

The Acolyte of Dul-Måt

by
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PART I

Isúrgo...Espirituum...

I'm slowly walking forward, my eyes fixed on my destination. I don't know why. Whenever I question it, my mind answers itself: *You are compelled to*. And the weird thing is, I don't question it. I just accept it.

I'm surrounded by ancient stone, columns in a row lining my path forward. In the distance, a few dozen steps away, there is an altar, dusted in gold and awaiting tribute. I'm not sure how I can tell it's waiting. It's so simple, but so ageless.

Isúrgo...Espirituum...

I hear those words, but I don't understand. Maybe if I just walk forward. Maybe if I offer tribute. Maybe then I will know. I just need to get there.

My scales tingle, I feel a shiver. My heart quickens, and my breathing become heavy. I am not tired, not fearful. Something else entirely. Some kind of passion fills me, but I am still hesitant.

Proficio...Tribulytia...

The words grow louder as I reach the altar.

I'm just about to touch it.

I woke up with a muffled gasp, breathing heavily, my whole body warmer than it should have been. It took a few moments for me to just recover from the dream, and I reminded myself.

I'm back in my bed. In my apartment. In Santa Christina.

I heard the blow-dryer turn on and saw my girlfriend Leesa ("The 'ee' is for extra ecstatic!" she always said). Leesa was the kind of girl who looked like she had it all together until she had her once-a-quarter sort-of emotional breakdown that her friends helped her out of. Feline build, jaguar features, average height, average weight, she could disappear in a crowd easily. Maybe that's why I was dating her. She looked more like A girlfriend than MY girlfriend.

And then I shifted my body and realized: That dream was a wet dream.

It wasn't even sexy! Not the way I was used to, at least. What a gyp. But I couldn't let Leesa know that, she would take it as a sign our relationship was dying and we needed to spark things up in the bedroom. No thanks, I've got enough on my plate.

These pajamas were going straight into the wash. Yuck.

I turned myself away from her and pretended to be asleep. That only worked until she turned around and prodded me in the back.

"Trent." She said, persistent.

"Hunh?" I grunted.

"Have you talked to the landlady about renewing the lease for next year?"

Right. It's June. School year's ending, and the lease is going to run out at the end of the month. But there was a reason I hadn't contacted her. What was it?

I shook my head. "Nuh. Waiting to hear back from the marketing firm about the internship."

"Yeah, well, I don't wanna move out just because your maybe-new-bosses are slackers, okay? It's your name on the lease, so you gotta talk to her."

"I *know*..." I said, emphasizing the W as much as possible and scrunching up for warmth, turning away more.

Less talking, more leaving. I don't want to embarrass myself.

She kissed me on the cheek.

"You baby. Do you even have any finals this week?"

Why wouldn't she just leave already?

"Nuh." I mumbled into the sheets. "All essays. No tests. I'm done for the quarter."

She reached back and tied her headfur into a ponytail. "All right, well some of us have actual tests to take. So enjoy your beauty rest, I want a victory ride when I'm all done." She grinned and reached out, groping me through the sheets.

Oh no. Please don't notice.

But she just walked away and wished me sweet dreams in her coy, playful voice.

I let out a sigh of relief and climbed my way out of bed and up to the bathroom. After plucking some tissues from the dispenser, I cleaned most of the cum away and resolved to finish it off with a shower.

I looked at myself in the mirror, if only to get rid of that stupid morning amnesia. Species: Lacerta, evolved from the lizards back East. My hunter green scales were smooth and shined in the right (and wrong) light, from a long line of pure Lacertan blood (or so I'm told). And my goddamn shoulders. And height. I could probably blame my dad for that. Football shoulders, he called them.

I ran my hand over my chest and belly. I'd let myself go in the past few years. Not as much exercise, but that's what happens when you're not on the football team anymore. The whole reason I picked the University of Santa Christina was its entire *lack* of football team. Nobody could pressure me to be on it, and I wouldn't have to slam myself into a locker room full of awkward, smelly dudes

and force myself to pretend to care about them.

Existential crisis averted, my mind drifted back to that dream. What a fucking bizarre dream it was, too. Wasn't even sexual, not remotely. My body didn't even need to have a *nocturnal emission* as they called it in sixth-grade puberty class. (That's what we called it. Puberty Class.) I just came the previous night, while Leesa was out with her friends. A well-deserved rest after turning in my last essay of the quarter.

I took my shower and washed it all off, and the whole thing disappeared into the back of my mind. I had a social life that I'd neglected for too long, and some friends to bother.

Shower fresh, I texted my classmate Apollo. [Yo are you down for some Jake's at the beach, westside?]

A few moments later, my phone buzzed in my hand. [U know it.]

"God, it feels so weird to just be done with the quarter already." I said before tipping back a bottle of some indie-brewed porter that the cashier recommended ("It's like soooo good, man." His voice so low, it was trying to crawl out of his mouth.)

"Lucky you. I still have a final to take." Apollo said. He tipped back some clear-bottled light beer. It probably tasted like piss, but maybe not to him.

Apollo was another feline, like Leesa, but he was orange and striped, like a

tiger. I'd never bothered to ask him about his family or anything, because that was at best rude, and at worst sounded like eugenics.

He was on the short side, but he was in better shape than I was, being on the official USanC cycling team. One of those finely-tuned bodies. But with the year over, he was ready to gain some weight and look more intimidating than fast. That was going to take some work.

"You've got a final left this week and you're out here drinking with me?" I said.

"Whatever, my brain's shot for a couple days. I used all the good stuff on the papers." He lifted a slice of pizza to his mouth and chewed, staring out at the ocean. I followed his gaze and looked at the horizon.

Fuckin' Santa Christina, man. Such a great little place from the outside. Simple beach town, reasonably famous university, even got its own theme park on part of the shore. The Boardwalk. And yet it was still just a beach town, just another tourist trap, just a place to hang out for a few years and then move on to bigger and brighter things. That's how I always saw it, at least.

Jake's was one of those cheaply-built shacks that charged you for the view more than the food, right there on the beach. And we all put up with it because it was a damn good view.

I shouldn't have let my mind drift, because it just went back to that dream.

I remembered it like no other dream I had before. Crystal clear at all times. Simple and short.

Quick, talk about something else. I told myself.

"You're a double major, right?" I asked Apollo.

"Yeah, but don't make me regret it now."

We shared a few Business classes together, mostly theory. It was my major, after all. Seemed like the smart thing to choose. I could suffer through four years of that to get a degree in something useful.

"Have any of your history classes covered local stuff?" I asked. "Like how we got the theme park?"

"Fuck man, there's a required class all about this dumb city. Goes over the whole thing as a Felarin controlled city-state, the stupid Felarin-Lacerta war, and how it changed after the big peace treaty a couple thousand years ago, and got all integrated with the rest of the nation and shit."

It all sounded like a jumble of events that he didn't want to revisit. I got funny looks from a lot of people over having a Felarin girlfriend, even in a liberal-appearing place like Santa Christina.

"Like, I shit you not, man. I *just* wrote a paper on the stupid war." Apollo said, not sounding like he was going to stop anytime soon. "It was some stupid thing fought over religion. Sad thing is both sides were so good at fighting that they ran out of warriors, and the economy tanked. Lots of deaths, lots of injuries, nobody left to fight, and a bunch of bills to pay. When people got over the religion thing, it was easy to put aside differences and just learn to trade their

bread for bricks or whatever. Bartering and shit."

"Bartering and shit." I echoed.

"Yeah, Trent. Bartering. This was before like, money."

"And you're majoring in this?"

"DON'T REMIND ME." He groaned, leaning back in his chair.

"But yeah, the Lacerta were the ones who had the slightly better economy so they won the holy shit. Knocked over a bunch of Felarin temples and built those butt-ugly missions all around the country."

"They purposefully knocked over temples just to build something else on top of them?"

"Yeah, the post-war Lacerta were vindictive sons of bitches." He grumbled, then gulped. "No disrespect, man." He said to me.

I shook my head. "No worries. I agree with you. It was a shitty time, wasn't it?"

"Fuckin' A."

"Why are you even in History classes, man?" I asked.

"I gotta have something I like to balance those boring-ass Business ones. I don't know how you DON'T have a second major, dude." Apollo said before

biting into his slice of pizza again.

"I dunno. Just seemed like the smartest one to pick. Gotta think about the real world after college, right?"

"Hey!" He said, mouth full. "A couple of us guys from 134A are going to go celebrate after their final. You wanna come along? Thursday, eight-ish. Gonna hop around a couple clubs downtown. We even got a DD."

"Sure."

Normally, I'd turn something like that down, but the whole week was wide open, and I could afford some fun before the weekend. Besides, if I didn't find something to distract me, I might end up thinking about the dream again.

Isûrgo...Espirituum...

I'm stepping closer again. The altar is waiting. Desire wells up within me.

I need to get there faster, but I must not run. This is a holy place.

Isûrgo...Espirituum...

There's something laying there on the altar this time. Circular strips of dark material. They're laid out in a specific pattern. I want to reach out and touch them, but first I must approach.

Proficio...Tribulytia...

I hear those words and look up at the wall behind the altar. A crude relief of a feline stands above, robed, with his arms extended outward.

And it's looking at me.

I'm frozen. I can't move. Or maybe I don't want to move.

Kneel...

Excitement surges through me and my knees bend, until eventually I descend, kneeling before the altar.

And then I realize the act of kneeling has made me aroused. It frightens me, but it feels proper as well.

My hand reaches out to grip my length. I feel my nerves light up as my hand surrounds it.

Another gasp.

It was the middle of the night this time. Three days in a row I had that dream. Every time, I'd gotten closer and closer to the altar, but that was the first it ever had such an effect on me.

I'd tried for three whole days not to think about it, but no number of games,

books, TV or movies could distract me for long enough. I even went looking for more internships, just in case I never heard back from the marketing firm I applied to earlier in the quarter. (But I was pretty confident about that one.)

And every night, I was starting to anxiously await the dream.

The worst part? I was starting to like it, too.

Leesa was sitting up in bed, reading something on her tablet, the screen illuminating her face. But she was looking right at me.

"You all right?" She asked.

"Yeah," I grunted. "Just a weird dream." I reached a hand down to check the "wet" status of the dream.

Confirmed. Sigh.

"Weird, like funny? Or weird like bad?" Leesa asked.

"Neither. Just weird. It's nothing." I said, turning my head on the pillow to go back to sleep.

She grinned. "I've got just the thing to cheer you up." She flexed her fingers and slipped her hand under the covers.

No! no no no. Not now.

I squirmed a little. "Not now, Lees. I don't feel up for it."

"You sure?" She said, sliding her fingers along my chest. "You don't have to do any—" She cut off her own sentence and pursed her lips as her fingers found my spent cock and damp pajamas. "Oh."

The next hour went exactly as I had hoped it wouldn't. She laid into me about how we weren't passionate enough with each other and this was just more evidence on why we needed to get back into that attitude like when we first dated. All handsy like horny college juniors should be. But I wasn't interested in being a horny college junior. I wanted to be the guy with the responsible, loving girlfriend who felt the same way about her. I wanted a deep relationship where we didn't need to have sex constantly. That's what I was always telling myself, so that's what had to be true.

At one point, we both yawned to interrupt each other, and we realized that 1AM was not the time to have this discussion, and she had a final in 11 hours. So we left it alone.

But then I knew I was done with these dreams. I had to stop them.

The next morning, after Leesa left, I called up Apollo and asked if he had any friends who actually enjoyed that class about Santa Christina.

"Fuck, man." He said. "Patrick's your guy for that. I'll text you his number."

I met Patrick at Jake's Pizza Shack, the way I'd met Apollo so many times before.

He was another feline, though he looked more like a lion, but without any of their telltale manes. I think the word was puma? He was a little bigger than Apollo, and it was clear he wasn't very active, though he held the extra weight well. What surprised me most were his broad shoulders (like mine) and towering height (also like mine). He was almost like some feline version of me.

Then I thought, *It's a little egotistical to think that a tall, broad-shouldered guy is another version of yourself, Trent.*

I waved him over after he ordered his own food and drink, and we sat facing the water. No matter what happened, I always had that vista. That never changed.

I extended my hand. "Trent." I said.

"Patrick. But you can call me Pat. Or Trick. I answer to both." He said, giving a firm shake before picking at his order of fries and soda. "So what's this all about? Apollo wouldn't tell me on the phone."

"Before I start, I have to know. Can you keep a secret?"

"Sure?"

"I need you to promise. That you'll listen to what I have to say, and you won't laugh, or think I'm crazy, or possessed or whatever. Okay?"

"As long as I'm not on some dumb hidden camera show, I promise." Patrick said.

"For the past four nights, I've been having the same dream..." I explained, going into detail about the temple and the way that I was walking toward the altar,

between the columns. But I didn't tell him about the sexual parts. Last thing I needed a stranger to know was when I got a boner in the middle of a dream.

He sat, so intent on listening to me he complete forgot about his fries.

"You've got to be shitting me." He said, after I finished.

"I swear you're not on a hidden camera show, man."

"No, no. I mean. This doesn't make any sense. Or it makes too much sense. I dunno. It's a lot to take in." He consoled himself by nibbling on the fries again.

"Don't tell me that you're having the same dreams, too." I said.

"No, I'm not. I...What you're describing sounds like a standard Felarin temple. Apollo told you about how the Lacerta came in and demolished the old Felarin temples, right? And they built the missions over them?"

"Yeah, he mentioned that."

"Well, all the Lacerta missions are dedicated to the one god they believed in, so it was like a big old pilgrimage people could take if they were up for going all up and down the coast. But before the Lacerta came into the picture, all the temples in this area were built for different Felarin gods. It was the same thing. Priests and the like would go out and travel up and down the shore, and acolytes at each temple would, uh, enlighten the priests to the wisdom of that temple's god. Usually had to do with whatever that god was in charge of. Feasts at the god of harvest's place. Preaching at the god of wisdom's temple. That kind of stuff."

He took a few more fries into his mouth and kept talking. It was a little gross. "So Santa Christina, which was the name that the Lacerta gave it, after the patron saint of moderation. It used to have a temple dedicated to Dul-Mât, the god of passion and the present."

"God of the present?" I asked.

"Yeah, the Felarin gods tended to pull double or triple duty, being about a couple things at once. They usually tied together. Dul-Mât is about the present, there are others for the past and future. As the myths go, Dul-Mât's kind of a hedonist. Gets what he wants, the moment he wants it. Lots of old literature about how he fucked up some poor mortal's life because he wanted something from them. Usually didn't end well for the mortal."

What a wonderful omen. I thought.

"And then the Lacerta came in and tore the temple down, putting a mission named after the patron saint of moderation." I sighed. "My ancestors are dicks."

"Sort of, but I think everybody's are. One way or another. I mean, there were Felarin who converted over to the Lacerta belief system really fast. Scholars say most of 'em were honest about it and just picked the winning side, but some of the monks who converted were said to have subverted the Lacerta in really subtle ways. Like secretly worshipping Felarin gods while building the missions."

I shrugged. "Can't blame them, exactly. Not when a bunch of invaders step in and stomp on your temple."

Patrick hesitated, scratching his neck idly. "I have a weird question to ask you,

now. Please don't be offended."

"I'll try not to." I said.

"These dreams you had. Are they...sexual at all?"

Shit, he got that already?

"Yeah." I said. "I mean, nothing really sexual has happened in them, but my body gets all weird. Like the first night you meet somebody and you're getting close to them and you get a little nervous but also turned on."

Patrick looked away. "I w-wouldn't know, but I can guess, yeah." Poor guy must have been a virgin.

"And after I wake up, I find out it's a wet dream."

"Yikes."

"But that doesn't mean anything, does it?"

"No, I don't really think so. I mean, it's still a dream. Sure, you're dreaming of a place you've never been, that might not even exist anymore. And you're getting wet dreams about the temple of a god of passion." Patrick bit his lip. "Okay I-I meant to start that sentence all reassuring but it ended sarcastic and I'm sorry."

"It's okay." I said. I wasn't really listening anymore either. I was just hoping that it was a fluke.

"Hey, you should go talk to a psych major or something, okay? They'll tell you what it really means. Like, I've had a bunch of dreams where I lose control of my bike and go off a cliff, but I don't even have a bike anymore! Or a helmet." Patrick said. It was a nice sentiment, but not really enough.

There was another moment of silence, until Patrick spoke again.

"Are you coming along with Apollo and us tonight? After the final?"

"Yeah." I said. It was just after noon, I might have time to go visit the mission, maybe sort this thing out once and for all.

"Cool. See you tonight, man. I, uh, gotta head back and do some last-minute studying."

"See you around."

The mission itself was tucked away in the North part of the city, technically close to a bunch of major roads and the freeway, but required six or seven turns from those to actually find it. You could only find this place if you *really* wanted to. Or had a smartphone.

I parked outside, next to one of the handicapped spots, but I was still afraid I might get a ticket somehow. It was right in front of glass-covered miniature model of the mission itself.

The exterior was unassuming, retrofitted over the years, and the adobe bricks

were replaced with stucco and the whole exterior was whitewashed to hell and back. It was a pain to look at on sunny days, bright like a whole building made out of headlights in your rearview mirror.

Being a Thursday, nobody else was around, and a short Lacerta woman in a white robe waved at me from the entrance.

Caught in her social flytrap, I willed myself to walk to her.

"Good afternoon, child." She said, her voice light and wispy. "Did you come to pray? We have a service tomorrow evening if you'd like to worship."

I shook my head. "No, thank you. I'm just curious to learn more about the history of the mission, if that's all right."

She smiled bright and gestured toward a smaller door, away from the main entrance that I assumed led into the sanctuary. "The museum entrance is right over here, sir. Please feel free to educate yourself to your mind's content."

"Uh, thank you." I said, opening the door and leaving her behind.

Lots of artifacts surrounded by plastic enclosures, showing what life was like for the monks that built the mission. A few things about how natural disasters forced repairs on the building.

No mention of the Felarin. *History books are always written by the winners*, I thought.

Everything was phrased very nobly and charitably. I was sure that the monks who built the place had their own problems.

And then I remembered.

"...Some of the monks who converted were said to have subverted the Lacerta in really subtle ways. Like secretly worshipping Felarín gods while building the missions." Patrick had said.

I took out my phone and texted Patrick. [Was there anything special about Felarín monks?]

[Like what?] he replied.

[the ones that worshipped felarín gods after pretending to convert. what did they do]

[uhhh i dunno. the really high-up ones had eight-point stars bleached onto their fur tho. not sure what else. i haven't taken that class yet.]

Great. [Thanks for the info. see you later tonight.]

[lookin forward to it man]

Eight point star. Nothing like that in the museum, nor in the tiny little gift shop. I wondered if it was even worth venturing into the sanctuary, probably interrupting someone's prayer. Kind of rude, honestly.

I stepped out of the building, waving to the robed woman as I went back to my car, and I saw the model of the building in front of my car again. I looked at it a little closer and saw, cut in the fake grass behind the building, an eight-point star.

In reality, though, that space was occupied by residential buildings, so I checked the information panel on the model.

"No matter the number of disasters the mission has seen, no matter how many times it has been rebuilt, the sacristy, adjacent to the sanctuary and where holy rites are prepared, has never fallen." And then it went into something about miracles and blah blah blah.

I turned around and went back toward the menacing double-doors, the Lacerta woman waving me over again.

"I'd like to try praying, I think." I said to her, feeling a little guilty for lying. Only appropriate given the setting.

"Step inside, and find yourself a seat. May your Fate commune with She-Who-Guides-Us."

Right. I'd commune with something, at least.

Thankfully, the woman stayed outside, and the sanctuary was empty. I had to hand it to the monks who built the place. It was pretty. Lots of stained glass and art on the walls, and there was a wooden altar over in the front, with a small statue of She-Who-Guides-Someone-Or-Another. But I didn't really care about the sanctuary, I wanted the stupid little room that's never been knocked down.

A few unlucky guesses and I found doors that led back to the museum and gift shop. On the third try, I found the sacristy, pulling the door open gently and peering inside. It was mostly empty. Just some chests of drawers and candles. Lots of storage. Like a boring priest's bedroom, but without a bed.

Closing the door behind me, I nearly jumped as an orange and white tabby cat pounced up to the top of one of the chests near me. It just liked its paw and looked at me.

"Is this your neighborhood or something?" I asked it.

The cat closed its eyes and tilted its head away from me, but jumped off, running back behind another chest of drawers, scratching its side on the rough edge.

And then I saw it, near where the cat had disappeared. An eight-point star, hollow in the middle, like a literal hole in the wall. It was partly obscured by a chest of drawers, and as I turned to get a better look, I knew it was unmistakably Felarin in origin.

I tried turning it, pressing the points of the star, running my finger around the circle, but nothing happened. It looked like one of those adventure-movie traps where it'd cut off my finger if I stuck it in.

You could always just go home and get on with your life. A voice reminded me. But I was done with those stupid dreams. I wanted that over with. *A finger for dream therapy, yeah, great choice.*

I slipped my pinky in first, but I couldn't reach the latch inside, if there even was one. Then I gave the ring finger a try. No luck either.

Then I heard footsteps approaching. *Shit.*

Okay one more. I put in my middle finger and felt it hit the back of the chamber, but no latch. I tried pressing in different directions, and then something gave way.

I heard a *tink* and felt the ring close tight around my finger. I gasped and tugged on it, to no avail. My finger was stuck. No matter how I pulled, the ring kept itself snug.

I looked over at the cat, which was sitting on the floor licking its paw like I wasn't even there.

The Lacerta woman opened the door, widening her eyes. The cat, meanwhile, just ran out of the room while the door was ajar.

"I...I'm sorry," I said. "This isn't--"

She just held up a hand and smiled, looking at my finger in the wall. "It's all right, child. We all have our own ways of praying. Take your time." And she closed the door.

I stood there in shock for several seconds, trying to decide what she must have assumed. I gave up, then focused on the problem at hand. No matter how hard I pulled, my finger wouldn't slip out. Only when I reached over with my other hand and tried to nudge it for leverage did the ring react and loosen, letting me take my finger out.

I heaved a sigh, pursing my lips. I heard a loud clunk followed by the squeaking of old hinges. An entire wall of the small room, little larger than a door, swung back and revealed an unlit staircase made of stone.

I pushed the wall the rest of the way and pulled out my phone and its flashlight app for light.

You can still turn back. I thought. But not this time. Those stupid dreams weren't going to stop, so neither should I.

I closed the door behind me and descended the stairs.

The staircase spiraled downward, surrounding me with rock and stone, no light source from either direction. Just my phone. I took each step as slowly as I could, until at last I saw the flickering red-orange light of an open flame. It was next to level ground, showing another outline of a door, light coming in from behind it. I pocked my phone and pushed on the door.

It was the temple. The temple from the dream. The same *exact* place.

I stepped out, looking at it in more detail. The stone columns, the altar, the flames lighting the place. It had to be. It was eerie.

Fuck stopping the dreams, time to go.

As soon as I thought it and turned, the door closed behind me, disappearing into the wall, as though it'd never been there in the first place.

I gulped, looking around, and my mind started to reel with paranoia.

What if this a trap? What if I'm going to die down here? Oh shit shit shit. How am I going to get out of here?

Maybe. Maybe the way to get out was to play along. The dream brought me down there, so it might be the way I could get out.

I had to get in the mood. The right frame of reference. Felarin monk, at the temple of the god of passion.

I should take off my clothes. I thought. *Something might zap them off and disintegrate them. And I like this shirt.*

So I took them off, and folded them into a pile by where I thought the door was.

Real case for mental stability. The reasonable part of my mind said. But I wanted to not suffocate, so I went with it.

I started walking and it felt so familiar. Like I was on autopilot.

With every step, I felt my heartbeat grow faster, nerves on my scales lighting up with tingling sensations. I dared to look down at myself, and I saw that my dick at full mast, throbbing like it hadn't been touched in weeks.

I looked forward again, closer to the altar. I told myself that it was probably a good sign I hadn't heard the chanting from my dream.

"*Isûrgo Espirituum.*" I heard my voice say. "*Proficio...La Tribulytia...*" I would have been more upset, but somehow, I felt better for repeating it. I felt a sense of serenity wash over me, rinsed of my worries.

I reached the altar, and I saw the circular strips of fabric. On closer look, in the dim light, they could have been leather or maybe rubber. I wasn't entirely sure. I would have to touch them.

My arm extended, and my finger felt the edge of one. Leather.

My head craned to look at the carved feline figure behind the altar, and I saw the gems laid into his eyes.

I froze, arm still out. I couldn't move. I was emptied of desire to move.

Arms at your sides. Kneel. Another voice entirely. Not from the dream. Not me being snarky at myself.

I put my arms at rest and descended to my knees. I felt the stale air of the temple all around me, and my dick still throbbed with arousal.

I felt a pair of hands slide onto my shoulders, then down my chest, massaging my pectorals. I looked downward and saw nothing there. But the pleasure from their touch is impossible to deny.

Behind me, I felt the sensation of fur against my back and warmth against my scales. It's like I'm in bed with Leesa again, except so much better. Every touch is ten times better than what I thought was allowed.

I turned my head and craned my neck, but I saw nothing behind me. Some kind of trick? A ghost? Or maybe it was all in my head.

Something else warm pressed against my neck. A muzzle, I think. I felt the

heavy, pleasant breath on my face and neck, and I started to feel drunk with emotion. My eyelids fell halfway, and I heard soft words in my ears.

"La Tribulytia et eximius." A smooth, deep voice said. *"Et Laudatus."*

This felt forbidden, and that made it so much better.

A hand placed itself on my head and rubbed gently for a few moments, and I simply enjoyed being there, kneeling before the altar and feeling the delightful sensations. In those moments, I forgot all about myself, and focused on what I felt.

Brace yourself. The voice said.

I opened my eyes fully again and I felt a force gently push me forward until I was on my hands and knees. I felt a hand slide along my back and knead into it. Fingers slid up and down my sides and I shivered.

I let out a moan, and my eyelids fluttered. I felt the exhale of breath on my neck, and another warm pressure there. Maybe even whiskers against my scales.

And then I felt something under my tail. On any other day, in any other moment, I would have jumped and ran, but the pleasure was too strong, and my senses were too clouded. Sight, sound, taste, smell, all dull. Touch remained sharp, sharper than ever before.

I felt something tapered press against my rear, massaging the ring under my tail, sending shivers through my body. It nearly made me fall onto my face, my arms quivering with delight.

Then that object pulled back, and I felt another warmth pushing inside me with little resistance. Only because nothing had ever slid itself in there before.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I realize that I'm having sex. Something, someone was having sex with me. And I didn't ask for it. Or maybe I did? Maybe that's what it was all about? Finding that temple?

Stop thinking. Start loving.

I groan as I feel that warmth slide in further inside me. It's firmly in there, and I feel a body press against the back of my legs and my rear. Whoever that is, we're joined together, in a way.

It never bothered me. Not once. Maybe I was having sex, maybe I wasn't, but all I know is that if it did count, it was the best sex I'd ever had.

I felt a hand slip around my hip and start stroking my length. I gasped and squirmed in the pleasure, rolling my hips unintentionally, but that made it feel oh so much better.

I felt the hips behind me slam into my body over and over again, that invading length sliding in and out of my rear with ease, pushing waves of pleasure throughout me. I gripped the floor as best I could, providing firm, beautiful friction as that hand stroked me even faster.

And then it hit. I felt a slam of that length into me, causing me to shudder and moan, my body seizing up as my length sprayed my load out onto the floor of the temple. And I feel empty. Peaceful. Happy. Obedient. Wonderful.

I felt that muzzle on my neck again, whispering to me. "*Praesignis, Tribulytia.*"

And that made me feel even better.

My eyelids closed, and it became so hard to stay awake. So I stopped trying.

I half expected to wake up in my bed again. That the whole thing was just one more dream.

But no, for once I woke up slowly, realizing over several seconds that I was still in the temple. Worse, there's a pool of semen, which I was pretty sure is mine, cause some of it dried on my abdomen.

And then I looked down at my naked body to discover it wasn't completely naked anymore.

No, those leather circles were all over me. One each around my wrists and ankles. One around my neck, like a collar. Another two forming an X over my chest, a ring at the intersection. Down from that ring, a strip that went down to my dick and balls, ending in something that circles around them all, but wasn't tight the way that I always thought a cock ring was.

And I had no idea how to get them off. No clasps, no loops, nothing.

I glanced at the altar, only to find that it was no longer there. In its place was a large, ornate throne.

What happened while I was out?

I looked over at the wall across the temple. The door was open. It was my shot to leave.

I dashed over to my clothes and put them on over the leather gear, hurrying upstairs and leaving the door open behind me.

What have I gotten myself into?

PART II

I'm gonna be okay, yeah. I just ran down to an underground temple below a church, got fucked in the ass by an invisible god, didn't question it, and ended up running around in bondage gear.

If I just keep telling myself I'm going to be okay then maybe it'll come true. Because that worked out so well last time.

I wasn't entirely convinced at that point, but the fact I got all my clothes back on and made it out of the temple was enough for me to start counting my blessings.

I stumbled my way up the stairs, the leather around my wrists and ankles reminding me of their presence with every motion. The X-strap around my chest held itself tight to my scales, like they intended to sink into my body.

At last I saw the faint outline of the door to the sacristy, and I crossed my fingers, hoping I wouldn't run into that robed woman again. I wasn't sure why she let me go with my finger in the wall like that.

I pulled on the false wall and peered out into the room. No sign of her. I slipped back out and closed the wall behind me. I gave a quick sniff of my hand and breath. They were both putrid and reeked of sex, but I didn't have any breathmints and I sure as hell wasn't going to dip my fapping hand in the holy water for a quick rinse.

I took a few moments to calm myself down. Deep breaths. That works, right?

Feeling mostly prepared, I opened the door to the sanctuary.

The woman was sitting in a pew just a few feet from me, holding a glass of water. She turned and saw me emerge, holding the glass out.

"You were in there quite a while, child. I brought you some water. It's important to stay hydrated after such activities."

I gulped, meekly taking the water from her and graciously sipping it. What did she mean by *such activities*? Did she know? If I asked her and she didn't, there'd be a lot of trouble. No, just playing along would do.

"Thank you. I appreciate the concern." I said, downing the rest of the water.

She flashed a warm smile, taking the glass back from me. "I hope you had a life-changing experience."

I wondered if she noticed the leather around my neck, just above the collar of my tee. I hoped not.

"I suppose I'll have to see if my life changes. Thanks again."

"Take care, child." She said as I turned and headed for my car.

So I smell like an orgy, look like a closeted sadomasochist and might just have had sex with a hedonist god. That's not so bad. A lot of people are worse off than that.

I kept telling myself that as I drove home. First thing I was going to do was take a nice long shower, heat up that leather and see if I could slip it off. I pulled into the carport for the apartment and saw that Leesa was still out, presumably still taking her final.

Finally, I caught a break for once.

I went inside and stripped off my clothes again, tossing them into the hamper with reckless abandon. It felt a little better to have them off again, so they weren't constantly reminding me of the leather around my body. Put my phone right on the counter of the bathroom.

I slammed the shower into action, quickly setting the temperature to somewhere around devil's-piss and let the steam fill the tiny bathroom.

My chest rose and fell as I heaved a sigh, stepping in and letting the water wash over me.

I don't know how long I was in there, exactly. Just long enough to try thinking about other things.

I still need to talk to the landlady. Figure out if we're renewing the lease. But I can't do that until I hear back from the marketing firm about the internship. I heaved a sigh. Okay, save that for later. What else was happening tonight? Didn't I make plans?

As I washed over my scales, I tried to dig in under the leather to scrub, but it wouldn't budge. I turned the heat up, hoping the stuff could be fixed like a persistent pickle jar.

First try, the bracelets. The leather was wide, but not very thick. And they were getting a little looser with the heat, but they wouldn't move past my wrists. Not the end of the world. I could pass it off as a fashion statement.

Anklets, maybe. I anchored myself in the shower and tried stretching them over the heel, but no luck. They were more persistent than the bracelets. Well, I reasoned, I could always wear socks over them, or just have pants. Shorts made me look like a child anyway.

Maybe the X-straps over my chest. I could sort of feel them jostling around when I walked, rubbing over my scales in a not-terrible way, if I didn't know where they had come from. All I had to do was slip one arm through and it could fall off easy. And I almost did it, but the bracelets got in the way and there just wasn't enough slack. Okay, not going shirtless for a while. Just wear some pajamas.

I'm cold-blooded. That's my excuse for wearing a shirt all the time.

The one most concerning was the collar. Not only was it out in the open, it signified ownership. That one *had* to come off. Tug. Squirm. *PULL*. Nothing. No clasp either. I had no idea how the thing had gotten around my neck to begin

with. My head wouldn't fit through that gap unless it stretched, and it really didn't stretch. Another fashion statement maybe. Something about capitalism. College students could go for that, right?

But then they wouldn't know who I served.

No. NO! Creepy thoughts. Creepy thoughts, go away!

I felt a shiver flow through my body, and that weird apprehensive, anxious, nervous, but yet so pleasant feeling came over me.

No, I had to nip that in the bud. Only the cock ring left.

I knew how they worked. Goes around the cock and the ballsac. It's meant to keep tight, hold blood in the penis, make sex last longer, make orgasms better. But this thing was loose. I was surprised it didn't fall off while I was walking around.

And then I reached down and tugged at it, and it felt like I was tugging at my own scales. I scraped at it and felt pain.

The fucking cock ring was a part of my fucking anatomy. And something told me it wasn't just for decoration. At least nobody could see it. Not without permission.

I finished washing myself off and turned the water off, left in the steamy bathroom as I emerged from the shower. The mirror was entirely fogged over.

Gotta make myself presentable again. I thought. I grabbed a towel and wiped away

the fog, but the remaining steam filled in the gaps and it blurred again.

But for a couple seconds, I saw myself in the gear, and I couldn't stop from thinking, *Damn, I look pretty good in this.* I chuckled to myself. *Depending on how this all plays out, I might have a future in the porn industry.*

I looked down again, at the five strips of leather circling my chest, one leading down to my crotch. Slid my fingers along the leather and scales, shivered a little. It was nice. Especially knowing I could pull off the look. Do something with enough confidence and nobody will question it.

Yeah, I can do this.

Maybe by accident, maybe on purpose, my finger brushed past my nipple and I shivered again. *That's nice.* I rubbed the nipple a little more, and the pleasure escalated. I let out an exhale and my eyelids fluttered. No more holding back.

I ran both my hands up and down my chest and sides, enjoying the way my fingers slid across my scales, pressing down on the leather as it held itself against me. It was so nice, and it just melted away that anxiety.

When I opened my eyes again, I saw a blurred shadow behind me in the mirror. But it didn't worry me. I had somehow expected it. The figure was massive, at least a foot taller than me, and brimming with strength, its wide frame nearly encompassing the entire mirror.

I saw it lift its arm and make a wiping motion with its hand across its face, then gestured toward me.

I bent and grabbed the towel, bringing it to the mirror and wiping away the fog.

The face of a maned lion stared back at me, a warm smile on his muzzle. The mane surrounded his features and fell down his chest, merging with the slightly bushier, red-tinged chestfur that flowed down ward, alongside the short, golden color that covered him. His arms were massive, capable of crushing me. And yet I knew they would never do such a thing.

I found myself disappointed that the mirror ended above his abdomen.

I felt so warm and happy, as though standing in front of him was just as good as feeling him hold me and whisper sweet nothings in my ear. He made another motion, slow and methodical, pointing to his eyes.

And I saw them again, bright orange-yellow and fascinating. The kind of eyes that you could stare into forever. The color like a gem, like the ones in the temple, utterly enrapturing. I heaved a happy sigh as my mind clouded like the mirror had, and finally I felt his warmth and his fur against my back.

Maybe this is all in my head, I thought. Even if it is, my head is a wonderful place to be right now. And if it isn't...well, it's proof of the supernatural, isn't it?

Philosophical quandaries aside, I just wanted to fuck something.

I felt his hand slide along my arm, grabbing my wrist and bringing it to my chest again, guiding me into rubbing my scales tenderly. At his touch, I felt the cock ring tighten, and I realized I was quickly getting hard again. But who could

blame me? With that situation, anybody with a penis would have had that happen.

But it felt so much better. That cock ring kept me throbbing and pulsing with arousal, heaving a happy sigh or a moan every few seconds.

And not once did I look away from the lion's eyes. The more I stared into them, the more beautifully warm the world became, tinted through orange vision. Everything was bright and cheery, peaceful and relaxed. Heavenly.

Then I found it harder and harder to keep my eyelids open. They just began to droop. So very heavy, with no provocation. But that was all right, because as soon as they closed, I could still picture the lion, and he stepped forward to wrap me in that tight, loving embrace of his.

He gently tipped me off balance and I fell into his arms, the lion setting me down on the ground. Or maybe a bed. It was a soft place to lay. Even with my eyes closed, he remained. The lion and his beautiful amber irises. He dragged a finger down my chest, down the inside of my thigh, to my foot and back down the other leg, circling his way around my body.

He took his time, carefully lighting up nerves, bringing pleasure to places I thought it couldn't be brought. I had always thought that whoever was laying down or sitting back and feeling good, they were the dominant one. But the lion was toying with my body like it was his personal playground, and I was the lucky one who got to feel it all.

I was his, and in return, he gave me all of this.

At last, I felt him slide his tongue over my chest, taking his time again and slowly working himself over my torso. He made sure that my nipples were coated in saliva, then brought his nose along the center of my chest, eliciting shivers out of me, until at last, he pressed his face up against my throbbing, attentive shaft.

He traced his finger up and down it, toying with it the way he'd done with the rest of my body, and I realized, it belonged to him too.

Then he slipped his lips around it, and I stopped thinking in words anymore. Only in concepts. Pleasure. Relaxation. Pulsing. Shivers and waves.

Bodies alight, fingers splaying. Stuttered moans and lusty gasps. Moisture on the most sensitive of organs.

Pleasure rising. Rising faster. Passion. Love. Wonder.

Deep down, I felt myself giving so much, but also receiving something. It took me a few moments to dig through all of the sensations, but at one point, I understood. I was receiving instructions.

Dul-Mât demands further tribute.

After that, I felt myself fade into a mess of beautiful feelings and relaxed wonder, the pleasure building higher and higher until at last, I felt it all erupt.

I didn't care what my body was doing, or even how I felt after that. I just heard a deep voice in my ear, saying words I didn't listen to, but still heard.

And when those words faded, so did I.

Bzz Bzz Bzz.

I coughed a little.

Bzz Bzz Bzz.

I moved my arms, flexed my toes. I had ended up slumped against the corner of the bathroom.

Bzz Bzz Bzz.

Something was making that noise. Vibrating.

My phone. On the bathroom counter.

I groaned and grabbed it, my muscles stiff and tender.

[INCOMING CALL: APOLLO MUREGA]

Oh no.

I glanced at the clock at the top of the screen: 7:45 PM.

Wincing, I answered the call. "Yo."

"Yo, Trent." Apollo said. "We're outside. How much longer are you gonna

be?"

Fuck.

"Gimme five minutes. I fell asleep and I just need a change of clothes, okay?"

"Sure man, but don't take long. I wanna get laid tonight."

"You're such an ass." I heard someone else say on the phone, and the call ended.

I groaned, standing up. Still covered in the leather straps, though the cock ring had loosened again. No evidence of an actual orgasm, but I wasn't going to complain if I got a couple hours freedom from this whole ordeal.

Maybe what I really needed to do was just go out and have some goddamned fun. On second thought, Dul-Mât might be the kind of guy who'd approve of that. Hopefully that'd mean he'd just leave me alone for once.

I gave myself a quick rinse, sprayed some deodorant on, and picked out some clothes that covered up the leather gear better than others.

I looked at myself in the mirror again, in a short-sleeved polo and blue jeans. For a moment I considered popping the collar of the polo, then thought *No way, I still have my dignity. What's left of it.*

I thought of Patrick, and the conversation from earlier that morning. Maybe he'd believe me. Maybe he could help me figure out how to get out of all this.

I strode out the door and crammed myself into the car, a boxy mini-SUV or something.

Patrick turned around from the driver's seat. "Hey Trent." He waved. I kind of raised my fingers back, squished between Apollo and the door. Another Felarin and Lacerta were in the car too, but I didn't recognize them.

"Trick's DDing for us tonight." Apollo said.

"Only cause I haven't done it since the quarter started."

"Thanks, man." I said. "So where are we going?"

"Figure we'll start at 99 bottles and make our way to the Red Room." Apollo grinned.

The Red Room. Of course. It was the happy medium of a lounge and a bar that everyone loved. Also posh enough not to feel like a dive, but not so expensive as to empty your checking account in one night.

Problem with being so good is that the place is never empty.

But Apollo and crew had the right idea starting somewhere else and making our way up to the Red Room. We had dinner and beer at 99 Bottles, talking shit about all our classes, both business and history. And then, when everyone else was wasted, made our way to the Red Room. Maybe because it was a Thursday, or maybe because people still had finals, it wasn't too bad.

It was still fucking crowded, but it's the Red Room.

The five of us stood in line heading up the staircase and stopping at the door with a couple bouncers, (im)patiently waiting for entry. Each of us was at least a little buzzed, except for Patrick, who resolved to be stone cold sober that night.

Patrick was behind me and gave me a nudge on the shoulder. I turned to him.

"Hey Trent, what was that text about? Earlier today, I mean."

"Oh." I said. "I went to the mission, just to check it out, look around and stuff."

"Did you find anything interesting?"

"Well I wanted to talk to you about it, if that's okay."

Apollo turned around and nudged me.

"Yo Trent, why are you flirting with Trick?" He said. "You got a girlfriend."

"Oh you do?" Patrick asked, looking surprised.

"Yeah." I said. Though not for long if things kept going in the same direction.

"Huh. Oh. Well, uh, good for you, I guess." He said, blushing a little.

The bouncer called for the next person in line and one of the other guys in our group jumped up to show ID.

"Why are you so surprised?" I asked.

"I dunno. You just gave off...vibes, yanno?" Patrick said.

"Uh oh!" Apollo smirked. "False reading on the gaydar. Better get it fixed, man. You guys are supposed to have the good ones." Then he hopped over to the bouncer to get himself in the club.

"You guys?" I asked. "Are you—"

Patrick cut me off with a nod. "Yeah. Sorry if I acted weird about it."

Gay virgin. I kind of felt bad about it, but then I realized maybe he wanted it that way. Wasn't my place.

"Next." The bouncer called, looking at me. I pulled out my license from my wallet and gave it to him to examine. He was huge, almost like the lion, but he was Lacertan.

I started to worry when he kept glancing back and forth between my face and the little card with my information. It's not like I was underage. That was frosh-type shit. No, I was legal for a good six months prior.

"What's up?" I asked. "Something wrong?"

"Date's fine. But it says your eyes are blue on here, but they're yellow."

Yellow? But my eyes were blue. They'd always been blue.

"Might have to get somebody to look at this."

He glanced up at me and I stared him directly in his own eyes. When I spoke, I felt a kind of authority in my voice that I hadn't expected, even though the lie was entirely mine.

"Just contacts. Came here to have a good time, sometimes it means trying new things, you know?"

His mouth opened a little bit and he gave a little nod. He didn't speak for a few seconds, then shook his head, as though snapping out of a daydream.

"Yeah, I understand, man." He handed the license back to me. "Have a good night, sir."

Never had a bouncer call me sir before. I glanced at Patrick and gave him a thumbs up, but he just looked confused.

I found Apollo and the others in a large, table-less corner booth and quickly jumped in the conversation. Patrick joined us shortly after, holding a soda (free for DDs at the Red Room. Another perk).

And for at least another hour and a couple more beers and sodas, we talked shit about our classes and professors.

In due time, Apollo and the other two, whose names I still couldn't remember, went off to try and "get some," as they said, leaving me and Patrick alone in the corner booth.

"Hey, uh, sorry again if it seemed like I was hitting on you before. I swear it wasn't like that." He said. "I didn't realize you were straight."

I shook my head, "It's all right. No harm done. I didn't think that at all." It didn't even occur to me to correct him on the label of straight. Those experiences in the temple and my apartment didn't feel like they counted as gay sex. They were just...great.

Great? Where did that come from?

"So you wanted to talk about what you found at the mission?"

"Yeah, I—"

The DJ started up another song at what must have been twice the volume as before. The kind of trance music with the ridiculously pumping bass line, where if you're too close, your whole body shakes.

"Jeez." I mumbled.

"Seriously." Patrick agreed.

I felt the bass push in on me. Stranger still, I felt the leather underneath my clothes pulse with the same beat. Must be some kind of resonance or frequency or something. It didn't matter.

"But yeah," I said, projecting a little so Patrick could hear me. "What would you think if I told you that there was a temple underneath the mission? And that I've been there?"

"Holy shit man." Patrick said. "That'd be a hell of a find. We could bring the head of the history department and analyze it with him."

No, that was a bad idea. *The temple must stay secret. It must stay safe.*

"I don't want to show it to everybody yet. I just want to show it to you first."

"Okay, but can we tell someone else, eventually?"

I winced again and turned toward the DJ and his massive speakers pumping the room full of techno. I focused a little, and I heard the lyrics. It was a poppy diva singing, but the words were all too familiar.

Isûrgo...Espirituum...Proficio...Tribulytia...

Not here. I thought. *You've got to be fucking kidding me.*

It was probably all in my head, I started telling myself. Just the beers. But of course it was all in my head. That's how Dul-Mât worked. It probably had perfectly normal lyrics and I was just hearing the words he wanted me to hear.

Or the words I wanted to hear.

"You okay, Trent?" Patrick asked.

I blinked a few times, and found my breath becoming heavier. The leather was pulsing supernaturally, and the words were repeating in my head.

"Y-yeah, I'm fine. I just...I'm worried about what people will think when we tell them about the temple."

No, that wasn't why. Why was I so worried about only showing it to Patrick?

"Okay man. It's just really exciting. I want to see it so bad."

"Listen, can we head outside? This music is fucking with me." I said.

"Nah, I don't think we should go past the bouncers without the others." Patrick whined.

He would need convincing.

Because Dul-Mât demands further tribute.

I looked straight into his eyes, my body tingling. "Let's just go outside."

He looked confused, blinking a few times. But he never looked away. "Yellow..." He said, his voice drifting. "They weren't yellow before. Not this morning..."

I had him.

"Come outside with me and I will explain." I said, standing up and looking at

him.

"Yes, sir." He responded, following me as I stepped toward the doors.

I waved to the others as we passed them, giving some excuse about fresh air and saying they'd find us outside if they needed anything.

Patrick and I slipped into a little nook where two buildings met and shrouded ourselves in darkness.

When we stopped, Patrick gave the same little shake of his head like the bouncer did, and looked at me, curious.

"What's going on, man? Why did we come out here? What did you—"

But I made eye contact with him again, and I knew that my yellow irises stood out like gems against the darkness.

"Dul-Mât demands further tribute. You will provide it for Him." I said, the words flowing from my mouth without effort.

His mouth opened a little bit and his eyelids drooped ever-so-slightly. He slowed his breathing, his beefy chest rising and falling as his voice grew quieter.

"I will...provide tribute for Dul-Mât." He said.

"To do this, you must relax yourself. Understand, Felarin?"

"Yes sir."

I could see my own eyes' reflection in his, and maybe I was getting a little bit of a contact high of sorts. Or maybe that was the pleasure of serving Dul-Mât. Either was acceptable.

"You must relax yourself. Physically. Mentally. Spiritually. Feel your muscles loosen, my tribute. Your toes. Your feet. Your ankles. Your legs. Your thighs. Your arms. Your shoulders. Your chest. Your neck." As I went through each body part, I could see Patrick visibly attempting to relax the muscles there. And he was succeeding.

"Relax..." Patrick mumbled back to me. "Yes, sir..."

I could still feel the pulsing beat of the club inside. Or maybe it was the leather. It didn't matter.

"Now that your body is relaxed, you must allow your mind to join it. Let go of the tension you feel in this moment. Let out the worries and cares you bring here. Here, it is only you, me and the present. Do not allow the rest of the world to interfere. They are not worth your energy. Take away everything before and after now. Let yourself empty."

"Empty...yes, sir...it's fading." He mumbled.

I reached out and slid a finger along his jawline, and the puma smiled a little, murring like a kitten.

"Gone, sir." He said. "All gone." His eyes looked a little empty, like he was asleep standing up.

"Excellent, tribute." I said, unsure where I started thinking of him like that. "Now that your body and mind are prepared, allow your spirit to accept this moment. All that is needed from you is obedience. Breathe deeply, tribute, and let that warmth wash over you. The happiness of never needing to find your own direction. Of being confident in the commands you are given."

"Yes, sir..." He mumbled again. "Obedient...I am obedient." He droned out, his mouth still open a little.

"Tell me how you feel, tribute."

"Relaxed...Empty...Obedient."

"Well done, tribute. Now you will be rewarded."

I reached over and started to unbutton Patrick's shirt, exposing his chest. It was a delight to run my fingers up and down his torso, and from his little moans and rumbles, he was having a better time than I was. I leaned down and slid my snout in to rub against his chest, and Patrick began to have little stuttered groans of delight.

I slid myself downward a little, supporting myself with a knee on the ground and rubbing his abdomen warmly. He continued his happy moans and kept his arms limp, leaning himself against the side of the building.

I brought my hands to his jeans and unbuttoned those as well, unzipping and pulling the denim away. The puma was wearing boxerbriefs underneath, and I gave the bulge there a little attention. A quick fondle. A nuzzle. He moaned

again, and let his tongue loll out of his mouth.

I peeled the underwear down and let his shaft pop out from behind it. The puma was surprisingly well-hung. A shame he'd been so shy about it before. I gave the length a nuzzle, listening for more sounds of delight from Patrick, and I wasn't disappointed.

Then I took it in my mouth and started bobbing back and forth on the length. I could hear the puma getting more and more excited, the shaft throbbing and leaking pre into my mouth.

A week before, I would have been disgusted by that whole scenario. But there, then, I was loving it. It was the best thing I'd ever felt, bringing pleasure to poor Patrick, so lonely and misguided for so long. Even better than the experiences in his apartment and in the temple. More than those, this felt right.

I started to feel something. A connection, both to Patrick and to some other force outside of us. And as I pulled my lips over his shaft, I could feel something lifting from him. Simultaneously, I could sense his pleasure as though it were my own, and I knew how close he was.

I slammed my mouth over as much of his shaft as I could, and I felt the length spasm as he let out a mighty groan. I could tell he was pumping his seed into my throat, but it was so far back that I couldn't feel it.

I kept my mouth there for several more moments while Patrick's eyelids drooped and his posture slumped, still barely supported by the building.

That force, the connection, faded slowly. The tribute had been offered.

Satisfied, I pulled my head away from him and put his spent member back behind his boxerbriefs, zipping him up and coming back to eye level.

"Felarin, you've done well. Know that Dul-Måt is pleased."

"Yes, sir." He mumbled, eyes still closed. "Pleased...Felt good..."

"It is important you listen to my words now. Do not mention what happened here to Apollo or the others. If anyone asks what transpired, you and Trent had a conversation because the music was too loud. It was nothing of consequence, just classes." I ordered to Patrick, not realizing I had referred to myself in the third person.

"Yes, sir." He responded.

"When we break our kiss, you will come back to your proper state of mind."

"Yes, sir."

I leaned in and kissed him. The puma was clearly inexperienced, but he was enjoying it as well as I did. I could have let it break easily, but he deserved to have a longer, more passionate kiss.

"Whoa, guys." I heard a voice say. "Didn't mean to interrupt."

I broke the kiss, and the world slammed back in on me. Everything, all the things I did and said as soon as I heard those fucking words in that fucking song, because something was messing with my fucking head.

It had been so different. I was in an entirely different state of mind, one that I found myself entirely okay with until that exact moment.

That moment when Apollo stared at me, kissing Patrick on the mouth, and not in the way "just friends" kiss on the mouth, if they *ever* did.

Patrick gulped, eyes glancing from me to Apollo.

"It...It's not—" I stumbled.

"Are you guys drunk enough to go home yet?" Patrick said over me.

Apollo just kind of stared for a few seconds. "Fuck yeah, man." He said. "Bitches, man. Nobody wants to celebrate finals being over the right way. Just... bitches." He repeated.

Patrick glanced at me. "Just play along, okay?"

I nodded, frightened.

It took an uncomfortably long time to gather up the other three and convince them all to get back in the car, but we managed it.

Driving back from the Red Room, I realized that my body had processed the two beers I drank over the night already. I was utterly sober. Patrick drove, I sat shotgun while the other three, drunk beyond belief, sat passed out in the backseat.

"Trent." Patrick said. "What the hell, man." It wasn't a question. It was a statement. "What happened back there?"

"I'm not entirely sure." I said, looking away from him, out at the lights along the shore. The boardwalk was lit up, summer night rides creeping into motion every once in a while.

"I mean, I'm not complaining about how it felt because...because *goddamn*, man." He said. "I've never felt that good before."

He offered a weird, weak smile, and I looked over, returning one just like it to him. Patrick was a really nice guy. Sweet. Caring. Interested in cool stuff. I'd known him for barely a day and he was already worried about me.

I liked him. More than I cared to admit. He was the kind of person I wish I had with me in high school.

"But I thought you had a girlfriend, man." He said.

I winced and turned back to the shoreline of lights. "I do."

"Does she know?"

"Know what?"

"That you're gay. Or bi. Or whatever." Patrick bit his lip, gripping the wheel tight. "This whole Dul-Mât thing...it wasn't a joke was it? Or just some way to get close to me? Please, Trent. I mean, you're wearing a leather collar too. It's like

you were built to turn me on."

"Patrick." I said, trying to assemble the words so they made sense, so he'd believe me. "This isn't a joke. It's not a trick. Something really weird is going on, and I need to figure out what to do."

"Trent, what happened down there? In the temple."

And I just opened up and told him. Everything. All that I did after meeting him at Jake's, how I got into the temple, how some invisible being fucked me, how I woke up with the leather on, how I ran home and couldn't get it off, how I ended up falling under that lion in the mirror's power, and what was going through my mind the whole time at the club.

I finished right as Patrick pulled up next to my apartment.

"I love Leesa, I really do." I said to him. "We've been there for each other for so long, and we've gotten so close. I always pictured us settling down, building a life together after college." I sighed. "But I never asked her about it. I just planned it."

"Listen, man." Patrick said. "This weekend, give me a call, okay? We'll figure this out. All this temple shit, the dreams. I've even got some nasty fuckin' scissors for the leather, okay?"

"Okay." I smiled, weakly. "See you then."

"Take care, man." He said as I got out of the car. I closed the door and he waved before driving off, to deliver the drunkards to their respective homes.

I felt so tired, but my mind was reeling from all that kept happening. I barely noticed myself pull out my keys and head into the apartment.

When I turned the lights on, I saw that there was a note left on the dining table, addressed to me.

"Trent.

About a half-hour ago, Apollo texted me and said he saw you leaving the Red Room with his gay friend. And he said that he saw you two kissing. I know you, Trent. You don't get horny or bi-curious when you're drunk. I don't know what's going on, but right now I can't talk about it. Not during finals week. I've been feeling like our relationship doesn't matter to either of us anymore. I'm spending tonight and tomorrow at Serena's place. I'll be back on Saturday to pick up my stuff and find another place to crash for the summer, unless you're ready to talk things out. I love you, but something's not working, and unless we can fix it, we're over.

-Leesa."

The worst part was I'm pretty sure there were tear stains on the note. Leesa might have been the type to make sure they were there, but that doesn't change the fact she cried.

I sat down in my chair and felt the leather on my chest rub against my scales, reminding me of how I got in this mess.

What the fuck am I supposed to do now? I thought.

And then I furrowed my brow, deciding I'd been toyed around by Dul-Mât enough.

I was going to find him, even if it meant going back to the temple, and I was going to get him to explain everything and set me free from all this bullshit.

Right, because demanding something from a god worked out so well for every other mortal.

I was really starting to hate myself.

PART III

I made a couple drunken mistakes, I've been having dreams about an old god, and my girlfriend is leaving me.

Things are going, overall, pretty terrible.

Much as I tried that night, I had trouble sleeping. Part of me didn't want to dream up a journey back into the temple before I was ready, afraid I'd wake up some kind of lusty maniac, but the other part just wanted some rest after everything that happened.

And it was still finals week. Sort of.

By Friday of every finals week, everyone's tests are done, and professors are required to submit final grades over the weekend.

So, naturally, that Friday was spent celebrating for most students. Teacher aides and profs, too, I imagined.

But me, well, I was having what I thought was a well-deserved breakdown. It

made me kind of understand how Leesa felt when she crashed every couple of months. I always thought she was partly doing it for attention, but it really just felt like my mind got cracked like an egg and was getting scrambled while I tried to sort things out.

Leesa. Leaving a note about hearing I kissed Patrick (on the mouth, not the way friends do) and then just running off. I would have told her off for running away from her problems, but I started to understand. She just couldn't take it. She needed time to process everything.

And she had no idea about the truth.

I planned to go back to the temple under the mission come the morning, and it took me hours just to feel tired enough to lay my head on my pillow and sleep. And hours more until it finally came.

Thankfully, it was entirely dreamless.

Because Dul-Mât had better pathways into my head by then.

When I woke, it was still barely before noon. Light was flooding in despite the best efforts of my blinds. As I slid out of bed, I saw that I had another hard-on and sighed.

"You're getting to be as obnoxious as you were in middle school." I said to it.

As if it could defend itself.

At least I didn't immediately lapse into some kind of hazy sex trance, I

thought. I was really starting to hate that. Not during it, of course, but after, like when you first start masturbating and think you're kind of a terrible person because of the hormones.

Or maybe that was just me.

I didn't bother showering or eating breakfast. I just put on the most reasonable clothes I could find that hid the leather outfit underneath. I didn't dare touch the straps with my bare fingers, thinking it would just start the whole problem over again.

Before going out, I looked at myself in the mirror.

The same Trent from last week, just a little different. Still tall. Still big. Still a little out of shape. Still built like a football player. A football player at a college without a football team.

But I had my leather collar, and the wrist cuffs that stood out from under my hoodie. The ashen colored sweatshirt looked frumpy and depressed while it sat on me.

I resolved not to let myself stay this way. Something was going to change.

Time to get some answers. Time to confront a god.

I parked outside the mission, with an otherwise empty parking lot around me. Even the Lacerta woman was gone.

Nobody wondered who I was as I entered the sanctuary. Nobody was there to stop me from slipping into the sacristy. Nobody gave me a funny look when I slammed my middle finger into the ring of the eight-point star in the wall and gently rubbed at outside to get it to release my finger.

The false wall clicked and swung lightly away from the room, ajar.

I stepped through and closed the door behind me, lighting my way with my phone for a second time.

As I descended the claustrophobic staircase, I started to think about how I was going to ask Dul-Måt to explain it all.

Rebellious? "Dul-Måt, you'll set things straight in my life or..." Or what? I'd threaten him? No.

Penitent? "O Gracious Dul-Måt, please enlighten me to your decision-making process." That couldn't possibly end well.

Maybe I'd just run at him and tackle the motherfucker.

I decided just to say it however I felt like saying it in the moment. Maybe that's what Dul-Måt wants, anyway.

Carefully descending, I had to wonder if this is what the old Felarin monks felt. Whether Dul-Måt fucked with their heads the way he fucked with mine.

I pictured a Felarin from long ago stepping down the stairs with me, dressed

in those old fabric robes, holding a torch up. He turned and looked at me, and I saw the same leather collar around his neck. Of course I'm not the first. He gave a weak smile and continued downward.

But if I wasn't the first, why pick me, a Lacertan? A descendant of one of the race that tore down the temple and killed His subjects? And why pick me now?

Lost in my mind, I almost didn't notice the light of the temple underneath, outlining the door to the chamber.

My little imaginary monk friend was gone. It was just me. Demanding answers from a god.

Here goes.

I pocketed my phone and pushed the door open.

The temple looked just like it did before, save for one key difference. The massive lion, the one I saw in the mirror in the bathroom, the one that made me feel so heavenly in that half-dream before my night out at the club, was sitting on the throne, leaning forward and smirking at me, staring intently.

I sheepishly closed the door behind me, then glanced at his eyes. The orange-yellow eyes so beautiful and warm.

I realized quickly that I was not properly dressed to be in His presence, and I hastily disrobed. How could I forget? One does not approach Dul-Mât with needless apparel on one's body.

And then I shook my head a little bit, like snapping out of a daydream. *Okay don't look at the eyes again if you can help it.* I thought.

I stepped closer, swallowing back my fear and anxiety.

When I was a couple dozen feet from him, I saw him lift his hand to signal me to stop. I stood in place without realizing I had a choice.

"Kuriusitatis, libenter hunc secundum quod vidisti." He said, his voice low and smooth.

I blinked a few times. "I'm sorry, what?"

He tilted his head and furrowed his brow. It was kind of cute, like a confused kitten. Then he stared at me intently again, and I couldn't help but make eye contact.

I felt a shiver and my body twitched in several places. No compulsions or desires. Instead, I felt...scanned.

Dul-Måt sat back in the throne, his posture still impressive and commanding.

"I see," he said. "This inefficient language is what you use now." He offered a little laugh, smiling. "Though you responded well, without knowing the translation. Curious, I must admit, that you approach me now, after all that you have seen and done. Out of all of those who have refused my Call, you are of the few to find me on your own volition. You must be curious as well." Hot damn, it was like listening to a radio show host reading your favorite piece of poetry. Except all the time. Silky smooth.

I gulped. "Yeah, what the fuck, man?"

"What the fuck, man?" That's how you follow it up?

"You are confused. Understandably so. I saw in your mind that you know of me, and my domains."

I nodded. "Yeah, passion and the present."

"Correct."

My eyes slipped down and took in his body again. He was so powerfully built, and yet graceful and dignified in even the smallest movements.

Or maybe that was just how I saw him.

"Can you...Can you just explain this? Why I had those dreams? Why these leather things are on me? Why you picked me for your call or whatever?"

"So many questions." He smirked. "And yet, I gain no pleasure in answering them for myself."

"Do I just pick one or something?"

"No. A game, perhaps. For every question you ask, I will provide an honest, complete answer. It may not be what you want to hear, but I will give it to you. In return, you must answer a question of mine, and I will not accept lies. In addition, you will fall further under my power."

"That doesn't seem fair." I said.

"Gods and mortals are not of equal measure. Our agreements follow this."

I bit my tongue a little, and continued. "How will we know when the game is over?"

"When you accept the Call." He said, his lips curling into a smile.

Nope. Nope nope nope. Turn around. Run back. Go home. You can figure all this out. You have time. Go get Leesa. Go find Patrick. Hell, call the police.

"Okay." I said.

Dul-Mât opened his hand toward me and smiled. For some reason, I only then noticed that the guy was sitting naked. Maybe my eyes just never glanced down there. Maybe I had other things on my mind. But he was packing. Oh boy, was he packing.

"You may begin." The lion spoke.

"What is the Call?" I asked. "Explain it to me."

"Throughout time, I have an Acolyte at my side, a mortal like yourself. My Acolyte serves me and serves as authority of my desires, whatever I wish to enact upon this realm. He or she spends his or her time beside me, fulfilling my wishes and aiding other mortals who require assistance in matters of my domain.

"The Call," Dul-Mât continued, "is the process of finding my next Acolyte. The Call begins when I reach out to my chosen tribute, and ends when that tribute accepts his or her place at my side."

"This is not the kind of call I can refuse, is it?" I asked, gulping.

"No." The lion said, then chuckled. "And I will count that as parcel of your first question." He resettled himself on his throne and looked at me again. "My first question: You came here unprovoked, seeking answers. Why did you decide to find me, and what do you hope for me to do?"

I was about to get on his case for asking two questions when I felt a shiver flow around my body. I let out a stuttered moan and blinked a few times. My vision blurred at the edges, and Dul-Mât's body seemed to shine out toward me like a pop-up book.

The motherfucker was hot.

Question. I had a question to answer. "All this, everything that's happened to me. The dreams, the visions, the outfit, the desires. I want it to go away. I want my life back. My girlfriend is going to leave me. I'm ruining my friendships. I was thinking I could speak with you, and ask you to take it back. To choose someone else, maybe. I'm not even a Felarin, my ancestors never worshipped you. I don't belong here. I shouldn't be your Acolyte."

"Did you truly expect I would do that? Give your former life back to you?"

"No," I said. "But I had to try. If I didn't try, then I was just giving up." The words came out of me, surprising my conscious self. Maybe it had something to

do with Dul-Mât's power. Or maybe I was just having one of those drunken epiphanies, without the drunkenness.

"My next question." I said. "What did you do to me? From the start."

"I found your spirit residing in my city. My spatial domain. I chose you and gave you the Call." He spoke. "This began your series of dreams, summoning you here. Left ignored, the call will take over your mind and bring you here against your will, but I prefer my Acolytes to find me in their own way. When you arrived, I gave you the Rite of Initiation and sealed the Markings of the Acolyte upon you."

"The Markings of the Acolyte are a bunch of leather BDSM gear?"

"Who do you think they got it from?"

Fuckin' Hell, he was serious.

"The first act of every Acolyte is to collect further tribute for me. They choose a person they love and confide their secret, then offer me tribute through unlocking desire inside them."

I shook my head. "No, not Patrick." I said, my voice breaking a little. "You can't take him too, he doesn't deserve this."

The lion nodded. "He was not chosen. He was merely a medium through which you offered tribute. You have shown him passion that he had not known, that is enough."

"Shortly after that," He continued, "Each Acolyte comes to terms with accepting the Call and resides at my right hand. But you have come back before accepting the Call." He leaned forward again, his elbows resting on his thighs, hands locked together. "That makes you a curious Acolyte of mine. Perhaps the most curious.

"My question: Why did you come to my city?" He asked, and again, I felt another shiver slide up and down my body. I looked straight at his body and imagined myself running my hands up and down his chest, arms and legs, pressing my face against his pecs, kissing him, sliding my tongue along his—

"To study." I barked, willing back the sexual images of the things I would do to him. And what wonderful things I wanted to do to him.

He shook his head. "Dishonesty will get you nothing, Acolyte. Speak truth."

"But it is true!" I exclaimed. "USanC has prestige and a good business major. That's why—"

"It is not what you tell people. Not what you tell your loved ones."

I picked USanC because it didn't have a football team. I wouldn't have to slam myself into a locker room full of awkward, smelly dudes and force myself to pretend to care about them.

I wouldn't have to look at them. I wouldn't have to become friends with them. I wouldn't have to wonder how things would be if I could just muster up the courage to talk to them about how I really felt. About how they made me feel.

About how I had to hide in a different part of the locker room when I changed so they wouldn't see it.

"I...I didn't want to be surrounded by them." The words just came out. But they were all me. "I didn't want to get close and force myself to bury how I felt about them. I didn't want to be just friends. I wanted more." I felt a little part of me shatter and I couldn't pick up the pieces without bleeding. "Why did you ask me? If you already knew..."

"Sometimes it is more important to ask than to answer. Give me your next question." He said.

I wanted to stop. I didn't like the way I was feeling. It hurt.

"Trent." He said, calling me by my name for the first time. "Do not try to escape the moment. Ask your question."

"Why...Why did you pick me? Me of all people? I'm Lacerta. I'm not even *from* here. Why choose me?"

The lion beckoned me closer and I found myself stepping toward him. Every inch I closed between us brought me more warmth and peace while he spoke.

"I choose my next Acolyte by finding the spirit in my domain that stands to heal the most from serving me. I found you, floating in the wastes of your obsession with what may come. I have met your kind before, future-thinker. You spend your days worried over the ones to come without realizing you are wasting the present on a life you may not ever see.

"Of all the mortals in my domain, Acolyte. You stood with the most to gain from being chosen. And so I made my selection."

"But...Leesa. Patrick. Apollo. Mum and Dad..." I mumbled. "What will they think? What will happen to them?"

"Not important." The lion said. "You may ask after my question, provided you resist the Call. Now consider this: Your lover, the one who lives with you. I sense that you are afraid of hurting her by loving the man whose passion you awakened. Why do you think that it is impossible to love two people the way you do?"

And then it hit me again, the wave of pleasure over my body, falling further and further into Dul-Mât's spiritual embrace. Warm and satisfying, I felt safe and loved. It wasn't an influence on me, but rather, giving me the freedom to let out what I really wanted to say.

"I...I was always told of two people. Just two people, together forever. That is how it's always been shown to me." I said. "I thought that's how it is for everyone."

"And that is enough for many. But it is not for all mortals. It is not for you."

"Leesa. I love her. We've been through so much together. We met in high school, but we only started dating in college. She helped me when I got drunk and stopped me from making horrible mistakes. I've helped her get through her toughest classes, through the anxiety of her tests and grades."

"An intimacy forged through fire." Dul-Mât said.

"Patrick. I love him. Not in the same way as Leesa. I only met him because of this whole thing, but he never questioned me. He trusted me, and I trust him. I would call him naïve but there was a connection between us from the beginning. He's the only person I ever wanted to tell about this. I wanted to show him my gratitude, and it came out as passion, because he's never felt it the way I have..."

"I ask you again, Acolyte. Why do you think it is impossible to love two people the way you do?"

I thought. Deep down, reaching for an answer. And I found one.

"I don't."

Dul-Måt smiled at me and stood up, stepping forward to me. He reached out his hand and slid his finger along my jawline. A thousand bolts of pleasure sparked from there and traveled over my body.

"And now you understand, Acolyte. Why you must stop thinking and start loving."

I did. He slipped that hand to my shoulder and looked me in the eyes. I stared back into his, into those fiery yellow-orange depths, and willingly let myself fall into them. That compulsion, that anxiety and excitement that was now so familiar, flowed over me.

"I accept the Call." I said.

I felt the wonderfully hazy fog cloud my vision, only Dul-Måt's glorious body

remaining in focus for me. I fell to my knees at no provocation, my face level with the lion's crotch. I leaned in and buried my face in his fur, reaching out and stroking his thigh warmly.

I heard a faint rumble from within his body, and took it as a signal to continue. My hand drifted over to his balls, gently cupping and fondling them, watching the shaft above engorge itself in a matter of seconds.

I slid it along my snout and smiled, my hand slipping to form a ring with my fingers around the base of the member. It was far too large for me to hope to fit entirely in my mouth, but I wanted to try. As I put my lips around it, the length miraculously fit within and I slowly but surely took it all the down to the hilt.

I tried not to think about the apparently magic dick in my mouth and focused on the pleasure I felt from worshipping Dul-Mât's body, and I realized that the cock ring around my own shaft had tightened, giving me a throbbing, sensitive hard-on.

I felt the lion's hand slide to my neck and scratch gently there, and my shaft felt like it was being sucked by my own mouth while I bobbed back and forth on his.

It was heavenly.

After a while, I lost my ability to sense the passing of time. It was just Dul-Mât and me, there in the temple, bringing pleasure to each other.

In the hours we spent together, my libido never faded. Each time I came, I felt a beautiful afterglow that melted into the start of another plateau of pleasure, and we just kept going.

Eventually, for a while, we settled on the throne where I sat straddling Dul-Mât's body, with my face in his chest, eyes closed as he held me close. His arms slid up and down my back, bringing those loving tingles of pleasure.

In the distance, I heard voices singing. Words I couldn't make out, and pretty harmonies that floated into my ears.

"Is that real?" I asked the lion.

"Yes. Though they do not sing for us, we shall enjoy it regardless." He said, that smooth voice melting all over me. "Won't we." He said, more of statement than a question.

"Yeah."

I nuzzled his chest again and let out a happy groan.

At some point, after we had spent ourselves countless times, Dul-Mât directed me to stand before him. I happily obeyed, expecting that I would get some kind of honor bestowed on me.

But instead, he took his seat back on the throne and clasped his hands together, lacing fingers between each other.

And I felt the fog lift once more.

I gasped and stumbled forward, catching myself. Again that rush of the world crushing down on me. Finals. Leesa. The apartment. The lease. Patrick. That kiss.

"What..." I mumbled. "How..."

"Acolyte, it is time I give you the ultimatum."

I gulped. "Ultimatum?"

"You have three days to sever ties with your loved ones and your institutions." The lion said. "After that, you will spend one hundred days with me, serving at my right hand."

A hundred days. How was I supposed to disappear for a hundred days? What kind of excuse could explain that?

The lion continued. "If anyone attempts to find you or discovers your identity as my Acolyte. You will spend a further one hundred years serving me."

Oh no.

"But that would be the rest of my life!"

"Many Acolytes of mine have spent their entire adult lives serving me."

"I...I can't do that. I'm going to graduate. I've got to go out and find a job. Go live. Start a family someday."

"Is this the truth, or another lie you tell yourself to reassure your future?"
Dul-Måt.

I didn't know.

The leather strips, the Markings, fell from my body. I looked down and saw that my scales were slightly darker where they had been. I saw the circles of leather on the floor.

"You are free from my influence for three days, Acolyte. On the dawn of the fourth, my power will bring you back here."

He disappeared from his throne.

My heart raced.

"What am I supposed to do? Supposed to say?" I yelled out to him, but only the ambient flickering of torches answered me.

I heaved a sigh and walked back to my pile of clothes, slowly, shamefully putting them on.

I saw two options. I could just apologize to everyone and try to enjoy the last three days of my waking life. Because who wouldn't try to look for me? Spend another night with Leesa. Say goodbye to Patrick and Apollo. Have one last slice of pizza on the beach.

Or I could try to alienate everyone in my life. Make them hate me enough so they wouldn't want to find me. But then what would happen after those hundred days? I'd get sent back out into a world that didn't want me back.

I pulled out my phone and saw that it had nearly drained itself of its battery. The time and date: 11:21 AM, Saturday, June 8.

Oh shit.

I had fucked my way entirely through Friday.

I ran up the stairs and out to my car. I had to get back to the apartment. I had to find Leesa.

When I drove up next to the apartment, I saw Leesa's car there, trunk open, bags spilling out, boxes sitting next to it. Neither of us had much, and the apartment came furnished. I was lucky to catch her when I did.

I parked like an asshole and ran to the door, bursting in to find Leesa sitting placidly on the couch with a box of tissues in her hand, her face damp with tears. She looked up at me, lip twitching.

"Why does everything during finals week have to suck so much?"

I bit my lip and closed the door.

"I tried to call you." She said. "To see if you were home. If you wanted to say anything."

I lifted my phone from my pocket. "Battery died. Forgot to charge it."

She sniffled and smirked. "Mister Responsible forgot to charge his phone. I should put it on the calendar." Every word came through her sad little tone. She was good at sounding pitiful. She could use it to her advantage, force it if she wanted to. But this wasn't forced. It was never forced with me.

I plugged my phone in to my computer, letting it charge, and then sat down next to her.

"Sorry for bailing the other night." She said. "I couldn't handle it. Not then. Not right after the test. I wanted to be an adult and talk about it, but—" She cut herself off by blowing her nose into the tissue.

I nodded. "Serena helped you out, right?"

"Yeah. She kinda talked shit about you. Made me feel better."

"I deserve it." I said. "I've been...learning a lot of stuff about myself in the past couple of days."

"That's kind of what Apollo said."

I sighed. "Yeah. I'm not proud of what happened that night."

"So what is it?" She said, grabbing another tissue and blowing her nose.

"What did your soul-searching teach you about yourself?"

I reached over and grabbed her hand. "It taught me that I love you. More than I thought I did."

She gave me an incredulous look. "You realize how you sound, don't you? You kissed another guy and now suddenly you love me more?"

I shook my head. "I've always loved you this much. Because we've been in this together, from the moment we met. But I've been afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid of holding you back. I dreamed of us building a life together after college, having kids, growing old." I blushed. "Hardcore commitment stuff. And I didn't want to scare you off."

"It's...That's sweet. But I don't see how this factors into you kissing a guy."

"I never told you. I've been denying it myself." I said, my mouth suddenly dry. "But the real reason I wanted to come here was because..."

"Because Santa Christina didn't have a football team." She repeated. "But I don't get it."

"I wanted a school that wouldn't pressure me into being on a team. So I wouldn't have to spend hours in the locker room, trying to hide the fact that I was attracted to guys."

She blinked at me. "So you're gay?"

I shook my head. "I'm bi. Or maybe something else. I could never have been with you if I was gay. I love you too much. But I was lying to everyone, including me, when I kept saying I was straight."

She put her head down and leaned into me. I thought maybe she was going to just give up and weep openly on the spot.

"You big stupid ass." She mumbled. "I kept thinking I was a bad girlfriend. Like I did something wrong." I heard a chuckle. "Shoulda just told me."

I reached my arm around and held her close to me, kissing the top of her head. I heard a little rumble, like a purr.

"There's something else." I said.

Bzz Bzz Bzz.

But before I could continue, I heard the vibrating of my phone against my desk.

"Don't pick it up." Leesa said.

"...Could be the landlady." I retorted. She grunted, acquiescing and leaned off me so I could check.

[INCOMING CALL: 831 555 6961]

Not the landlady. But I was already there. Might as well pick it up.

"Hello?" I asked.

"Hi, may I speak with Trent? I'm Nina from Esconterra Marketing."

The internship.

"Uh, speaking." I said.

"Yes, you applied for an intern position with us a few weeks ago."

"Yeah. Do you have any news regarding that?"

"Unfortunately, we already have three qualified applicants but I can put you on a waitlist. At the moment, you would be eighth on the waitlist. If any of the positions open up and you're next on the waitlist, you'll be notified."

"I see." I said.

"Thank you for your interest, Trent. I'm sorry that we couldn't provide this opportunity. Competition for internships is rather fierce."

"Yeah."

"Do you have any questions?"

"No, I think I understand it all."

"Have a good day."

She hung up.

I looked down at my phone as the [CALL ENDED] floated into view.

I have met your kind before, future-thinker. You spend your days worried over the ones to come without realizing you are wasting the present on a life you may not ever see.

That's what Dul-Måt had said.

A hundred days.

Three months and change.

Fourteen weeks.

Summer.

It was a bad idea. But it was my only idea. And it was only bad because it didn't do a damn thing for my future.

Maybe Dul-Måt was right. Maybe it was time to think about the present for once. To stop thinking and start loving. Maybe there was a way out of this where nobody would go looking for me, where I could come back without hurting anyone.

"Who was it?" Leesa asked from the couch.

I set the phone down. "The Marketing firm."

"Calling about the internship? Did you get it?"

I smiled. "Yeah. They want me to fly out to their HQ in three days."

"Holy shit." She exclaimed. "They must have loved your application."

I nodded. I continued the lie, explaining that they'd put me up in sublet with the other interns and I'd be helping on a confidential project, so I had to leave all my social media during the time.

Leesa kept her smile the whole time. Finally we could start closing things out. She'd stay with Serena for the summer, we'd come back to the apartment together in the fall. The landlady would rent the place for the summer like she always did.

And then the conversation turned back to me.

"Before the call." She said, leaning against me, muzzle pressed against my chest. "You were going to say something."

"Oh yeah." I said, then swallowed. "This is going to be the tough part."

She looked up at me, confused.

"I...I realized in the last couple of days that...I have room in my heart to love more than one person. I love you, I really, truly do. And I think I can love someone else the same way."

"So..."

"So I'm saying that if you find someone during the summer. Someone you get to know. Someone you trust. Someone you grow to love, don't stop yourself because you love me. That's not a good reason to turn someone away."

She nodded a little bit.

"I just...I'll need a little time to mull that over." She said. "But I believe you. I've always questioned that kind of stuff, but I told myself that it's okay as long as I find someone wonderful."

Finally, a pleasant surprise for a change.

"This doesn't mean we're breaking up, does it?" She asked.

"That's entirely up to you. I'd understand if you weren't comfortable with this."

She shook her head and pushed her muzzle into me again.

"I just want to keep loving you." She said. "...Stupidhead."

Over the next three days, I gave my alibi to all the appropriate people, had some of the best sex ever with Leesa, and piled all my belongings into my car.

She and I shared a little tearful goodbye, knowing we'd see each other again in the fall.

I drove to a self-storage company and paid for three and a half months up front, unloaded my car and said goodbye to the finer things of my mortal life for a while.

I parked my car at a lot on the edge of town, the kind of place that charged per month and served as a spot for people whose leases forbade extra cars and who didn't want to deal with on-campus parking fees.

I took a bus back to the mission, empty on another dull June Tuesday, save for the robed woman at the door.

She smiled as I approached from the sidewalk. "You came back. The cat will be so happy."

I tilted my head. "The cat?"

"The one who lives downstairs." She giggled, opening the door and leading me inside. "I imagine you know his name better than we do. He doesn't speak much with us."

"But you know him?"

"Yes, he comes to visit us sometimes." She said. I saw the other woman who ran the gift shop appear from a side door. "He's quite the fluffy one, isn't he?"

"I, uh, never really stopped to consider that."

"I suppose not. I imagine you have much more important things to worry about, being the Acolyte and all. But I do recommend scratching his belly. He likes that."

I heard a little meow and saw the tabby cat from before press itself against the woman's legs, over her robes. "And there he is now." She leaned down and gave the cat a few pets.

The cat looked up at me, and I saw yellow-orange irises behind its eyes. But it darted off, disappearing under a pew.

"If you need anything, Acolyte," the woman said. "We are here to assist you."

"But why?" I asked. "Isn't what I do against your beliefs?"

"Many paths converge on the road to enlightenment. It is not our place to judge one's personal voyage. He has helped us in many ways, and we are happy to reciprocate."

I nodded. "Thank you."

"You're a clever one." She said. "I don't think you'll be here long."

I smiled. "That's the plan."

In a matter of minutes, I descended the stone staircase a third time and found myself before Dul-Mât in all of his leonine glory. It was only proper at this time that I approached him without clothes.

He looked at me and grinned, with that beastly, jovial smile.

"Well done, Acolyte. I trust that you have severed all necessary ties."

"All but one, sir. Though I had hoped to make that one of my first acts as your Acolyte."

I was already slipping back into that wonderful feeling. Knowing that I was safe only made it feel better.

I stood at attention before him, and with a wave of his hand, the Markings of the Acolyte slipped themselves around me once more. Their snug fit gave me comfort and ease.

I looked into the lion's eyes and felt him rummage through my mind.

"A task well-suited to your new position. Very well, you may do so as my Acolyte."

"Thank you sir."

I gave in, and began my first day of one hundred.

That's where you came in.

I had confessed it to you. I told you that I visited the temple. I wanted you to

come back with me.

You told me I gave off vibes. You looked into my eyes and followed me outside. You listened to my voice as I unlocked the passion inside you.

I never got the chance to tell you I loved you.

That night, you had just gone to bed. You were sitting on the edge of your bed. You heaved a sigh, worried about me.

It didn't add up, you thought. All the talk about the temple, then suddenly I was gone for the summer, at an internship where I couldn't contact anyone.

You thought that maybe he got me. That I'd never come back.

You were thinking you'd have to go and find me. That you'd have to save me. Even if it meant going to the police.

But that night, you left your window open.

You felt my hand on your shoulder. You turned and saw me standing there, completely nude, covered in leather. It was like I was built to turn you on.

You looked into my eyes, and you were reminded of that night outside the club. It was easy for you to slip back into that happy state, only in the present.

I helped you stand up, pulled your body close to mine, slid my arms up and down your back. You felt my arousal touch yours and it made you shiver. You felt my finger slide down your jawline and you let out a little moan.

"Don't worry about me." I said. "Know that I love you, and that I will return. Do not question my whereabouts."

You nodded. You understood how important it was to listen to my words.

I slid my hand between your legs and rubbed there, strong but slow. You nearly melted in my grasp.

"I need you to forget. Just for a little while."

"Forget..." you mumbled.

I nodded, instructing you before I began a beautiful night of passion with you. One that we both had been waiting years for.

"I need you to forget who I really am."

"Forget who you really are..." You echoed, a dull monotone.

"The Acolyte of Dul-Mât."