a very weird expression on your face."

He had to swallow, hard, and try twice before he could get his mouth in motion. “It just happened.”

“What just happened?” Wicky’s expression indicated that he wasn’t sure whether to be worried or not.

“The vision. The moment in the vision just happened.”

Wicky blinked then looked around himself as if taking stock of what he’d done, where he stood, and the realization dawned over his face. “Holy shit. It’s exactly how you described. Well. Uh. Congratulations, you’re now officially in the right place at the right time?”

Sun had to laugh, even if it sounded a bit strangled, because, yeah. That was true. Being in that moment had been surreal, though, and he found it a bit hard to shake off.

A horn honked outside and Nico called, “What’s the hold-up in there?”

Sun gave himself a shake and put one foot in front of the other. “We need to go. We can talk about this later.”

Wicky took better hold of his hand, lips still curled up in a warm way. “You can sit and digest while we’re flying.”

“Yeah.” Sun wholeheartedly approved of this plan because several hours of sitting on a plane was precisely what the doctor ordered right now.

Still, even as his head whirled at what had just happened, the feel of Wicky’s hand at his back grounded him, and the sight of a black truck full of friends awaited him. Not many people knew with certainty if they were in the right place at the right time, doing precisely what they should be doing with who they should be doing it with. In this moment, Sun did.

He wouldn’t trade that feeling for anything in the world.

Thank you for reading *A Mage's Guide to Wicky!* All I'll say is Sun has no idea what he's getting into, but the next case is going to be a doozy.

Want poly, magic bonds, accidental husbands, and sass? Check out:

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Thank you for all of your support. See you in the next book!



AJ's mind is the sort that refuses to let her write one project at a time. Or even just one book a year. She normally writes fantasy under a different pen name, but her aforementioned mind couldn't help but want to write in the LGBTQIA+ genre. Fortunately, her editor is completely on board with this plan.

In her spare time, AJ loves to devour books, eat way too much chocolate, and take regular trips. She's only been outside of the United States once, to Japan, and loved the experience so much that she firmly intends to see more of the world as soon as possible. Until then, she'll just research via Google Earth and write about the worlds in her own head.

If you'd like to join her newsletter to be notified when books are released, and get behind-the-scenes information about upcoming books, you can join her [NEWSLETTER](#) here, or email her directly at sherwoodwrites@gmail.com and you'll be added to the mailing list. You'll also receive a free copy of her book *Fourth Point of Contact*! If you'd like to interact with AJ more directly, you can socialize with her on various sites and join her [Facebook group: AJ's Gentlemen](#) and her [Patreon](#)!