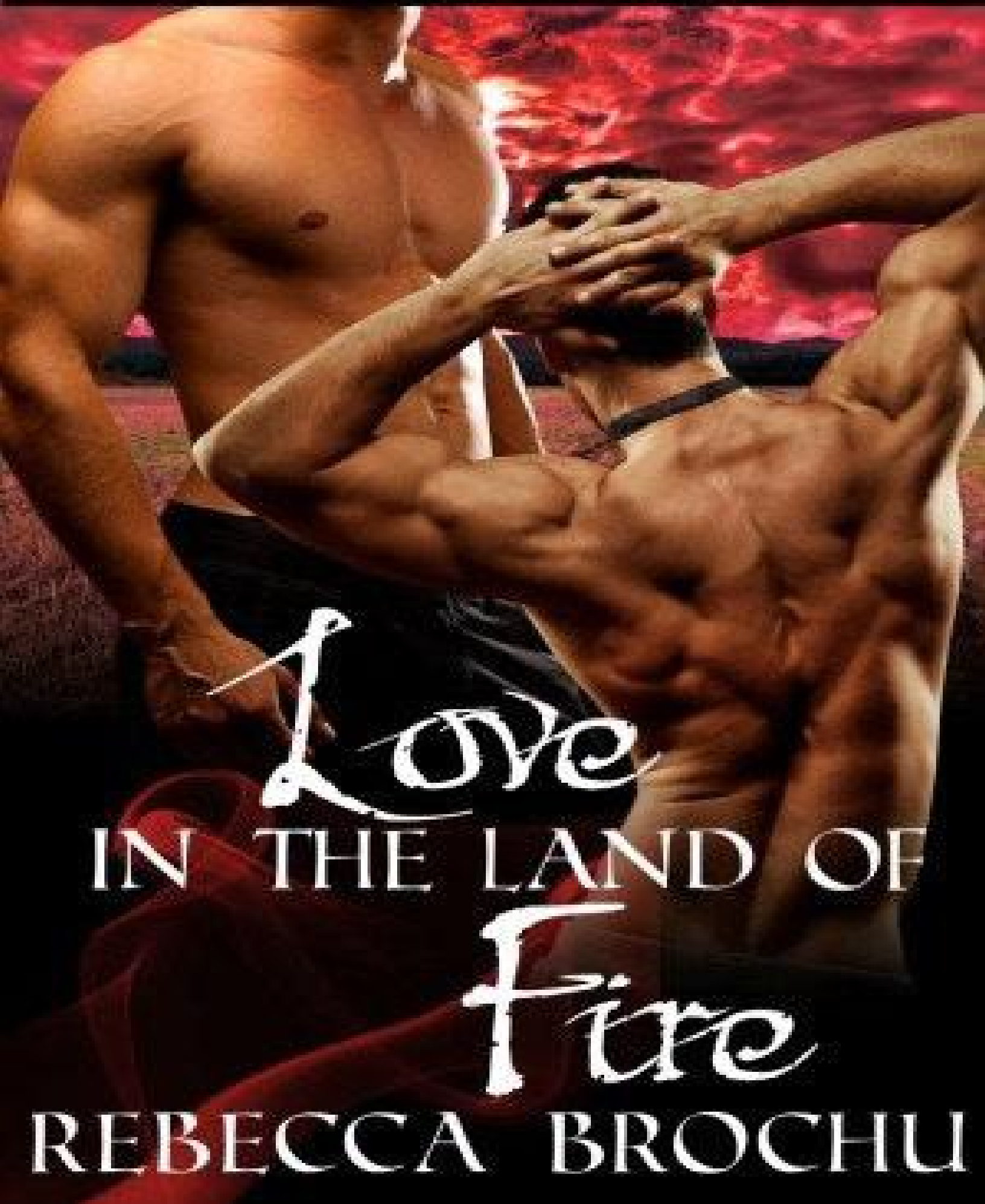
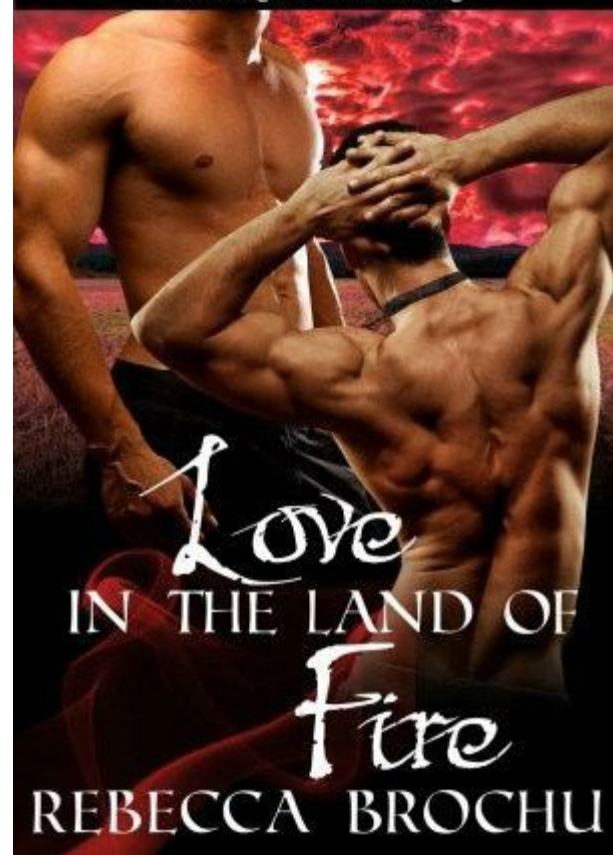


Evernight Publishing



Love
IN THE LAND OF
Fire
REBECCA BROCHU

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DEDICATION

For you as always

LOVE IN THE LAND OF FIRE

Shangri-La, 1

Rebecca Brochu

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Chapter One

Josiah Marx almost ignores the summons when his implant chimes softly in his ear. He's long overdue for a turn at the pleasure houses and to have his only trip in months interrupted is enough to have him practically snarling in rage and the communal submissive he's paid for the evening scrambling backwards in fear. He gets control of his temper quickly at her movement and manages to reign in his anger enough to give the wary woman a reassuring smile. She doesn't seem to notice and instead curls herself tighter in her position against the opposite wall. The sight of her cowering form almost draws a darker frown to Josiah's face before he manages to catch himself.

Submissives like her are the reason he normally avoids the pleasure houses in the first place and only frequents the more upscale and reputable establishments like The Crimson Lotus when he can no longer ignore his urges. Still even in the more expensive houses there is always the chance of running across something like this. It is a sad fact that those who are indebted to the pleasure houses are normally the ones who've been beaten and abused or abandoned for one reason or another and given no choice but to take a position as a communal pleasure giver.

To be fair there was also a good portion of them who chose the lifestyle in an attempt to make contact with as many possible matches in the hopes of finding someone to enter into a contract with and perhaps eventually Bond with. Sadly the number of submissives who willingly chose the lifestyle were far outnumbered by those with no other choice at all.

Abuse of such a nature has always been especially rampant in The Land of Fire. As one of the four Great Lands of Shangri-La, The Land of Fire tended to concentrate on military prowess as opposed to the more peaceable pursuits of the other three. As such the men and women who belong to the house tend to be battlehardened and quick to both passion and anger. It is a volatile mix of personalities that unfortunately leads to an overabundance of abuse and a frankly sickening number of fearful submissives. Even the ever tightening laws regarding their care and treatment have done little to stop the crimes committed against those who should by all rights be treasured.

As a fourth tier dominant who rose to his position thanks in part to his time in The Land of Fire's armed services and then the years he's spent in his current position as an enforcer, Josiah has seen his fair share of both cases and then some. Sadly enough he's almost become accustomed to seeing the abuse even though it still makes his blood boil each time. It was actually one of the more unpleasant motivations behind him accepting a place on the enforcer squad after he'd resigned from the Crimson Elite, a special operations division of the armed forces, at the age of twenty-nine. He'd been in the armed forces since he was a small child. He'd practically been raised in the barracks, and he'd seen so much death and pain that when the time to renew his commission had come up he'd chosen to retire instead and take up a position where he might do some actual good.

He's pleased that after almost six years he feels confident enough to say that he actually has.

Still the abuse that he sees practically every day affects him far more than he cares to admit and as a result he's often far more happy to stay celibate instead of indulging in the pleasure houses on a

regular basis. When he actually does partake, Josiah is always especially careful to treat his temporary subs with all of the gentle care that he can muster, withholding the darker aspects of his passion in an effort to spare them. He knows that there are far too many dominants who do not share the same views that he does and that unfortunately their behavior can and will be overlooked if there are credits available to grease greedy palms. Besides, at his age without a contract or a Bonded and no actual prospects Josiah's become rather accustomed to ignoring his baser instincts.

The chime sounds again, slightly louder this time, and with a harsh exhale Josiah reaches upwards to run his finger lightly over the thin metal of his ear implant known as an *oricula*. His fingertips trace over the delicate pattern that swirls out of his inner ear, up and around the cartilage, forming an intricate cuff that tapers to a point at the end and is adorned with the four small round rubies that announce both his Land and his tier. The small, intricately carved crimson feather that hangs from the tip tells its own story and marks him as someone not to be trifled with. His eyes track back over to the submissive, his gaze taking in her fall of raven curls, her smaller and unadorned *oricula*, and the collar with a single ruby embedded in the middle that marks her as a first tier submissive. He feels pity well in him when she shifts and the light reflects over the surface of the band and for the first time he notices the blemish, the swirl of damaged silver that marks her as Disavowed.

She'd been Bonded once, had vowed her loyalty and her life to a single dominant only to be rejected and thrown away sometime afterwards, the dominant's family sigil forcefully removed from her collar. To undergo such a thing was to be Disavowed, to be marked as unworthy or useless. Josiah knew that she would be unlikely to enter into another contract or to ever Bond again. There were few who were willing to take a chance on a submissive that had already been turned loose after being Bonded.

Feeling his already flagging desire fully deflate, Josiah presses down firmly on the center of his *oricula* and listens as the voice of the Lead Enforcer of his unit, a man named Eagan, comes across the communication line he's just opened.

"Marx, I was wondering if you were going to answer me or not." Eagan's voice is amused and Josiah knows that the other man isn't actually bothered by his delay in answering his comm request.

Eagan's a lighthearted individual with a temper to match his fiery mane and larger build. He's also been happily Bonded for over twenty years to a serene blond from The Land of Water and is one of the kindest and most intelligent enforcers Josiah has ever met. It's no wonder he'd made L.E. at the tender age of thirty-five.

"I was...indisposed, Eagan. I thought I put in for leave today?" His voice is sharp and he makes an effort to soften it when he catches the submissive flinch slightly out of the corner of his eye.

"Damn I'm sorry about that, Marx, but I just got sent a p.a.t.c.h about a case that I think you're the best one to handle. I wouldn't have interrupted you if I had anyone else that I think would be suited for this kind of thing."

Josiah pinches the bridge of his nose with his opposite hand, clenches his eyes shut and breathes out a low hissing sigh. If Eagan thought he was the only one for the job then it was either one of two things; first, something that required his particular skill set from the Crimson Elite, or second, it was something that would be best handled by someone with Josiah's particular feelings when it came to the care and treatment of submissives.

Neither option promises a particularly pleasant assignment.

"Is this a Crimson Elite thing or more of a morals issue?"

"Ah, I would say that it might be a little bit of both to be honest with you."

"Fine. Give me a minute to get back to my transport and then you can p.a.t.c.h me the file."

“Thanks, Marx. I’ll make sure you’re put in for time and a half for this one since it’s interrupting your leave. Eagan out.”

Josiah gets to his feet slowly, still aware of the submissive in the corner, and redresses with quick and efficient movements. When he’s done he approaches the woman carefully, fully aware of the dangers of cornering anyone, even a submissive, and crouches down to make himself less intimidating.

“It’s alright, sweet; I’m not going to hurt you.” Josiah’s careful to keep his voice gentle and coaxing but she sits still and silent and after a few moments he sighs deeply once more, rises to his full height and heads for the door.

“I’ve got to go, but you can keep the credits and the time that I paid for. Take the rest of the night for yourself as well. Rest, eat, sleep, do whatever you need to do in order to regain some strength and peace. If your madam has any issues with what I’ve told you to do have her comm me and I’ll set the situation straight.”

He’s almost gone, the door sliding open in front of him and one foot over the threshold when her voice stops him cold.

“Why would you do that? Why would you be so kind to someone like me even when you didn’t get what you paid for?”

He takes a moment to consider and then answers her with something as close to the truth as he’s willing to get at the moment.

“Let’s just say that I knew someone in your position once and I know how hard it is. A good meal and an undisturbed night’s rest is less than you deserve but it’s all that I have the power to give you.”

Josiah resumes his movements and the door slides closed behind him, the submissive’s soft sobs ringing in his ears.

Chapter Two

Josiah moves swiftly through the wide-open corridors of The Crimson Lotus, stopping on the way out to have a quiet word with the handler at the front desk in an effort to make things easier for the submissive he’s left behind. It only takes a few moments to convey his wishes before he leaves and he knows from the way that the handler’s eyes take in his tier gems and the feather that marks him as Crimson Elite that he will be obeyed.

There are not many who are willing to defy direct orders from an individual of his tier and skill set and that fact is something that Josiah uses shamelessly in this situation.

He moves seamlessly through the bustling street outside the pleasure house, gaze as watchful as always and his stride eating up the sidewalk as he moves to the charging station where he’d stored his transport. He enters his pass code to release the locks that keep his sleek black model grounded and is inside in a quick series of fluid movements and queuing up the startup sequence in seconds.

Once he’s settled Josiah takes a moment to prepare, to roll his shoulders and stretch his neck in an effort get into the correct frame of mind for the task ahead. He stops after a few seconds and reaches down to activate his p.a.t.c.h. The Personal and Technical Communications Handheld is as long as his forearm, as thin as paper, and folds just as easily into its docking station, which comes in the form of the wide silver cuff around his left wrist. The piece of tech is extremely useful and enables him to send and receive data to and from other units that are on the network. It makes his job as an enforcer easier by far as it allows him to compile the data on his cases no matter where he is.

P.a.t.c.h active, Josiah presses a finger to the centerpiece of his *oricula* and informs the implant to initiate a connection with Eagan on a secure channel. He waits patiently for the other man to answer and when he does they waste no time in getting down to business.

“The situation is this. Rafe Zweil, a fourth tier submissive, was reported as insubordinate and violent by one Noah Frisch, a second tier dominant, and get this, Zweil’s supposed future Bonded. We’ve not been able to pull up a contract on record but there’s still the possibility that it was an in-house agreement. Apparently Zweil refused to submit to correction and instead pulled a runner, but not before he managed to wound Frisch and incapacitate at least four guards on his way out. I’m sending you a p.a.t.c.h file with all of the information we’ve managed to gather on him as of now. As for identifying him, we haven’t managed to get a recent still shot of him but there is a video from a surveillance camera that’s more than sufficient, and let me tell you right now that this one is one hell of a sub. He’s completely wasted on a two; he should be matched with someone on his own level. There’s no way anyone else will be able to handle him.”

Josiah takes Eagan’s words with a grain of salt, familiar with his superior’s almost complete inability to talk without exaggerating at least to a small degree, as he reads through the basic information they’ve managed to gather on the other male. It reads like any other straightforward report and lets Josiah know small things about his subject. Zweil is a twenty-nine year old fourth tier submissive, six foot-two with black hair and green eyes. He’s rated high on the intellect scale and apparently has a history of violence. The majority of the reports on his record have been filed by the previously mentioned Frisch and Zweil’s own Head of House, a paternal aunt by the name of Jean.

Overall it’s neither the best nor the worst report that Josiah’s ever read so he’s hard pressed to see what makes this Zweil so special. Except of course for the fact that the younger man is, by all rights, being done a grave injustice by being promised to someone he outranks to such a major degree. Functioning matches between two individuals separated by only one tier were rare, and a match between a four and a two is practically unheard of. With such a large gap between ranks there is practically a guarantee that the relationship will fail as either one or both of the pair would be unable to accommodate their partner’s needs.

Still Josiah is careful to keep an open mind when he accesses the video file that’s attached. He’s hardly prepared for the way he feels his breath catch in his throat and his cock harden against the seam of his leather pants almost immediately at the sight of his subject apparently fleeing what should be his home. The desire that had dwindled within him earlier roars back with a vengeance. Rafe Zweil is beautiful.

His description doesn’t do him justice at all. It doesn’t say that Zweil is lean and tightly muscled with tanned skin and legs that go for miles, or that his raven hair falls in a rippling wave to just below his shoulders. It fails to mention that he is obviously skilled in hand to hand from the way that his movements contain the grace and awareness of a seasoned fighter as he takes down the guards that try to stop him from working his way across the open grounds of the compound.

When Zweil turns and for a moment seems to stare directly at the camera recording his every move, Josiah pauses the film with a touch of his finger and silently calculates the other things the file fails to adequately explain. It doesn’t touch on the angular planes of the male’s face, on the sharp line of his jaw and the delicious length of his throat. More importantly it neglects to mention the way that his brows arch upwards over a pair of almost startlingly green eyes that are wide with fear and pain.

It’s that look, the one that Josiah’s seen in the eyes of hundreds of other submissives over the years, that snaps him out of his daze and prompts him to rewind the video and watch it once more with analytical eyes and a dawning suspicion. It isn’t long after Zweil first comes on camera that Josiah swears softly under his breath, his dark suspicions confirmed. Rafe Zweil had been beaten and badly from the looks of it.

It’s in the way Zweil limps on screen, his face tight with pain and his movements stiff as his eyes

dart everywhere in search of an escape. He's wearing a look of almost panic in those first few seconds before the guards rush onscreen and Josiah knows in his gut that this submissive is running from something far more damaging than a routine corrections session. The look on his face is too hunted, too desperate, for him to be doing anything short of running for his life.

Josiah's all the more impressed at the way the other man manages to push back his pain in order to force his body to move fast enough and smoothly enough to take down the guards he encounters. At the same time it worries him more because this time around he can see what those actions cost the injured male. He sees the grimace on his face, and the way that his lips are pursed in a white line as he presses a hand against his ribs and forces himself to stay upright and continue moving until he's finally out of the range of the cameras.

Zweil's not only beautiful and apparently intelligent, but he's also a survivor, and that's a trait that Josiah can deeply appreciate in another person.

Josiah's silent for another moment before he remembers that Eagan is still on the channel and that Zweil is out in the city somewhere alone, unprotected, and injured.

Josiah needs to find him fast.

"Do we have a location on him, Eagan?" Josiah's voice is sharp and this time he doesn't try to tone it down at all.

"He's caught your attention, hasn't he? I figured you'd like him. From what little bit I saw of that video he seemed like he'd be your type." Eagan sounds contemplative and it pisses Josiah off to a small degree because now is not the time to discuss his preferences in male submissives.

"Give me a location, Eagan." He grits the words out between clenched teeth even as he refolds and docks his p.a.t.c.h before he completes the ignition sequence on his transport and prepares to head out in whatever direction Zweil was last seen.

"Alright, alright. No need to get uppity about it. Reports have him last seen going west towards the Ember Harbor district. If he makes it onto a cargo ship and out of Fire territory we'll have no chance of getting our hands on him again so you have to get to him before he gets out. Apparently he did a lot of damage to Frisch and he's demanding reparations. Zweil's going to have a lot to answer for when you bring him in. After what he's done today he'll be lucky to end up in a pleasure house afterwards."

Josiah scowls harshly in the safety of his transport as he orders it to head for the Ember Harbor district and to activate his enforcer's status to allow for a quicker commute. He knows that Eagan is telling the truth. After attacking and injuring the one to whom he'd been promised, Zweil is in serious trouble, but Josiah's far from happy with the situation. He knows in his gut that Zweil doesn't deserve what's in store for him.

"I'm heading in that direction now. Eagan, I want you to get a medical unit and a defender on the line and have them on standby. Try Marcel. She's always been passionate about submissive rights and he's going to need the best to get him out of this mess he's in. And whatever you do don't let Frisch out of our sight. Plant a few of the lower ranks on him if you have to but he goes nowhere."

He can practically hear Eagan's hesitation and confusion but it's a testament to the other man's level head and intelligence that he picks up on the implications behind what Josiah's saying. Josiah can hear him curse soft and vicious under his breath as it all sinks in.

"What exactly are we looking at here, Marx? How bad is this? There was no mention of it in the reports and everyone but Frisch was taken down with hand to hand, but do you think that he's armed? Do you want me to send another enforcer unit your way?"

Josiah hesitates for a moment, eyes staring blankly out the polarized glass of his front window as

his mind traces back over what he'd seen in the video. Panic, fear, a flash of helplessness and a large dose of pain mixed in with all of it; none of the signs were good, but he doesn't have solid proof and he doesn't know just what had made the other man run like he had hounds on his heels. Still he's confident that surrounding Zweil with unfamiliar faces would be the wrong thing to do at the moment.

"No, I'm confident that reinforcements will not be necessary. They might actually make the situation worse, but I'll update you if the circumstances change. I'm not sure exactly but something tells me that it's going to be bad, Eagan, and by that I mean he's going to be in rough shape and more likely to be more dangerous to himself than to me. You need to watch the video feed again and pay careful attention to his face and the way his body moves. He's in pain, desperate, and most of all scared, and I've seen how situations like this can play out if they're not handled just right. If I don't get to him soon he might do something stupid."

"I'll take care of things on this end. You just bring that one back in one piece and we'll handle it from there. Eagan out."

Josiah hears the click of Eagan closing the channel between them but it barely even fazes him; he's too caught up in thoughts of Zweil and planning the best way to make sure that they both make it out of this thing relatively unscathed.

Zweil's bright, pain-filled eyes flash across his mind once again and Josiah's afraid that he might already be too late.

Chapter Three

After half an hour of travel Josiah finds himself staring down a crossroads in indecision. Something is telling him that he needs to hurry, that Zweil's living on borrowed time and that he needs help, but for some reason Josiah can't move forward. The control panel of his transport blinks a mocking red as it waits for him to either order it to resume the previously set course or to select a new one but he's frozen.

By all rights he shouldn't be having this problem, shouldn't be confused or indecisive about where to go. The reports had been clear cut and simple with sightings of Zweil headed down this very road over an hour ago in the direction of the Ember Harbor District. According to them Josiah should've gone ahead and allowed his transport to take the right fork and speed down towards the cargo ships that might even now be taking Zweil out of his reach. Instead he'd barked out an order to the vehicle as soon as he realized where exactly the other road led, causing it to stop rather suddenly right in the middle of the fork.

Something is telling him that the harbor isn't where he should be going, that Zweil isn't there and it will only be a waste of time he doesn't have. The small voice in the back of his mind, the one that he'd learned to listen to as a child, the one that told him to duck and dodge and when someone had him in the crosshairs, is telling him to go left instead, that he'll find Zweil in that direction. Josiah hesitates because there is nothing in that direction anymore, at least not anything particularly habitable. The estates and housing facilities in that area had been destroyed in the Steam War, the decade long battle that had raged across much of Shangri-La between The Land of Fire and The Land of Water. Those were painful years, especially for those Bonded pairs who originated from opposite lands and for the children of such unions who had been disdainfully referred to as *steam brats* due to their mixed heritage.

Many families had suffered on both sides and the devastating fighting had only seen a resolution about seven years ago, a year before Josiah had left the Crimson Elite. Most people had tried desperately to move on, and Fire and Water now enjoyed a cooperative and almost unbelievably joyful peace but some things had been unsalvageable. The area formally known as the Flicker District

was one of those places.

That area had been heavily hit during the fighting, leaving only grief-stricken and destroyed families and the haunting shells of the places that they'd once called home. Shortly after the incident the area had been unofficially renamed the Charred District and was carefully avoided. Even now, almost a decade later, there are still dead unaccounted for and no effort has been made to reclaim the land from the ash and debris that covers it.

By all logic Josiah knows that Zweil shouldn't be there, that the man has no reason to go there, not when he's so close to the harbor and the possibility of safe passage across Fire's borders. Still Josiah can't shake the feeling that Zweil doesn't seem to be the type to run like that, not to that extent, or the disturbing reminder that most animals liked to slink off to be alone when they're dying. Josiah knows that the other man isn't some wild beast but he's all too aware of the fact that he doesn't actually know the extent of his injuries. All he knows is that something within him is screaming, telling him to go left instead of right.

With a bitten off curse Josiah takes manual control of his transport and with a harsh jerk speeds down the left fork and towards a place that he shouldn't even be thinking about. His implant chimes in his ear and he grits his teeth, knowing that Eagan is on the other end and that he's about to have to explain himself. With a resigned sigh he opens the channel between them.

"Marx, what in the hell are you doing? Your locator has you heading for the Charred District. What happened to Ember Harbor? Has there been an update that I don't know about or did you see Zweil?" "He's not at the harbor Eagan. I know he isn't." Josiah keeps his voice calm and steady, careful to hide his own doubt.

Eagan is silent for a moment and when he speaks again his voice is level and cool, so at odds with his normal informal teasing that Josiah knows the other man is dangerously close to true anger.

"How pray tell did you find that out, Marx? Do you have some secret informant that I don't know about or something?"

"Actually I have several but that's another subject entirely. I just know that Zweil isn't at the harbor; he's not trying to escape all of Fire he's just trying to get away from Frisch. It's just a hunch but I'm asking you to trust me, Eagan. I've never led you wrong in the past."

"Remind me to point out all of the things that are wrong with that statement before I fire you for this later, Josiah." Eagan sounds resigned and slightly irritated but he isn't demanding that Josiah turn around so everything is alright.

Plus Eagan normally threatens to fire him about once a week because of his more unorthodox techniques when it comes to negotiation and interrogation, so it's almost become a routine between them.

"Thanks, boss."

"Yeah, yeah, don't thank me yet. If you're wrong and Zweil gets away I'm handing your ass over to Frisch and his people when they start screaming for blood over this fuck up. Anyways I've got a medical unit and Marcel mobilized and on alert. They're not too far behind you but they'll wait for you at the crossroads since you didn't seem to think back up would be a good idea right off the bat. Either one can be to your location in a little under fifteen minutes. You are to maintain an open channel at all times; otherwise, I'm sending in the cavalry. I'm not going to take the chance of losing you if Zweil happens to get the drop on you despite all odds."

Josiah bristles, his hands tightening around the steering bars of his transport at the thought of anyone getting the drop on him with all of his training and experience.

"I hardly think that'll be necessary."

“Necessary or not, it’s what’s going to happen. I know that you’re Crimson Elite and everything and normally I let you pretty much run wild but you’re right. There’s something different about this case. I’m not taking any chances.”

The channel between them is muted, but not terminated, before Josiah can protest any further and he knows that Eagan did it on purpose. He has little time to think about it because he’s rounding the next curve seconds later and the Charred District is looming in front of him in all of its desolate glory.

He spends precious seconds taking in the sight of the burned out ghost town in front of him before he once again bursts into action. His transport is powered down and he’s out and onto the ash-covered street moments after he enters the district. His best bet of finding Zweil’s trail is on foot where his transport can’t erase any evidence of the other man’s passage that might have been left in the ash on the ground.

One hand on the hilt of the rapier attached to his belt, the weapon that he’s always favored and is rarely without, Josiah moves forward. His eyes scan his surroundings and the ground in front of him automatically, constantly on the lookout for movement or tracks, anything that can lead him to Zweil. He’s also completely alert, ready to draw either his sword or the standard issue electric pistol that he’d received along with his badge.

It takes him almost ten minutes to pick up the trail and when he does he’s covered in a fine layer of ash and even more impressed with Zweil. The other man had went through the pains of hiding his tracks as best he could, but Josiah finally manages to pick up the trail when he spots the place where pain or exhaustion had caught up with him. Zweil had gone down on a knee, and the hand he’d used to brace himself is outlined perfectly in the ash. Josiah feels relief well up within him at the first bit of tangible evidence that Zweil had gone this way.

The situation gets better for Josiah and worse for Zweil quickly after that initial discovery. After that the foot prints are perfectly clear and crisp and Josiah cannot help the way that his anxiety grows as he reads the tracks and sees the way Zweil gets more and more unsteady the further he goes. Something is wrong with Zweil; something has to be to make him so careless with his tracks when he’d been so meticulous before. Josiah feels that anxiety gnaw at his gut so he picks up his pace, following the trail at a slow run.

It isn’t long before the trail ends and he finds himself staring up at the burned out remains of what was once a nice, if a bit modest for the area, house. What’s left of the walls bear the same scorch marks as the houses around it, the windows destroyed by what was once intense heat, and the front door is propped up almost comically against what’s left of its frame.

The tracks lead inside.

Josiah unholsters his electric pistol and slides his way up the front stairs to peek inside while giving himself as much cover as he can. He doesn’t actually believe that Zweil will be a danger to him but the years of training he’d undergone refuses to allow him to leave himself open in such a manner. He easily spots what appears to be the sole of a thick black leather boot, which he knows Zweil was wearing the last time he was seen, from around the corner of what must have once been the main living area in the house.

Josiah does his best to soften the rough tone of his voice when he calls out, to sound friendly and non-threatening despite the fact that he is armed and heavily trained.

“Rafe Zweil, this is Enforcer Marx. I need you to come out unarmed and with your hands up.”

He hears a worryingly wet cough and sees the boot shift just slightly before a husky voice that sends inappropriate shivers down his spine and straight to his cock calls out lowly to him.

“I’m afraid that I’m going to have to say no to that, Enforcer Marx. I don’t think I could move right

now even if I absolutely had to. So if you want to talk to me either we keep yelling at each other or you bring your ass in here.”

Zweil’s short speech is followed by a round of equally wet and painful sounding coughs that cause the hair on the back of Josiah’s neck to stand up. Something is terribly wrong with Zweil and Josiah has a not so sneaking suspicion that the other man’s injuries are worse than he had thought. The only way he’ll be able to find out is to go inside.

His instincts tell him not to, that Zweil could be lying and ready to ambush him with any number of things, but he pushes them down and into the back of his mind. He *needs* to get to Zweil, to find out if he’s safe and to get his wounds treated as quickly as possible. So with a deep breath and a roll of his tense shoulders Josiah raises his pistol into a firing position and steps calmly up and into the remains of the house.

Chapter Four

The remnants of the house are silent, almost eerily so, except for the occasional sound of Zweil letting loose another damp sounding cough or the quiet rustling of his clothes as he shifts in his spot on the floor. Josiah is careful not to rush himself, to hold back his impatience and sweep what he can of the dilapidated building before he heads towards Zweil in order to make sure he isn’t walking into a trap. After a few moments he’s as satisfied as he’s going to get with the security of the building and he turns and heads in the downed man’s direction.

He peeks around the corner swiftly, eyes taking in the picture Zweil makes on the floor. The younger male is slumped against the wall of what Josiah had correctly guessed to be the remnants of the house’s main living area. His clothes are dirty with ash and debris and his face is wet with sweat and unnaturally pale for someone of his complexion. His right arm is draped loosely across his stomach, fingers clenched in pain. Taking in Zweil’s prone form, Josiah lowers his weapon slightly as he steps fully around the corner but doesn’t holster it; he’s not willing to ignore his instincts and make himself vulnerable to that degree, not until he gets a chance to assess Zweil further.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d holster that thing since you really don’t need it. I’m not exactly a threat to anyone at the moment, in case you couldn’t tell. Unless of course you come close enough and then I might be able to gnaw on an ankle or two.” Zweil quips, almost cheerful despite how obviously wounded and vulnerable he is.

Josiah feels his lips quirk up into an almost smile, a begrudging sense of admiration taking root in his chest at the other man’s blasé statement. Dark humor is something he’s always found particularly appealing and hard to find in a submissive, so to see it in one like Zweil does nothing but sweeten an already prime deal. He’d like nothing more than to take Zweil home, stretch him out across the length of his bed, lick him open and take him so far down that he forgets everything and everyone but Josiah. Wants to do it over and over again every day from now until the end of their lives, wants to be the only name Zweil calls out in the night, the only hand he submits to.

Another hacking cough breaks him out of the fantasy and reminds him that he’s here for a purpose that doesn’t include claiming the other man as his own. He has a job to do, a submissive to take into custody, and a case to close. Josiah isn’t going to let a pretty face and the sweetest pair of lips he’s seen in years stop him from doing what he’s supposed to do. Zweil needs help that Josiah can’t give him, things that are out of his jurisdiction and his skill set, so he’ll take him back to the crossroads and turn him over to Marcel and the medics and be done with it. He’ll go home tonight and work his frustrations out on his training equipment and put thoughts of claiming, of *Bonding*, out of his mind.

Josiah shakes his head and holsters his pistol, making sure that the lock is secured before he crouches down beside Zweil. He isn’t worried about an ambush or anything of the like now. Zweil is

clearly in no shape to attack him and even if he does Josiah is more than confident in his own skills and abilities in hand to hand. He starts to say something, starts to tell Zweil that he's got help waiting for him only a handful of miles away, but Zweil's husky voice interrupts him before he can even start. "You said your name was Marx, right? What's your first name?"

"Josiah." He answers out of curiosity and confusion, unsure why the information is necessary.

"Josiah. That's a pretty nice name. Well, Josiah, you should call me Rafe since you're seeing me at what's admittedly not exactly my finest."

Josiah frowns slightly, liking the way Zweil's tongue curls around his name and wanting to accept the offer but knowing that he shouldn't, that it's a step in a direction that he shouldn't take.

"That would be...inappropriate given the circumstances."

Something within Zweil seems to dim for a moment, something wounded and vulnerable shining through before he noticeably stuffs it back down, takes a deep breath, and continues talking.

"This used to be my home, you know. I lived here with my father and his Bonded Miguel when I was a child. I remember waking up every morning to laughter and knowing just how much those two loved each other and me. It was glorious. Those days where something I thought would never end, something I thought would be there forever. Then when the war started and my father died in one of the first raids I knew that everything was going to change. I was twelve and terrified. We had to go to my father's family's main housing complex and I never saw Miguel again."

Josiah is confused, almost startled really, at the way Zweil is volunteering all of this unnecessary information while at the same time another part of him is rejoicing in being able to gather more details about him. The almost dazed look on Zweil's face brings his world sharply back into focus in the next second.

"I just...I wish that I could see him one more time or at least find out what happened to him...before it's all over with..."

Zweil's voice fades out and Josiah is once again on high alert as his eyes search the other man for any sign that his injuries have noticeably worsened. That's when he sees it, sees the way the hand he'd thought was curled closed in pain is now open and loose on Zweil's other side, fingers barely making contact with an empty glass-vialed syringe.

The pieces fall together with an almost audible click and Josiah surges forward, hands darting out to cup Zweil's face in his palms so that he can look into his eyes. The pupils are blown wide, the color almost eclipsed by black, and Josiah can practically see whatever drug the other man had injected into himself swimming there in the depths of his gaze. Cursing savagely he takes a brief second to thank Eagan for his foresight in thinking to keep an open channel between them.

"Eagan, I know you can hear me. You need to send Marcel and that medical unit to my location, stat! Zweil's injected himself with some sort of drug and I have the feeling that he doesn't have much time left so tell them to hurry the fuck up!"

Teeth gnashing, Josiah curses his own stupidity in underestimating just how far Zweil was willing to go. No wonder Zweil had been so intent to stall, so eager to talk and keep Josiah distracted. He'd been biding time, trying to make sure that enough passed so that the drug in his system couldn't be reversed. Not willing to let it happen, not willing to let him go that easily, Josiah cups a too slack shoulder in one hand and slaps the other man across the cheek hard enough to sting and hopefully to make him focus a bit with the other. Sure enough Zweil's eyes sharpen for a moment as they focus on Josiah's face.

"What. Did. You. Take?" Josiah grits the question out through clenched teeth, each word its own separate sentence as he tries to contain his rage.

“Hmm. A little of this...a little of that. You don't have to...worry...about me...anymore...”

Zweil's losing coherency fast, the drugs finally taking hold of him and stealing away his senses. Josiah can feel his own control slipping in a way that it never has before, can feel panic creeping up on him where calm has always been.

“Zweil! Zweil! Rafe! Snap out of it and tell me what you took, damn you!”

Josiah bellows the words but they have no effect. All he can do is clutch uselessly at the other man's loose form and pray that the sirens he can hear in the distance will make it to them in time.

Chapter Five

Josiah scrubs a hand roughly across his face, fingers scraping through the build-up of stubble that coats his cheeks. He's basically been playing guard over Rafe's bedside for the past three days and he's beginning to get frustrated. He's given up all thoughts of not calling the man by his given name. Josiah figures it's a small reward for all of the bullshit he's had to put up with.

The situation had gone downhill at an almost awe-inspiring speed after the medical unit had finally made it to the ruins of Rafe's old home. The submissive had flat-lined twice on the ride back to the city and on the second time the medics had barely been able to revive him again. The large dose of distilled quiesco root, a plant that acted as a powerful sedative, that he'd injected into his arm had stopped his heart before the medics had been able to flush his system completely. They'd almost been too late.

He'd almost lost Rafe before he even had the chance to have him.

Josiah pushes that thought away harshly. Rafe isn't his, cannot be his, and does in fact belong to someone else. Someone Josiah has spent the last three days making damn sure is unable to come within two feet of the vulnerable man. He knows that he should have went home instead, that he should have left the hospital as soon as it was clear that Rafe would live, gone home and washed the feel of ash and death off of his skin with scalding hot water. Instead he'd glued himself to Rafe's side, ignoring or practically snarling at anyone who suggested he should leave. Eagan had walked in, taken one look at him before shaking his head and wishing him good luck.

What he meant Josiah isn't exactly sure he wants to know, but he appreciates the sentiment anyways.

Frisch had been particularly hard to get rid of, but Josiah had taken an almost feral delight in intimidating the lower tiered dominant into leaving. So far he'd been the only visitor; there'd been no friends, no other family. The unconscious man's Head of House hadn't even bothered to show when she'd been notified of his condition and location and that alone spoke volumes about Rafe's home life. It was something that set Josiah's teeth on edge and his fingers itching for his rapier.

Especially when the medical workup on Rafe had been completed and Josiah and Marcel had been presented with irrefutable proof that the submissive had been treated poorly for what had to have been years now. The physical scars were few but the in-depth scans had told a different, more terrible story. Josiah has a not so sneaky suspicion that it'd all began when Rafe had been separated from his father's Bonded. He's got feelers out in some discreet places to see if he can locate the other man; it'd only taken a few discreet messages on his p.a.t.c.h to start the process, but he's more than aware of the fact that after so many years any important information might already be gone.

Now all they can do is play the waiting game and hope that Rafe will wake up soon so that Josiah can get his testimony and have Frisch's abusing ass thrown somewhere where he won't see the light of day for a very long time.

“You know I don't think I've ever seen you quite this invested in a case before, Josie.”

It's Marcel, her platinum blonde hair swept up in her trademark twist as her dark brown eyes almost twinkle at him despite the seriousness of the situation.

“Don’t call me that, *Marcy*. You know how much I hate it.” He smirks tiredly at the displeased moue he gets in return.

“Point taken, sweetness. Now no more changing the subject! You’ve gotten yourself all twisted up about this delicious little morsel like nothing I’ve ever seen before. Not that I blame you really, he’s exceptional from what I’ve seen.”

Josiah doesn’t even bother to bristle about the way Marcel speaks about Rafe like he knows he will if others are so casual in their speech. Marcel is a fourth tier dominant who’s been Bonded to a fourth tier submissive from Air named Isaac for the past three years, and Josiah trusts her more than almost anyone else in his life at the moment. They’ve known each other practically their entire lives and Josiah knows that despite her bluster and sometimes entirely too frank manner of speech she’s just as dedicated to the protection of submissives as he is.

He’s not the only one with skeletons in his closet and a deep hatred of dominants who abuse their positions and tier.

“There’s just something about him that grabs me, Marcel. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever felt before and I don’t even know him, not really. We’ve had one conversation and that was only because he was trying to distract me from finding out that he was trying to commit suicide. So even if he was free we still wouldn’t be able...it still wouldn’t be right.”

Marcel drops a comforting hand on his shoulder and when she speaks to him again her voice is a sweet soothing tone that’s rare to hear directed to anyone who isn’t Isaac.

“You’re the last dominant I’d even accuse of mistreating someone in your care, regardless of the circumstances of your meeting. Let me give you some friendly advice, Josiah. When you find someone that speaks to you on so deep a level without ever really saying anything you don’t let them go without a fight. You grab them with both hands and tear your way through anything that tries to keep you two apart. Trust me when I tell you that if you let this opportunity slip through your fingers you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

“You can’t tell me that, *Marcy*. You can’t come in here and tell me that I need to keep him when we both know I can’t, that it’s not that simple.”

Marcel regards him for a moment in silence, her gaze going sharp and cool as she arches a brow at him.

“I never took you for a coward, *Marx*.”

Anger shoots through him despite the exhaustion that lingers around him like a cloud. If there’s one thing he isn’t in this world it’s a coward. Marcel knows how he feels about the word and the fact that she’s dared to cross such a line with him lets him know that she’s serious but it doesn’t change the fact that it pisses him off.

“We’ve been friends for a very long time, Marcel, and I would hate for that to change over something like this.”

“Oh please, like you’ll ever actually get rid of me. Face it, sweetness, you’re stuck with me until one of us breathes our last and then if there’s a way probably after that as well. Now smooth down your feathers and let’s get back to the point.”

Josiah rolls his shoulders and surges to his feet, hands clasped behind his back as he begins to pace the room restlessly, eyes rarely actually leaving Rafe’s still form even as Marcel begins to speak to him again.

“You remember what I was like before Isaac, don’t you? I went through the pleasure houses like I was racing against time, never staying with one submissive more than once and rejecting everyone who wanted a chance to vie for my attention. None of them were what I wanted; none of them could

satisfy me. But when I met Isaac. The moment I saw him, all I could think about was how beautiful he'd look for me, about how much I wanted to own him."

Josiah hears her, knows what she's talking about and knows that he'd had the same reaction to Rafe, that instinctual urge to dominate, that drive to conquer and own. It'd been deep and dark and unlike anything he'd ever felt before and he knows with a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach that she's right.

"What do I do then, Marcel? How do I make this right? How do I make it work?"

He can hear the uncharacteristic edge of desperation in his own voice and it hits him all over again just how much Rafe has affected him in such a short amount of time. Just how tied up in knots this wounded submissive has him without even trying.

"You do what we've always done, Josiah. You gather information, you control the situation, and then you conquer your objective. And this time you'll have something on your side that Frisch and Zweil's Head of House will never see coming."

"What?"

Marcel's gaze is cold and sharp and Josiah sees the steel and ice that made her a fourth tier in the almost cruel smirk that graces her deceptively delicate features.

"Me."

Chapter Six

It's another two days before anything changes with Rafe but Josiah's been busy so the time is almost appreciated even though he wants nothing more than for Rafe to open his eyes and look at him again. He's actually left Rafe's bedside for once, making a quick journey home for a few hours of decent sleep, a shave and a shower, and some truly edible food. He's left Marcel and Isaac with Rafe, trusting the other dominant to keep anyone who wasn't supposed to be there out of the submissive's room while he was out handling his business.

Still the urge to return, the need to be the one overseeing Rafe's care bites at Josiah and only the knowledge that he was no good to the other man if he was exhausted and starving had kept him from refusing to leave at all.

He can't bite down the savage curse that rips itself out of his throat when his *oricula* chimes an alert on the channel that he's left open but muted between himself and Marcel and her voice informs him sweetly that Rafe is waking up. He'd wanted to be there, had wanted to be the first face the submissive saw when he woke up in some misguided sense of possessiveness. Scowling he throws on his clothes and rushes out of his apartment and down to his transport. He's on the way to the facility after only a few minutes.

When he arrives he doesn't bother to check in, doesn't even pause his long strides when the nurses try to waylay him. He has one set destination and he refuses to be distracted or knocked off course. He practically tears the door to Rafe's private room out of its track when it doesn't open fast enough for his taste.

"Really, Josiah, you'd think you'd have learned some manners and decorum after all these years."

Josiah ignores her, knows that she doesn't actually expect a response or acknowledgement. She knows better, knows that all of his attention will be focused where it should be, on the submissive he intends to claim as his own one way or another. Josiah's practically devouring Rafe with his eyes the second his gaze lands on the other man even as he makes his way swiftly across the space that separates them until he's standing at his bedside.

Rafe looks back at him silently, eyes impossibly wide in a face still too pale for Josiah's liking. Josiah raises a hand to touch him and feels his heart crack down the center when Rafe flinches back,

arms rising in an attempt to protect his face from the expected blow. It's a telling sign, one more black mark in a case that already has its fair share. Josiah drops his hand slowly and when he speaks he's careful to keep his voice low and even, keeping an iron grip on his temper in an effort to keep it from leaking through.

"I want you to know that when this is over. Frisch will never touch you again. No one will ever touch you again unless you want them to. I give you my word."

He's telling the truth because as much as he wants Rafe, as much as he wants to spread him out and work him over with his teeth and his tongue he won't if the submissive doesn't want it as well. No matter how much he aches to dominate, conquer and own the younger male he won't lay a single finger on him in that manner unless Rafe's willing and eager. He'll make him beg for it first. Josiah's never been the type to force his attentions on someone, never been the type to abide by that behavior in others either.

If this all works out, he'll have plenty of time to teach Rafe the joys of pain, how a little bit can make the pleasure sweeter, can intensify the feeling until he aches with it. He'll have years to break him in just right, to coax and soothe him until he trusts Josiah enough to give himself unflinchingly to any punishment that he might earn. Plenty of time to teach him that sometimes punishment can be its own reward. And if it doesn't, then Josiah will make sure that Rafe never has to worry about anything ever again. He'll make sure that he has a life that doesn't involve the pleasure houses or another disastrous attempt at matching him with someone not of his choosing.

If he has to rip Zweil House down with his bare hands he'll make sure of it.

The wounded submissive is studying him, arms slowly lowering back down until they're resting at his sides even as his eyes continue to take in every detail of Josiah they can find. He hopes absently that Rafe finds him as pleasing as he finds Rafe. Neither of them bothers to acknowledge Marcel and Isaac when they quietly step out of the room to wait in the hall, closing the door softly behind them. They're both entirely too occupied with observing each other.

"You're real."

Josiah stiffens slightly in surprise at the quiet and steady statement. It's the last thing he's expecting Rafe to say so all he can do is answer with the obvious truth.

"Yes, I am."

"I thought...I thought I dreamt you, made you up so that I wouldn't have to be alone when I...at the end."

He understands what Rafe's saying, understands that the other man's talking about when he tried to kill himself, and while he hates to even think about it he's almost pleased by the fact that Rafe thinks he is worthy of being a fantasy of any sort. Even if it technically took place during a rather morbid and depressing situation, it still counted for something.

"No, I was and am as real as you are. I was assigned to your retrieval and I tracked you to the Charred District. After everything that happened I stayed with you there until the medical unit arrived."

He doesn't mention the week spent hovering at his bedside, intent on not disturbing the submissive or making him uncomfortable with possibly unwanted attention.

"Madam Marcel said that you stayed with me the entire time, that today's the first time you've left my side this entire week. Is that true?"

Josiah doesn't sigh but he doesn't rebel against the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose in amused frustration at Marcel's ability to ruin his plans without even trying. Still he refuses to lie to Rafe, will not start off what he hopes will be a relationship between them with falsehoods and outright deceit.

“Yes. I didn’t want you to wake up alone, and I don’t trust the staff here to keep the people who are supposed to stay out of your room actually out of it. Since I had the time and the will I decided to stay with you.”

“That’s more than I could have ever hoped for. Thank you for going through so much trouble when you didn’t have to. I’m not your problem; I wasn’t supposed to be anyone’s problem anymore...” Rafe’s words trail off, the week he’s spent unconscious and the drugs that have been constantly pumping through his body dragging him back to sleep against his will.

Josiah grits his teeth at the words; he knows that it is a bad idea to give into the urge to shake some sense into Rafe. He knows better than to lay hands on him despite the way he wants to do nothing more than to make Rafe swear to him that he’ll erase that way of thinking from his mind. Instead he wraps his hands tightly around the guardrail of the bed and stares down into green eyes that are beginning to droop in renewed exhaustion.

“You’re not a problem at all, and I’d be ready and willing to say that you’ve probably never really been a problem in the past either.”

He’s almost positive that Rafe doesn’t hear him because the submissive’s lovely green eyes are closed and his breathing is even. He’s asleep, body unable or unwilling to fight against the pull of unconsciousness any longer. Josiah stares down at him silently, hands gradually relaxing their white knuckled grip on the bar. He reaches out slowly, almost against his will, to touch the now peaceful face that’s resting on the soft down pillow. All he wants is a touch, one tiny moment of skin on skin contact that he knows will both soothe and enflame his urge to possess and dominate the other man.

Before he can make contact a throat is cleared quietly behind him and he jerks his hand back swiftly, recognizing Marcel in the tiny sound. His shoulders tense automatically. He knows that she would have never interrupted him if it wasn’t something important, something that he needs to know immediately.

“What is it, Marcel?”

He almost winces at the harshness of his tone, the commanding growl in his voice, but he knows that Marcel will understand, that they’ve been friends for too long to let dominance displays come between them. Although he is aware that there’s an end to even her patience and he has no desire to push her to that point.

“There’s been a new...development.” She sounds almost angry, like she’s biting back her temper the same way he is but there’s also a small current of what sounds like satisfaction hidden beneath it.

“Just tell me. Whatever it is I’m sure that I’ll be able to handle it.”

“I just received word from Sanctuary that they will be unable to house Zweil once he’s been released from medical containment. According to their representative, the main office was notified this morning to the fact that Zweil has an extensive history of violence and has on more than one occasion caused extensive physical harm to those around him. Out of concern for those who are already housed on the premises they are sorry to inform us that there will be no place for him there.”

Josiah can tell from the stiffness of her words that she’s quoting whomever she’d spoken to, that the words are not her own and suddenly he knows just where her anger comes from. Frisch or perhaps even the head of Zweil House herself had contacted Sanctuary, the safe haven for all those who were abused by their partners, and intimidated them into refusing Rafe’s future attempts to relocate.

“I’m sure I can guess where the rest of this headed. Sanctuary refuses him admittance and that means he’s destitute and wounded now so of course for the sake of his wellbeing he should be handed over to his Head of House and his future Bonded. Both of whom I’m sure only have his best interests

at heart and are willing to overlook this misunderstanding. Does that about sum up the situation?"

"As always you're at the head of the class, sweetness."

"They will not get their hands on him again. I promised him, swore to him that I wouldn't allow it. So is there another way to make sure I don't become a liar, or am I going to have to take drastic measures?"

By this point he's almost hoping that it'll come down to that, that he'll have to resort to swords and pistols, to fists and blood and physically making sure that no harm can ever touch Rafe again. He knows that with his training and experience that he'll be able to do irreparable damage before they even know what hit them. He also knows that if he does that, if he goes to such lengths, they'll send Cleaners, a specially trained branch of the armed forces that specialized in neutralizing or capturing berserk soldiers, after him and he'll never see Rafe or anyone else ever again.

"You've always had such a flair for the dramatic. You do know that, don't you? That's why I started calling you Josie when we were younger. No, you won't have to go out and risk having someone sic Cleaners on you, sweet. Like I told you before Frisch doesn't know about me; I've managed to keep my name almost completely out of this. As far as he, and that shrew who calls herself Head of House, knows, they're simply dealing with one hellishly stubborn enforcer."

Marcel pauses for a moment as she reaches down and undocks her p.a.t.c.h, a delicate silver model that looks lovely on her wrist. Her fingers fly across the screen without any hesitation for a few seconds before she briskly refolds and docks her unit with a satisfied air about her. Marcel shoots him a sly smile that lights her features up from within and her voice rings with victory.

"They'll never see this coming, and by the time they figure out which way's up, it'll be too late for them to do anything immediately. I'll tie them up in so much paperwork and litigation that their descendants' descendants will be wading through it. Now I just sent you a file and I need you to read and sign everything in it as soon as possible."

Josiah immediately undocks and unfurls his p.a.t.c.h and dives into the information that Marcel had just sent streaming to him. His eyes widen a fraction at what he reads and he's almost grinning before he's done. Attention never leaving the text before him, he raises his free hand, fingers positioned as if holding a pen, and signs his name across the air in front of the screen with a flourish. A sense of deep satisfaction wells up in his chest when he sees his signature appear in the correct slot and he doesn't bother to try and tamp it down when it's authenticated and made official.

That easily, Rafe belongs to him for the period of no less than one year.

"I'm not exactly sure how you did that, Marcel, but you are a goddess of law."

"You're finally admitting something I've been trying to get you to see for years now so I would definitely count this as a win for me as well. As for the how, well, so few people check those pesky little bylaws that were developed when Sanctuary was first established. Especially not the ones that state that a reputable enforcer has the right to take custody of and house any dominant or submissive that has been rejected from the premises."

Josiah chuckles low in his throat at the almost childish tone Marcel's adopted, the one that does nothing to hide the vicious glee that threads through her voice.

"A goddess, Marcel; there is no other word to describe you. Still this almost seems too easy somehow."

"Oh, sweetness, it's not easy. We're both going to have our hands full for some time to come. This just makes things a bit more manageable and keeps you from ripping apart an entire complex to get what belongs to you back. That in turn keeps me from having to use all of my considerable pull in a vain effort to keep the both of you safe afterwards."

Josiah docks his p.a.t.c.h and turns his eyes back on Rafe's sleeping form. His hand reaches out and his fingers brush softly against the skin of the sleeping man's cheek. He can touch him now, has all rights to lay hands on him, but this is all he'll take for now, all he'll take until he knows Rafe wants it as well. He has a year, an entire cycle of seasons to turn the submissive to his way of life, to convince the man that he'll never find somewhere he belongs better than at Josiah's side and in his bed.

"And what will you do with the time your little maneuver has given us, Marcel? What dastardly plan do you have spinning in your parlor?"

Marcel laughs, a thick, honey-sweet sound, and when he looks up at her briefly her smile is as devious and venomous as the spider he's just likened her to.

"I'll show those miscreants at the Sanctuary that going against the vows you've made to protect the abused has a steep price to pay. When I'm done with them they'll be on the streets searching for those in need instead of waiting for them to show up on their doorstep. And if they don't, then I'll bring their organization down around their ears."

Josiah smiles down at Rafe's still form and the expression's a sharp one, all gleaming teeth and satisfaction.

"Good."

Chapter Seven

"Easy now, there's no need to rush."

"Honestly, Josiah, you're hovering. Give the poor thing some room to breathe."

Josiah fights down an uncharacteristic flush that's threatening to work its way across his cheeks at the poorly veiled amusement in Marcel's voice. He knows that he's hovering, that he is practically on top of Rafe as he walks slowly down the hall towards the door of Josiah's apartment, but he can't help himself. Rafe is still noticeably unsteady on his feet after over a week spent confined to a hospital bed and heavily sedated.

He would personally prefer not to start Rafe's tenure in his home with a return trip to the hospital to treat the concussion the submissive would probably get from tripping over his already dragging feet.

"It's fine...I'm grateful for the help."

Rafe's softly spoken sentence draws all of Josiah's attention back to the other man as he willfully ignores the smug expression on Marcel's face. She's entirely too amused with the fact that he's being openly concerned over Rafe and almost manic when it comes to anything that he deems too stressful for the other man. Still he doesn't intend to stop; he's not ashamed to openly care for a submissive in his power. He's always been a firm believer that only the foolish believed that showing concern over someone entrusted to them for safekeeping was a mark of weakness.

To have someone willingly give themselves over to you is to experience true power and only a fool would abuse such a thing. Josiah is many things but a fool is not one of them.

So instead he rests one hand lightly on the small of Rafe's back and cups his elbow with the other, feigning ignorance to the way the submissive automatically tenses and then flushes in embarrassment. Rafe is helpless against his body's natural desire to protect itself from harm and Josiah will not embarrass the man further by bringing attention to it. Rafe's reaction is more than expected from someone who's been through so much and Josiah cannot hold it against him.

They manage to make it into Josiah's apartment without any mishaps, and Marcel waves them off with a wink, saying something about raiding Josiah's kitchen for lunch of some sort. Left alone, Josiah and Rafe move slowly down the apartment's short hallway and stop in front of the door to the spare bedroom Josiah's had prepared specifically for Rafe. He'd had it done in colors that reminded him of

Rafe, colors that he hoped the submissive would find relaxing and appealing, and he finds himself strangely nervous about showing it to him.

“I had the room made up for you. It’s not much, but I hope it pleases you.”

Josiah’s voice is a bit rough, his nerves showing through in the stiff way that he holds himself as he unconsciously falls back on his engrained training. Rafe looks at him silently for a moment before he nods his head, and Josiah reaches out and slowly opens the door. Their eyes maintain contact with one another until the doors fully open and Rafe turns his head slowly to take in his new living space.

The room is done in cool mint green, the hardwood floors are polished to a shine, and the thick black comforter on the bed is already turned down invitingly. They’re standing so close to one another that Josiah feels more than hears Rafe suck in an unsteady breath.

“This is…” Rafe trails off and clears his throat roughly as he turns back to Josiah, his eyes suspiciously damp around the edges and his face filled with a sort of confused awe. “Is this really for me?”

Josiah closes his eyes for a moment, fighting to repress the urge to turn around, walk out of his apartment, hunt Frisch and the rest of Rafe’s family down, and then take them apart with his bare hands. Or worse the urge to wipe that look off of Rafe’s face with his tongue and his hands, which is something that he knows Rafe isn’t ready for yet, if he ever will be. When he opens his eyes, Rafe’s staring at the ground silently, already weary shoulders slumped even further. Josiah cannot help himself when he reaches his free hand up and grasps the submissive gently by the chin and tilts his face upwards until their eyes meet.

“This room, this bit of space and paint is less than you deserve and the least that I could do. I want you to be comfortable, to be happy here.” The *with me* remains unsaid at the end of Josiah’s sentence, but he thinks maybe Rafe hears it from the way his eyes soften and his body relaxes the tiniest bit.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Are the colors to your liking?”

“It’s perfect, all of it.”

Josiah sighs softly, the pad of his thumb stroking the curve of Rafe’s jaw gently.

“If there’s anything you need or anything you want to change, just tell me and I’ll take care of it. Don’t be afraid to ask me for anything, Rafe.”

Rafe stays silent and after a moment Josiah reluctantly drops his hand and steps back and away from the submissive. He doesn’t want to leave him but Josiah knows that he needs some space, a moment to gather his composure before he makes a move that he’ll regret.

“Will you be alright from here? I would like to go and make sure that Marcel isn’t destroying the kitchen in one of her attempts to cook. I would prefer not to have to replace any appliances this time.”

Josiah is pleased by the small smile his statement draws from Rafe even as the submissive shuffles slowly into his new room, the door closing with a low click behind him. Josiah doesn’t move immediately. Instead he lingers for few moments, listening for any sounds of distress from within the room before he slowly makes his way to the kitchen to take over Marcel’s latest attempt at making lunch.

Half an hour goes by and Josiah makes them all a light lunch and is about to go and fetch Rafe himself when he appears silently in the doorway, looking freshly showered and better than he has in days. Josiah motions him silently toward the already set table and is pleased when Rafe shoots him an appreciative look as he sets a bowl of soup in front of him before moving to take his own place, Marcel trailing along behind him.

The three of them settle down and eat together, the atmosphere comfortable and for the most part quiet except for the occasional comment thrown by Marcel and its required answer. Josiah feels strangely at peace, content to share a simple meal with one of his closest friends and the submissive who has captured him so completely and so quickly. When everyone is through, Marcel volunteers to take the dishes to the cleaning receptacle, and they sit in silence for a moment before Rafe actually speaks up.

“If it would please you, I could take over all of the meals in the future.”

It’s less of a question and more of a statement, and Josiah cannot repress his frown even when it causes Rafe to hunch in on himself.

“Was the food not to your liking?”

“N-No, I meant no offense...I just...it...” Rafe’s words trail off and he hunches further in his seat. Josiah scrambles to recover the situation.

“Is cooking something that you enjoy? Honestly?”

Rafe doesn’t meet his eyes when he answers him and Josiah has to force down the growl of displeasure that provokes from him.

“I am proficient in the kitchen and can prepare any number of meals.”

His words are stiff, almost rehearsed sounding, and Josiah is quickly beginning to hate the meekness Rafe is presenting to him. He wants the fire, the passion and strength he’d seen in the other man in the video, the dark humor and wit he’d seen in the decrepit house. He doesn’t want to spend the next year with this shell, this pale imitation of the man he’s been itching to claim as his own since he first saw him.

“That’s not what I asked you. I asked you if you enjoyed cooking and I would like an honest answer.”

Rafe actually looks up at him then, green eyes studying his face, and Josiah falls back on his training to make sure that nothing he feels is given away. The last thing he wants to do is startle or alarm Rafe by letting the intuitive man catch a glimpse of the darker emotions that are rioting inside of him at the moment. Josiah almost hums with pleasure when Rafe seems to gather himself before he answers, his shoulders straightening as he comes to a noticeable decision.

“No, not particularly. I’m well educated in the subject, as it was something that I was expected to know, but it’s not something that I’m all that fond of.”

“Then I’ll handle the meals or we’ll take turns as the mood strikes us. You’re not here to serve me, Rafe; you’re here for your own protection. I’m not going to treat you like a slave. You’re a person; being a submissive doesn’t make you less than I am and despite what you might have been told in the past I believe that you deserve nothing but respect.”

Rafe stares at him, eyes slightly wider than normal, and Josiah is both pleased and saddened by the look of almost shocked delight that flitters briefly across the other male’s face. It’s replaced all too quickly with a sort of wary acceptance. He knows that it’ll take some convincing before Rafe truly trusts him, that it’ll take work to make the submissive understand that he’s telling the truth. Just like Marcel had warned him earlier in the week Josiah knows that it will not be easy, but he also knows that Rafe is well worth the effort.

Chapter Eight

They fall into a steady routine together sometime within that first week. Josiah is as soft spoken and gentle tempered as he can force himself to be and Rafe wanders through the apartment like a wraith. Marcel is a regular visitor and her loud and unapologetic presence provides a pleasant sort of buffer between Josiah and the still skittish submissive. Even better are the days that she is sometimes accompanied by Isaac.

The obviously happy and well-loved submissive visits on the rare days that he doesn't spend locked inside his studio, spinning the pottery that makes him famous. His presence seems to almost reassure Rafe on some level, almost as if it's a small amount of proof that Josiah is telling him the truth. Somehow it seems as if Isaac's obvious love for Marcel and the joy that is palpable between the couple begins to help Rafe believe that he might actually be safe with Josiah, and he slowly starts to relax.

Josiah himself gets an unexpected jolt of pleasure from seeing Rafe interact with Marcel and Isaac. It's as if seeing him there, getting along with two of the only people Josiah actively trusts pleases Josiah on a deeper level. It's further proof to him about just how well Rafe would fit into his life if the submissive would be willing to try.

Things go on like this and Rafe heals quickly. The steady meals, low stress and freedom of movement within the apartment do much to reverse the effects of spending a week sedated in a bed and to speed what bit of healing Rafe still has to do thanks to his other injuries. It is in this way that, despite his misgivings, despite wishing otherwise, Josiah returns to his duties as an enforcer fulltime with little in the actual way of complaints.

Weeks pass and Josiah and Rafe coexist around each other instead of actually together. Josiah rises first in the morning and is often out of the apartment before Rafe begins to stir. Rafe is often awake long into the night and Josiah falls asleep to the small sounds of the submissive existing not too far from him. Generally the atmosphere in the apartment is filled with a delicate sort of tension that Josiah itches to break but refrains from doing so. He knows that what he wants must come second to what Rafe needs now more than ever.

Things do not change until the day that Josiah is sitting, calmly completing the files upon files of digital after-case paperwork that is the main downside to his job. His concentration is disrupted by the low, vibrating ping that signals an incoming message on his p.a.t.c.h. Absently he pauses in his work and undocks and unfolds his screen, fingers bringing up the message through sheer muscle memory alone. His mind wanders for a moment, pausing on different thoughts here and there, lingering as always on the ones that revolve around Rafe.

He freezes though, feels fear rush through him at the message displayed on his screen.

Vanguard,

The danger and plot are larger than you know so watch your boy's back before someone sinks a knife into it.

Reestablish contact soon,

Skirmisher

Vanguard is something that he hasn't been called since his days in the Crimson Elite, where he'd specialized in the forward assault. It's the sender though that truly gives him pause, the name Skirmisher sending all sorts of warning bells ringing in his mind. Gar.

Gar Druce, or Skirmisher as he'd been known in their unit, had been a sniper by trade and a shadow by nature. A tall, leanly muscled dominant, Gar had been all wild dark hair and pale white skin. He'd been quiet and intense but fiercely loyal to the unit and braver than most. He'd taken to his job of disrupting any enemy troop formations and guarding their collective asses like a stalking tiger, fiercely territorial and all fluid movements and quick kills. Every man and woman in the unit had adored Gar, but for all of his loyalty he'd always been standoffish and almost awkward around everyone. They'd all been surprised when he'd been the main driving force behind making sure that they stayed in contact once their unit had finally disbanded.

They'd all realized though that his desire to stay in contact was mainly due to the fact that Gar was

utterly alone outside of the ties that bound them all together.

Josiah knows that if Gar has decided the situation warrants such an outright warning that things must be worse than he and Marcel have realized. He deletes the message, erasing any sign of it from his p.a.t.c.h out of respect for Gar's own personal preferences before he refolds and docks the piece of tech. There's no sense in sending a reply. Josiah knows that Gar doesn't actually expect one and that more than likely he'll have used a disposable unit anyways.

Gar'd always tried harder to be invisible than any of the rest of the unit and so far no one has ever been able to figure out exactly why.

Josiah wastes no time in heading to Eagan's office, closing the door and asking the older man if the room is secure through a series of simple hand signs that are standard tools of communication in their job. When he receives the all clear signal he jumps right into explaining the new information he's just been made privy to.

"I've just been informed that the danger to Rafe Zweil is far from over."

Eagan stares at him for a moment, something like confusion swimming across his features before he snaps himself out of it and straightens from his relaxed slouch in his chair.

"What were you told and how reliable is the source?"

"It was more of a vague warning, but I'll be receiving a packet of Intel soon. As for the source, Skirmisher initiated contact with me a moment ago."

Josiah feels the tension in the room wrench itself up a few notches and knows that Eagan understands the implications of that statement. The other man, who as his new CO had been informed of some of the particulars of Josiah's time in the Crimson Elite, is aware of Skirmisher's reputation within their unit and the fact that his involvement spells trouble.

"Shit. Skirmisher's presence just made this a lot more complicated. Here I was hoping that this whole situation would be resolved peacefully and then you have to tell me something like this."

"Frisch has been almost suspiciously silent as of late. Marcel and I had hoped that he'd simply come to his senses and moved on, especially since my own contacts have mentioned nothing out of the ordinary. Then again Skirmisher was always better at maintaining a network than any of the rest of us besides Con our resident techie."

Eagan scrubs a hand over his normally cheerful face and regards Josiah with a smile that falls just short of amused.

"You're going to kill him if he makes one wrong move towards Zweil, am I right? Nothing I can say or do is going to be able to stop that if Frisch gets to him before you manage to get to Frisch."

Josiah doesn't even bother to pretend otherwise. He just nods along with Eagan's statement, knowing all the while that it's completely true.

"It's fairly obvious to everyone, except for Zweil, how you feel about him. We all know that you'd Claim him in an instance and probably Bond with him if given the opportunity."

Josiah forces himself not to twitch under Eagan's watchful eyes at that statement. He wants Rafe, wants him chained to his side and kneeling at his feet, wants to do anything and everything to him, with him, but he wasn't aware that he'd been obvious about it. Besides around Marcel and Isaac, of course. Those two knew more than anyone. Plus the thought of Bonding with Rafe, of having him at his side for the rest of their existence, to become one with him and to forsake all others, the thought alone is enough to heat his blood.

Eagan chuckles then, actual amusement ringing in the sound.

"Give you a rapier and an electric pistol and you're ready to storm a beach somewhere, but talk about you Bonding with that man of yours and you get as flustered as a school girl. This is something

I'll have to remember for the blessing speeches.”

“You're a horrible bitch of a man, Eagan.” Josiah deadpans only to have Eagan break out into full-blown laughter, and Josiah cannot help the small answering twitch of his mouth at the sound of the other man's glee.

The laughter doesn't last long as the seriousness of the situation takes a hold of the atmosphere of the room once again.

“As of right now you're being granted full leave to stay by Zweil's side until this mess is completely resolved.”

Josiah can't contain his faint frown of disbelief at Eagan's statement even though the thought of having so much time with Rafe is a welcome one.

“Are you sure that you want to go that far? There are alternatives, ways that we normally handle cases similar to this one.”

“This is an unusual case, Josiah. We've never had a submissive that we have to protect from so many people at once. Zweil's got a dominant with a claim and his Head of House after him so we're going to have to try something a bit more unusual. I'll not have the death or mistreatment of a submissive in our custody happen on my watch so I'd rather be overly cautious instead of getting caught off guard. You'll need to provide regular reports, of course, both in person and over a secure channel. We'll have extra security making sweeps in your area on a regular basis but for now the best thing to do is to keep Zweil off the streets all together. Other than that, I ask that you keep me informed unofficially with any new developments and watch your back as well as Zweil's. I don't want to lose one of my best in the crossfire either.”

Josiah studies Eagan silently for a moment before he snaps a sharp salute at the other man, a sign of respect that he knows his L.E. will understand. He turns on his heel and heads back towards his desk to gather anything and everything he might need until the next time he can make it back into the office.

He's got a submissive to protect and he's not willing to take any chances either. He refuses to lose Rafe before he's even had the chance to have him.

Chapter Nine

Josiah manages to make it home quicker than he normally would without blatantly breaking all of the known speed restrictions. He's out of the transport, eyes scanning the surrounding area and footsteps silent, and at his door before he realizes anything is amiss.

The apartment door is unlocked and partially ajar and Josiah is immediately on full alert. He draws his pistol and steps through the opening almost before he realizes he's moved. Moving swiftly down the entrance hall he begins to do a thorough sweep of the apartment. He knows almost immediately that the pistol is not necessary. The apartment is obviously empty, the silence in the place so thick that it practically vibrates, but he still keeps his weapon out and in position because that's what he'd been trained to do.

The apartment is dark, the wall-lights either dimmed or off completely in some areas, and it only serves to add to the feeling that the place is clearly empty. Still he finds no sign of forced entry, no signs of a struggle or anything really out of place. All of his personal belongings and the things that he'd purchased for Rafe are still in their proper places. The only thing actually missing is Rafe himself.

Josiah hears the front door squeak open slowly, feels the change in the air when someone steps into the apartment, and he's crouched, hiding in the shadows and ready to spring in seconds. Footsteps move slowly down the hall and right when they round the corner Josiah's leg sweeps out

automatically to trip the intruder.

His leg connects and he feels the intruder stumble and tilt forward. Surprise filters through him when instead of going down hard the stranger uses the momentum of his own fall to propel himself forward onto his outstretched palms and into a smooth forward flip. Josiah is up instantly, his pistol pressing deep into the flesh of the exposed back before him.

“If you as much as twitch,” he hisses, “I will shoot you.”

“Josiah?” It’s Rafe’s voice that speaks his name, the word practically vibrating with unease.

“Shit!” Josiah immediately holsters his gun, wraps one hand around Rafe’s shoulder and spins him around until they’re face to face. Anger flares through him, anger at himself for not recognizing the other male sooner, anger at Rafe for not being where he was supposed to be in the first place. It all comes spilling out of him before he can think twice about it.

“What in the fuck were you doing? What in the hell possessed you to leave the apartment? I’ve seen your test scores, Zweil, so you’ve got no excuse for acting like a fucking idiot!”

Josiah shakes Rafe hard once before letting go of the submissive as if burned. Raking a hand through his blond hair he stalks towards the nearest switch and turns the dial all the way up until the apartment is flooded with light. In the now bright room he can see Rafe’s face clearly, can see an anger that matches his own rising up in the man, which is at odds with the mostly meek behavior he’s shown to Josiah since they’ve been together.

“I wasn’t aware that I was a prisoner, *Marx*, or that you’re apparently my warden. Although I suppose that was a foolish assumption to make. After all a cage is still a cage even if the bars are pretty this time around.”

“Damn it all to hell, Rafe, that’s not what I meant and you fucking know it!”

“Are you sure about that, Josiah? Do you really not want to keep me locked away, hidden from the outside world like every-fucking-body else seems to?”

Josiah has no control over himself as he lunges forward, buries one hand in Rafe’s silky hair and yanks the submissive forward. Their lips meet harshly, all teeth and no finesse and Josiah runs his tongue roughly along the seam of Rafe’s mouth, a pleased growl rumbling in his chest when the he opens for him. Josiah sweeps inside, his tongue tangling hotly with Rafe’s even as he begins to crowd the submissive against the nearest wall.

They fit together perfectly, the long lean plains of Rafe’s body slotting into the more thickly muscled valleys of Josiah’s as if they’d been carved from the same single piece of stone, broken and divided and only now reunited. Josiah groans low in his throat at the feel of Rafe pressed against him and his cock hardens instantly at the combined sensations of touch and taste. Rafe echoes his groan and the sound of pleasure from the submissive doubles Josiah’s arousal, making him helpless to do anything but press closer, driving their bodies together and Rafe further against the wall.

Their tongues slide against and around each other, spit slick and eager to taste, to consume one another. Josiah knew it would be like this, knew it would be perfect and all-consuming the moment he laid eyes on Rafe. His hand loosens its tight grip in Rafe’s hair and slides slowly through the cool, thick locks to curl firmly around the back of the submissive’s neck, unable to control the impulse to completely dominate the other male. Rafe breaks the kiss, gasping for air and moaning openly as his head tips back, pressing deeper into the grip on his neck and exposing his throat and collar to Josiah’s hungry gaze.

It’s an instinctual move, the desire to show off for a dominant, the urge to entice a fitting and worthy partner with his unclaimed status, and the sight of it has Josiah practically snarling in victory. Rafe wants him as well, wants to be claimed on some level as much as Josiah wants to be the one

doing the claiming. If he didn't, if their desires didn't match to some degree, Rafe would not respond so beautifully, would not be showing off his collar and trying to entice Josiah into claiming him.

His hand tightens slightly, as his head dips down until he can taste Rafe's neck, can rack teeth and tongue across the tempting expanse, and suck tiny bruises into the vulnerable skin. He runs his tongue across the smooth surface of the collar, tongue flirting with the inlaid rubies and dragging lightly across the sensitive area where silver meets skin. Rafe bucks against him and Josiah tightens his hand in reprimand, pleased and aroused when he can actually feel Rafe's knees weaken at the silent command even as the submissive obeys and stills.

Josiah pulls himself away from the mesmerizing taste and feel of Rafe, dragging his lips and tongue up across the exposed side of his neck so that he can whisper hotly in the submissive's ear.

"Such a good boy, Rafe, such a sweet, beautiful boy. You were made to be ruled, made for me to own."

He claims Rafe's mouth in another searing kiss, reveling in the breathless gasp and shaky moan it prompts.

"You'll be so pretty for me, won't you? So sweet and delicious when I have you begging, wanting what only I can give you. I can't wait to have you bare and spread open before me."

Rafe shudders, a full body tremor that Josiah can feel perfectly, and it goes straight to his cock. He urges Rafe's arms above his head with his free hand before grasping them both tightly and pinning them back against the wall. He feels Rafe go still against him, the tiny, almost unnoticed rocking of his hips stopping abruptly, but it doesn't really register with him, doesn't penetrate the fog of lust and need that's slowly taking him over.

"P-Please, Josiah." The plea comes out quietly, almost too quietly, and when Josiah hears it he takes it as a plea for more, more touch, more sensation. Just more. So he rocks his body against Rafe's again as he mouths at the sensitive skin behind his ear. He loves the feel of his cock rubbing against the submissive's, even muted as it is by the multiple layers of leather and cloth. It's a heady feeling, something he wants more of even though it's enough to drive him mad. He wants Rafe bare, wants to feel all of that silky skin against his own as he takes the other man down and apart.

"Oh the things I'll make you do. I'll make you love me and what I can give you."

Josiah isn't sure what happens. He only knows that Rafe goes from being still to in motion between one breath and the next. The submissive thrashes like a wild thing, his sudden struggling ripping his arms out of Josiah's hold. Josiah's too stunned, still buried too deep in his dominant headspace to dodge the punch that lands on his jaw and sends him staggering back a step.

Anger rips through him instantly, anger at Rafe for disobeying him so blatantly, and anger at himself for being caught off guard. He's on Rafe then, hands grabbing and holding as he struggles to back the submissive against the wall once again. Rafe doesn't make it easy. He's a fighter through and through and he's obviously spooked. He's highly trained, clearly comfortable with his body, and knows how to move in a fight, but he's panicking and Josiah is better. Still it takes the blond man a moment or two to get a handle on him, to get him sandwiched tightly between the wall and his own body like before but without the lust and the passion.

Josiah has one hand wrapped around Rafe's wrists and the other around the front of his throat in a cruel echo of their earlier passion filled embrace. They're both breathing heavily and Rafe's eyes are wide with fear, but Josiah can see the panic laced calculations running behind that entrancing green, even as Rafe holds his now caged in body as straight as possible.

His hand tightens warningly around Rafe's throat when the younger male shifts slightly as if he's about to make another escape attempt.

“Submit.” Josiah hisses the word out through clenched teeth as he struggles with his own urges, struggles with the need to immediately see to Rafe’s punishment for acting so out of turn.

He sees the moment when fear turns to full-blown panic, sees the terror overtake the dark-haired sub, so he’s ready for the next round of fear-induced struggling. He rides it out, uses his body weight to keep Rafe pressed against the wall and in place. The fear he sees in the other man’s eyes, the terror that’s only growing instead of fading, helps him to lock down on his own desires, that deep-seated need to show Rafe his place as he realizes slowly that something beyond his understanding is taking place.

He loosens his grip on Rafe, watches as the fear retreats a bit but still not far enough for his liking as he forces his expression to soften, for the anger to drain from his features bit by bit.

“Rafe, I’m not going to hurt you. You know that so explain this to me. Tell me what’s wrong.” He gentles his voice, likes the way Rafe softens a bit at the sound of it and is surprised when the submissive immediately begins to talk.

“Noah used to...he would always...” Rafe can’t seem to find his words, can’t seem to form a coherent sentence.

Josiah releases him slowly and takes a step back until he’s no longer touching Rafe at all. He sees the way it helps the submissive calm down, sees how he’s able to get a better grip on himself. Josiah is equal parts pleased that he has such an effect on the man, that he can unsettle Rafe as much as Rafe unsettles him, but he’s displeased that it’s manifesting in such a negative manner. Rafe takes a deep breath and rubs at his wrists before he continues on, a bit calmer than before but still obviously shaken.

“Noah’s a two and he doesn’t understand that I, people like me and you, subs and doms of higher tiers need the scene, the byplay more often than he does. That it’s different when you’re a four or even a three. He didn’t feel the need for it that often, didn’t have the same desires and needs that I do. But when he did...when he did it was...horrible.” Rafe shudders and Josiah has to stop himself from reaching out to him, from offering comfort that he knows might not be welcome when Rafe is so busy reliving something so obviously unpleasant.

“He’s a sadist, likes the blood and the screams and isn’t much for aftercare. I tried to explain to him and to Mistress Jean that I’m not a masochist, and that we weren’t suited for each other but they wouldn’t listen. Jean would go on and on about it being my duty, reminding me that our family *owed* Noah a sub and that I was it. I never understood it, could never find any information on anything like that no matter how hard I looked. And Noah, it made him so *angry* and he’d punish me even though we hadn’t entered into a contract yet.”

Rafe looks up then, meets Josiah’s eyes head on and Josiah braces himself, because he knows that what Rafe’s about to say is going to break him.

“When I started fighting back, when it got to be too much, he’d have a few of his guard help him tie me down and he’d tell me...he’d tell me that he was going to *make* me love it, *make* me love him.”

Josiah springs back as if burned, his hands coming up to fist in his own hair to keep himself from doing something else stupid, like reaching for Rafe or punching a hole through the apartment wall. Both of those things were liable to frighten or upset the submissive even more than he already had.

“Rafe. I would never...there’s nothing...fuck! I would never hurt you if you were mine, not like that. Anything between us would always be consensual and you’d always have the right to truly say no, and if you used your word I’d immediately back off. I’m not like Frisch. I’m not.”

Josiah isn’t sure who he’s trying to convince, himself or Rafe, but the idea of falling into the same category as Frisch makes him want to eat his pistol. He begins to pace back and forth down the

narrow hallway, trying his best to ignore the way Rafe's eyes follow his every movement, all wary watchfulness and alert tension.

"I want you. I've made no secret of that fact to anyone. Hell, everyone but you understands that to be a complete truth. So I'm not going to deny that I want you."

Josiah looks up then and makes eye contact with Rafe, his own dark eyes clashing with Rafe's green as he tries his best to emphasize just how serious he is.

"But it's different than what Frisch wanted out of you. You owe me nothing, you owe him nothing, and I don't see you as anything less than what you are. I want you at my feet and at my side, in each and every way I can get you and a few that I haven't thought of yet. I'm not going to pretend that I don't, but I would never do what he did to you. There would be rules, regulations for both of us, things that would be discussed and agreed upon before we entered into a contract."

Josiah clamps his mouth shut, aware that he's pleading his case when he probably shouldn't be. Instead he takes a deep breath and tries to calm himself back down. It's surprisingly hard to do, further proof of just how twisted up into knots Rafe has managed to get him.

"There are things we need to discuss, the reason why I was so angry about you leaving among them, but now's not the best time. I'm going to go to my room and I would like for you to stay here. You're welcome to do anything you want to. Just please don't leave the apartment."

He manages to get the words out as calmly and as evenly as he can and he's relieved when Rafe gives him a cautious nod of agreement from his place against the wall. Unable to continue looking at the submissive's still slightly fearful face without doing something stupid Josiah turns on his heel and strides towards his own bedroom. The door closes behind him with a quiet click and he sinks back against the sturdy wood, an unfamiliar tightness in his chest.

He'd almost made a mistake that would have haunted them both for the rest of their lives.

Chapter Ten

Josiah spends the remainder of the night in his room, forcefully resisting the urge to head back out into the rest of the apartment and show Rafe just how tender and unlike Frisch he can be. He doesn't give into the urge; he stays strong and finally manages to catch a few hours of uneasy sleep somewhere around dawn. When he drags himself out of bed and stumbles bare chested and bleary eyed into the kitchen he stops abruptly and blinks confusedly for a moment at the sight that greets him.

There's a truly impressive spread of food across the counter and table, all of it set out as if waiting for him to inspect it. Josiah looks around, vaguely puzzled and feeling as if he's missed something important, but Rafe is nowhere to be seen. He wanders into the eating area, and sees that the table is laid out for one and that's where he finds Rafe and he can't help the way he sucks in his breath harshly at the sight of him.

The submissive is kneeling beside the chair at the head of the table and while that alone is a delicious sight it's the way he's dressed that causes Josiah's cock to harden almost painfully. Rafe's dressed in the traditional garb of a submissive proposing a contract to a dominant and the sight of it, the message that he's silently sending, is enough to strain Josiah's already weak control over his instincts.

Rafe is bare from the waist up, clad only in the thin, form fitting black shorts that are embossed with his family crest in delicate silver stitches. Josiah isn't sure where he'd managed to get a pair from since he'd arrived with only the clothes on his back and what Josiah himself had purchased for him. He can practically smell Marcel's involvement in this so he pushes the question to the back of his mind.

His hair has been even more carefully groomed than normal, pampered until it falls in a gleaming

silky wave to his glistening and obviously lightly oiled shoulders. His collar has been polished until it shines as bright and pristine as the day it'd first been soldered on. His whole body, from the way he's dressed to the way his head is bent meekly so that he stares at the floor, is an invitation, one that Josiah is confused about but helplessly drawn to.

His bare feet are nearly silent as he pads across the smooth wooden floor until he's standing directly in front of Rafe. Almost against his will his hand reaches out and he runs his thick fingers through the heavy fall of Rafe's silky hair, his eyes drifting closed for a moment at the exquisite feeling of those glorious tresses catching on the calluses that decorate his fingertips. Rafe leans into the touch like a large sleek cat, all fluid movements and deliciously sculpted lines.

Josiah wants this, wants to accept what Rafe is so obviously offering, but he knows that he can't. He knows that it's too much of a switch from the night before to accept it without questions. Instead he trails the hand currently entangled in Rafe's hair through the clinging strands until he can fully cup the back of the other man's head and uses his hold on him to tilt the submissive's face up towards his own. Once they're looking each other directly in the eye Josiah asks the question that's currently burning inside of him.

"Why?" It comes out hoarse and rough but Josiah doesn't care.

All he cares about is the way that Rafe's looking up at him, emerald eyes soft with fragile trust and need apparent in his gaze. It's a look that makes Josiah burn, that ignites all of the instincts to dominate and control that live just beneath his civilized surface. It's the look a submissive gives a dominant when in need, the look that screams out that person's desire to serve and be loved in return, to give and be cherished in turn. It's something Josiah's almost never truly hoped to see directed at himself outside of the pleasure houses.

When Rafe speaks his voice is low, his tone respectful and yet not as meek as his position portrays. There's a subtle fire in his words that sets something within Josiah at ease. There's a spark in Rafe's eyes that reassures Josiah that the passion and steel that had attracted him to begin with are still there.

"Last night you showed me something I'd never seen before from a dominant in charge of my care. You showed me restraint. You could have taken what you wanted, could have tried at least, and there would have been little I would have been able to do to stop you. We both know that even though I'm skilled you're far better. Noah...Frisch, he never stopped no matter what I said or did. That last day, when I finally broke out, he was going to do something new, something with needles and sedatives and I knew that if I didn't stop him I would never wake up again. I didn't want to die by his hands, didn't want to give him the satisfaction, so I ran and when I didn't see a way out I tried to make one. The guilt eats at me because I know that someone else will be given to him in my place, another made to suffer his sickness no matter how they felt about it. Mistress Jean is so adamant that our family owes him a debt that she gave me to him even though I never signed a contract. I know she would have given him whoever she could get her hands on."

Josiah flexes his hand against the back of Rafe's head, the light action meant to soothe, to show Rafe that he's here and listening, to ground him in the present and keep him from getting swept away in the past. He's pleased when Rafe's shoulders relax slightly, the tension that had begun to build within him lowering a bit as the lines around his eyes and mouth smooth out.

"But you, Josiah, you stopped. You reacted at the first sign of real distress. You stopped and you soothed me, let me speak and have my own emotions, not just the ones you'd decided I had a right to feel. You controlled but you also cared, like I'd always dreamed a dom would."

Rafe breaks off then, his eyes darting down and away from Josiah's, and Josiah has to control his

displeased growl. He doesn't like it when Rafe speaks to him without eye contact, doesn't like the loss of a possible connection between them even though he knows that he doesn't have the right to demand it. Rafe has made a silent offer but nothing has been settled, nothing has been agreed upon, and thus Josiah has no actual rights. Not yet.

"Even when I hit you, even then you held tight and didn't try to punish me, didn't try to hurt me back."

"Don't think for a second that I didn't want to punish you, Rafe. Don't think I'm some sort of saint who doesn't have those urges because I do. I wanted to show you your place, wanted to do so much to you, but I didn't."

"That's my point, Josiah. I deserved it. You wanted to do it and I deserved it, but you didn't and that's something that I've never seen before. That type of restraint is something that I wasn't even sure existed."

Josiah studies Rafe, eyes tracking the way his tongue flits out to lap nervously at his bottom lip, the way his lashes fan out against his cheeks every time he blinks. He damns himself for asking but he knows that he'll always regret it if they enter into this under false pretenses.

"Are you sure this is what you want? Once we've entered into a contract I'm not going to let you go easily. I fight to keep what's mine, Rafe. You'll never be a prisoner, but you will be chained to me. You do understand that, don't you? I'll own you in every way, and I'll ask you for everything and will give you everything in return."

Rafe's breathing goes shallow and there's a light blush across the sun kissed skin of his cheeks when he makes eye contact with Josiah again. The sight of it has Josiah licking his lips, wanting to run his tongue across the line of red to see if that blush tastes as delicious as it looks. Unable to resist the urge Josiah leans down and brushes a sweet kiss across Rafe's parted lips, lets his tongue dip inside briefly but withdraws to run his mouth across Rafe's cheekbones when the submissive tries to draw him into a deeper kiss.

He tracks his mouth back across the smooth skin of Rafe's face until their lips are once again flush with each other in an almost chaste kiss, but this time he speaks so that Rafe can hear and feel his words as he says them.

"So is that what you want? Do you want to be mine, Rafe? To belong to me and only me? To perhaps one day Bond with me so that none can ever come between us? Would you give yourself to me and take all that I would give to you in return?"

Rafe shudders beneath his hand, a move that echoes the night before, and Josiah sees his pupils go wide with desire, a flush of lust lighting his face up even further.

"You would...you would consider Bonding? With me? What of the Disavowal? Would you have me give myself to you only to be shamed in such a way?"

Josiah's hand tightens where he's gripping the other man's hair as the mere mention of Disavowing Rafe sends rage coursing through his veins. He pulls Rafe further up onto his knees by his hold on his hair and bends so that he can nip sharply at the small dark bruises dotting the other man's throat from the night before. He bites down on one that's situated just below his ear before pulling back to lap at it with his tongue and then he moves his mouth back to its previous position.

"Never. The Disavowal would never happen. You'd be mine until death ripped one of us away. There are things about me, things about my past that you don't know, but rest assured that you will never be shamed in such a manner. So give me your answer, Rafe. Is this what you want? Will you honor your offer and enter into a contract with me?"

"Yes."

Josiah doesn't wait for Rafe to say anything more than that single word of approval, can't make

himself wait any longer. He knows that overall he'll have to take things slower than he wants to, that Rafe is still healing mentally and emotionally even if his body is fit and sound. He knows that Rafe isn't ready for everything Josiah wants from him yet even if he's agreed to a contract between them. He knows all of this but he refuses to wait to have a taste of him, refuses to be denied this one simple thing.

His hands flow down to grip Rafe's slick shoulders and he pulls the submissive up with him until they're both standing, facing each other with barely any space between them. In one swift move he spins Rafe around so that his back is to the table and with a careful hand guides him until he's sitting on the edge of the thick wood. They both ignore the quiet tinkling of glass shifting as his movement rocks the place setting beside him.

"You made me breakfast. I'd like to have it now."

Rafe looks at him, confused for a second before he blushes lightly, a display that Josiah is now sure will never fail to attract his attention. Josiah smirks slightly at him, wondering if Rafe for all of his intelligence will really understand what he's insinuating. He doesn't actually give him a chance to respond, just surges forward and takes Rafe's mouth in another scorching kiss now that he officially has the right.

His tongue plunges deep, tracing its way across Rafe's teeth and tangling their tongues together until the taste of Rafe threatens to overwhelm his senses. His hands are drawn almost magnetically to Rafe, his desire to touch and learn every inch of the submissive overtaking him. One hand finds its now familiar place tangled in Rafe's thick locks as he props himself up on his elbow above the man's prone form, while the other trails down over the sleek lines of his collarbone to pluck teasingly at one of his already beaded nipples.

Rafe groans into the kiss, his body surging upwards against the weight of Josiah's own heavily muscled frame. Josiah urges him back down by softly stroking the taunt lines of his abdomen and then ramps him back up by tracing the lines of his muscles with his nails, leaving thin pink lines behind from the pressure. His mouth continues to plunder Rafe's for a moment before he rips it away only to latch it onto what is fast becoming his favorite spot on Rafe's neck. He sucks at the ever darkening bruise just below the submissive's ear, worrying it with teeth and tongue, and growls low in his throat, pleased with the hard edged groan the action rips from Rafe's throat.

Finally when the bruise is dark enough to satisfy him for the moment he trails his mouth down over those enticing collarbones to latch onto the nipple his fingers aren't currently torturing. He stays there for a moment, nipping at the bud with his teeth and then lapping at it with his tongue to soothe the sting while Rafe groans lowly beneath him. Finally though his attention is drawn elsewhere, to the feel of Rafe's cock pressing against his bare stomach through the thin fabric of his shorts.

He presses down for the thrill of hearing Rafe moan at the pressure against his arousal but his own desire, his own need to touch and taste, won't allow him to tease for too long. So he makes his way down, tongue and lips tracing all of the exposed skin he comes across, savoring the slight almond flavor that comes from the edible oil Rafe'd used earlier. He pulls back, ignoring the way that Rafe strains towards him and grabs one of the man's wrists in each of his hands. Gently he presses his hands palms down against the smooth surface of the table, telling him with a look to keep them there before he releases him and dips back down.

He pauses over the fabric straining to contain Rafe's cock and lets the anticipation build for as long as he can stand. He presses the palm of one hand against the flat planes of Rafe's stomach, savors the rhythmic clenching of his muscles for a moment as the other hand begins to work the tight shorts off of the submissive's hips. He's helpless to resist the dips and valleys the tight material bares

at it slowly inches its way off. His tongue flicks out to trace the cut of Rafe's hips, the thin line of dark hair that's just been exposed, and to dip down inside the shorts, flirting with the still concealed crease of his thigh.

The scrap of black fabric pools at Rafe's ankles and falls whisper quiet to the floor. The sight of the younger man's newly bared cock entrances Josiah. He's hard, his cock straining upwards towards his belly; the head flushed a dark shade of crimson and already drooling pre-cum even though Josiah hasn't even really touched him yet.

"Oh you do want this, don't you? Such a needy, wanton thing you are. I haven't even touched you yet and you're aching for it already."

Josiah's voice is husky, his tone dark and smugly pleased, and Rafe reacts to the sound of it beautifully, his cock jerking in desire and his neck arching back even as his hands remain perfectly in place. Josiah trails the fingers of his free hand back up the tense muscles of Rafe's thigh until he can bury them in the crisp curls at his base. He runs them teasingly up the smooth skin of Rafe's hard shaft, fingernails lightly scoring the velvety flesh there, causing light hisses to escape the man below him.

He takes his time exploring, circling the head with curious fingers, spreading the pre-cum that's gathered there with the pad of his thumb before backing off to rub it lightly with the palm of his hand. His need to possess is satiated for the moment by the feel of Rafe's velvety skin beneath his fingertips. Rafe squirms beneath him, open and honest with his reactions but always careful to keep his own hands in place. Josiah rewards him by finally wrapping his large hand completely around him, the thin layer of pre-cum that coats his palm easing the way.

He strokes him firmly, twisting his wrist on the upstroke, setting a rhythm that has Rafe arching and squirming even worse than before. The whole time he whispers praise to the submissive in the dark husky voice that he knows affects him.

"So beautiful. Look at you. So perfect and responsive. Anyone would want you but they can't have you. Not now. You're mine, Rafe. Mine. Mine. Mine."

Rafe's cock jerks in his hand and Josiah knows he's close to coming, can tell by the way he's getting harder, swelling in his grasp as his orgasm builds.

"Not yet, precious. Not yet. You'll come when I say, Rafe, and not a moment before."

Rafe whines at him, a plea in the high pitched tone, but Josiah chuckles darkly and continues to work him for a minute before he finally takes pity on him. He grips the base of Rafe's cock with the circle of his fingers and squeezes tightly for a second, knowing that the pain and pressure will help stave off his orgasm. Rafe gasps and twitches and Josiah gives him a second to recover before he swoops down and takes his cock deep into his mouth in a single go.

He sucks hard, takes Rafe as deep as he can go and swallows. He enjoys the way the body beneath his arches upwards in a deep bow at the feel of his throat muscles working around Rafe's cock. He varies the rhythm and pressure, goes fast and light and then slow and hard to keep Rafe from getting used to anything, to keep him undone and give him no chance to gather his composure.

Josiah pulls back for a second to sweep the glistening expanse of Rafe's body with a searing look. He's flushed, green eyes heavy lidded and dark with desire, and it hits Josiah with the force of a blow that he's never seen something so beautiful, so captivating. Suddenly the need for reassurance rails through him. Josiah needs to know, to hear out loud once again, that Rafe wants this just as much as he does.

"Beg me. If you want it beg for it."

Rafe doesn't miss a beat and in the next second he is practically mewling, begging Josiah in that

beautiful husky voice of his to give him what he wants. Josiah feels his own cock give a hard twitch, pleasure flooding through him unexpectedly at seeing Rafe comply with his demands as if he'd been made for them. Josiah wastes no time. He bends back down and takes Rafe's cock back into his mouth, running his tongue along the shaft and swallowing around the head.

Rafe cries out again, the sound cutting through his steady stream of begging and pleading for more, and Josiah smiles as best he can around the submissive's shaft. He starts working Rafe in earnest, licking, sucking, and swallowing down the younger man's cock in a steady rhythm that drives him ever closer to the brink. Still he keeps the circle of his fingers tight around Rafe's base, not willing to end things right yet, wanting to draw out the beauty of Rafe's pleasure for a while longer.

He plays with him for a bit, swallowing down the slightly bitter pre-cum that's weeping from Rafe's slit with a pleased smirk. Finally when Rafe's voice is hoarse and breaking, when the skin beneath his hands is damp from sweat instead of oil and Rafe's own fingers are almost clawing at the tabletop, he relents. He pulls back and straightens almost to his full height, raking his gaze over Rafe's panting form as he slowly relaxes the tight ring of fingers from around the base of the submissive's cock.

"Come, Rafe. Come now, for me."

Rafe does. He arches his head back, baring his throat and the glinting silver of his collar to Josiah's hungry gaze as he comes. He spills himself all over Josiah's fingertips, coats his hand as he shudders and shakes from the sharpness of his completion. Josiah looks on in fascination until he finishes and slumps back down, panting and breathless against the surface of the table. Josiah raises his cum-covered hand to his mouth and without breaking eye contact with Rafe proceeds to lick it clean, a small grin curling his lips.

When he's done, when his fingers are pristine and glistening from the wetness of his mouth, he leans down and kisses Rafe. He pushes some of the submissive's own cum into his mouth, sharing with Rafe the taste and texture of his own pleasure for a moment before he breaks the kiss. He looks at him silently for a moment, at the still heaving chest, flushed skin, and hands still perfectly in place and smiles softly.

Rafe shifts like he's going to try to move or stand, to reach for Josiah or something, but he waves him down and is satisfied when he settles back without a protest. Rafe takes orders perfectly, never second guessing only trusting Josiah to have his best interests at heart. For them to be so in tune right here at the beginning, with all that's happened and is currently happening, is a miracle and Josiah knows that things will only grow to be better as time passes and they truly learn one another.

Josiah turns and strides into the bathroom, ignoring the way his still rigid cock presses against the material of his pants. This interlude was about Rafe, about rewarding him for the trust he's placed in Josiah and not about Josiah's satisfaction. Besides he got so much more out of watching Rafe, out of knowing that he was the cause of his pleasure and seeing him come undone, that his own orgasm was almost forgotten. There will be plenty of time for that kind of satisfaction later. Now is about building trust and showing care.

He comes out with a warm damp cloth and makes his way to Rafe's side quietly. He swipes the cloth across Rafe's exposed skin gently, carefully cleaning the sweat, oil and cum from his body. This is important he knows. This aftercare builds trust between a dom and a sub, shows that their relationship is about affection and trust as well as pleasure, that it can be nurturing on top of everything else. So he cleans Rafe gently, takes care when he cleans the sensitive skin of his now soft cock and the creases of his thighs. Rafe watches him the entire time, eyes still half-lidded but mouth curled in an almost confused half smile.

When Josiah's done he motions for Rafe to stand, steadies him with a hand on his arm and then leads him around the table to sit down in the chair in front of the place setting. Rafe tries to protest, tries to take his place on his knees beside the chair but Josiah stills him with a firm hand on his shoulder. He makes short work of gathering the laid out plate, going to the kitchen, and returning with a plateful of the food Rafe had prepared. He'd mainly chosen things like the cut cheeses and fruits the other man had prepared, things that could be eaten by hand and weren't terribly messy.

He puts the food down and then urges Rafe to stand so that he can take his place in the chair. When the submissive once again tries to kneel Josiah stops him and instead maneuvers him around until he's sitting comfortably in Josiah's lap. It's awkward at first because neither of them is small by any stretch of the imagination, but they shift around for a moment and finally find comfortable positions.

Josiah picks up a square of cheese and places it against Rafe's lips. He waits patiently for Rafe to take it from him, careful of his teeth, and lets himself smile at the sight of *his* sub eating from his hand. They sit in silence, Josiah alternating between feeding Rafe small bites of food and feeding himself. It's not actually perfect. There are still too many things that need to be dealt with, but Josiah thinks that maybe it might be one day. That it has the potential to be the best thing that's ever happened to him.

Chapter Eleven

They have three days of blissful peace before it all comes crashing down around them. They have three quiet days that they spend learning bits and pieces about each other, not doing any scenes just getting truly comfortable with one another. It starts when Josiah undocks his p.a.t.c.h and sets about filling out the paperwork that will bind them into a contract. Rafe will have to file a second set as soon as Josiah's is accepted and processed, but Josiah wants to get things underway as quickly as possible.

He signs off on the documents with a bit of a flourish and then keys in his personal identification code to verify its authenticity and presses send. For a moment things go as planned, the screen showing its customary request that he wait a moment while his file is processed but then it cuts out. The page that's normally pale beige in color turns dark blue and tiny white text scrolls its way across the top.

Bad idea, Vanguard. It wouldn't be wise to file that at the moment. Information packet in route and will arrive on an encrypted chip in three...two...one...

Josiah starts when the chime at his front door goes off at the same time the countdown that's obviously Gar's doing hits one. He's on his feet and moving, p.a.t.c.h laying abandoned on the couch, hand reaching out and plucking his pistol off of the side table, which has not been far from him at any time since this all started, and creeping cautiously towards the door. He waits for a moment but the chime doesn't sound again so he moves forward silently and keys up the visual screen to look outside. The small screen shows him nothing but he's still cautious, fully aware that *peepers*, the small cameras that serve as peepholes, are easily fooled.

He flips the lock on the door and then eases it open all of the way with a booted foot, making sure that he's otherwise hidden from view. Nothing happens. There's no shuffling on the other side, no one tries to enter, and there's no sign that anyone's there at all. Weapon still in hand, Josiah ducks a quick look around the doorframe and sees only a small box, black lacquered and beautifully carved. Feeling vaguely foolish Josiah lowers his weapon and steps over the threshold to bend down and scoop the box up in the palm of his hand before heading back inside.

He flips the lock on the door and walks back to his chair. The still blue screen of his p.a.t.c.h blinks

up at him mockingly.

Understandably paranoid, Vanguard, but I told you it was coming. Open it and if there are any questions...well, I'll find you before you find me...Skirmisher out.

Josiah scowls at the screen that's now showing his normal personalized menu for a moment and vows silently to try and beat an actual sense of humor into Gar the next time they see each other. He rolls the black box around in his hands for a moment before he makes up his mind. Rafe's still asleep so he'll have plenty of time to go over whatever it is that Gar has sent him. He opens the box, pulls out the data chip that's inside and inserts it into the port on the underside of the arm cuff that acts as the dock for his p.a.t.c.h.

Immediately the screen turns black and then document after document pops up, showing Josiah just how much information Gar has compiled in a relatively short amount of time. His stomach is uneasy because he knows that Gar would have only included things that were important, things that stood out. For there to be so much on that small data chip is actually a bad sign. Still it's something that has to be done, something he has to do in order to get to the bottom of what's going on, so he picks up his screen and pulls one of the documents up to full size with a flick of his fingers.

The document turns out to be a death certificate and the name on it causes Josiah to breathe out a low curse. Miguel Zweil died almost ten years ago, the apparent cause being suicide, something that Josiah doesn't believe for a moment. There'd been such affection in Rafe's eyes the day he'd talked about Miguel, affection that Josiah's sure had been returned wholeheartedly. There's no way someone who could inspire such care in Rafe after so many years without contact would have committed suicide without saying goodbye to Rafe first. It seems as if Zweil House has more than one thing to answer for if Josiah is reading the signs correctly.

He closes the document out and pulls up the next one, resolving to break the news to Rafe gently as soon as he gets the chance. The next document is a compilation of financial records outlining a series of credit exchanges between Zweil House and Frisch House. Josiah sets them to the side to be forwarded to Marcel after he's done. They'll be of far more use to her than to him.

He goes through a few more files of the same kind, things that are important but will have to be forwarded to the proper channels or handled later before he finds something that makes him curse viciously.

It's a contract, signed by Frisch and Jean Zweil around the time Rafe turned twenty-one, binding Rafe into Frisch's care on the understanding that they might one day Bond. He now knows why Gar had stopped him from sending in the paperwork that announced his intention to enter into a contract with Rafe and Josiah curses himself for not thinking ahead. It seemed as if Eagan had been correct when he'd called Frisch Rafe's future Bonded despite not being able to find a contract on record. It had been done in-house, obviously without Rafe's approval or knowledge, and it makes Josiah's gut clench in knots. If he had sent in those documents he and Rafe both would have been found in direct violation of a previously established contract and would have been immediately subjected to questioning and a heavy fine. Even though Frisch was being investigated on charges of abuse the contract still stood for the moment and unless it was dissolved Josiah and Rafe would be unable to enter into a legal contract of their own. Added onto that were the possible ramifications it would have on the case itself.

Contracts were designed to protect both parties and there are normally heavy consequences to breaking one, especially on the count of what could be considered infidelity. If it weren't for Gar, Josiah would have ruined everything with a single document. He closes the contract, putting it aside to look at later even though he knows deep inside that it won't matter. He'll have Rafe no matter what

he has to do, how long he has to wait, or who he has to pay off.

The screen of his p.a.t.c.h blinks and goes blue again with an incoming message and Josiah knows that the person behind it is Gar.

Document NFJ-2234 will take care of the contract. Have patience and stay calm.

Intrigued Josiah types in the file name, curious as to what Gar has found that he believes can be used to dissolve the contract so easily. His entire body goes tense when the file opens and Josiah realizes that Gar has managed to get his hands on a copy of Frisch's personal video diary. Almost nervous, Josiah cues up the first file, dated some ten years back, and watches as Frisch's younger but still familiar face comes on screen and his voice spills out into the room around him.

"That bitch Jean owes me for pulling her ass out of the fire. If it weren't for me she would have lost everything. She'll give me what I want or I'll make sure it all happens anyways. She owes me and I intend to collect."

It's ominous and doesn't explain much, but Josiah knows that Gar has included it for a reason so he flips to the next clip, this one dated almost a full year later, to see if things become any clearer.

"I think I've found exactly what I want in return. I saw him around the compound and he's perfect. The fact that he's his son makes it all the sweeter. It might take some doing since Jean seems fond of him but she's fonder of her position. He'll be mine. It's just a matter of time." A nasty suspicion begins to form in Josiah's mind, a cold dread filling up the pit of his stomach even as he clicks on the next file.

"She's finally given in, after relentless perusal and reminding her where she'd be right now without me she's finally agreed to give him to me. He's of age now, twenty-one and fully capable of entering into a contract. She'll sign him over or I'll make an anonymous tip off to the Enforcers and let them know just how the boy's parents really died."

Josiah drops his p.a.t.c.h on the cushion beside him and scrubs his hands violently over his face. It's what he thought it was, what he hoped he'd been wrong about when the suspicion first unfurled in his breast. Rafe had been *sold*, forced to enter into a contract against his will and even without his knowledge in order to appease Frisch. Bartered as payment to a blackmailer who apparently knew the real truth behind how Rafe's father and his Bonded Miguel had died. He has to resist the urge to pour himself a stiff drink, knowing that it's entirely too early and that he needs to be sober and clearheaded when Rafe wakes up.

The next clip comes from two years after the last one; Rafe would have been twenty-three and tied to Frisch. Josiah's gut clenches and he almost doesn't bring it up, almost doesn't want to watch it, but he doesn't really have a choice. He needs to know for sure what Gar thought was so important in these files even though he suspects from Gar's warning that what he'll find will be far from pleasant.

Frisch's face is older when it comes on the screen; there are lines that weren't there before, signs of age and wear. It's the almost maniacal gleam in his eyes that sets Josiah on edge, the way his voice is teetering on the edge of hysterical.

"He's still so beautiful even after so long. I love to watch him scream, watch him bleed. He actually tried to use his safe-word last night but I put a stop to that. He'll know better next time; he'll know that what he says doesn't matter, that he's mine. She gave him to me."

Feeling sick Josiah closes out the clip and pulls up the next one and then the next one. Each one gets progressively worse, showing Frisch's downward spiral into cruelty. They show how he ignored Rafe's attempts to end a scene by his own admission, how he abused a submissive under his protection in ways that he should have never even thought of.

It's the last one that he pulls up that does him in.

Frisch comes on screen, his skin flushed and chest heaving with exertion, eyes blown wide in pleasure. The hand he wipes across his forehead is red to the wrist and leaves a smear of crimson blood in its wake.

"That bitch still won't agree to him living with me, says it's not in the contract, that it'd be a bad idea. She thinks I'll end up killing him if I have him all the time. Maybe she's right...maybe I would. But I just can't help it; he's just so pretty when he screams. Especially when I cut him, God I love to cut him. He's a strong fucker though; I've got to get better restrains, maybe some help in here. Still I'll never give him up..."

Frisch trails off and in the background Josiah can hear Rafe, and he's screaming. The screen goes black, the file ending, and Josiah has to stop himself from snapping the flexible tech in half. Instead he walks away from it, stumbles into the kitchen and pours himself a finger of liquor, downs it in one burning swallow and then pours another. He'd wanted to be completely sober but after that, after hearing Rafe scream in the background and knowing that it had already happened, that he couldn't help, he needed something to steady his nerves.

He hears the floorboards behind him shift and squeak and he whirls around, hand reaching for the pistol that he'd actually forgotten in the living room, and comes face to face with Rafe. Rafe's face is ashen, his eyes wide and breathing shallow, and Josiah knows in startling clarity that he's been there for longer than Josiah is comfortable with, that he's heard everything. Shaken, Josiah tries to speak with him.

"Rafe...Rafe, I..."

"How long...how long have you had that? How long have you had proof of what he did to me? How long have you known that she *sold* me?" Rafe cuts him off sharply and there's something wild in his voice, in his eyes, that Josiah doesn't like. It reminds him too much of the way he'd looked when they'd first met face to face.

"Not long, Rafe, I swear."

"Is this a game to you? Some sort of sick fucking game where you string the poor pitiful submissive along while you get your rocks off over all of the horrible shit that's happened to them in the past? Is it?" Rafe screams the last bit and Josiah sees the hysteria in his face, knows that he won't be able to reason with him, not now, but knows that he has no choice but to try.

"Rafe, it's not like that. You know it isn't like that. Just calm down and let me explain." He starts forward to lay a hand on his shoulder, needing the contact, but withdraws, stung when Rafe actually flinches back from him.

"Don't touch me. Not after you've been watching him, not after what you've seen. We both know you shouldn't touch me."

It slams into Josiah then, slams into him with the force of a blow, exactly what the problem is, why Rafe's so desperate and wild-eyed. He steps forward determinedly ignoring the way Rafe flinches back from him again and wraps his arms completely around him. He holds on despite the way Rafe struggles, uses his strength to clamp his arms to his sides so that he won't hurt himself and simply waits him out.

When Rafe finally seems to tire of the one-sided fight, he goes limp in Josiah's arms. The dominant simply gathers him closer, strokes a hand through his disheveled hair and speaks quietly into his ear, his voice low and steady and completely sincere.

"What happened to you, what you've been through, is terrible and you came out of it so much stronger than you realize. You didn't give up, Rafe, not really; you kept fighting even though you

didn't have to and when you couldn't fight anymore you still took control over the situation. Nothing that happened was your fault, Rafe. You're beautiful and good and nothing that happened to you is your fault. It's not your fault, Rafe."

Rafe shudders in his arms and Josiah feels it when his shirtfront begins to grow damp. He realizes that finally, after everything that's happened, Rafe is letting himself cry. He gathers Rafe closer to him, rocks him slowly back and forth where they're standing, and croons sweetly in his ear.

"You're going to be alright, Rafe. I swear you will."

For the first time since all of this started, for the first time since Josiah met Rafe, he actually believes that it might be true.

Chapter Twelve

They end up on Josiah's bed, curled around each other on his wine colored sheets, Rafe's head nestled safely on his chest and Josiah's hand stroking lovingly through his hair. They lay there, comfortable with one another and yet there's still something between them, something hanging in the air and keeping them apart that Josiah's almost desperate to fix.

"My mother died when I was seven." He speaks almost without realizing it, the words tumbling out of his mouth before he can call them back. He feels Rafe go still against his side and knows that he's listening intently.

This is an important instance; Josiah recognizes it as an opportunity to show a sign of trust, of openness. He knows so much about what Rafe went through during his time with Frisch so it's his turn to share, to even the score between them. If he has to pick open old wounds to show Rafe just how serious he is then he'll do it no matter how much it might still pain him.

"Her name was Nicolette and she was beautiful. I still remember her a bit, mainly small things like the way her hair looked, so blonde it was almost white, or the way she smelled like cinnamon and sugar."

"What happened to her, if you don't mind me asking?" Rafe's voice is carefully casual, and Josiah knows that he truly wants to know, wants to hear about his past, to know him. Josiah takes a deep breath and plunges on.

"Draxon, my father, Disavowed her when I was five. He claimed that she wasn't properly skilled, that she couldn't perform her duties as a proper submissive should. Then as if that wasn't good enough he accused her of infidelity, swore that I wasn't his." Josiah snorts in remembered bitterness at the pain he'd felt when the father he'd adored from afar had refused to even acknowledge him. He'd been young but not stupid and he'd always paid attention.

"It was an obvious lie and everyone had to have known it. I've seen old pictures of him and I'm practically a carbon copy of the man. Still in the end it didn't matter. The accusation was enough to destroy any standing she'd had in society and within the week he'd Disavowed her and disinherited me. Nicolette, my mother, had nothing after that, no friends, no credits, no family and no reputation to speak of. Draxon was old fashioned and believed that her duties should revolve only around him and his household so she had no skills either."

Josiah feels the way Rafe tightens his arm around his stomach, the way he burrows his head further into the warmth of his chest. He knows that Rafe's a strong and fierce man, but he also knows that he's fragile now in a way he's never been, that his fire and flash are buried under pain and depression, and Josiah doesn't want to upset him. Rafe squeezes him tightly then, a wordless plea for him to continue so he puts his reservations aside and goes on.

"We lived on the street for a while, and then in a few run down apartments that barely deserved the name." Josiah smiles slightly, the memory of peeling paint and chipped plaster, of sour smelling

air and patched curtain floating across his mind.

“I remember that she was too proud to go to Sanctuary, too proud to consider herself in need of that kind of help. Then when I was six the men came, muscle from a local thug I found out later, and we both ended up in one of the less reputable pleasure houses. Looking back on it I’m amazed that they let her keep me at all, but I guess it didn’t really matter anyways because the place was a nightmare. She...she tried her best but she didn’t make it a year there before some out of control dominant without any limits went a step too far. She held me while she cried and I remember her apologizing and I was so confused about why. It took her two days to die and when she wouldn’t wake up no matter what I tried I ran away.”

“Josiah...” Rafe’s voice is soft and sorrowful and Josiah just presses a kiss into the crown of his head and keeps talking.

“I ate out of dumpsters and avoided the enforcers for as long as I could before I was dragged kicking and screaming into the orphans program of the armed forces. Marx isn’t my real last name; it’s the name the people in my barracks, the ones who eventually became my family of sorts, gave me since I didn’t actually have one. They even designed my crest for me. Draxon took even that from us both, had our names stricken from the records so we couldn’t claim relation. After that I didn’t really have any other options. I stayed there, eventually joined Crimson Elite and then retired when my last tour was over. I just wanted out after that, wanted to find some way to make an actual difference. So I became an enforcer instead.”

Josiah tightens his grip in Rafe’s hair, uses it to tilt the submissive’s head up so that he can look him in the eye.

“I know what it’s like to be hurt, Rafe. Not in the same way you were but I’ve seen other horrors. I would never do anything like that to you. The information I got, the files I was going through, a friend of mine from my old unit sent it to me. He’s always watched all of our backs and even after we disbanded he never stopped. He sent me things he knew would help, things he knew we’d need to settle this. None of it was to hurt you.”

He sees the embarrassment and shame in Rafe’s eyes at his words and wants nothing more than to be able to erase it. He knows that it’s something Rafe will have to conquer on his own, but Josiah intends to help him as much as possible.

“I know that, Josiah. I knew that when I offered you a contract between us. It’s just the thought of you knowing what he did, and now knowing that I was given away without being consulted; the thought that you might look at me differently...it was too much to bear. I snapped.”

He loosens his grip on Rafe’s hair and pushes his head back down to its place on his chest and resumes his calming petting.

“We’ll deal with that later, Rafe; we’ll deal with it all later. For now let’s just enjoy this, enjoy this moment of peace, while we can.”

They end up drifting off to sleep together, despite it still being early afternoon. The comfort and peace of sharing a bed lulls them both into rest almost against their wills.

Josiah wakes first again, too many years in the armed forces preventing him from getting an overabundance of sleep. He untangles himself from Rafe and crawls off of the bed, careful not to wake the submissive up. He needs a few moments on his own again, just a bit of time to get his head on straight and form a plan of action.

He wanders back into the living room, bending over to absent-mindedly pick up and refold his previously forgotten p.a.t.c.h before he drops down on the sofa. His mind runs over the new developments in their situation, going over what he knows he needs to do before he pushes it all to the

back of his mind and instead focuses on the here and now, on Rafe.

Josiah thinks that maybe it's time to change the way he's been dealing with the submissive, that maybe what Rafe needs is normalcy instead of being awkwardly coddled. They are both fourth tiers and they need the scene, the lifestyle more than most. Perhaps after being trapped in an unhealthy relationship for so long what Rafe needs is to be treated normally, like a submissive should be. If Josiah can show him that he wants that type of relationship with him, and that their future contract will be everything they have both dreamed of, maybe it will help. Mind made up, Josiah's mind starts outlining a plan for when Rafe wakes up.

Chapter Thirteen

Rafe wakes up a couple of hours later and wanders sleepy-eyed and tousled into the living room. Josiah's heart skips a beat from his place on the couch at the sight of him looking so soft and vulnerable, and he almost doesn't want to go through with what he has planned. Almost. Instead he hardens his resolve and pushes forward. Rafe wanders over to him, bending down to kiss him sweetly, and Josiah forces himself not to respond, to sit cold and still in the face of Rafe's affection, one hand carefully gripping the unfolded screen of his p.a.t.c.h.

The submissive pulls back with a frown, green eyes troubled as they lock with Josiah's stern gaze. "W-what's the matter, Josiah?" Rafe sounds small and insecure and Josiah hates it, hates seeing him so quelled even though he knows that this is what he needs to do.

He needs to show Rafe that this thing between them, the contract that they *will* be forming in the future, will be healthy and good. He gathers himself and reaches out a hand and gestures to Rafe, watching the way his face softens in relief as he moves to settle on the couch only to fall in confusion when Josiah stops him. Face blank Josiah motions towards the floor silently and sees the moment that understanding washes across Rafe's face even as he sinks to his knees between Josiah's splayed legs. Rafe reaches for his zipper and Josiah frowns and grabs his hands. This thing between them is about more than sex and he wants Rafe to know that as well.

"Turn around." His voice is low but not harsh and Rafe seems to relax at the sound of it as he twists around until his back is facing Josiah.

"Closer, wrap your arm around my calf and relax yourself. You need to learn that I'll take care of you, Rafe, so stay there until I tell you to move. You will tell me immediately if you're uncomfortable or in any pain, do you understand?"

Rafe nods his head silently as he wraps one tanned arm around Josiah's calf, leaning himself against Josiah and trusting him to give the support that he needs.

The room goes silent again, Josiah turning back to the p.a.t.c.h that rests in his hand as he tries to lose himself in the remainder of the information that Gar had sent him. He makes sure to continue touching Rafe periodically, running a hand through his hair, scraping his nails gently across his scalp, trailing a finger softly down the curve of his neck. All of his actions are silent reminders to Rafe that he's there, that he's present and has not forgotten about him.

Eventually Josiah manages to actually get absorbed in the files; Gar's sent him a truly impressive amount of information and Josiah is afraid that he's going to owe Gar more than one after this. After he's slogged through a good amount he's distracted as he feels Rafe shift slightly against him and he takes a look at the time. It's been well over an hour now and he's pleased with the way that Rafe's acted. He'd accepted his directions without complaint and Josiah knows that this is just the beginning for them.

"Rafe." Josiah calls his name softly and when he gets no answer he leans forward and tips Rafe's head back so that he can see his face.

Rafe's green eyes are glazed over, his expression perfectly at ease and a tiny half smile flirting with the edge of his mouth. Josiah calls his name again, even softer than the first time, and those thick black lashes flutter as Rafe finally focuses.

"Oh." It's a tiny sigh of a sound but the contentment, the relaxation that it holds goes straight to Josiah's cock and he has to resist the urge to turn things in another direction instead of what he has planned for the moment.

"You went down far for our first time." It's true and Josiah does nothing to hide the pleasure it brings him to know that already he can take Rafe down so far without even really touching him.

"Hmm." Rafe hums a pleased sound and rubs the back of his upturned head against the firm wall of Josiah's thigh.

"Do you need help standing?"

Rafe seems to contemplate the question for a moment before he nods as he slowly unwraps his arm from its place around Josiah's leg. Josiah stands up, careful not to jostle Rafe as he maneuvers around until he's in front of him looking down at his still kneeling form. He reaches out a hand and is pleased when Rafe immediately clasps it in his own. He tugs the submissive to his feet, steadying him when he stumbles slightly because his legs are most likely asleep after so long in one position.

He guides him around the living room a few times, careful to make sure that Rafe stretches and gets his blood flowing properly. Then when he knows that Rafe's steady and able to support himself he releases his hold and turns to look him in the eyes.

"You and I need to speak. Sit down on the couch and listen to me very carefully."

Rafe immediately sinks down on the cushions, his body reacting almost without thought to the commanding tone in Josiah's voice.

"We still need to deal with what happened earlier, Rafe."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

Josiah takes a deep breath and lets the part of himself that he's always held back rise closer to the surface, the part that chafes with the urge to dominate, to show others their place beneath him. It's a part of him that he's never really been able to embrace, never been able to truly tap into with any of the submissives at the pleasure houses, no matter their tier. He intends to unleash it on Rafe fully however, intends to show him just how he really is.

"You offered yourself to me, offered me a contract and then you went against the spirit of that offer, Rafe."

Rafe stares at him in disbelief and confusion and when he speaks his voice reflects both.

"I...we haven't actually entered into the contract yet and from what I saw we won't be able to for a while, if ever, since I doubt Noah's going to give up without a fight."

The newly unleashed part of Josiah growls in displeasure at hearing *his* submissive speak of another with such familiarity. Josiah reaches down and tangles a hand deep in Rafe's hair, a gesture that he's quickly become obsessed with, and tips his head further back.

"His name is Frisch. You'll not be so familiar towards him again; he's neither asked for nor earned the right to have you use his first name. Do you understand me? You're mine now whether we have a contract at the moment or not. He'll *never* get you back."

Rafe's breathing goes deep and his eyes are wide as Josiah looks closely at him. There's no fear in his gaze, which is something Josiah is thankful for. Rafe seems to know instinctively that Josiah's not trying to truly hurt him; he's simply exerting his rights as his dominant. Still holding Rafe by the hair Josiah lowers his voice again, lets it slip into the commanding baritone from before.

"You damaged my property, Rafe." He sees the confusion on Rafe's face and knows that he's

going to have to explain, knows that this is something that Rafe will not understand to begin with, but it's something that they both need.

"You'd already offered yourself to me, had already offered me your contract, and yet you turned on me, Rafe. You didn't trust me enough to not jump to conclusions. More than that you turned on yourself, tried to take blame that I didn't give to you and that's not how this works."

Rafe gapes at him, stunned at what Josiah's implying before words begin to tumble out of him.

"That's...you can't do...you can't punish me for blaming myself for something!"

"It's well within my right as your dominant when that blame is doing you harm that I've not approved."

"What was I supposed to think, Josiah? My own Head of House, my father's sister, wouldn't help me. No matter what I did, no matter what I said, there was never anywhere to turn, never any way out until that last day. If no one else had a problem with what was going on, how could I not believe that the problem was with me?"

Josiah doesn't ignore Rafe's words but he doesn't respond to them either. Technically he knows that what Rafe's saying is true, but he has a point to make and he's not going to get sidetracked. He loosens his hold on Rafe's hair and slides his fingers through the strands as he pulls back so he can grasp him by the chin instead.

"I'm going to go into my bedroom and I'm going to wait for you, Rafe. If you want to be here, if you want to be *mine*, then you'll come to me. If not then go to your room and don't come out for the rest of the night."

He lets his hand fall away from Rafe's chin, spins on his heel and goes to his room, careful to leave the door open a crack so that Rafe knows to come inside. He wants to pace but he doesn't let himself. Instead he stands silently at the end of his bed and waits. Rafe will have to come to him, will have to willingly place himself into Josiah's hands knowing that punishment is imminent if this is going to work between them. Josiah can't be a proper dominant to a submissive that subconsciously fears him and isn't willing to submit to the proper forms of punishment.

Five minutes pass agonizingly slow and then another and Josiah's about to give up when he hears Rafe's soft footsteps come padding down the hallway. He holds his breath, waits for the horrible moment when the sound passes by his door and heads towards Rafe's instead. It never comes. Rafe enters his room cautiously, like he'd not just spent the hours curled tightly in Josiah's arms on those same rumpled sheets. Josiah stares at him silently for a moment before he motions for Rafe to come closer until he's standing directly in front of him.

"Strip."

Rafe falters for a moment before he seems to gather himself and pulls down the loose sleep pants he's wearing with a single fluid motion. He picks them up and folds them without being told and presents the small bundle of cloth to Josiah like an offering. He takes it carefully and places it on the smooth top of his dresser before he turns back to Rafe.

The submissive is beautiful, long planes of smooth, tanned skin and perfectly formed muscles. It hits Josiah suddenly that Frisch must have paid a small fortune in medical care to keep Rafe from scarring too badly. He shakes the thought off viciously and focuses back on Rafe's nude form. This time he doesn't try to hide the desire that he knows is shining in his eyes or the way his cock is rapidly filling from the submissive.

He wants Rafe to know that even if he's displeased with him, even if he's going to punish him, he'll always want him, will always desire him. The trick is going to be showing Rafe that punishment and pain are not always bad things, that they can heal as well as harm, and that it's something they

both need to be happy. Josiah walks a small circle around Rafe, reaching out a hand and running the tips of his fingers over Rafe's chest and back as he goes.

"A dominant is nothing without a submissive and all dominants dream of having a beautiful one. And you are beautiful, Rafe. Now say yellow if I'm approaching your limit and red if I reach it."

Rafe jerks at the mention of a safe-word and Josiah has to grit his teeth at the anger that rises in his chest at seeing the open surprise on his face. He hopes Frisch gives him an excuse so that he can rip his throat out with his *teeth*.

"You won't need it this time, hopefully not ever, but you will have one. I'm going to hurt you, Rafe, and you'll take it because you'll want to please me, but I promise that I'll never actually damage you. You'll always be cared for, Rafe, always be the first thing on my mind before anyone or anything else. I'll protect you even if it means protecting you from myself."

Josiah takes a step back away from Rafe and settles down on the edge of his bed.

"Now, over my knee."

Rafe only hesitates for a moment—Josiah's more than willing to overlook it this time given the circumstances—before he steps forward and lays himself face down across Josiah's lap. Josiah runs a hand gently down Rafe's flank, fingers flirting with the cleft of his ass, dipping in for a second to prod gently before retreating again. Rafe squirms lightly and Josiah stops him with a firm hand on his hip before he pulls it away.

"There is no count. I'll stop when I think I've made my point and I don't want to hear a sound until you can't hold it anymore."

Rafe nods jerkily and Josiah begins.

He delivers the first five strokes in quick succession, not pausing as he spreads them evenly across the rapidly reddening skin of Rafe's ass. Rafe holds still, his body telegraphing resistance, but Josiah presses on. He falls into a rhythm, finding the necessary headspace easily as he alternates the speed and spacing so that Rafe is incapable of anticipating them. Rafe's fingers tangle in the loose material of Josiah's pants leg but he doesn't make a sound, doesn't try to get away, and Josiah is proud.

Josiah redoubles his efforts, working towards a goal that he can't properly express. He knows what needs to happen, knows what they both need; it's just a matter of getting there.

When Rafe finally breaks, Josiah has no idea what the count is. His hand is fairly numb and Rafe's ass is darkening with the promise of bruises, but it's worth it for the way that Rafe clutches at him and groans deep in his throat. Josiah counts out ten more swift strikes as Rafe moans softly across his knees before he stops and slides an arm under Rafe's chest to pull him upright and into his lap. Rafe's eyes are blood shot, his face streaked with tears and sweat, but there's also relief in his gaze, the beginnings of a sort of peace that reaches out and grips Josiah hard.

"You did so good, Rafe, so perfect. I'm so proud of you." He cradles Rafe's long body closer to him, tucking the submissive's head under his chin as he rocks them both back and forth.

"Let it all out, Rafe. Give me everything just like we agreed. You're not alone anymore."

Rafe sobs then, tears coming full tilt and without hesitation. Just like earlier, when Rafe had wept silently into his shirtfront, Josiah knows it's a good thing. Before had been about releasing Rafe's pent up emotions but this, this was about absolution, about true healing.

"Thank you." Rafe whispers the words into the hollow of Josiah's throat and all he can do is smile, a small upturning of his lips that doesn't do justice to the way he's feeling inside.

He holds Rafe carefully for a moment before he prompts him to stand. Rafe's shaky when he gets his feet underneath him and Josiah has to reach out and steady him with a hand on his arm but he

doesn't hesitate to obey. There's a newfound look of contentment in Rafe's eyes, a gentle glow of peace that reassures Josiah that he's done the right thing. This is what they'd both needed. He's managed to show Rafe that punishment and pain aren't always the horrible scarring things that Frisch had always shown him and in turn Rafe's obviously grown to trust him on a deeper level.

"Undress me." His voice is low and husky and he sees the way Rafe's eyes widen and go dark at the sound of it.

Rafe raises trembling fingers to the top button of Josiah's shirt; he fumbles for a moment but recovers quickly and makes swift work of working his way down the line of buttons. He looks up and Josiah sees the silent question in his eyes. He nods and Rafe's hands slip under the fabric of his now open shirt, fingers trailing over the skin of Josiah's shoulders as he slowly draws the silky material down his arms and off. Rafe gathers the shirt before it can hit the ground and to Josiah's pleasure folds it neatly and places it beside his previously removed sleep pants on top of the dresser.

He comes back then and his fingers hesitate for a split second over Josiah's zipper, once again asking silently for permission to continue. When Josiah nods again, Rafe grasps the tab and slowly draws it down. He goes down on his knees in front of Josiah, wincing slightly at what the other man knows has to be a painful twinge from a sore ass, and hooks his fingers into the sides of Josiah's pants. Rafe slowly tugs them down his legs. The loose material goes easily, and Josiah raises first one foot and then the other to step out of them. Rafe rises, gives the pants the same treatment as the shirt before going back down in front of Josiah to do the same with his underwear.

Josiah's cock bobs with the movement, curving up towards his belly, head flushed and glistening with pre-cum. Rafe eyes it hungrily, tongue flicking out to wet his lips, and Josiah almost snaps at the sight but manages to rein himself in at the last second.

"I want you on all fours on the bed and don't move until I tell you to."

Rafe scrambles to comply and Josiah has to wrap his fingers tightly around the base of his own cock at the sight of him. He's gorgeous, tanned skin glistening with a light sheen of sweat, ass red from Josiah's hand. Bruises are already forming, the darkening skin marking him as owned as clearly as any contract.

Josiah rips his eyes away from the sight and rummages through the top drawer of his dresser, coming back with a small pot of oil. He pours a small amount into the palm of his hand before he sets it aside on the bedside table and crawls onto the bed behind Rafe. He tips his hand and lets the oil dribble down onto the flushed and bruised skin of Rafe's ass, watching almost transfixed as the droplets disappear into his cleft. Rafe tenses slightly but doesn't move, mind obviously concentrating on following Josiah's instructions.

Rafe hisses a quick indrawn breath that's nearly silent in the next second when Josiah lays a hand on him, but it's a reaction that doesn't displease Josiah. Josiah prods softly at one of the quickly darkening bruises before he goes about following the oil with his fingertips. He traces his fingers across Rafe's skin, relishing the feel of it beneath his hands and the knowledge that Rafe is his now and that hopefully very soon no one will ever be able to say otherwise. He doesn't hesitate to slide a finger down Rafe's cleft, oil slicking the way as he nudges softly at his tightly furled hole. Rafe is entirely too tense, his muscles clenching in obvious nervousness that Josiah cannot fault him for, so instead he tries to soothe his nerves.

"Relax, Rafe. You belong to me now and I'll always take care of you. Always."

He continues stroking his fingertip lightly over Rafe's bud, spreading the oil around and encouraging him to relax. He reaches around Rafe's kneeling body with his free hand and grasps his cock, soft from the pain of his punishment and his onslaught of nerves, and gives it a few firm pulls

until he feels it begin to thicken in his hand.

“Look at you responding so beautifully to such a simple touch. I’ll teach you how it should be, Rafe, how pain can mix with pleasure until you can’t see straight.” He lowers his voice, makes it that gravelly growl that he knows Rafe likes. “You just have to let me in first, Rafe. Just let me in and I’ll take care of you, of everything.”

Rafe drops his head so that it hangs down between his arms and Josiah feels the shudder that works its way through his body as he struggles to relax his muscles. Josiah continues to prod gently at his hole but releases his hold on the submissive’s cock. He doesn’t want Rafe to get too worked up yet. He wants him to feel everything, every slick push and glide in excruciating detail with every inch of his body. Finally he pushes the tip of his finger past the now slightly loosened ring of muscles and then nearly groans aloud at the feel of Rafe’s heat, at the thought of having it wrapped so tightly around his cock.

He pushes in further, the oil easing his passage as he begins the slow work of stretching Rafe. He’s determined to do it properly, will accept nothing less for their first time and doesn’t want it marred by memories of unnecessary pain. The punishment doesn’t count, is an entirely separate issue that Josiah’s prepared to deal with, but Rafe’s trust in him is still too new, too fragile for anything truly rough when it comes to sex. That is something Josiah will take great pleasure in introducing him to in the future.

Josiah continues working his finger deeper and deeper into Rafe, feeling the way the younger man begins to slowly relax more and more as he seems to realize that Josiah is truly not interested in rushing things. Finally when there’s no more resistance, when there’s only the smooth glide of him working his way into Rafe he adds another finger. Rafe stays relaxed as Josiah thrusts deeper into him, careful of the bruised flesh of his ass, and then begins to scissor his digits to stretch him even wider.

He leans over Rafe’s back and licks a stripe up his spine, tongue dragging through the droplet of sweat on his skin as he works his way up so that he can lay teasing kisses on the back of his neck. Rafe moans, a low sound of pleasure that drags a smile out of Josiah even as he pulls back so that he can watch his fingers as they disappear into Rafe’s body.

“You’re so beautiful like this, Rafe. You take me so perfectly, like you were made for it, made for me.”

He crooks his fingers on an in stroke and watches the way Rafe’s entire body twitches in pleasure when he rubs against his prostate. He massages that spot for a moment, sees the way a new coat of sweat is slowly starting to form on Rafe’s skin as he struggles to stay still, to not buck back into Josiah’s touch. He keeps it up until Rafe begins to tremble, his arms growing weaker from the heightened pleasure, and then he reaches around Rafe’s hips and clamps his fingers tightly around the base of his cock again. Rafe keens, hips jerking, and Josiah twists the fingers that are still working their way deeper into his body and suddenly adds a third. Josiah works them in deep, twisting and curling his fingers on every odd stroke to send stars bursting behind Rafe’s eyelids again. He lets Rafe’s cock go and slides back across the mattress, lowering his upper body to the mattress and using his free hand to spread Rafe open in front of him. Rafe groans again at the slight pressure on his bruised skin but the sound is choked in his throat when Josiah leans forward and runs his tongue lightly around his stretched rim. Josiah inhales the musky scent of Rafe, mixed with the slightly pungent smell and taste of the oil that’s coating his skin before he licks him again.

He sets to work on Rafe in earnest then, tracing his tongue around the fingers still buried in his body and occasionally slipping it past the ring of muscle alongside them. Rafe’s arms buckle

underneath him, sending his upper body crashing to the mattress and Josiah's fingers even deeper inside of him. Josiah pulls back and swats him lightly on the ass in punishment and Rafe immediately tries to scramble back into place, struggling to get his arms to hold him up. Josiah takes no pity on him, bending back to his task with single-minded focus.

A few more minutes pass like this, Josiah's fingers and tongue tormenting Rafe as he struggles to maintain the position he'd been ordered to before he finally pulls away completely. His fingers make a sloppy, wet sound when he pulls them free that sends a bolt of sheer lust through him and makes his own cock jump in want. He arches himself over Rafe's back, laying another kiss on the nape of his neck, and whispers hotly in his ear.

"I'm going to fuck you now, Rafe, and it's going to erase the memory of every other touch you've ever had. You'll never forget the way this feels. It'll be so good that you'll crave it, feel it, feel me, every time you close your eyes."

Rafe trembles beneath him and hisses slightly when Josiah's cock prods at the cleft of his ass. Josiah nips sharply at the side of his neck before rearing back up and wrapping a hand still slick with oil around his own cock. He slicks his shaft from base to tip with a few strokes, shuddering at the feeling, before he guides himself closer to Rafe's entrance. He rubs his tip across the loose muscle, spellbound by the feel of it catching on Rafe's rim before he pushes forward slowly, feeling Rafe's body give way to his and welcome him inside.

Josiah can't bite back his own groan; the heat of Rafe's body is just as glorious as he thought it would be. He pushes in slowly, inch by inch, and Rafe takes him perfectly until Josiah settles deep inside of him, his hips pressing against the bruises of his ass. Rafe inhales sharply and his body clenches around Josiah's cock, and Josiah's hips thrust forward hard almost of their own accord. Rafe cries out, a choked off sound that makes Josiah's eyes drift shut even as he thrusts forward again, slower this time but still deep.

"Does it hurt?"

"Y-Yes." Rafe whimpers.

"It's supposed to. This is a good hurt, Rafe, pain at its sweetest. You'll love every second of it and when it's over every twinge, every ache will be a reminder."

Josiah doesn't give him a chance to respond, just pushes his hips tighter against Rafe's ass, pressing on the bruises even as he bottoms out inside of him. He pulls back until only the tip of his cock is still inside and then he pushes back inside, angling his thrust so that he hits that spot inside Rafe, sending a rush of pleasure through him even as the bruises ache.

Rafe's arms give out on him again but Josiah pushes him back down when he tries to get back up, and wraps one of his palms around the back of his neck and squeezes. Rafe's hips shove back to meet him at the gesture and Josiah doesn't try to gentle his pace at all after that. He pushes as deep into Rafe as he can with each thrust, setting up a rhythm that's both hard and exquisitely slow.

Rafe keens beneath him and his hips are trying to match Josiah's pace, but he's unable to because of the way he's pinned. Josiah tightens his hold on Rafe's neck, the silver of his collar warm beneath his palm as he works himself in and out of his body. It's exquisite, pleasure arching through his veins at the feel of Rafe's damp heat tightening rhythmically around his cock. And the sight of Rafe, his back arched and ass bruised as he takes Josiah's cock like he was crafted for it, is enough to make Josiah's head spin all on its own.

"So perfect, Rafe, keeping you forever." Josiah pants the words out, sweat beading on his forehead.

He reaches around Rafe and wraps a hand around his weeping cock, and this time instead of squeezing he strokes him from base to tip. Rafe tries to thrust down and back at the same time, caught

in the dual sensations of Josiah moving deep inside him and stroking his cock with a matching rhythm. He groans in frustrated pleasure laced with pain and Josiah chuckles at him lowly.

“Shh, pretty. I’ll take care of you. Just relax and feel.”

Josiah strokes him in time with the thrusts of his hips at first and then he changes it. He runs feather light fingers across Rafe’s cock as he pushes into his ass hard and deep and then grips him with tight fingers as he goes soft and shallow. He can feel his own orgasm building, can feel the sparks of it dancing up his sweatsoaked spine as Rafe’s body fights to keep him inside. Rafe’s not far behind him either, cock thickening and muscles fluttering as he shivers and shakes in Josiah’s hold.

“Come for me, Rafe. Come.” His voice is deep and dark and filled with an irresistible command.

Rafe’s hips buck and he cries out, a harsh ringing sound, and spills over Josiah’s hand. Josiah continues to pump him for a moment, before he lets go and raises his cum-soaked hand to his face. He flicks his tongue out to get a taste and hums appreciatively in the back of his throat before he rubs the rest of it into the skin at the small of Rafe’s back. Rafe’s still beneath him, a faint trembling in his muscles the only exception as Josiah continues moving inside of him.

“Do you want me to come inside you, Rafe? Do you think you deserve that gift?”

Rafe nods his head as best he can in answer.

“I want to hear it, Rafe. I want to hear you beg for my cum.”

“P-Please, Josiah, please come. Please.”

Rafe slips into begging effortlessly, and Josiah feels his cock twitch before he finally lets himself go, thrusting hard and fast for a few moments before letting himself spill into the willing body beneath him.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.” Rafe is muttering the words over and over again, his voice filled with what sounds like sincere gratitude at the feel of Josiah spilling deep inside of him, marking him from the inside out as owned, possessed.

Josiah’s hips stutter a few more times before he moves the hand that’s still on Rafe’s neck to his waist and tips them both over sideways. They lay tangled in the sheets together for a moment, Josiah still inside of Rafe, and simply breathe. Josiah shifts and they both groan when he slowly slips free of Rafe’s body and then crawls off of the bed. He pads silently into the bathroom and returns with a damp cloth and a small tube of ointment.

Rafe watches his every move from heavy lidded eyes as Josiah sits down beside his hip and slowly begins to clean off his front. He wipes away the sweat and cum with gentle strokes of the cloth, careful to get every inch of Rafe that he can reach. “On your stomach.”

Rafe rolls over and Josiah goes back to washing him. When he’s finished he tosses the cloth to the side and uncaps the tube of ointment and squirts a bit onto the sensitive skin of Rafe’s ass. Rafe hisses when the cold paste makes contact but sighs in contentment when Josiah carefully rubs it into his skin. The ointment will take some of the stinging pain away from the bruises. It’ll also leave enough that Rafe will be able to feel them just like Josiah promised, but it’ll numb the pain a bit so that he can sleep comfortably. When he’s done he returns everything to its proper place and slides back onto the bed beside Rafe’s prone figure.

He runs a hand down the line of Rafe’s back and then back up again, tangling his fingers in his hair and leaning down to kiss him sweetly just beneath his ear.

“I told you I’d take care of you, Rafe, that I’d hurt you but never damage you. I meant it.”

Josiah stretches out on his back and welcomes the weight of Rafe’s body against his own when he moves across the mattress so that he can pillow his head on Josiah’s chest. They drift off to sleep together, blissful and sated, a new level of trust hanging in the air between them.

Chapter Fourteen

Josiah's shower is cut short by the chiming of his *oracula* and the automated notice that Marcel is requesting an open channel echoing in his ear. Cursing softly he cuts the spray with a twist of his wrist and climbs out. Toweling off violently he stomps out of the bathroom only to be brought up short by the sight of Rafe still sleeping peacefully. The sight of him, arm stretching out across the empty bed like he's reaching for Josiah, takes the majority of his anger from him in an instance. Marcel's request pings in his ear again and he rolls his eyes in irritation. With a sigh he pulls his eyes away from Rafe, grabs a change of clothes from the dresser, and slips silently out of the room, careful not to disturb the still sleeping submissive. Rafe's had a hard few days, preceded by a hard few years, and right now Josiah's happy to make sure he gets plenty of sleep.

He presses down on the center of the implant and signals his acceptance of Marcel's ping. He starts pulling his clothes on slowly as her voice, edgy and restless, fills his ears. Josiah instantly knows something is wrong.

"Josie, I'm afraid we've got a bit of a problem here."

Josiah tenses, his muscles clenching tight as he's put immediately on alert.

"What is it?" He barks the question out.

Marcel doesn't call him on his tone, doesn't even seem to notice it, which does nothing to ease the tension that's running rampant through his body.

"It's Frisch and Jean Zweil. They're both saying that we have no right to interfere with what was a legitimate and legal contract and that if Rafe's not returned to them they'll file a suit."

Josiah barks out a laugh, no humor in his tone, just biting disbelief.

"That's the angle they're playing? As an institute charged with the protection of the citizens of the country we have full right to separate any submissive and dominant pair if there is ample proof of abuse."

"And that, my dear, would be the problem. Frisch and the bitch that runs Rafe's family are saying that the enforcer office doesn't have ample proof. They're claiming that Rafe's injuries were due to a routine punishment and that Rafe is the one in the wrong as he attacked the guards without provocation. They're willing to take him back of course since all Frisch wants to do is care for his submissive after this misunderstanding."

Josiah's hands curl into tight fists and his teeth grind together at Marcel's words.

"Rafe is *mine*. If Frisch thinks I'll let him lay a hand on *my* submissive he's an idiot. I'll feed him his own heart before I let him get away with that."

There's a beat of silence and then Marcel's voice comes across the channel between them, low and serious.

"You've claimed him then? He's agreed to a contract between the two of you?"

"He offered one to me and I accepted."

Josiah can hear her indrawn breath as his words sink in and then she's asking him questions in a tone laced with urgency.

"Josiah, you didn't notify anyone about your intent to form a contract, did you? That would give Frisch grounds to have his case dismissed."

Josiah closes his eyes and inhales a deep breath, thankful all over again for Gar's interference and quick thinking. He'd saved Josiah when Josiah had been too distracted to save himself.

"No, no I didn't. I was about to but Gar stopped me. If it's evidence you need, Marcel, Gar gave me plenty. There are things on that chip...well, let's just say that no tribunal in their right mind would send him back to that. And I'll kill any who tried."

Marcel chuckles low and dark, a sort of pleased violence underlining her tone, a true viciousness that's rare in her.

"I'd do the same to anyone that tried to take Isaac from me. Now there's a data chip you say?"

"Yes, a gift from Gar. I'm not sure how he got ahold of the information on there, and I probably don't want to know, but there are things that you need to see. Marcel, this goes way beyond what's happened to Rafe. From the way these files tell it we're looking at two possible murders."

"Fuck. That changes the game a bit. Gar gave you this chip so we both know it's secure. I'm going to need that chip, Josiah. You can't risk forwarding the material to me now in case someone tries to intercept it or the information gets leaked. We need to blindside these fuckers before they get the chance to throw more money at their problems."

"We're at my apartment right now. Come and get the data chip if you need it that badly."

"There's not enough time for me to make it to your place and then back here. I've got less than half an hour before I have to do my best to persuade a tribunal not to turn Rafe over to one of the most influential houses in the area. I need that chip, Josiah, and I need you to bring it to me."

Josiah's torn for a moment. He knows that Marcel needs the chip, that him taking it to her is the only way to make this work, but at the same time he can't take Rafe with him and he doesn't want to leave him alone. He struggles with the dilemma, weighs his options and then sighs heavily when he realizes that he doesn't have much of a choice.

"I'll be there as soon as possible, Marcel, and I'll contact you when I'm close. Stall if you have to just don't go into this without this data chip. I've got to wake Rafe up and bring him up to speed and then I'm gone."

"Hurry." Marcel disconnects then, ending the conversation in her typical style, and Josiah's up and moving in the next second, striding down the hall and into the room where Rafe's just now stirring on the bed.

"W-What's wrong?" His voice is rough with sleep, his eyes heavy and unfocused and his hair a disheveled halo around his head. Josiah's heart clenches painfully at the sight of him.

"I need you to listen to me, Rafe, and listen well." His urgency must shine through in his tone because Rafe's out of the bed and standing in front of him in seconds, eyes alert and body tense.

"What's happened? It's N-Frisch, isn't it?"

"Yes." He sees the fear flash across Rafe's eyes at his easy admittance and he reaches out and pulls Rafe against his chest, tangling a hand in his hair and wrapping an arm around his waist in reassurance.

"I need to take that data chip to Marcel. She can't come here and we don't have much time. I want you up, awake, and alert. I'll be back as soon as possible, but you need to be careful, Rafe. Don't leave the apartment, and don't take any unnecessary risks. Keep yourself safe no matter what, do you understand me?"

"Y-Yes."

Josiah pulls back, uses the hand in Rafe's hair to tilt his face up and takes his mouth in a hot, devouring kiss, tongue and teeth working to remind the other who he belongs to. It's also a promise, a promise that he'll be back and that everything will be alright. They're both breathless when he lets go and runs the fingers of his free hand tenderly across Rafe's face.

"Be careful, Josiah."

Josiah smiles at Rafe gently before pulling away completely so that he can turn on his heel and march out of the room. He doesn't look back, only stops to gather his weapons and the data chip before he's out the door, locking it and engaging the security system after he pulls it to.

He won't let himself look back because if he does, if he has to see Rafe watching him leave he might not be able to go. This is far too important to mess up.

He's in his transport, firing up the starter sequence almost before he realizes it, peeling out of his space and speeding towards Marcel's location. When he's close, about five minutes out, he pings Marcel on a secure channel, his hands tight around the steering wheel while he waits for her to respond.

"Josiah, are you close?" Her voice is sharp and the tension in her tone bleeds over into Josiah, wrenching his nerves even tighter.

"I'm five minutes out, Marcel. You set fire to the fucking building if you have to. Just buy me five minutes."

"Right. Just hurry, Josiah."

He ramps up his speed, going entirely too fast, but not able to actually find it in him to care as long as it gets him to the tribunal in time. He skids into a spot outside of the old ornate building with a minute to spare, cutting the power and jumping out of his transport in a single fluid movement. He pushes past the few people who don't immediately clear out of his way, the urgency he's feeling clearly being telegraphed in his every move.

He spots Marcel easily, her signature hair swept up into an elaborate design, and he calls her name even as he makes his way towards her at a quick pace. She spins around, face fierce and determined, and starts towards him. When they meet they're both steely-eyed and blank faced, their eyes transmitting their every thought to each other as he slips the data chip into the palm of her hand.

"Stop this, Marcy. Do whatever you have to do to stop this."

"Trust me, Josie. I have every intention of doing just that." She whirls around and takes off, long legs and dangerously spiked heels eating up the ground in front of her at a pace that's almost unbelievable.

Josiah lets himself relax a bit, lets some of the tension ease from his shoulders as he readjusts his belt and the lay of his rapier and pistol. Marcel has what she needs, has everything to put Frisch away for a very long time and to make Jean Zweil pay as well. Rafe will be safe after this, will no longer be tied to a sadistic dominant or a manipulative old woman.

His *oricula* pings again with an incoming message from a blocked address and curious he reaches up to accept the connection as he makes his way back towards his transport. He blinks in shock when Gar's smoky voice, all whiskey smooth and ocean deep, floats into his ear.

"Josiah, I'm sorry. I wasn't fast enough. I didn't expect them to make a move this quickly and I wasn't fast enough."

"Gar, it's fine, I swear. I got Marcel the chip and she'll take care of everything. No matter what smooth tricks Frisch tries to pull, Marcel will have all the evidence she needs to counteract his moves."

There's a beat of silence, much like the one with Marcel, and when Gar speaks again his voice is tight, the low tone hard and cold with the icy rage that Gar was so well known for.

"I'm not talking about the tribunal meeting, Josiah! I'm talking about Zweil himself."

Josiah freezes, ignores the crowds of people that move around him on all sides as he focuses on Gar's voice, ice settling in the pit of his stomach.

"What are you talking about?"

"They got him, Josiah. They set off some kind of pulse that took down anything that runs on electricity in almost a block radius and they broke in. Frisch has Zweil, Josiah. He has him and I was too slow to stop it."

Josiah doesn't give himself time to think, time to feel anything. He just breaks into a flat run towards

his transport, Gar's voice ringing in his ears and his mind screaming at him.

Rafe.

Rafe.

Frisch has Rafe and Josiah knows that if they don't find him quickly Frisch will kill him to keep anyone else from having him.

Chapter Fifteen

Josiah doesn't register the ride back to his apartment; it passes him by in a blur of shapes outside his transport's windows and a tight knuckled grip on the steering wheel. When he finally pulls into view he's out of the vehicle as soon as he's in the parking area, not even bothering to shut it off or lock it down. It's not important right now. What's important is finding out whether or not Gar is right, if Rafe really has been taken.

He charges up the stairs, ignoring the slower moving elevator in favor of keeping himself moving, and skids into the hallway. It's almost like *déjà vu*, the feeling he gets when he sees his apartment door partially ajar, almost but not quite since even from a distance he can see the way the wood is buckled inwards, obviously smashed open by force. There's a nearly silent creaking noise inside that captures his attention and quietly, almost dreading what he'll find inside, Josiah unholsters his pistol and steps through the doorway. He's face to barrel with a high caliber rifle as soon as he steps across the threshold, and he feels his shoulders relax slightly as he lowers his own weapon.

"Gar."

"Josiah."

"You know you can lower Boo now, right?"

"Oh, right, my apologies."

Their exchange would have been amusing if Josiah wasn't hanging onto his control by the skin of his teeth. Still even if it doesn't exactly lighten the mood it does make Josiah feel as if his feet are planted firmly on the ground now. Gar's here in the flesh, which means that he has all intentions of backing Josiah up personally. He would have never shown up otherwise.

Gar lowers his beloved rifle, putting it back into place across his shoulder as carefully as he always does, and Josiah gets his first real look at the man in years.

Gar's not changed any; he's the same tall, leanly muscled ghost that he's always been. His hair is a shaggy mess of black spikes that fall down far enough to cover his *oricula* from sight and still look like they've never actually seen a brush before. It's always been his eyes that truly attract attention however. His right eye is a clear bright blue, while the left is a deep dark brown. The contrast is startling, giving Gar's stare an almost unsettling depth that takes time to get used to. Even after all the years they'd spent together in the dark, dirty war zones of the world Gar's eyes can still throw even Josiah for a moment before he shakes it off.

They move forward together as one, hands wrapping around each other's forearms in a sign of greeting and solidarity. Josiah knows that Gar is more than aware of the fact that the situation is delicate and that time is of the essence and his appreciation for his presence grows tenfold. When he turns an expectant look on the other man he isn't surprised by how easily they slip back into the roles they'd filled while serving together, and Gar begins to give him a quick rundown of the situation. Josiah forces himself to remain calm, to take deep even breathes and approach this situation like he would have any other operation with the Crimson Elite.

If he isn't careful, Rafe is dead anyways.

"The charge that was set off was a short lived EMP pulse designed to temporarily knock down anything with an electrical charge. It dissipated approximately ten minutes before your arrival.

According to what my network managed to pick up before the blackout there were five intruders, all moderately armed and moving with intent. I've had eyes and ears around you for weeks now but I was too far out to be able to get here in time to stop any of it. I'm sorry for that, Josiah."

Gar's voice is deep and husky and apologetic, but Josiah doesn't blame him. If it weren't for Gar he'd have no hope of ever getting Rafe back. It was Gar's information he'd passed to Marcel and it was Gar's call that had alerted him to the fact that Rafe was no longer where he was supposed to be. Josiah just shakes his head at Gar and motions for him to continue talking while he moves past him down the hallway and into the rest of his apartment.

"I've got a search program running right now that'll be able to tell us if any one of them have been anywhere near a still functioning camera. If they show their faces we'll know about it."

Josiah can see evidence of a struggle as soon as he steps into the living room. The couch is flipped onto its back, and the coffee table is reduced to a twisted metal frame and broken glass. It gets worse as he continues on down the hallway towards the bedroom he'd shared with Rafe just hours before. There are holes in the walls, chunks of plaster missing and large gouges in the paint of other areas. The room itself is destroyed, clothes and glass everywhere, the drawers from the dresser flung across the room to shatter against the opposite wall. It looks like a war zone.

Gar's voice calls out to him from the next room over, the one he'd decorated for Rafe's personal use, so Josiah turns on his heel and makes his way over. When he gets there he finds Gar crouched over a body, hand flying over the screen of his p.a.t.c.h, face blank and eyes focused. Gar makes a pleased sound in the back of his throat and stands back up, and Josiah notices that the p.a.t.c.h he's operating isn't actually his own. Gar's is still docked in its station, which means that the one he's currently operating belongs to the dead man on his floor. When Gar's eyes fall on him again he smiles, a sort of awkward upturning of his lips, as he gestures to the body and the room with his free hand.

"Your boy did some damage, Josiah. He fought hard and as outnumbered as he was I'm impressed. I mean I knew he was good, the video and notes on his first escape were impressive, but he's better than I expected. These guys are all private sector according to this, efficient, ruthless, and not known for being particularly soft handed. This one must have gotten too close. His neck's been snapped in a way that would make you proud. I suspect that the only reason they got him at all was because of this."

Gar fishes in one of his many pockets and pulls out a tiny familiar syringe. Josiah takes it from him and knows what he'll find even before he raises it to his nose and inhales the sickly sweet scent of quiesco root, the same sedative Rafe had overdosed on.

"Fuck." Josiah runs a hand through his hair, gripping at the strands in frustration before he forces himself to calm down.

Before he can say anything else an alarm goes off on Gar's personal p.a.t.c.h and Josiah watches as the other man unfurls the tech and his fingers fly over it almost too quickly for Josiah to follow his movements. A minute passes and then another and it takes everything Josiah has in him not to pace. He knows that if he doesn't keep a tight handle on himself he'll be out the door in flash and desperately searching for any sign of Rafe. His best bet is to be patient, to let Gar work and wait for the information that the other man is sure to provide.

"Got them." Gar's voice is filled with triumph and Josiah is immediately on alert, muscles tensing in preparation for movement.

"Where?" He growls the words out, sees the understanding and muted bloodlust on Gar's face at his question. Even though the other dominant has never actually met Rafe, Josiah knows that Gar is

fiercely protective of their old unit and anyone they consider family. It's reassuring to have him at his back again.

"I've got a positive I.D. on our boy Frisch and his men on the far side of Ember Harbor, outside of a small warehouse. There's no sign of Zweil outside but judging by the area and the travel time I'm ninety percent sure he's inside. Address is being sent to your navigational system and details of the surrounding area are currently being worked up. I'll do a full layout of the perimeter on the way there."

Josiah's already moving, long legs eating up the distance as he rushes out of the apartment and back to his still running transport, Gar hot on his heels. They're peeling out of the parking area in seconds, Josiah focusing on weaving in and out of traffic while Gar types away at his p.a.t.c.h, mouth spewing a constant stream of information that Josiah absorbs automatically. Gar's always been talented at battle strategy and they'd worked together for so long that Josiah trusts him to develop the most effective plan. It would be beyond foolish to ignore such a reliable source of information and support.

"I'll set up on a neighboring rooftop and pick off any outlying guards while you secure an entry point. Once that's handled we'll rendezvous and infiltrate together. A word to the wise, you might want to call Eagan. I thought you'd want to handle this in-house so to speak but given the nature of the situation and the dead man in your apartment you might want to head off any currently unforeseen complications. Plus back up, no matter how late or inept, might actually be a good thing in this case."

Josiah curses low and rough, hands tightening around the steering wheel until he hears the metal and plastic material groan in protest. He cannot believe that he'd not thought of that himself, that he'd let himself get tangled so deep in thoughts of Rafe being hurt and of killing Frisch with his bare hands that he'd let something so important as that slip his mind. Despite his best efforts to stay calm and clearheaded it's painfully obvious that he's not nearly as in control as he's been trying to be.

He pries one of his hands loose and jabs roughly at his *ocular*, barking out a request for a secure channel with Eagan and waiting impatiently for the Lead Enforcer to answer.

"Marx. I didn't think I'd be hearing from your ugly ass for a while longer." Eagan is as loud and cheerful as always but Josiah doesn't have the time for pleasantries.

"Eagan, Rafe's been taken. Private sector muscle under Frisch's command broke into my apartment while I was meeting Marcel and took him. Gar's located their position and we're in route now, E.T.A. eight minutes."

Eagan's silent for a moment and when he speaks there's a commanding tone to his voice that chafes at Josiah even as he tries to shove the instinctual reaction back down.

"Do not take any unnecessary risks, Marx. I know how you are and I told you before that I don't want to lose my best agent over this. Take the little fuck alive if you can, but I'm honestly not going to lose any sleep over it if deadly force is necessary. He forfeited all rights to be treated with care when he kidnapped someone under enforcer protection. We'll use him to send a message."

Josiah smiles, a sharp stretch of teeth and lips, at Eagan's words. Frisch has fucked up royally by kidnapping Rafe. By directly violating the protection laws in such a blatant manner he's lost all right to consideration by the law. Enforcers are charged with protecting the people and are authorized to use deadly force in more situations than the public seems to realize.

"Lead Enforcer Eagan, you should also know that there's a corpse in Josiah's apartment. His boy's apparently a bit harsher than any of us gave him credit for." Gar's voice is distracted but slightly amused, his eyes and fingers still flying over the screen of his p.a.t.c.h as he sorts through and discards information at lightning speed.

“Great, just what we all need, another Marx floating around the area. I’ll dispatch someone to process the scene. As for backup I’ve got a full squad assembled and heading in your direction, but they’re going to be a while, longer than I’m sure either of you are willing to wait. Just try not to get yourselves killed, either of you. I really don’t want to deal with the paperwork.”

Eagan signs off without another word and Josiah knows that his commanding officer is diving head first into the storm. He’s more than happy to leave all of the red tape to Eagan in this instance. He’ll deal with the aftermath when he has to and if anyone has a problem with his shooting Frisch, because he’s eighty percent sure that it’s going to end like that and he’s looking forward to it, then they can take it up with him later.

Grim faced and determined, Josiah pushes his transport even harder, watching the speed gauge climb higher and higher with cold satisfaction. It won’t be long now and he’ll have Frisch’s throat between his hands. He’d just better hope that Rafe is alive or Josiah knows ways to make a person wish for death and he can only pity anyone who’s foolish enough to try and stop him.

Chapter Sixteen

The warehouse in the distance is new, obviously recently erected and well put together. Josiah pulls his eye away from Boo’s scope before handing the rifle back to Gar carefully. Even in this situation he knows better than to handle Boo with anything less than reverence.

“We’ve got four on the outside and no sign of any movement near any of the windows. You take them down and then we’ll go in hard. Back up’s still twenty minutes out and I’m not inclined to wait for them.”

“You’ve never really been inclined to wait on back up. That’s why you’re Vanguard.”

Josiah smirks slightly before he turns to make his way down the ladder that’s attached to the rooftop they’re currently perched on. Gar stays behind, a secure channel open between them as he sets up his equipment so they can begin their operation. He slinks through the alleyways of the neighboring warehouses, careful to keep to the shadows, his electric pistol in hand and rapier thrown securely around his waist. He stills when he’s finally in place, eyes locked on the back entrance, ready if there are more hostiles than they’d previously been aware of and trusting Gar to handle the front entrance.

It starts between one second and the next; Josiah hears the nearly silent sound of Gar chambering a round, a quiet snick, and then there is yelling and the sound of running feet and Gar’s voice is in his ear growling out his code for a successful take down.

“Scratch.”

The next three happen in quick succession, Gar growling out his code word back to back, each one within seconds of the other until all four of the guards that they’d counted are dead. Josiah goes to speak, goes to make the call for Gar to come down from his perch when the door in front of him bursts open. Four more guards, their presence previously unknown, pour out of the building. Instead he raises his hand to his ear and gives Gar new orders, his voice low and tight, a part of him anticipating the fight. He’s more than capable of taking down four on his own but he knows better than to underestimate any situation.

“Skirmisher, I’ve got eyes on four more hostiles. Reposition and provide support. Vanguard shall engage.”

“Affirmative, Vanguard, repositioning.”

Josiah steps out of the shadows of the warehouse, hands steady and pistol ready and when the first guard turns in his direction, weapon drawn, he puts an electrically charged bullet between his eyes. Josiah’s moving before the body even hits the ground, throwing himself down behind a stack of crates and lining up his next shot in seconds. Another body hits the ground but the remaining two have found

cover and begin to return fire with a vengeance.

He ducks out from behind his cover, intent on taking down the remaining opposition, but the gunfire abruptly halts and there's the quiet hiss of Gar's voice in his ear.

"Double scratch. Game, match."

Josiah straightens slowly, eyes scanning the area but confident that the coast is clear. Gar would have never called the coast clear otherwise.

"Rendezvous in three." He slides up beside the now open door, impatient but determined to wait on Gar's arrival. He's checking over his equipment, making sure that everything is functional, when a scream reaches out past the open door and grips him by the heart.

Rafe.

He's moving before his brain catches up with him, rushing through the doorway and around the various stacks of crates and barrels, ears trained to the horrifying sound of Rafe screaming in pain. He's deaf to anything else, unable to truly register Gar's voice in his ear, or the fact that he can hear the other man pounding across the warehouse floor somewhere behind him.

He skids to a halt a few moments later, eyes trained on the glass and metal plated wall and the engaged intercom that's broadcasting the room's sounds to him. Rafe screams again and Josiah's eyes snap up and focus on a sight that makes his body go still and his mind blank with rage. Frisch is on the other side of the partition, scalpel in hand, wild-eyed and hair in disarray with blood streaking his face as he gazes at Josiah through the glass.

He rips his eyes away from the other dominant and it is Rafe who truly holds his gaze, Rafe who's strapped to an inverted table, lines of blood running down his back. Josiah levels his pistol, takes aim and fires a round into the glass, cursing low in his throat when it doesn't penetrate. Rafe jerks on the table and Josiah knows that the intercom works both ways, knows that Rafe will be able to hear him so he starts talking, tries to let him know that he's there and that it'll all be over soon.

"Let him go, Frisch. Just let him go now and you can walk away from this alive. Just give him up and no one else has to die." He does his level best to keep his voice low and soothing, to keep the rage from spilling over. He wants Frisch's throat between his hands but he knows better than to upset him when Rafe's still trapped on the other side of that glass divider.

Frisch's eyes flicker for a moment. His face crumples in confusion and his voice sounds surprisingly young when he speaks for the first time.

"My men? You've...killed them all?" He asks the question with what sounds like genuine puzzlement and Josiah hesitates for a moment before he answers him.

"Yes."

"Why, why would you do that?"

"You orchestrated the abduction of a submissive under enforcer protection; under the law, their lives were forfeit."

"Abduction? I didn't abduct anyone!"

Josiah stares at the man, caught briefly off guard by the adamant denial. This isn't the same man he'd dealt with in the hospital or the same sadistic dominant he'd watched ramble gleefully on about the various things he'd done to Rafe. This is a man broken, a mind cracked and damaged, and Josiah tenses further because those are always the most dangerous types of people.

"You abducted Rafe, Frisch; your men stole him out of an apartment and brought him here against his will. You need to give him back now."

"But Rafe is mine. She gave him to me! He's mine!" Josiah can tell Frisch is getting more and more agitated and he knows that he has to tread carefully.

“Not anymore, you need to give him back to me. Give him back to me and you can still walk away.” He knows it’s the wrong thing to say as soon as the words escape him, can see the way they make Frisch’s head jerk up and his eyes narrow as he seems to truly look at Josiah for the first time.

“You. I remember you. You’re the one who wouldn’t let me have him back. You *took* him from me!” There’s anger in his voice now, a biting sort of rage that makes his eyes flash even through the glass, the type that sets Josiah’s hair on end.

“Yes, it was me. I took him; Rafe didn’t go on his own. So don’t blame him, blame me. Let me in and we’ll deal with this between us. There’s no reason for you to hurt him anymore.”

“But he’s so pretty when he bleeds.”

Even as he watches Frisch grin at him, a baring of teeth more than anything else, and cuts into Rafe again. Rafe screams, a high-pitched sound that shatters something in Josiah’s mind, sends him careening forward to slam himself against the glass door that’s keeping them apart. He slams himself against it again and again, ignoring the way his shoulders throb with the effort.

“Stop it! Stop it, stop it, stop it! I can’t think when you’re doing that!” Frisch sounds almost hysterical, and the way he raises blood-covered hands to grip at his hair only reinforces the idea.

Josiah forces himself to stop, to grab the anger and pain that’s fueling him and chain it tightly in the back of his mind, not gone but temporarily under control. There’s a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye, the familiar shape of Gar slinking crouched across the floor, and Josiah’s careful not to let his expression give anything away. Gar slides up to the door, shielded by the solid metal lower half and reaches up to place a small metal disk on the side of the security lock. He’s typing away at his p.a.t.c.h one handed, Boo placed gently on the ground beside him, opposite hand raised with three fingers showing, a silent countdown to Josiah.

Knowing that he needs to stall for time, that he needs to do something, anything, to keep Frisch distracted, Josiah starts talking again.

“Rafe? Rafe, I’m here. Everything’s going to be alright.” He doesn’t let his voice crack, doesn’t let himself show the weakness that’s eating at him from seeing Rafe so hurt and not being able to get to him.

“Don’t talk to him! Don’t talk to him like you know him! He’s mine, damn you!” Frisch is yelling, hands waving and eyes wild, but he’s moving away from Rafe, moving closer to the door, and Gar’s only holding up two fingers now.

“He’s not yours anymore, Frisch. He’s mine now.” Josiah sneers the words at the distraught man, trying to distract him, trying to keep his attention off of Rafe for as long as possible and his rage focused on him.

“No, no, no! He’s mine! He bleeds for me!” There are tears in Frisch’s eyes alongside the madness and Josiah pushes further.

“No he’s not, Frisch. He gave himself to a real dominant, to someone on his level. He gave himself to a fourth tier that could handle him.” Josiah tosses his head slightly, lets the light glint off the rubies in his *oricula* so that the gems catch Frisch’s eye.

One minute.

“He wouldn’t do that! He’s perfect and he’s mine and I’m going to *make* him love *me*. Me, goddamn you!” Frisch turns to head back towards Rafe’s prone form, hand clenched tightly around the scalpel, and there are sirens in the background but there isn’t enough time. Josiah jumps forward and slams his free palm down against the door with bruising force. Frisch jumps, startled, but he turns back around and that’s what Josiah wanted all along. Josiah leans forward until his breath is misting the glass of the door and his tone is low and snide when he speaks.

“He’ll never love you, Frisch. He told me that. Do you know what he did? He stripped down and oiled up and gave himself to me all on his own. I didn’t have to force him: he *begged* for it. Begged for me like he never would for you because you’re nothing. Do you hear me, Frisch? You’re nothing!”

Frisch snarls and turns back towards Rafe, but Gar’s hand is closed into a tight fist and in the next second the door is open and Josiah’s sprinting forward. He collides with Frisch hard, free hand wrapping around the wrist of the hand holding the scalpel and snapping it with a quick forceful upwards stroke with the butt of his pistol. Frisch howls and drops the blade, but he shuts up quickly when Josiah presses the muzzle of his pistol directly against his sweaty forehead.

“Twitch. Give me one more reason to put a bullet in your brainpan and so help me I will and I won’t even blink.” He growls the words out, teeth gnashing and eyes narrowed.

Frisch whimpers, and there’s the sudden smell of urine in the air, but he doesn’t move. Josiah pulls his hand back, moving the pistol away from the other man, but before Frisch can even sigh in relief he crashes the butt of the gun down hard across the back of his head.

Frisch drops and Josiah doesn’t even make an attempt to catch him, just steps over his prone form and heads towards Rafe. He’s dimly aware of Gar’s voice in the background, of running feet and the sounds of backup arriving too late to be of any real use. His attention is focused on getting to Rafe, to making sure that he’s alive.

“Rafe.” Josiah chokes the word out, panic clawing at his throat when he’s close enough to see just how deep the cuts are on Rafe’s back.

Rafe moans low in his throat and it sounds pained and drugged. He flinches when Josiah lays a hand on his arm, and Josiah goes around the table and drops to his knees so that they’re eye to eye. Rafe’s gaze is blurry, the aftereffects of the sedative apparent in his sluggish reactions, but when he focuses enough to recognize Josiah his eyes fill with tears.

“J-Josiah?”

Josiah reaches up and tenderly cups Rafe’s jaw in his slightly shaking palm, dips forward and lays a sweet kiss on Rafe’s brow.

“Yeah, Rafe, it’s me.”

“Hurts.”

“I know it does, I know. We’re going to get you out here’ and we’re going to go home so you got to hang in there for me, alright, Rafe? You got to stay awake.”

Rafe’s eyelids flutter closed, but Josiah taps him gently on the jaw, desperate to keep him awake, not wanting to take the chance that he’ll slip into unconsciousness and never be able to find his way back out.

“Rafe! Rafe, stay with me. Focus on my voice and stay awake.” Josiah hears approaching footsteps and he stands quickly, ready for any new threat, but it’s just Gar, a medical unit in tow and obviously intent on getting Rafe free and on his way to the hospital. Josiah ducks back down and cups Rafe’s jaw in his palm again, fingers stroking soothingly across his bruised skin.

“You did so good, Rafe, so perfect, and this is going to hurt but we’ve got to move you. Just try to stay calm. Gar’s here and I know you’re going to want to meet him so you need to stay awake, alright?”

“Gar?” Rafe’s voice is reed thin and weak, but he’s focusing on Josiah and that’s really all that matters.

“Yeah, Gar. The friend I was telling you about, the one that helped me find you today. He’s here and he’s going to want to meet you later on and tell you embarrassing stories about me from our time in the Elite together so you need to stay with me.”

“Y-Yeah. Josiah?”

“Yeah, Rafe?”

“Don’t...don’t leave me.” Rafe’s eyes flutter closed again and Josiah hears one of the medics behind him curse loud and vicious, and he feels Gar grip him tightly by the shoulder all at the same time.

“I won’t, Rafe. I swear I won’t.”

He doesn’t get an answer. Rafe doesn’t twitch, and his eyes stay shuttered. His face is slack and Josiah feels pain spike through his chest even as he’s ripping himself out of Gar’s hold. He’s on his knees again in front of Rafe, cradling his bruised and bloody face in the crook of his neck as his hands run gently through his hair. He breathes softly on the skin that’s next to his mouth and begs low and desperate into the shell of Rafe’s ear.

“Rafe, baby? Come on, now. Stay with me. Don’t do this, Rafe. Don’t do this to me. Baby? Come now, open your eyes! Rafe?” It comes out lost and broken, a sound that Josiah would have never thought himself capable of making but isn’t ashamed of in the slightest.

There’s still no response, only the feel of Gar forcefully pulling him back and away and the sight of the medical unit lifting Rafe’s bloody body onto a stretcher and rushing him out the door.

Josiah stumbles to his feet, not willing to be separated from Rafe, not willing to let him out of his sight. Gar’s on his heels the entire time, long fingered hand pressed to his shoulder in a show of silent support that’s normally not their style, but Josiah is strangely thankful for it. He knows that if it wasn’t for Gar’s guiding hand and the promise he’d made to Rafe he would have fought his way through anything and everything that stood in the way of him getting to Frisch.

Instead he climbs into the back of the medical transport, Gar’s promise to meet him at the hospital ringing in his ears. He clings to Rafe’s limp hand and realizes that he never wants to let it go. Josiah knows that they haven’t actually known each other for long in the scheme of things, but that doesn’t compare to the way the knowledge that he truly does want to Bond with Rafe hits him directly in the heart.

Faced with Rafe bloody and bruised for the second time since they first met Josiah knows without a shadow of a doubt that Rafe is it for him. If anything happens to him Josiah knows that it’ll be like a piece of him has been ripped out, something destroyed that he’ll never find again.

For only the second time in his life Josiah closes his eyes and prays.

Chapter Seventeen

The ride to the hospital is like a nightmare. Rafe stays unconscious, his hand limp in Josiah’s grasp and his eyes closed no matter what the medical team does to him. Josiah refuses to let him go, has a hand on a part of him the entire time, until they’re inside the hospital and Gar and Eagan are there and they’re holding him back from going into the operating room.

He doesn’t even struggle against their restraining hands, doesn’t have the extra concentration it would require. Every part of him is focused on Rafe, on remembering the way he looked on that table, the way he’d asked Josiah to stay with him. For the first time since he can remember Josiah feels truly helpless.

Gar and Eagan hold him together for a while; Eagan has an understanding look on his face and Josiah knows that he’s imagining his own Bonded in a similar situation while Gar looks on, an awkward but fiercely protective shadow. Marcel and Isaac rush in at some point, Marcel enveloping him in a perfume scented, spine cracking hug while she whispers in his ear, and in the background Isaac nods at him in silent support.

They settle in to wait; a mismatched but closed ranked group that gets more than one cautious glance from anyone who wanders too close.

Hours pass Josiah by in a fog, his attention turned inwards until he snaps out of it abruptly when a doctor approaches them. He's shorter than Josiah by about half a foot, his eyes a light grey color and his hair a close cropped brown. His collar flashes when he moves, the four sapphires embedded in the silver glinting in the bright light of the hospital corridor marking him as having originated from Water. The man looks tired, his face streaked with sweat and lined with fatigue and Josiah feels his heart clench in fear. He's on his feet and in front of him before he has the chance to say anything, the others crowding close behind him in support and shared worry.

"Is Rafe alright?" He croaks out the question, his entire being hanging on the answer.

The doctor's eyes narrow, warm but tired grey edging into steel territory as he rakes his gaze dismissively over Josiah and turns towards Eagan instead.

"Lead Enforcer, we need to have a word. Privately." The man's voice is honey smooth and cultured but cold as ice, and it pisses Josiah off to be dismissed in such a manner.

Eagan glances between the doctor and Josiah, confusion and a slight hint of nervousness on his expressive face. He knows just as well as everyone, besides the doctor, just how dangerous Josiah can be and they're all vaguely afraid that this man's refusal to acknowledge him might actually push him over the edge.

"Doctor?" Josiah breaks into conversation before it can actually begin, his tone sharp and unforgiving.

"Karney, Bryant Karney, and I have nothing to say to you." Karney's voice is razor sharp and the venom in it takes Josiah aback for a second before his own tightly reined in temper kicks its way back to the forefront of his mind.

"Listen to me, you son of a bitch, if you don't tell me how Rafe is right now I'll feed you your teeth." The words are practically hissed out and Josiah means every single one of them.

Karney takes a half step back and Josiah sees Gar shift slightly in the corner of his eye but dismisses it when the doctor seems to gather himself. He sets his shoulders and meets Josiah's gaze head on, distaste curling his plush mouth into a sneer. "I don't answer to abusive assholes like you so take my advice and back off before I have you thrown out."

Josiah gapes for seconds, caught off guard by the doctor's implications, before he steps forward, hand raised to grab the other man by his collar. Gar's in front of him suddenly, crowding the doctor's space and speaking in a low intense voice.

"Josiah wasn't the one who did this. It was Zweil's former dominant. Josiah is an enforcer and the last one who would hurt another in such a way."

Karney searches Gar's face for a moment, his eyes flickering around to the rest of their group as well before they land on Josiah again. The doctor studies him for a moment and seems to find what he was looking for because his face softens, his eyes warming and his shoulders relaxing. He steps around Gar so that he's face to face with Josiah again and this time when he speaks his voice is smooth and warm.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize. I see far too many cases such as this one and it never gets any easier." Shadows flicker behind the doctor's eyes and Josiah understands. He's still angry but he understands. He recognizes someone who's been wounded before.

"Rafe?" He pushes aside everything else, focusing on the one thing he truly wants, needs, to know. Karney scrubs a hand over his face, exhaustion once more in his movements as he begins to give Josiah his report.

"I'm not going to lie to you; it was touch and go for a while. The drug he was injected with mixed with the trauma and blood loss did a number on his system. The cuts he suffered on his back were

deep and will take time to heal, and even with our technology he's going to have scars. Overall he's stable for the time being and our main concern is the possibility of infection. We cleaned the wounds and gave him a full round of antibiotics, but there's always the possibility that something latched onto his system before he got here. He's going to need a lot of help over the next few weeks, and I would prefer it if he wasn't left alone. If he needs a place to stay I know people who work at Sanctuary and a few private facilities."

"He's mine." Josiah snaps the words out, unable to hold them back when this man, this stranger, is talking about sending Rafe away.

"What Marx here means is that Zweil is officially under his protection and that's not liable to change any time soon. He'll have a place to stay and all the hands on care he could ever need, I imagine." Eagan speaks up for the first time, an almost amused expression on his face as he works to smooth things over.

There's a knowing look in Karney's eyes at that, and he seems to soften even further towards Josiah as he nods in agreement.

"I'm sure you'd like to see him now. I'll only allow one of you in at a time and only on the condition that you do not upset him. He's still weak and he'll be in pain for a while, but it's probably best that he receives the reassurances I'm sure he needs."

Karney motions for them to follow him and personally leads them down the hall to the private room where Rafe is. No one else makes a move to enter the room, all of them knowing that it's not their place and that Josiah would never allow it anyways. He intends on being the first person Rafe sees when he opens his eyes.

His breath catches in his throat when he walks through the door and lays eyes on Rafe's still form. He's lying face down on his stomach, his back a mass of bandages, and the sight of him simultaneously makes Josiah relax and breaks his heart. He wasn't able to spare Rafe this, wasn't able to protect him properly like he'd promised him he would and that knowledge, that guilt is already beginning to eat at him.

Josiah makes his way to Rafe's bedside, careful to keep his footsteps light, and stares down at him. Even like this, even beaten and asleep, Rafe's beautiful to him. He has to fight the dual urges to drape himself growling over Rafe's prone form to keep anyone else from touching him and the urge to turn around and hunt Frisch down and kill him with his bare hands.

He has a feeling that those will be two urges he'll be fighting with for a long time to come.

He reaches out and strokes a careful hand through Rafe's hair, fingers careful not to get caught in any tangles. He's caught off guard when Rafe's eyes flicker open, pained green focusing on him with surprising clarity.

"Josiah." Rafe whispers his name, and Josiah musters up a smile for the injured man.

"Hey, Rafe."

"I'm sorry." Rafe's eyes flutter shut and Josiah's surprised to see a lone tear work its way from the corner of his eye.

"What for?"

"I-I wasn't strong enough. I, they took me and I couldn't stop them. You told me to keep myself safe and I couldn't do it." Rafe's crying silently then, tears dripping down his face one after the other.

Josiah wipes them away with his free hand and continues stroking his fingers through Rafe's limp hair. "No, Rafe, I'm sorry. You were perfect. You killed one of those bastards, and you fought them every step of the way. I'm the one who wasn't there when you needed me. Wasn't where I should have been."

Rafe raises a hand from the mattress and Josiah's quick to gather his clammy fingers in a loose grip, to press his lips to the bruised skin of Rafe's knuckles.

"You came for me. You got me out, Josiah. No one, no one's ever done that before, no one but you. No one's ever took my well-being into consideration before."

Josiah stops, his mind ringing with Rafe's words while the earlier whispered conversation he'd had with Marcel springs to the forefront of his mind.

"Rafe...there's something you need to know."

"W-What is it? Is it Frisch?" Rafe's eyes are wide and Josiah curses himself for scaring him by being cryptic.

"No, no he's gone. He's locked up and you'll never have to worry about him again. That's what I wanted to tell you. You're free now, well and truly free. Frisch and Jean Zweil are currently in custody and they'll never be able to get near you again. It's over, Rafe."

Rafe stares at him uncomprehending as he slowly registers Josiah's words.

"Over? The contract? It's gone, dissolved?" "Beyond dissolved, Rafe. Marcel had every record of it sealed for your protection. Your family will be choosing a new Head of House soon, and you'll never have to worry about being a bargaining chip again. You'll be able to form a contract with whoever you choose or you can continue your life in Zweil House."

Rafe's face clouds over in confusion and hurt as he stares up at Josiah.

"I thought, I mean, we had agreed...I thought there was to be a contract between us? Do you not want that, want me, anymore?"

Josiah takes a deep breath and puts it all on the line.

"I don't want a contract with you, Rafe. No, wait, let me finish. Seeing you there, not being able to get to you through that wall, it almost broke me. I've wanted you since the day I saw you, wanted to own you, possess you, in all ways that I could. That's not changed."

"Josiah, what're you saying?" Rafe's voice wavers, hope building in his eyes.

Josiah lowers his forehead until it presses softly against the side of Rafe's head, until he can whisper, breathless and rushed, into the shell of Rafe's ear.

"Bond with me, Rafe. Bond with me and make sure that nothing will ever come between us again. Help me build a House of our own. Become a Marx and make a family with me. Please?"

Rafe sobs, an open sound laced with laughter and relief, and Josiah feels tears rising in the corners of his own eyes.

"You've got one hell of a sense of timing, Josiah. I'm looking forward to being surprised by it for the rest of our lives."

"Do you mean it?"

Rafe raises his head as far as he can up off of the pillow and catches Josiah's mouth in a sweet kiss. When he pulls back they're both smiling, Rafe a small secretive curl of his lips and Josiah an actual full-blown grin.

"I've been a Zweil for far too long, Josiah, and Rafe Marx has a bit of a ring to it."

Josiah reaches out and traces a finger lightly over the back of Rafe's neck, fingertips seeking out the silver of his collar.

"Not yet it doesn't, but it will. As soon as you're out of here, as soon as you're better, I'm going to sear my crest into this collar and nothing will ever come between us again."

"I'm looking forward to it."

Josiah's the one who captures Rafe's mouth in a kiss then, chaste and sweet, a promise for all of the years to come that they will spend together. After everything, after all that has ever happened in

his life, Josiah has finally found someone, finally found that one person that he can make a home in and with.

He intends to never let him go. The End

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