

They look at me, gazes unflinching. Determination is the only thing in their eyes. Boxes crack and seep under the influence of a specific one.

They know.

They know the monster that I am, and they don't approve of me and Alex. They will demand that I end this to their adoptive son can have a happy—

I chain that box again, and my paranoia eases. Whatever they know, think they know, and want will be irrelevant to what I and Alex do.

"I think," Franklin says, "that it's time we established some ground rules."

"Franklin," Gabrielle whispers, reproach in the tone, "there's no need to be harsh about it." She places a hand on his. "What he means to say is that it's clear you and Alex are serious. That ring, if nothing else."

"And there is plenty more," Franklin adds.

"What I feel for him is real."

"I know," she replies without hesitation, and I'm surprised. She's playing me, pops into my head before I have time to tighten the chains. "But is that enough?"

How can it not be enough when it's become everything?

"Look," Franklin says, his tone bordering on understanding. "I know you aren't entirely the upstanding citizen you claim to be." He raises a hand to stop a protestation I'm not about to make. "If you were, Alex would have dropped you ages ago. Those guys never lasted because they couldn't give him what he craved."

And do they know what Alex truly craves? The promise that binds him to me?

"It's clear that you do," Gabrielle takes up. "But our concern is that you'll take advantage of the power over him that gives you. We've seen upfront what that kind of hold over someone can do to the person holding that power, even if they start well intentioned."

And you know those are not the kind of intentions I have. Of the two, she will have worked out that much. Franklin is willing to confront reality, but is able to hope he is wrong, and proceed as such. She takes it upfront without illusion and still maintains optimism.

Can I play them? Individually, I can tell them the story they want to hear, each one different enough they will be fully comforted, but close enough that if they compare notes, which they would, the differences could be accounted by misunderstanding a statement. Making an unintended assumption of something I implied. With both of them here, that becomes more difficult. They are both looking for reassurances. But not exactly about the same things.

More importantly, as I impose my will on my paranoia, I find myself questioning if I want to play them. They are important to Alex. Only a step below me, and I am uncertain if they are above Emil in his eyes or not still. It hasn't been so long that they should have fallen below, but Alex is impetuous. Quick to give when he cares. And I know he cares about Emil. Anything I do here with them, will affect Alex in some way.

My fear, I discover, is that what I say here will disappoint him.

"What are you looking from me?"

The directness surprises Franklin, but Gabrielle smiles, as if I confirmed something she suspected.

"Your word," Franklin states. "That you'll never hurt him."

"Your promise," she says, squeezing his hand. "That no matter how tempting it might

be, you will handle the power you have over him with care.” He isn’t happy she usurped the promise he tried to pull from me. A promise she knows I’ll never give. To promise that would be to take from Alex something he needs. She understands it in a way he doesn’t, although I suspect she doesn’t understand how deep it runs. How far Alex hopes it will one day go.

“I am always careful with how I handle him.”

She isn’t pleased. Like Franklin, she wants something she believe will bind my actions. Will force me to fall within a group of men she considers acceptable for Alex. Unlike them, I am not a man of my word. I can convince them I mean it, then break my promise the instant I am alone with Alex.

Only...

“I only give him what he asks for.” I want them to understand, even a little, what we have. They are Alex’s family. It would be...comforting, if they could accept even a small part of who I am. As unrealistic as that hope is.

I hesitate to crush that box into silence. That is one that rarely has a voice, since my father ensured I never had it. Maintaining that lack of hope has been a core way I have survived. It should be easy to silence it.

“I am... not a good man,” I state, using Alex’s descriptive for himself. Monster will be too much, even for them. “So I can’t make a promise that all I’ll ever bring him is happiness, Franklin. That isn’t who I am. It isn’t who he wants me to be.” His anger is controlled. I am confirming things he has suspected, but wished against. “I...want him to be happy.” Protests aplenty. I do not want anything. Cannot want. Wanting leads to having something that can be used against me. Another lesson my father taught me. “But happy under his parameters. And those do not match what you want for him.”

The nod is brusque. An acknowledgement, more than agreement, but he doesn’t give into his anger. Like me, he is controlled. He has to be. His job required that he protect a man who sold his son to a pimp for the crime of wantonly loving men. A boy he took in, healed as best as he could, nurtured into someone capable of passing for normal. Considering how I feel about Alex, I am uncertain what I would do if I found myself face to face with the man who had damaged him is so deep a way.

“Do you want that for the long term?” Gabrielle asks. She knows how quickly the heat of power can grow cold. What people who’ve experienced it can do to find it again.

“I want it for as long as Alex will let me have it.” The choice of words is deliberate, but not a lie. An allowance for the wrong conclusion of an unsaid implication. With the promise between us, Alex will never push me away, not without a concerted effort on my part, and I am unsure if he would, even then. And she might know that much. Unlike Franklin, she is better at masking what she feels.

“I want a home,” I say, ignoring the protesting box. “Alex has drawn that out of me. I no longer want to be alone.” So long as it is him and Emile. The rest of the world can burn. Alex would mourn them, but I... want him to be as happy as I can make him, and that will have to include them. Or at least their continued existence. Which means the world can’t be allowed to burn anymore.

Wanting is so problematic.

That statement softens Franklin’s expression.

“Then how about this?” Franklin says in a sharper tone than his expression suggests. “We won’t question how you live with him. And that will go to the point of not asking about those injuries he’s sporting each time you’ve visited recently. But the day he comes to us because of how you treat him... I don’t care what you think you’re able to do, or withstand. I will crush you. Is that clear?”

I nod. Returning the acknowledgment he gave me earlier without agreement. He is justified in his desire to protect Alex, but for as skilled as he is, I am two decades younger than he is. And as rigorous as his training was. He is still human, while I am a monster. If it comes to it, I don’t know how much my caring for Alex will allow me to hold back when removing his threat from our lives.

But my feelings for him mean I will not act proactively on the threat Franklin might be. He will be safe so long as he doesn’t act. Then...

Then we will see.

“I’m not hearing explosions,” Alex says from within the kitchen, door partially opened. The jest barely covers the trembling in his voice. He knows me and his grandparents. Knows how volatile this conversation was.

Gabrielle’s laughter is light. “It wasn’t that kind of talk, Alex. We were just asking him about his plans once your house was rebuilt.”

Alex’s head pokes in, and he looks at me.

She has placed a conundrum on me, and her expression as she looks at me makes it clear it isn’t accidental. I can lie to Alex, or claim she is lying.

The smile I return to her is devoid of friendliness. Or break the implied rules. “They were concerned for the quality of the life I could give you, since I’m no longer plan on doing security work full time.”

“Like money’s ever going to be a problem for us.” He moves his chair close to mine and sits, leaning against me. I place an arm over his shoulders possessively. She smiles, amused, as Emil hands her a cup. Alex and Franklin get coffee and I get a glass of water, and the rest of the conversation is without pitfalls or landmines.

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“I can help,” Emil says as we reach the car. “I’m not some useless kid that’ll just get in the way.”

“I know. But you need some normalcy.”

“And think of everything Gramps can teach you in the meantime,” Alex says. “When you move back in with us, you’ll be able to kick both our asses.”

“Yours,” I correct. No matter what Franklin teaches Emil, it will be a long time before he can beat me.

“Do I look like I give a damn about normal?” he asked indignantly. “I want to be with you.”

“And you’ll be again soon,” Alex says. “I promise. But it’s better if you’re safe with them right now.”

Emil looks at me.

“You know I put your safety before anything else, Emil. That has always driven what I did. It drives this too. I want you to be safe. This is the best place that happens. As soon as we are done, you will return with us. You have my word.”

The look he gives me is a reminder that he knows how much those are worth from me. But he and Alex are the two people I intend to keep my promises to.

“Fine,” he relents. “But if you two aren’t here within minutes of bringing that human trafficking ring down, I will kick both your asses.”

“Try to,” I correct and he gives me a defiant look that has his box shimmering, and me smiling. He kicks stones as he returns to the house, where Gabrielle and Franklin are waiting.

“What did they really want to talk about?” Alex asks once we are in the car.

“They wanted to make sure I knew where they stood when it came to your happiness.” I look at him as he rolls his eyes in the light of the dashboard. Before he gives his opinion on that, I lean in and kiss him gently.

He raises an eyebrow as I pull away and start the Corolla.

“That was unexpected.”

“The conversation made me realize how angry I am.”

“And that led to kissing me. Okay, not that surprising, but still.”

I smile as his boxes lights up comfortingly. “I knew I wanted there to be an us, with a home and contentment. But with as out-of-sorts as the destruction of the garage made me, I never thought about what it meant. You, Emil, a home.”

“We’ll have that as soon as we’re done with this.”

“I don’t want to wait that long,” I growl, driving to the gate. “I want them gone now, so we can move on to building the garage your grandparents believe we are having rebuilt. So we can have a home again.” He squeezes my leg and his box’s glow brightens, calms other boxes, and me.

“We’ll get there. I promise.”

I nod and hope. Unlike me, Alex means his promises nearly all the time. But he’s promising against the world, and the world has a habit of breaking those.

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