

HUNGER PAINS



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OFFICERS ate last. It was Marine Corps policy. The Lieutenant knew it. Sergeant Skye Lowrey knew it, too, but that didn't make it any easier to watch the dejected slump of Lieutenant Hockley's shoulders as his men lined up to eat.

Half-rations sucked for everybody, but the LT had taken it harder than most. His already-thin frame looked positively waifish in the cavernous bulk of his camo and MOPP suit. The deep circles that shadowed Hockley's gunmetal eyes were so richly purple, the skin looked almost bruised.

Next to him, Hockley shifted, almost as though he could sense Skye's eyes on him. When Skye's stare lingered, Hockley turned and caught his eye.

"What?" Hockley snapped. As he spoke, his full, upper lip curled back to reveal a row of perfect white teeth. Skye shivered. Hockley had earned something of a reputation for that feral sneer. It had cowed more than one uppity Private First Class into silence. Skye himself had provoked that look a thousand times over the long course of their friendship if he'd done it once. But it didn't matter how many times he saw it. It still made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

"Nothing," Skye replied. His stomach rumbled as he spoke. Skye grimaced, hating it (as he always did) when his body betrayed a physical weakness. If Officers ate last,

Senior NCOs didn't eat much before that, and Skye's hunger pains had kicked in a good seventy-two hours earlier.

Now, Skye's stomach seemed to have turned on him. It yawned (Skye thought) like a big, black hole that threatened to consume him from the inside out. As it gurgled again, Skye flinched. Hockley's lips twitched at the sound and gradually eased back into their normal grimace.

"You, too, huh?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Lieutenant," Skye said stiffly.

"Bullshit," Hockley answered. This time, though, there was no venom in his voice. Just fatigue. Skye sighed, wondered when he'd last seen Hockley eat, and came up blank. "I can hear you thinking from here, Sergeant," Hockley prodded after a time.

"I imagine that's so, Sir," Skye said. Hockley's situational awareness was legendary, even in the Corps. There were times when he seemed to have an almost preternatural sense for what was going on around him. He could read the emotions of his men with uncanny accuracy and often seemed to know what the enemy would do before they knew it themselves.

But his skills weren't foolproof. Skye knew the LT thought he was hiding his distress. It bothered him more than he cared to admit that Hockley still thought he could hide himself from Skye the way he could from the rest of the platoon.

Behind closed doors, Hockley's broad face was an expressive one. But the LT had a deep suspicion about

officers who showed too much emotion in front of their men. In public, he schooled his face into something resembling a marble mask. It had taken years of effort (of consciously chipping away at that stony façade) for Skye to see the man that lay behind it.

But by now, Skye was so well schooled at reading his Lieutenant that he could see his discomfort even here, in the middle of a crowded mess tent on the eve of war. It was there in the subtle trembling of the LT's fingers as he scrubbed a hand over his face. Present in Hockley's jaw, which was clenched so tight, it made Skye's teeth ache in sympathy. Not that Skye blamed him.

He'd seen his fair share of combat. Skye had completed two tours in Afghanistan before being shipped out here, to the desolate, desert wastelands of Iraq. But no matter where you were in the world, waiting for war was always the hardest part. In combat, training kicked in. Adrenaline narrowed the body's focus to pure instinct. Many, if not most, Marines could keep their cool under fire.

It was during the long slog up to battle that tensions ran highest. Over the past few weeks, Skye had felt the stress and worry build inside him until it was almost a physical thing, as real as the blood running through his veins. He felt it now, as he looked around him.

Days like today, colossal fuck-ups seemed as imminent as the *shamal*, the sand storm brewing on the horizon outside. The sky was so clear out here that their visibility stretched a hundred miles away in any direction. They'd watched the storm gather all afternoon. The cloud of dirt and

wind hadn't struck camp yet but likely would before the night was through.

The mess tent seemed to hum with the same tension as the air outside. Skye didn't have to look at Hockley to know he was scanning the room, waiting for someone to snap. For some table or other to erupt in violence. Skye could sense it, simmering below the surface clamor of their platoon-mates: twenty-three bored, angry men with not enough guidance and too much time on their hands.

The interior of the structure stank of yesterday's PT gear and gunpowder residue. It rang with the noise of shouts and catcalls and the metallic clang of weapons and silverware. Skye's hands slipped on the muzzle of his M16. They'd grown slick as he'd stood there. The body heat of the men wrapped around him like a thready blanket. Skye's head was spinning with it. He envied the LT his composure.

But even as he thought it, a crack appeared in the Lieutenant's surface calm. He shifted, muttered a quiet, "Fuck this!" and finally slipped past Skye, through the tent flap that passed for an open door, and into the waiting arms of the Iraqi evening. Suddenly alone, Skye stood blinking in the harsh glare of the fluorescent lights overhead. Frowning, he peered through the flap and watched as Hockley trudged away from the shelter of camp and out towards the exposed, shifting surface of the dunes.

"Jesus, bro," a voice said, beside him. Startled, Skye jumped as the big, brawny form of Giovanni Costa settled near the side of the tent beside him. He carried a tray with him. On it was slopped a pile of something that might once

have resembled spaghetti in a former life. “The hell did you do to piss off the LT so bad?”

“I didn’t,” Skye answered, wishing he were as sure of that as he sounded. The Lieutenant had been on edge lately. His normally pleasant conversation had been littered with the kinds of thistles and barbs that Skye expected from other officers, but not from *his* Lieutenant. Hockley was (had always been) different. A few weeks ago (if anyone had asked him) Skye would have said that his bond with the LT could have withstood anything. Now, he was not so sure.

“Sure,” Giovanni snickered.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Skye asked. Giovanni’s eyes widened at his tone. Skye didn’t blame him. Even *he* heard the flash of irritation in his voice. Frowning, Skye willed it away.

He’d known Giovanni even longer than he’d known Hockley. Normally, he appreciated the other man’s needling. Relied on it more than he’d ever admit out loud. Giovanni drew him out of his shell, helped him open up the same way Skye hoped he helped the LT. On any other evening, the man’s loud, energetic presence would have been a welcome one. Tonight, it annoyed him.

“Don’t think we don’t all know how it is between you and the LT, brother,” Giovanni said with a broad smile as he twirled his fork in the mush on his tray.

“And how would that be?” Skye ground his teeth together so hard, he wondered if Giovanni could hear him. If he did, he didn’t show it.

“You *know!*” Giovanni said, in a voice full of meaning. When Skye remained silent, Giovanni added, “First with the bickering, then with the love.” He paused. “Then with a little more love. For fuck’s sake, homes, it’s so obvious every man in the battalion can see it. Don’t tell me I have to explain this shit to you.”

Heat rose in Skye’s cheeks. As he gazed into Giovanni’s shit-eating grin with typical, stoic silence, he had the sudden, horrible suspicion that he was blushing. Cherokee he might be, but only on his father’s side (and then, distantly). He had the high cheekbones and dark hair of his tribe, but his skin was every bit as pale as his Irish mother’s. When caught in the grip of strong emotion (whether that be embarrassment, anger, or arousal) his skin broadcast his feelings clear as the big, black lettering of the marquee at the dollar theater back home.

Gathering the tattered remains of his dignity, Skye straightened. “I’m going after him,” he said, meaning Hockley.

“Sure thing, dawg,” Giovanni chuckled. “You do that.”

The thick, rich notes of Giovanni’s laughter pinged off Skye’s skin like so many grains of sand as he stepped out of the claustrophobic circle of the tent and into the cooler air of the gathering dusk outside. The desert was cold at night. Skye had to fight the urge to hunker down into the shelter of his own MOPP suit. And the sun hadn’t even fully sunk yet. It glowed, a red inferno where it clung to the horizon like the arms of a desperate lover, refusing to let go.

Already, the sand had dusted over the trail left by Hockley’s size 12 combat boots. But Skye was a good

tracker, always had been. He picked apart the terrain in front of him, eyes marking out the places where the ground furrowed beneath his feet. Sand swirled around him. It stung his eyes. Turned them red and raw and made them ache, but Skye was stubborn when and where it mattered.

And few things mattered more to him than Hockley. Skye thought of Giovanni's gentle ribbing and wondered if the other man knew how close to home he'd hit. He had to, Skye was sure. If Giovanni's intuitive sense of people wasn't as good as Hockley's (and whose was?) it was almost as good as his intrinsic understanding of machines, and that was saying something. Giovanni fixed things that were broken. Whether that thing was a broken carburetor or a broken heart didn't seem to matter much to him.

For a moment, Skye allowed himself to wonder what would happen if he broke down and told Giovanni of the... *arrangement* he'd had with Hockley since the last tour. Skye had never known what to call it. He and Hockley weren't lovers. They certainly weren't boyfriends. Their bond had always transcended friendship, so "friends-with-benefits" (or whatever it was the kids were calling it these days) didn't seem to apply, either.

Whatever it was, it worked, and that was the important thing. It worked to ease the loneliness of command. Worked to rid them both of the stress that came with leading a group of half-retarded thugs and frightened teenagers into battle and out again (alive, or so they hoped). If Skye sometimes wanted more than just sex (if he sometimes wanted to clutch the LT close in those hazy, perfect seconds *after*, or hear his name on Colin's lips as he came), well, that was his own problem.

Skye trudged across a particularly bleak and empty stretch of desert and tried to imagine confessing as much to Giovanni. This certainly wasn't the first time it had occurred to him, but he dismissed it as quickly as he always did.

Love (and, privately, Skye could admit there was that, or something like it, between him and the LT) did crazy things to people. It made a man want to shout his feelings from the rafters, or stare dreamily into space for hours at a time. Skye might be better at schooling his expressions than the average civilian, but that didn't mean he was immune to the emotions themselves. It got lonely sometimes, keeping the feelings Hockley stirred inside him locked safe inside.

But loneliness was part and parcel of the Marine Corps way. *The Few*, they were called, for a reason. There was pride there, too, of course, but pride was a cold comfort, not to mention one of the seven deadly sins.

In any case, Skye knew he couldn't tell Giovanni. Things like Don't Ask, Don't Tell existed for a reason. Besides, even if Giovanni didn't care that Skye was seeing another man, the fact Skye was embroiled in a personal relationship with an officer might just give the big Italian pause. Skye had reached the summit of the second dune by the time the thoughts finished chasing each other inside his head. His hands were stiff with cold. Skye flexed his fingers and slapped his palms against his thighs in an effort to warm them.

The trek made Skye grateful for the rigorous months of training he'd endured just to get here. He was in shape, but the long hike over shifting sand still felt like work. It felt like hours by the time Skye reached the crest of one, rolling hill

and saw below him the burned-out hulk of a Humvee. In reality, it was probably only forty minutes.

Skye took a moment to survey the wreck of the vehicle below him. He lacked Giovanni's intuition for mechanics, but he'd taken the time to memorize every component of his own Humvee, down to the last screw. Even in the fading light, he could tell (with only a cursory glance) that this one was several years out-of-date. It was a relic of the last war. Had to be.

As Skye began his descent toward the truck, he wondered how many hours Hockley had whiled away inside the shadow of its bulk. He had no doubt that the LT was here. Hockley craved solitude more than any man Skye knew. It was only natural that he'd find a place like this in which to hide himself away, safe from the chaos and tumult of the camp.

As level ground loomed before him, Skye took a moment to relish the freedom from the prying eyes of his men and the ever-present need for dignity that his rank and position imposed upon him. He slid down the last few feet of the dune's slope, allowing his arms to pinwheel madly at his sides. The sudden rush of exhilaration left Skye breathless. He laughed, nearly tripping over his own feet as he landed. Skye grinned and let the joy of the moment wash over him.

Skye had chalked up Hockley's sudden disappearances over the past few weeks to the endless paperwork of command. It had never occurred to him to search for a place like this: a place where Hockley could retreat from the daily pressures of camp life. That neglect made him faintly embarrassed now. Skye liked to think that he knew just

II

about everything there was to know about the LT. The knowledge that Hockley had been keeping secrets from him (even mild ones) bothered him in ways that Skye didn't quite know how to deal with.

Skye told himself he wasn't intruding as he rounded the vehicle's left flank. Just because Hockley hadn't told him about this place didn't mean that Skye wouldn't be welcome. Skye was always the pursuer where they were concerned. He'd initiated their friendship every bit as much as he had the more physical aspect of their relationship.

It had been years since Hockley had turned down one of Skye's offers of company. Who was to say he wouldn't want some now? After all, Skye might not have any food to give him, but a man had other needs.

Skye felt his cock twitch with interest at the thought. It had been weeks since either of them had sought the comfort that only each other's bodies seemed to give. Hockley had been distant lately. The outburst tonight at mess had been far from the only sign that *something* was seriously eating at the LT. Maybe, Skye thought, a kiss (or three) and a soothing touch would do the trick.

But when Skye stepped around the back of the truck, he pulled up short at what he saw. The LT was here, all right, and huddled in the shadow of one of the Humvee's gigantic wheels. Hockley sat, legs drawn up to his chest. His arms were wrapped around his knees, face pressed to the tops of them. His shoulders shook visibly in the pale light.

Hockley was—yes, Hockley was *crying*. Skye stared. He knew that officers were only human. This wasn't the first time that Skye had seen one of them cave to the enormous

pressures they faced every day, but the fact that it was *Hockley*.... Skye licked his lips and wondered if he should back away. Likely, Hockley wouldn't take kindly to being discovered in his current condition. But retreat was a fool's hope, and Skye knew it.

Hockley had those keen senses; in all probability, he knew that Skye was there. He was just the kind of guy to call Skye on it, too, even if it meant his own embarrassment as well as Skye's. Swallowing his fear of the potential repercussions, Skye decided to take the plunge.

"Sir—" he began. Skye was unsurprised to find that his voice was dry as sandpaper. It was only when Hockley refused to look up that puzzlement began to replace his terror. "Hoc—*Colin*." When even that failed to drag Hockley's eyes up to meet his, Skye approached him cautiously and knelt in the sand at the other man's feet. Perhaps, he thought, he'd misjudged the situation entirely. Maybe the LT would have preferred him to back away.

But he'd broken the barrier of silence. There was no going back now, or so Skye told himself. In the privacy of his own mind, he could not deny that curiosity was a factor as well. He could count on one hand the number of times he'd addressed Hockley by his first name. He'd intended it as bait. That Hockley *wouldn't* rise to it....

"Sir, it's me," Skye quietly identified himself. He settled on his knees in the sand beside Hockley, and when the LT still refused to acknowledge him, muttered, "Damn it, Colin," in a voice thick and rough with worry. "*Look* at me." As though to emphasize his point, Skye pressed his thumb—*hard*—into Hockley's cheek.

“*Don’t!*” Hockley gasped, punctuating his words with a swat at Skye’s hand. “Colin—” Skye started in surprise. He rocked back on his heels. Relief and hurt warred inside him; relief that the LT had finally spoken, hurt that he’d brushed Skye away as though Skye was little more than an irritating fly.

“*Leave,*” Hockley ordered. His voice was rough with tension, and Skye knew that should be the end of it. Under normal circumstances, he would never dare defy a command that blatant, even if it *was* given in private. But this (he already knew) was one order he wasn’t going to obey. His blood was up, as it always was after spending any amount of time in Hockley’s presence.

Skye took a breath and answered, “No, sir,” wondering what it was about the other man that made him this consistently reckless, this willing to push boundaries that he would never push were Hockley any other officer, any other man. “Not until you look at me.”

Hockley cursed and curled into what was (if such a thing was possible) an even tighter ball than before. If Skye had had time to imagine this, he’d have expected the gesture to annoy him. He was surprised when what surged through him instead was a sudden, protective instinct so strong it made him gasp out loud.

It was an absurd emotion. Hockley was a Marine Corps trained killer, recipient of the same multimillion dollars’ worth of training that had honed Skye’s skills to perfection. But Hockley seemed less like the seasoned warrior Skye knew and respected by the second. In his present position,

he bore an uncanny resemblance to a frightened kindergartener.

“I *can't!*” Hockley wailed. In answer, Skye pursed his lips and ran his fingers ruefully through the too-short crop of his hair.

“Sir,” he answered, and as he spoke, he felt truly confident for the first time all evening. “There are no doubt many things that you can't do, but looking at me is not one of them.”

“You won't like what you see.”

Hockley's words were muffled by his bulky camo. Skye had to strain to hear them. At least, he thought, the LT had stopped crying.

“Try me,” he pressed. “I'm an open-minded guy.”

That, at least, was one statement Hockley couldn't argue with. Skye voted Republican and respected both God and his country. If anyone had asked, he'd have called himself a traditionalist. But he had a rebellious streak. The Corps had mostly beaten it out of him by now, but in high school, Skye had hung out primarily with pot-heads and petty drug dealers, the kinds of kids who got caught tagging park benches and classrooms with anarchist symbols. Every once in awhile, that free spirit still reared its ugly head. If his relationship with the LT wasn't a prime example of that, Skye didn't know what was.

Skye heard Hockley hitch a breath. Then, as though in response to Skye's verbal prodding, he lifted his tear-streaked face slowly from his knees. When he did, Skye's mouth fell open, and he gaped in open astonishment. He'd

thought Hockley couldn't surprise him any more tonight than he already had. It turned out, he was wrong. The LT was crying, all right, but he was crying—crying—

Skye shook his head.

“Is that *blood?*” he asked. If he'd had it in him to be any more surprised than he already was, he'd have been shocked by how steady his voice sounded. Skye had always been a pretty hard-to-faze kind of guy. All the Corps had done was sharpen his natural edge.

He'd thought the Marines had prepared him to handle every kind of situation there was and then some. But this—this was something else. Skye stared at the streaks of blood tracking their way slowly down Hockley's face and decided that his beloved Corps probably hadn't yet invented an instruction manual that could teach him how to figure his way out of this particular snafu. If they had, they'd seriously been holding out on him.

As Skye struggled to wrap his mind around what his eyes were telling him, Hockley stared back stolidly. His chin had a stubborn heft as he stared Skye down with those deep, blue eyes of his, almost daring Skye to comment. His earlier timidity appeared to have vanished as quickly as it had come.

Hockley didn't answer Skye's question. He didn't have to. Skye knew the streaks on Hockley's face were made of blood, not tears. They were too dark to be water, for one thing. Almost black, the half-congealed trails were thick and viscous. They looked like slugs, clinging to Hockley's skin.

Skye felt his stomach roil and had to look away. He was no stranger to gore. The aftereffects of violence were not new

to him. He'd watched men die. Seen them maimed, and burned, and screaming. Once, he'd held a comrade's leg together as they'd waited for the Corpsman to arrive. Sometimes, he still dreamed of it: those white spikes of bone threading between his fingers. The way they'd stood at attention, thrust through layers of flesh and muscle.

So, it wasn't the horror as much as the sheer *strangeness* of the sight of blood leaking from Hockley's eyes that twisted Skye's insides. He had to hand one to Hockley, he thought, as he fought the urge to spill whatever was left of yesterday's breakfast on the ground in front of him. He *didn't* like what Hockley had had to show him.

"See?" Hockley said, as though he'd read Skye's mind. He didn't add *I told you so*, but Skye read it, loud and clear.

"But—but what about the *sun*?" Skye sputtered, once he'd gotten his insides back under control. Skye had read plenty of comic books as a kid. Hockley didn't have to tell him what bloody tears meant.

"For fuck's sake, Lowrey!" Hockley snapped. "Vampires don't *die* from the sun! If I didn't know better, I'd say you needed to brush up on your mythology."

And there—*there* was the blunt, faintly sarcastic, Lieutenant Colin Hockley that Skye'd been craving over the last few weeks. Skye might have wondered when *that* Hockley had been replaced by the sulky stranger inside the mess tent earlier this evening, but there were other, more pressing issues on his mind.

Vampires, he thought, and nearly laughed aloud. The word sounded ridiculous, even in the privacy of his own

mind. He wondered if he'd ever be able to say it without irony. For Hockley's sake, he hoped so.

"Okay," Skye managed. "Okay. So the sun doesn't hurt you—"

"I didn't say it didn't *hurt* me," Hockley interrupted. There was a note of impatience in his voice as he added, "Only that it didn't *kill* me."

"The fatigue," Skye said, at last. "*That's* why you get cranky whenever you're not stuck behind a desk."

"Or in the middle of a particularly fucked-up night op," Hockley said, stiffly. "I do things *besides* paperwork, you know."

Skye stared. Now he thought about it, Hockley did have a habit of volunteering for exactly the kind of hairy night mission that almost everybody else tried their hardest to avoid. Skye had always chalked it up to a hero complex. Now, he wondered if the fact that it was a pragmatic choice lessened the bravery of the act.

"Food," he said, mostly to fill the silence.

Strangely, Hockley looked away at that. He didn't seem to be in any hurry to reply, so Skye was left to puzzle out the answer for himself. Skye worked through the possibilities. Assuming blood was Hockley's major food group (and Skye was pretty sure *that* part of the legend wouldn't prove fictitious) that left their men.

They were out of the question. The MP had failed to report any suspicious disappearances, but more than that, Skye was fairly certain that Hockley's morals would forbid him taking a living, human life (particularly an unwilling

one). That left animals (and there were few enough of those in Iraq, too few to make up a full diet), and—

“Oh *God*, Colin! *Please* tell me you haven’t been feeding off the dead bodies.”

Skye thought of the half-rotted corpses they’d passed by the side of the road (dead women and children, mostly) and nearly wretched all over again. In reply, Colin only sniffed. Skye closed his eyes and breathed deep, willing away his sense of mounting horror. *Jesus*, he thought. It was no wonder Colin had been off since the invasion had started. Skye would be, too, if he’d had to subsist on that.

“Well you’re not going to do it, anymore,” Skye said as he scooted close to Colin and moved to sit beside him. “You hear me, Sir? I won’t allow it.”

“What other choice do I have? For Christ’s sake, Skye, it’s not like this is an ideal fucking situation for me. You think I’d be doing this if I had any other option?”

“No,” Skye soothed. “No, of course I don’t.”

They lapsed into companionable silence for a moment, resting shoulder-to-shoulder as they watched the last of the sun slip below the horizon in a blaze of orange and yellow glory. He’d missed this, Skye realized. Missed the easy companionship he and Hockley shared, their ability to share space without speaking. For a moment, the joy of having that connection back again almost eclipsed the hurt he felt that Hockley had kept something so enormous from him.

Skye knew he shouldn’t take it personally. Even in the most intimate of circumstances, it could be difficult to disclose one’s true self to another person. Skye had been

married once. If his wife had ever guessed he had a predilection for sucking cock, she'd never let on to him about it.

And Skye had known more than one Marine whose marriage had broken up after he'd returned home from combat. The ability to compartmentalize was an almost universal trait in the Corps. The only way to deal with the truly irrational, it often seemed to Skye, was by *not* dealing with it. He wondered if the same principle applied to the supernatural as well as to the darker spots of human nature.

"That's beautiful," Hockley said. Skye shook his head as the sound of the other man's voice interrupted his reverie, and said, "What?"

"The sunset," Hockley answered. He gestured toward it, adding, "When you first shipped out, did you think you'd be seeing shit like this?"

Skye gave the horizon no more than a fleeting glance before he said, "What about the blood bags?"

"Skye!" Hockley said, grinding his teeth in irritation. "You really don't give up, do you?"

"Haven't yet," Skye replied.

"Not even to appreciate the beauty of a decent sunset?"

"They're always nice before a storm," Skye said with a shrug. "Not like we'll never see another. Now about the—"

"Our men *need* that blood," Hockley said, with an exasperated sigh. "Haverford is AB. Do you have any idea how rare that is? I waste a bag of that, we may not get another."

“So don’t drink AB.”

“Sergeant!”

At that, Skye fell silent. Hockley’s point was a valid one, and he knew it. That didn’t mean he had to like it, though.

“We’ll think of something,” he said, at last.

“You always do,” Hockley murmured as he reached up to wipe his tears away.

“Here,” Skye said, quickly. He balled up the neck of his shirtsleeve in his fist and circled one large hand protectively around the back of Hockley’s skull. “Let me.” Hockley shuddered as Skye touched his face and gently brushed the tears away.

“I thought—” Hockley said thickly as Skye pawed softly at him, moving slowly from one cheek to the other. “I thought if I ever told you—”

“I know,” Skye murmured. “Believe me, Sir, I know.”

Dimly, he wondered what Hockley would do if Skye ever told him that it mattered more to him that Hockley survive this war than that he did. That he worried for Hockley so much, it scared him sometimes.

Hockley shivered as Skye cleaned him, so Skye lingered over the task. Hockley’s face was like a well-worn map, one that Skye had memorized long ago but that he liked the weight and feel of in his grip. Skye traced the familiar contours of Hockley’s nose and chin and jawbone until his shirtsleeve was damp with blood. Hockley clung to him as he worked. Once, Skye thought he heard him whimper.

They'd been fucking for months, Skye thought as he released him. But their relationship had never felt truly intimate until this moment. Skye hated to let go, but he'd run out of excuses to do anything else. By now, Hockley's face was clean not only of the blood but of most of its fine coating of sand as well.

Skye had just unhooked his hand from the back of Hockley's skull when it happened. He glanced at Hockley, some question or other on the tip of his tongue, but stopped short when he saw the expression on Hockley's face. Hockley's mouth was open, pink tongue darting between chapped lips. His eyes were wide and hungry. They sparkled in the soft glow of new moonlight and lingered on the spot where the slope of Skye's shoulder met his neck. On his pulse.

Skye slapped his palm across the spot. Later, he would tell himself it was pure instinct that made him cover it. Instinct, nothing conscious. Skye knew Hockley would never hurt him. But as Skye looked into Hockley's face, he did not see the Lieutenant he knew and trusted. He saw only a predator: something foreign, and threatening, and animalistic.

The sound of the slap seemed to jar Hockley back to his senses. As Skye reeled away from him, Hockley shook his head. The dazed look in his eyes was replaced by one of confusion and mounting horror.

"Skye?" Hockley asked. And then, "Skye!" as Skye's head slammed back against the side of Humvee, hard enough to make stars burst before his eyes. Then Hockley's hands were on him, much as Skye's had been on Hockley

earlier. Skye felt fingers dancing over the back of his skull. *Looking for blood*, Skye thought, but that wasn't enough to keep him from crying, "No! Stop! *Stop!*"

Skye moved to push Hockley back, but Hockley had already dropped his hands. Skye felt Hockley's eyes on him as he slumped back against the Humvee and let his flutter shut. Hockley was silent while Skye sat back and waited for his heart rate to settle. The beats were uncomfortably loud in the nighttime silence. Skye had the horrible feeling that Hockley could hear them. He thought of the look on Hockley's face just a few moments ago and shuddered.

Skye's breath was still coming hard and fast in his chest when Hockley said, "Skye?" again. His voice was so tentative it was almost painful to listen to. It was that, more than anything, that made Skye crack open his eyes and look at him. The "Sir?" on Skye's lips died as he took in the expression on Hockley's face.

Hockley looked—he looked *wrecked*, Skye thought, as he surveyed the deep furrows in Hockley's brow. Hockley was worrying his bottom lip with his teeth, and his *eyes*.... Skye stuttered on a breath and looked away. That was when he noticed one of Hockley's hands lingering beside his knee, as though Hockley had started to reach for it and then thought better of it.

Skye stared at it and at last felt his panic ease a little. *There* was his Lieutenant, Skye thought. He dragged his eyes up to meet Hockley's and saw his own understanding and relief begin to mirror itself in Hockley's face. Hockley's eyes darted across Skye's face before he just as quickly looked away.

“I—”

“Just tried to take a bite out of my neck?” Skye snapped, unable to keep a certain edge from his voice.

“I wouldn’t!” Hockley said, and his face crumpled even further. “Wouldn’t ever. And I meant to say I’m sorry.”

“Sir,” Skye said, evenly. He could feel something begin to cave inside him, though what it was, he couldn’t say. “You are on the top of a *very* short list.”

When Hockley quirked an eyebrow, Skye added, “Things still capable of scaring the ever-living shit out of me.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Hockley said with a grimace.

“Take it however you want,” Skye replied. “It’s the truth.”

“I wasn’t going to eat you,” Hockley said. “You know that, right?”

Skye couldn’t help it. He snorted with laughter.

“This,” he began, “is without a doubt the strangest evening of my entire—” He trailed off into silence as he realized what Hockley had just said.

“Um, Skye?” Hockley prompted. “You just stopped talking there. Not that there’s anything wrong with that,” he added, when Skye remained silent. “But I worry for the combat effectiveness of your team if their Team Leader lacks the situational awareness to keep track of a simple sentence.”

“Eat!” Skye said.

Hockley sighed and said, “I should add ‘spontaneous cracking up’ to my list of reasons not to tell the people I like that I’m a—”

“Could you?” Skye pressed. “Eat me?”

“No!” Hockley recoiled. The night had turned so black, Skye could barely make out Hockley’s face, but he still thought the LT paled as he spoke.

“No you *can’t*, or no you *won’t*?”

“No! Just—no,” Hockley said. “Stop!” he added, when Skye opened his mouth to speak. “Don’t! You can’t ask that. For fuck’s sake, Skye, you nearly had a heart attack when I peeked at your pulse back there.”

“But you could control it, couldn’t you? The—the *urge*, or whatever. You wouldn’t take it all.”

“Control,” Hockley said. His voice was so bitter Skye almost flinched at the sound of it. “This isn’t a comic book, Skye. It’s not TV. Do you have any idea how hard I have to work to control myself every day? Around the men? Around *you*?” Skye’s eyes widened, but he stayed silent as Hockley said, “What you saw earlier, that’s just a taste.”

“Let me guess,” Skye put in. “No pun intended, right?”

“Damn it, Skye! This isn’t *funny*!”

Hockley’s eyes darted back to Skye’s pulse point again as he spoke. He grabbed handfuls of the thick fabric of his fatigues. Twisting the cloth in a grip so tight that Skye was sure Hockley’s knuckles would have been white if he’d been able to see them, Hockley said, “I want—I *want!*”

“Take it,” Skye urged, grimacing at the frustration he heard in Hockley’s voice. He didn’t want to think about how long Hockley had been keeping that battened down beneath his aloof, by-the-book façade. However long it had been was too long for Skye’s taste.

Now he’d had time to get used to the idea, the thought of Hockley feeding from him didn’t scare him. Much. And if it did, it was a fear he was willing to overcome for the LT’s sake. Hadn’t he begun the evening wishing he could lessen Hockley’s hunger pains? As it happened, the LT hungered for something Skye had it in his power to give. He sure as hell wasn’t about to hold out on him now.

Hockley was warring with himself. Skye could see it on his face. His expression was a mask of distress, but there was desire there, too, and stronger drives beneath that: hunger. *Need*. Skye waited, and after a few moments, Hockley’s resolve began to slip.

“What if—” Hockley closed his eyes. “What if I start and then can’t bring myself to stop?”

Skye blinked, startled by the naked honesty of Hockley’s question.

“That won’t happen,” he said. “I trust you, Sir.”

“You’ve always trusted me,” Hockley said, raggedly. “Too much.”

“I trust each officer as much as he deserves, Sir.”

“You sure?” Hockley asked, at last. Skye licked his lips. It was now or never. This was more than just a meal, he knew. It was a Rubicon they were crossing here. For better

or for worse, if they went through with this, their relationship would never be the same again.

Skye turned, as he always did in moments of indecision, to Hockley. Skye believed in Hockley, trusted him more than any other officer to get him and his men into an engagement and out the other side in one piece. It was Hockley he took his cues from when their intel was bad and his faith was failing.

When Skye looked at him now, he saw Hockley's iron will in every muscle of his body. They stood at attention, rigid with control and repressed desire. Skye knew that if he said no, if he retracted his offer, Hockley would accept it without question and likely never mention it again.

"Yes," Skye said, willfully ignoring the anxious flutter of his pulse. "I'm sure."

Hockley made a strangled sound at that. He seemed to crumple, shoulders sagging as though someone had cut the cord of tension inside him with rusty scissors. Skye tensed. He expected Hockley to surge towards him, a hurricane of barely contained violence and suppressed desire. But even here, Hockley was precise. Careful.

He crept across the narrow strip of sand between them, 'til he was almost on top of Skye, and then (only then) began to kiss him. Skye huffed a breath, startled. They were the same familiar kisses he remembered: tender, bruising little nips with just a hint of teeth that occasionally lengthened into something longer and more delicate.

Skye felt a moan shake from him as the warm, wet weight of Hockley's mouth settled over his. *This*, Skye thought, as he plucked at the pockets of Hockley's uniform

with unsteady fingers, *was as much a conversation as anything else that passed between them.* Hockley answered by tonguing the closed seam of Skye's lips. As he always did, Skye made a show of resistance, opening them only when Hockley made a low, frustrated sound from deep within his throat.

Hockley darted inside as though afraid Skye would barricade himself again if he didn't take advantage of the momentary opening. When Hockley's tongue slid home, Skye drew a teasing line on the underside of it with his. Hockley shivered. He made an odd sound: a cross between a groan and a whimper. A pair of calloused hands settled on either side of Skye's neck, but it was only when Skye brushed across Hockley's canines with his tongue that he remembered.

Digging his palms into the sand below him, Skye forcibly untangled himself from the kiss. His mouth was wet. A bubble of spittle clung to his lower lip. Skye felt it burst and begin to trickle down his chin as Hockley followed him. His lips were slightly parted, eyes closed.

Skye had to press a hand against his chest to stop him. Panting, Hockley stilled in mid-approach. There was a hard set to his jaw. His eyes, when they finally opened, were almost angry.

"Don't," Hockley growled. "Don't you *dare* tell me you've changed your mind!"

"No," Skye said in a rush. "No, of course not. It's just. I kind of thought that was the idea, Sir: feeding, not fucking."

"Call this an appetizer," Hockley said, his voice rough (and hopeful) as he reached, once more, for Skye. Instead of

surrendering to the touch, Skye shook free of it. Tugging down his collar, Skye tilted his head to one side, exposing the slope of his neck.

“Sir,” he said, pointedly. Annoyance rippled beneath his façade of calm. Skye had to resist the urge to point out that while *Hockley* might be an old hat at this blood-sucking thing, Skye wasn’t. Skye would do anything for the LT, but he was man enough to admit that he didn’t particularly relish the idea of having his throat punctured. He couldn’t understand why Hockley (who was normally so business-like and focused on the task at hand) felt the need to draw this out. It was as though Hockley was... *toying* with him, somehow. And Sergeant Skye Lowrey was no man’s plaything.

“Be that way, then,” Hockley said. Skye blinked, wondering if the note of hurt he’d heard in Hockley’s voice had been imagined or real. He tried to turn to look at him, but before he could do so, Hockley wrapped both hands around his skull to hold him steady.

Here we go, Skye thought. He tensed, blowing out a long, stuttered breath. He clenched and unclenched his hands and was annoyed to find that his palms were slick again. Skye tried to tell himself that Hockley wouldn’t hurt him any more than could be helped. But it was one thing to say it, another thing to make himself believe.

Skye had been in battle. He knew bloodlust had a tendency to overpower good intentions. If that were true in combat, how much more so would it be when every instinct inside you—everything you *were*—told you to kill? Told you

to suck and keep sucking until the body in your hands was empty as a cornhusk, blowing in the wind?

Imprisoned in Hockley's grasp, it was hard not to perceive him as a threat. Harder still not to struggle when Skye heard the *snick* of fangs distending. Though barely more than a whisper, the sound seemed louder than a shock-and-awe campaign in the silence. Despite his best intentions, he flailed feebly in Hockley's grip, and was utterly surprised when (instead of a puncture wound) the next thing he felt were Hockley's hands fumbling at his fly.

Skye whimpered in confusion: a sound that only deepened when Hockley bent to nuzzle tenderly at his throat. Skye felt a brush of cool air as Hockley succeeded in tugging down his zipper. Then Hockley's fingers slipped inside to brush against the damp cotton of Skye's briefs. Skye's hips jumped. Hockley's tongue flickered out over the soft skin at the curve of Skye's throat, leaving wet trails in its wake. Skye let out a strangled sound.

"Shhh!" Hockley murmured back. Then he slipped his thumb beneath the waistband of Skye's underwear and began to rub gentle circles into the hard muscles of Skye's abdomen. Skye heard himself make a greedy noise, and Hockley lifted his head to mouth behind Skye's ear.

"Did you really," Hockley said, pausing to nibble at the lobe, "think I'd agree to this without making damned sure you enjoyed it?"

"F—*fuck!*" Skye managed, half-amazed that he was still capable of human speech at all.

“That’s it,” Hockley said, as he wrapped his fingers at last around Skye’s cock, and Skye bucked into it. “That’s it. Give in. Let me—*let me* make you feel good.”

“Good,” Skye murmured, when Hockley began to pull his shaft with long, smooth strokes. “Good. Yeah. *Good!*”

And it was. *Too good*, Skye thought. But then, Hockley had always known exactly how to touch him. How to use his calluses *right there*, with just the right amount of pressure, in a way that never failed to push Skye straight into the grip of a kind of pleasure so intense it felt almost like pain.

Skye gasped and arched into Hockley’s touch. *Had he ever been this noisy when making love?* he wondered. *And since when had he called it making love and not fucking?* Before Skye could make his lips form the words of a proper question, Hockley returned his attention to Skye’s throat.

Then Skye felt the points of Hockley’s fangs (impossibly delicate, impossibly sharp) brush across his skin, just over his jugular. He writhed in Hockley’s grip. Hockley increased the tempo of his strokes, wringing sounds from Skye that Skye was sure he’d never made before.

Skye knew he was close, so close to the cusp of pleasure that he could *taste* it. He could feel it thrumming through his body, begging for release. It was then that Hockley bit him. It was barely a bite, at first: just a pinprick, really, as the tips of the incisors broke his skin. Skye felt a burst of pain, like a bee sting, and then nothing.

Hockley had drawn back. Skye couldn’t see him, but he could imagine Hockley running his tongue over the tips of his fangs, tasting him. Tasting *Skye*. Then Hockley fell on

him. Skye convulsed as the fangs pierced his flesh, for real, this time.

Skye cried out. The sharp jut of those teeth sunk inside him up to the hilt. He could feel everything, *all* of it, and it wasn't so much painful as it was simply unpleasant. If anything, it reminded Skye of the first time he'd ever had a man inside him. It was the sensation of something foreign thrust inside a place where it had no right to be.

Skye was lost in the strangeness of it, so much so that he almost didn't notice when Hockley used his free hand to grip Skye's shoulder and cradle him to his chest. Like a baby in a cradle, Hockley rocked Skye through the final, dizzy moments as Skye's pleasure overcame him and Hockley began to suck.

Shuddering through his orgasm, Skye was only dimly aware of movement as Hockley shifted. The LT grasped Skye's wrist, pinned Skye's arm to his side, and pressed his thumb over the thin scar on Skye's forearm. The mark was a souvenir from one hot July day in Skye's childhood.

He'd been playing near the crippled stretch of railroad that passed the rez when he'd slipped. He must have hit his head on the ties, Skye supposed, though he had no memory of it now. Whatever had happened, he'd blacked out and woken up to find a rusty shaft of metal thrust through his wrist. He remembered giggling as he sat back to watch the blood froth from the wound in long, lazy spurts.

This felt something like that, Skye thought, as he gurgled in Hockley's arms. There was the same sense of vertigo as the world whirled around him. The same fatigue, the temptation to simply close his eyes and surrender to the

false comfort of Hockley's teeth and touch. Same blood, even, roaring in his ears.

Was he dying? Skye wondered. But if he was, he was spared, just as he had been on that long-ago summer morning. Even as Skye trembled and twitched through the last moments of his orgasm, his body managed a final, feeble show of resistance. He kicked and struggled. Finally, he felt the strange sucking sensation begin to slow.

Hockley jerked and broke unsteadily away. His teeth tore at Skye's throat as he retreated. Whatever mark would be there in the morning, Skye knew it wouldn't be a perfect pair of puncture wounds. He should probably be grateful, Skye thought, as he shifted in Hockley's grasp and waited for the world to stop spinning. A simple cut or tear would be easier to explain away. He was surprised by how much the thought of that bothered him, startled to find that he *wanted* to bear a mark that was uniquely Colin's.

"H—Hockley?" he managed weakly. In reply, Hockley gave him a sympathetic squeeze. Skye could hear Hockley shuddering above him and wondered if the LT had reached his own climax as he'd fed. He found that he hoped he had.

It was Skye's last conscious thought before his eyes flickered shut. After that, Skye lost track of time for a while. He must have dozed, because some minutes or hours later, he blinked himself awake in Hockley's lap.

"Huh," Skye managed, at a loss for anything more particular to say. He felt a pain in his neck when he moved. When he reached up to touch his throat, his fingers met the rough cloth of a bandage.

“Had my med kit with me,” Hockley said from above him. “Hope you don’t mind.”

“Just saves time and trouble later,” Skye responded with a shrug. “Besides. Turnabout is fair play. I mean, after the times I saved your—” Skye stopped short, as all sorts of mental bells and whistles suddenly went off at once.

“Skye. You just stopped in the middle of a sentence again,” Hockley said, just as Skye burst out, “Oh, fuck *me!*” He’d meant it as a shout. It came out as an uncertain croak. Skye wondered if he’d shouted as he came and hoped he hadn’t made any embarrassing professions of undying love. “You can’t *die!*”

“Regretting all those hours you’ve spent worrying about my life and safety?” Hockley asked around a deep chuckle.

“You bastard!” Skye fumed. “You sick, twisted motherfucker!”

“Shhh!” Hockley soothed mockingly as he patted Skye’s head. Skye fumed, silently. He hoped Hockley was prepared for some serious payback later because the LT was going *down*. “For the record,” Hockley added, once he’d stopped laughing. “It was really very sweet. I haven’t had anyone fret over me like that in over 2,000 years.”

Skye opened his mouth to protest, but Hockley beat him to it.

“Let me guess,” he said. “You’re about to tell me that Sergeant Skye Lowrey doesn’t *do* ‘sweet’.”

“Now that you mention it,” Skye grumbled.

Together, they lapsed into silence. Skye's teeth were chattering again by the time Hockley said, "Well, maybe you should reconsider."

"W—what?" Skye asked. Was it imagination, or was Hockley holding him a little tighter?

"Sweet," Hockley said. "I mean, I think I could handle sweet. If you wanted. Tonight—" Hockley let out a breath.

"I know," Skye said, and then surprised himself by reaching up to brush Hockley's cheek. "Tonight was different."

"And not something I'd give up easily," Hockley said. His jaw tensed beneath Skye's hand. "I mean it. Skye, I'd fight for this if I—"

"You don't," Skye said, finally releasing his touch. "Have to."

"Good." Hockley closed his eyes, and Skye watched the tension drain from his body. "Good."

"So," Skye said awkwardly. He'd never been good at these moments. Hated them, in fact, with a blinding passion. "We should—we should do this again sometime. Or something."

And there it was, Skye thought as Hockley's eyes widened. The first time they'd ever actually talked about this out loud.

"Or something," Hockley repeated with a rasp. One of his hands wandered low to settle protectively over Skye's hip. "Yeah. We should."

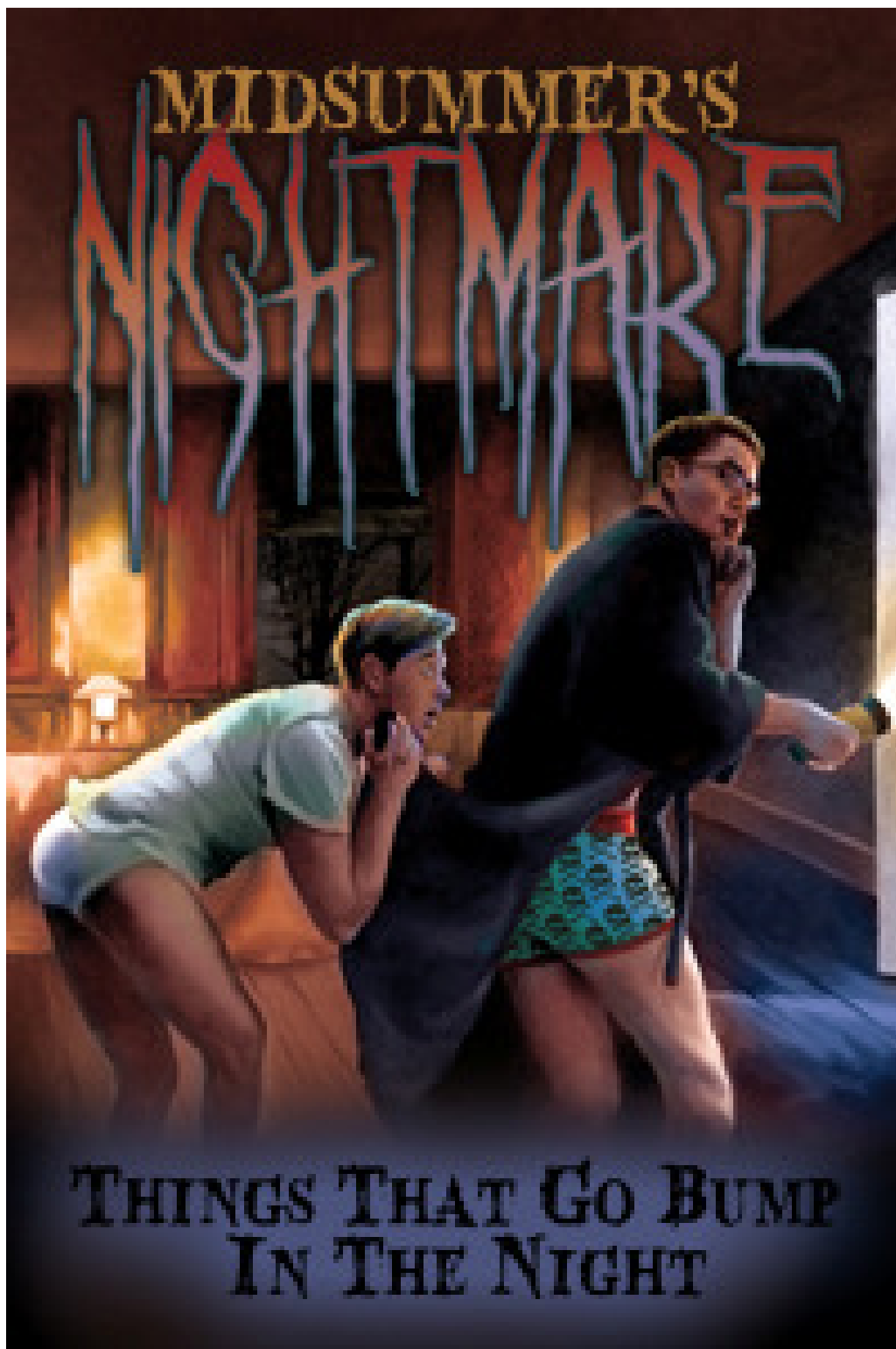
"Just can't make a habit of it," Skye said.

“Definitely not,” Hockley answered, brushing the bandage on Skye’s neck with his free hand. “Wouldn’t want to take too much. Have your men find out that—”

“Sir.” Skye caught Hockley’s wrist. “You really ought to know by now that your secret—” he broke off with a quiet groan as Hockley gently squeezed the inside of his thigh. “—is safe with me.”

Then Hockley bent low and answered him in a kiss. Skye surged up to meet him, and the night dissolved into a tangle of lip-on-lip until there was nothing left but Hockley and the air around them, alive with tension and the distant threat of a sandstorm brewing on the horizon.

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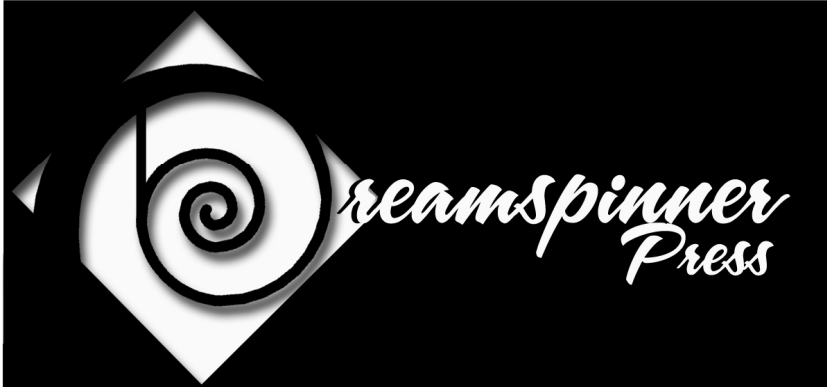


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