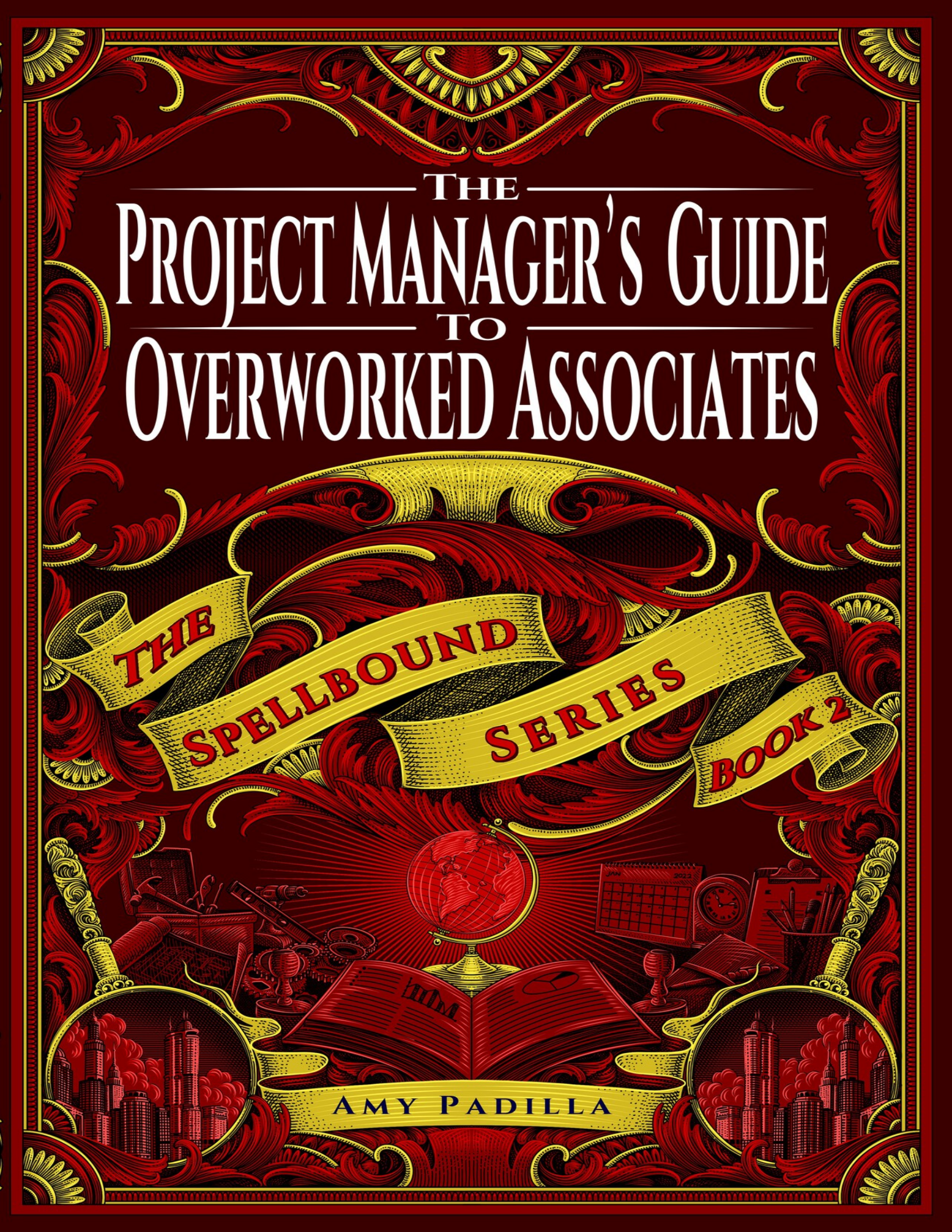

THE
PROJECT MANAGER'S GUIDE
TO
OVERWORKED ASSOCIATES
THE SPELLBOUND SERIES
BOOK 2
AMY PADILLA

THE PROJECT MANAGER'S GUIDE TO OVERWORKED ASSOCIATES

SPELLBOUND SERIES

BOOK 2

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Did you find a typo?
Also by Amy Padilla
About the Author

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This book contains sexually explicit material which is suitable only for mature readers.

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CHAPTER ONE

LOUIS

Do you know the statistics of a human actually making it as an innovations engineer in a company like Spellbound? One in one hundred thousand. One hundred thousand supe applicants would be chosen over him. So when Louis got his place in Spellbound's magical innovations research team, he knew it had something to do with luck. He was determined to prove it was more than that. He wasn't just lucky. He earned his place, damn it.

It'd be a lot easier to do if he wasn't constantly interrupted.

"Louis!" Taron called from across the research floor.

Louis ignored him, focusing on the project he was working on. This was his third attempt at getting this device to stabilize and he could screw everything up if the lines got crossed somewhere. He bent to the task, shoving his safety glasses up his nose as he concentrated, and didn't flinch when Taron spoke beside him.

"Louis! I have something I want to run by you."

He grunted, but ignored the shapeshifter. He'd been polite his first week, he didn't want to piss off the company president, but it took no time at all to realize that Taron wasn't easily riled and was more of a menace than an actual boss.

"Louissss!" Taron whined.

Was it possible to shorten the wiring for the sensor a little? He didn't want it to overheat by being too compact, but the excess wiring would get

annoying to deal with. He made a note on the pad resting on the table beside the device before giving his attention back to the wires.

“I’m just going to talk to you since you’re probably capable of listening while working.”

He made a non committal sound. He was only half listening, but the shapeshifter didn’t need to know that.

“Jonah and I have come up with this pilot program– Have you met Jonah? He’s my son—I just adopted him recently actually. He’s human, had kind of a crappy upbringing, but he’s great. You should meet him…”

Louis tuned him out, narrowing his eyes when he noticed the soldering was getting too close to the sensor. He needed a smaller iron tip than the one he was using, but he wasn’t sure where his had run off too. Did he bring it home? He had projects he was working on at home, but he didn’t remember needing the soldering iron for them recently. When was the last time he saw it?

“...So what do you think?”

“Hmm?”

“About the pilot program? You said in your interview you had to take a portal to get here, didn’t you? This would make your commute easier at the very least, and I kind of like the idea of a researcher being part of the program. You know how important trials are for this kind of thing.”

Blinking, he finally looked up from his work to frown at Taron. “What?”

“It’s ten blocks away,” Taron shrugged. “I used to walk to work every morning when I lived there.”

“What’s ten blocks away?” he asked, confused. Maybe he should’ve been listening better. Was it his fault Taron always seemed to interrupt him mid thought?

“The residential pilot program! Louis, were you even listening to me?”

The… what?

Setting down the soldering iron, he scrubbed his hands roughly over his face. He’d lost track of how long he’d been working, but it was possible he was too tired to focus on more than one thing. He’d rather focus on his work if he had to choose, but from the scowl on Taron’s face, he didn’t think he could afford to do that right now. While Taron had visited often since he started working at Spellbound and seemed like a friendly guy, Louis didn’t want to piss off someone who could fire him without cause and

get away with it. He'd worked his ass off for this position. He'd play nice with the company president if he had to.

"I missed part of it," he admitted. "What's the…" he trailed off, forgetting again what they were talking about.

"The residential pilot program," Taron repeated. "I've been thinking about offering company housing for those who need it and I'm running a test to see how it might work. You said during your interview that you had to portal to get here. I was wondering if you wanted to be part of it since the condo is only ten blocks from here, which would help with your commute."

That got his attention. Louis's current housing situation was… complicated. He spent most of his life in school, getting his doctorate in engineering to make himself as competitive in the field as he could. He was drowning in student loans and it took a while for him to find a job after he graduated. He'd been living in his best friend's basement since he graduated, and his wife was getting pissed that Louis was still there two years later. It'd taken that long to find a job, and while Terrence was always happy to let him stay, his wife was another issue entirely. He'd gotten the feeling lately that he was overstaying his welcome and considered seriously spending what little money he had on a car so he could at least have somewhere to live that wasn't on the streets.

That would make things complicated since he had a few projects he'd been working on at home that were too delicate to work on inside a car. Not to mention the potential fire hazard.

"What does it cost?"

Taron lit up, pleased that he finally had Louis's full attention. "Nothing. Right now, it's a pilot program which means we'll be working out the kinks of how it'll all work. Everyone living in the condo will basically be guinea pigs for the program, so charging rent felt wrong. No rent, no utilities, just frequent check-ins on how the program is going, if it's helpful, probably a few surveys on what you'd think would be a comfortable price for rent for future residents, that kind of thing. It's still in its infancy, I'm sure there's a lot I haven't considered yet, but after Jonah's situation, I thought it was better to get the program off the ground sooner just in case people needed a place to stay, you know?"

No. He didn't know. He wasn't sure who Jonah was or what Taron was talking about. But it didn't really matter. He was offering Louis a free place to stay within walking distance of work and only asked if he'd participate in

surveys and check-ins on how the program is working in exchange. Only an idiot would turn that down.

“When does it start?”

“Should only be a couple of weeks,” Taron replied, practically bouncing now. “We just need to finish some maintenance on a few of the rooms. So you’ll be part of the program then?”

He nodded. “Yes. Send me the details. I’ll fill out whatever paperwork you need when I’m done with this.”

Taron narrowed his eyes, his face becoming serious as he took in Louis’s appearance. “How about I fill out the paperwork for you, and you go home and get some rest. You look like you could use a nap, Louis.”

Louis waved that off. He felt fine. And he was in the middle of something.

“I’m almost done. I need to get back to this. Send me an email with the move in day. I’ll be there.”

And hopefully Terrance’s wife would stop nagging the poor man now that he had a timeframe of when he was moving. He didn’t love making his friend’s life more difficult. Especially since Terrance was the only one who stood by him all these years while the rest of his friends and family told him he was wasting his time and needed to be more realistic. He was being realistic. And he’d prove it eventually. Once one of his products was out on the market, they’d stop hounding him to find something real.

“Louis Dubois, you'd better have a good excuse for changing your mind about the tenancy!” Taron demanded.

Louis blinked, trying to clear the fog from his mind. He’d been working on his project when someone pulled his attention away. He saw Dax, a fellow researcher, and Taron, but he didn’t understand what was going on. He hadn’t been working on any projects with Dax… had he?

“What tenancy?” Dax asked Taron. Louis tried to follow the conversation, but he felt like he’d lost the thread somewhere. What were they talking about?

“He signed up for the Residential Pilot Program and then didn’t show up on move-in day! We can’t get a decent idea of how the program works if

people don’t show up, Louis!”

Louis’s brows furrowed tightly in confusion. “That’s not until next week.”

At least, that’s what he’d thought. From the way Taron started squawking, he felt like maybe he’d been wrong. He was pretty sure it wasn’t move-in day yet. Terrance’s wife had a countdown calendar in the kitchen with big red slashes to mark each passing day. He thought when he last looked that it had at least a few days left on it…

“Louis, do you know what day it is?” Dax asked, pulling Louis’s attention again. He looked up at the kraken with a frown. When did he get here?

“Dax?” He felt something tighten around his waist and looked down dumbly, confused why Dax had a tentacle around his waist. “What’s going on? We don’t have a project together, do we?”

Thus far, he’d been able to avoid working with other researchers. He preferred to work alone. Unless his boss assigned him to work on a project and he missed the memo?

His eyes felt heavy, and he wondered if he’d forgotten to grab some coffee before he started working. He scanned his workstation for his mug, losing track of the conversation again. Maybe a coffee and some cold water on his face would wake his brain up enough to get back to work.

“What was he doing when you found him?” Taron asked. Louis frowned. Who was he talking about?

“Falling asleep on his project,” Dax chuckled. His tentacle tightening around Louis’s waist, pulling him away from the table when he reached to find his mug, let Louis know they were talking about him.

“I wasn’t falling asleep,” he mumbled. He’d slept recently. He couldn’t remember when exactly, but he knew it wasn’t that long ago. It felt like he’d only just started working when Dax showed up.

“Uh huh. I think it’s time for you to go home and get some rest,” Dax said.

“No, I’m fine,” he protested, trying to push the tentacle away. It didn’t budge. Were all kraken this strong? What kind of muscle density did tentacles have? Did he need to calibrate that specifically into the sensor?

Without his say-so, his screwdriver was pulled from his hand. His eyes flew open from where they’d slipped shut for just a moment. What was happening?

“Time to go, Louis,” Taron said, taking his arm and pulling him out of his seat. “You’re lucky there’s already a bed waiting for you at the condo. You need a nap.”

“What? No! I’m not done yet! I only have a little left!”

He tried pushing Taron away, but several more hands grabbed him and he was manhandled through a portal before he could wrap his head around what was happening. Then his head hit something soft, a blanket was draped over him, and he lost his battle with sleep.

Maybe a little nap wouldn’t hurt.

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CHAPTER TWO

ARTHUR

“Thank you everyone. We’ll meet back here next week.”

Pushing to his feet, Arthur gave the researchers a kind smile. They’d been working hard on their most recent project and all signs pointed to it being completed on time. They deserved to feel good about themselves for that and he’d always been more of a praise first manager than a critical one.

“Mr. Holloway?” a melodic, shy voice murmured.

Arthur turned to face the speaker, nodding in greeting to the familiar face. “Knox?”

The siren, who’d only recently joined Arthur’s team for their newest project, lit up, a big smile overtaking his face. “Oh, um… I–”

He blushed and ducked his head, still unused to people referring to him by his chosen name. Not many sirens were male at birth, but Knox wasn’t the first to transition once he reached a certain age. Thankfully, sirens as a whole were quite supportive of their family members in transition and Knox’s shyness was just because he was still in the beginning stages of his journey and not that he wasn’t accepted elsewhere. Arthur had checked when he’d first been asked to have a meeting with SR to share the news where Knox felt comfortable. He didn’t want any of his researchers struggling if he had something to say about it.

“Did you need something?” Arthur asked, giving the sweet man a moment to adjust.

“Y-yes, um, I was wondering if I could take some time off a few afternoons a week? There’s a project that’s being worked on in Dimensions that I want to volunteer for.”

Gesturing to the chair nearest him, Arthur sat back down at the conference table, giving the man his full attention. “Can I ask what kind of project? Will you need rest between sessions? Is it better for you to take a sabbatical? You know you’re allowed to request that if necessary, right?”

Knox blinked rapidly for a moment, taking in the rapid fire questions, and Arthur silently berated himself. He could be a little overbearing when it came to the health and safety of his team. It was why he didn’t date often. That kind of behavior had chased away past lovers, who told him he was too controlling and needed to get a grip. He tried his best not to treat his researchers the same way, but most of them had been working with him long enough that they knew he only wanted to ensure they were happy.

“Apologies. I don’t mean to pry. You’re not required to tell me the details if you don’t want to,” he reassured the smaller man.

Knox’s smile came back and he shook his head, his voice upbeat and not at all offended. “It’s fine. I’m happy to share. It’s a voice transition project specifically for sirens. During transitions, other species’ voices change naturally. Sirens' voices don’t change without specific magic and it's exhausting to do all the time. Dimensions is trying to figure out how to let the voice change naturally by changing the spell. I’ve got the information packet at my desk if you want to see it. Right now, they’re just doing baseline testing and seeing if they can pinpoint where the magic does most of the heavy lifting, but it could mean great things for people like me if they get enough volunteers.” He bounced a little in his seat, excited now. “The main researcher, Sasha, transitioned herself. Most of her research has been helping other people do the same.”

Pursing his lips, Arthur nodded thoughtfully. “It sounds like a good project for you to participate in. That shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll send SR an email about it so they know where you are. But if they begin actual testing and you find yourself more tired or strained than usual, you tell me immediately. Your health is more important than your work. Understand?”

Knox blushed again, beaming and nodding, and when they stood again, he stumbled forward and hugged Arthur so quickly, Arthur had no time to respond. “Thank you! The project starts on Monday, so I’ll leave early on that day and tell you what my schedule will be like after the first meeting!”

He was gone before Arthur could blink, practically skipping out of the room with a bright smile on his face. Arthur chuckled to himself, shaking his head a little. He was glad to see Knox smiling again. Before he was brave enough to share his journey, he'd become quiet and isolated. Arthur had worried for him. He was glad the little siren was coming back to himself.

Gathering the papers from the meeting, Arthur returned to his office, pausing outside his door when he heard a ruckus on the research floor. His eyes narrowed as he took in the researcher who had his hands in his hair, his shoulders slumped as whatever he was working on died with a forlorn beep.

Unfortunately, that expression was all too common among the researchers. They put heart and soul into their work and when it didn't work out the way they'd intended, they were often distraught over it. He made a mental note to check in with the man's supervisor. He'd found that a little support went a long way during this stage of experimentation. A few words of encouragement from his project manager might make him feel a little better.

He noticed the man again when he returned from lunch, a deep frown on his face while he scribbled notes and peered intently at the screen of his computer, his project connected to the workstation with some wires, likely to find the cause of the failure. Arthur looked down at his watch. He'd gone to lunch late because he had a meeting with the higher ups. It didn't look like the researcher had moved more than a few feet in the time since Arthur had last seen him that morning. Had the man eaten?

Backtracking to the front desk, he waited for Zeraphine to finish her phone call before getting her attention. "Zeraphine, a moment, please."

"Mr. Holloway! How can I help you?" she asked cheerfully.

Tipping his head toward the researcher who kept rubbing his eyes, he asked, "Do you know who his project manager is?"

Following his gaze, he noticed her nose wrinkle as she realized who he was talking about. "Who, Louis? He's one of Mr. Yarrow's researchers." She leaned closer conspiratorially. "Between you and me, I'm a little worried about him. He's worked through the weekends before and Taron has needed to get someone to escort him home to get him to sleep. I mentioned it to Mr. Yarrow and he said he'd look into it, but I don't think anything has changed."

Arthur studied the man who reached absentmindedly to grab his coffee cup, bringing it to his lips, then frowned and looked down when he realized it was empty. Instead of getting himself more, he set it aside and rubbed his hands over his face again, forcing his eyes open so he could focus. That behavior was… concerning.

“I’ll speak with him. Thank you, Zeraphine.”

He stopped in his office long enough to drop off his briefcase before going to find Basil. As a fellow project manager, Basil Yarrow’s office was only a few doors down from his, and he happened to catch the yeti just after he’d finished up speaking with someone else. He knocked politely as the goblin sidestepped him, giving him a friendly smile as he went back to his work, and waited for Basil to invite him before coming inside.

“Arthur. How’s it going?”

“It’s going well. I came to talk to you about one of your researchers.”

“Oh?” Basil gestured to the chair across his desk, his mouse already moving as he pulled up his roster. Not every project manager remembered each of their researchers by name, especially since they worked on multiple projects at a time. Arthur could grumble about it, researchers deserved to be seen, but he didn’t want to come off as judgemental off the bat.

“Zeraphine said his name was Louis?”

The yeti’s large brows drew together as he clicked around on the screen. When he pulled up the file on the man, he cocked his head with a frown. “Louis Dubois? What about him? He’s not had any complaints as far as I’m aware.”

Shaking his head, Arthur explained, “It’s not a complaint. I’m concerned about him. He looks exhausted and I’m pretty sure he skipped lunch. It might be worth having a conversation with him at the very least. I noticed his project went through a mishap earlier today and he seems to be taking it badly.”

Basil snorted, looking amused. “Ah, no. He always looks like that. He’s a perfectionist, that one, and isn’t satisfied unless the project works exactly like he wants it to. The project he’s working on is one of Spellbound’s, not for a client, so he’s not on a time crunch, but he’s the kind of guy who likes to work until it's done. It’s fine.”

Arthur felt the muscles in his jaw flex as he bit back an argument. It clearly wasn’t fine if Louis looked so exhausted. If he was the type of

researcher to work until he collapsed then he needed supervision, not free rein.

“Do you think you could check on him anyway? At least encourage him to eat. The process will only take longer if he’s not taking care of himself.”

The yeti’s eyes narrowed and he raised an eyebrow at Arthur. “I’m a project manager, not his babysitter. He’s a grown man and can get food when he’s hungry. Unless I see signs that his lifestyle is affecting his work, I’m not going to interject myself into his business. He hasn’t complained to me about the workload. I assume if he has a problem with it, he will. If you’ll excuse me, I need to meet with a few of my researchers. They’re supposed to be giving me an update right now.”

He stood, effectively dismissing Arthur despite the conversation having gone nowhere. It irritated him, but there was nothing he could do about it. Technically, if an associate didn’t complain and there was nothing wrong with his work, there was no reason for leadership to intervene. Just because Arthur felt his researchers’ wellbeings were paramount didn’t mean everyone else did.

Grumbling out something resembling a professional good bye, he stormed out of the room, eyes immediately scanning for the researcher from before. He was still at his desk, coffee cup still empty by his elbow, his face so close to the screen, it had to be straining his eyes. He kept blinking and squeezing his eyes shut like he was trying to get them to focus and couldn’t quite pull it off. Who could look at that and think the man was fine?

Arthur couldn’t help keeping an eye on the man over the next week. The more he saw, the more concerned he became. For several days in a row, when Arthur arrived first thing in the morning, the researcher was already there, tinkering with his device or attempting not to nod off. And was it his imagination or was the man wearing that same outfit the day before?

He ended up with a late meeting on Friday and went straight home instead of going back to his office, so he didn’t have a chance to check on the man before the weekend rolled around. He was going to talk to him the following Monday, figuring if Basil wouldn’t check in with the man, he would just to make sure everything was okay. He didn’t make it to Monday, though, before having to make an introduction. He realized he’d forgotten his phone on his desk after he arrived home on Friday and decided to go back for it the following morning. He expected the office to be closed, the only people around being the security guards who let him past the turnstiles

when he explained what he needed. So when he found the same researcher asleep at his workstation on a Saturday morning, he stopped in the doorway, incredulous. *He was still here?*

No. Absolutely not. He couldn't just let this stand. The man was going to exhaust himself to the point of illness if someone didn't step in.

He gently shook the man's shoulder, jerking his hand back when Louis sat up with a start and shouted something that sounded a lot like, "I wasn't sleeping" in half garbled words. He frowned, looking around, and when he noticed Arthur standing over him, he tipped his head back and nearly fell out of his chair trying to look up at him. Arthur tsked, grabbing the man's arm and moving it over his shoulder so he could pull him to his feet.

"Who…?" the man slurred, so deliriously exhausted, he couldn't form full sentences.

"I'm Arthur."

"Arthur…" the man frowned, his eyes so heavily lidded, it was a surprise he could even keep himself upright enough to walk forward.

"Yes, Arthur. The man who's bringing you home."

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CHAPTER THREE

LOUIS

Louis almost always dreamed of his work. It was the last thing on his mind before he inevitably succumbed to sleep, so it made sense. He often figured out solutions for problems he'd been working on in his sleep, and when that happened, he'd bully his brain back awake so he could fix the issue promptly before he forgot what his dream self conjured up as a solution. It wasn't a pleasant way to wake up, sitting upright in a rush, but if he didn't move fast enough, there was a chance he'd forget the dream entirely.

Jerking upright, he reached for his screwdriver, only to pause when he realized he wasn't in the office anymore. He looked around in confusion, frowning at the dark room. How the hell had he ended up at home? He hadn't intended to go back to the condo until he figured out the solution to his problem.

…Did he fix it already?

"You haven't gotten enough rest yet," a velvety and entirely unfamiliar voice growled. "Go back to sleep."

Confused and a little unnerved, he tossed the blankets off his legs, intending to stand, only for a large body to lean over him and jerk the blankets back. Not roughly, more like with stubborn intention. Louis stared up at the shadow in bewilderment.

"Who–"

“I’m not surprised you don’t remember,” the smooth voice commented, like there wasn’t a stranger currently in Louis’s room demanding he stay in bed. Was he in danger? No, that couldn’t possibly be it. There were wards on the building and attached to each apartment. The building would literally expel someone who meant harm to an occupant. If the wards didn’t kick this guy out, he obviously meant Louis no harm. Which begged the question then, what was happening right now?

“Remember what?” he croaked, trying again to tug the blankets off his legs and failing when the man physically moved him back to the middle of the bed and tugged the blankets up to his chin. His eyes widened in shock, even though he couldn’t see a damned thing in the dark like this. “Who are you?”

With a sigh, the shadow moved enough to turn on the bedside lamp. Louis flinched, having not been expecting it, and waited a long moment before peeking his eyes open. When he opened his eyes, he took in the man standing beside his bed. He wasn’t anyone Louis was familiar with. At least… he didn’t think so. He would’ve remembered meeting the man, wouldn’t he?

He looked to be well over six feet, with a muscular build and wide shoulders. He had a square jaw covered in a well-trimmed beard, honey blonde hair in a designer undercut, pushed back to show off serious amber eyes. His clothes were probably expensive and tailored to fit as well as they did, the henley practically molded to the muscles of his arms. Louis stared at the man for a long moment, trying to figure out if he knew him and if so, from where. The longer he tried, the more confused he felt.

“Do I… know you?”

Huffing a small laugh that seemed to be more exasperation than true humor, the man replied, “You do and you don’t. My name is Arthur Holloway. I’m a project manager at Spellbound. I introduced myself to you when I found you asleep at your workstation when I went into the office a few hours ago. You were so exhausted, you could barely walk on your own. Which is how I know you’re in no way done resting. You barely managed two hours of sleep since I brought you back here, and given that none of your roommates could say how long it was since you’d last come home, I’m betting it’s been a while since you got a decent night’s sleep. Aside from food if you’re hungry, I see no reason for you to need to get up right now. Get some rest.”

Louis felt a little like he'd been smacked upside the head. He stared at the man, too stunned to think properly. "Did you… kidnap me from the office?" he finally asked incredulously.

Arthur raised one eyebrow that held a wealth of superiority to it. Louis wasn't sure how he knew it, he just did. This was not a man who lacked dominance and wouldn't be pushed around easily. "Do you consider someone helping you get home so you can rest kidnapping?"

"I do when I didn't ask for any help," he countered with a frown. "I don't need more rest. I need to get back to the office. I've figured out a way to get the sensor to adjust per species without needing input from the user and–"

"You're not going back to the office today."

Once again, Louis was speechless. He gaped up at the man. "Excuse me?"

Arthur's expression didn't soften an inch or even waver. "It's Saturday. You should be relaxing and taking the time you need for rest and recovery after a long week. I spoke with Taron and I know you work overtime more often than you come home. Your body and your mind need rest. There's nothing so important at the office that you can't give yourself that time."

"There is too!" Louis insisted, tossing the blankets away again and scooting to the end of the bed. "I need to change the algorithm to include– What are you doing? Let go!"

Apparently, Arthur wasn't the type to back down. He blocked Louis from getting up and when Louis shoved his hand away and tried to stand, the man literally yanked him off his feet and forced him back into bed.

Louis tried to struggle, he really did, but the man wasn't entirely incorrect. It had been a while since he'd gotten enough sleep. His body was sluggish and weak, and he was probably due for a proper meal. All that meant when push came to shove, he was no match for the larger man who actually sat on the bed next to him with one big hand on his chest, keeping him from getting up again with barely a flex of his arm.

"This is unnecessary…" Louis grumbled.

"Mhmm. Go back to sleep."

"I'm not tired," he shot back just as Arthur leaned and clicked off the bedside lamp again. "At least give me a notebook and let me write it down."

“Tell me your solution,” Arthur countered. “I’ll email it to you so that you can look it over on Monday. *After* you’ve gotten some rest.”

Louis flailed a little, trying once again to escape the belligerent man, to no avail. “How would you even understand what I’m saying? You’re not an engineer, are you?”

He’d been hoping that at least logic would earn him his freedom, but Arthur didn’t move a single inch. “I’m a project manager, Louis. Try me.”

And because he was exhausted, his energy depleted and he had no choice but to listen. He grumbled out his thought process, making it intentionally complicated in hopes that the stubborn man would let him write it down himself, but when he didn’t, he let his head flop on the pillows with a frustrated growl. He couldn’t even report this—not without risking his position. Not when he’d fought this hard to get here. The man was a project leader and likely a supe given his strength. They’d be more interested in keeping him than Louis.

While he was still mumbling to himself, a rumbling sort of purr filled the air. Louis blinked, looking around with confusion. Whatever the sound was, it made his eyelids feel like they were weighed down by sand bags and his fight to stay awake drained out of him like water through a sieve.

“What’s… that…?” he slurred, feeling his consciousness slip out of his grasp.

“Sleep,” was Arthur’s only reply.

When he woke up for the second time, it was less abrupt than he had before. He’d grown so used to short bouts of sleep that a full night felt like a little much. He woke up groggy and even more confused than he’d been the day before. There was light beaming into his room and burning his retinas and since when did he sleep late enough for the sun to wake him? What was even happening right now?

He was surprised to find the man from the night prior gone. With how dominating he had been, Louis would’ve thought he’d still be there when he woke up. He fought against the blankets holding him hostage in bed, trying to drag him back to sleep, and landed with a thud on the floor when his foot

got tangled in the bedding and he was too groggy to notice how close to the edge of the bed he was getting.

Grumpy and grumbling, he pushed to his feet, kicking the blanket away and stomping over to his ensuite bathroom. The man had kept him asleep for so long, it felt like his bladder was going to explode. Had he cast a spell or something? Was that the rumbling sound that made him feel so tired?

He was going to grab his things and head straight to the office, but he opened the bedroom door and actually crashed into someone on the other side as he tried to leave. He would've landed on his ass if the person in question hadn't grabbed his arm, keeping him from falling.

Louis jerked his gaze up, mouth opening to complain, then came up short when he noticed it was the same guy from last night. His eyes widened in shock. "You're still here?"

That got him another eyebrow raise. Seriously, how did the man convey so much in a single eyebrow raise? He didn't even need to say anything to let Louis know that was a stupid question.

"After how you woke up before, I knew better than to think you'd sleep through the night without help. How do you feel?"

Louis could only gape at the man. He slept here all night?

When he didn't answer, Arthur cocked his head slightly. "Are you still tired? I noticed you don't have curtains to block the sun, but I picked up a room darkening charm while I was out. It'll last long enough for you to get more rest."

"No!" Louis practically shouted. "No more rest! I need to get back to work!"

That made Arthur's expression flatten and his voice was more firm when he said, "It's Sunday. The office is closed. If you don't feel like you need more sleep, that's fine, but you still need rest."

"I– What– That's the same thing!" Louis complained.

"The fact that you think that tells me all I need to know," Arthur replied. "Now, do you want coffee or would you prefer to shower first?" His nose wrinkled ever so slightly like he was offended by Louis's smell. "How long has it been since you showered?"

"I– You–"

Why couldn't he use words? Did the sleep actually muddle his brain? What was happening right now?

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CHAPTER FOUR

ARTHUR

Sleeping over uninvited at someone's home wasn't usually Arthur's style. If and when he had sleepovers, it was with someone he was familiar with and both sides were accepting of the arrangement. If he thought he could slip out and leave and the exhausted human would get some rest, he would have done so. Unfortunately, every time he tried, the man started to stir and it looked like he was going to force himself awake to get back to work. Only Arthur's growl kept the man asleep.

It wasn't a hardship to keep up the sound, and he was glad the man got some decent sleep. It didn't surprise him that he woke up the moment Arthur slipped away. He'd been gone long enough to grab some coffee and pastries from a nearby cafe, and he came back just in time to stop the man from running straight back to work. After he was fed and clean, Arthur was going to have a conversation with him about work-life balance.

Louis seemed at a loss for words, so Arthur took charge like he always did, steering the man back into his room and into the ensuite. He looked incredulous, but not awake enough to argue, and a few moments after Arthur closed the door behind him, giving the man his privacy, he heard the shower start with a quiet hiss.

Leaving the man to his own devices, Arthur returned to the kitchen to wait. When he'd texted Taron to ask if he knew where the man lived, he hadn't expected him to live so close. Not many humans lived in the heart of

the city. It was expensive and they didn't have it easy with the amount of limitations they and their government put on themselves. Not even Arthur could afford a place this close to the city center. Not that his home was bad, far from it, but it wasn't nearly this… ostentatious.

The condo had walls of floor-to-ceiling windows, a kitchen that would easily star in any chef's wet dreams, and five enormous bedrooms each with their own attached bath and an amazing view of the city. It certainly wasn't what he'd expected when Taron mentioned the residential pilot program.

He took a sip of his coffee, considering the space thoughtfully. It seemed nice enough, so there shouldn't be a reason Louis was avoiding it. He had only seen his roommates in passing, but they seemed to be a mix of humans and supes, so if there was discrimination, it likely would've been brought to Taron's attention already. He'd check just in case.

Louis came out of his room shortly after, fully dressed and seemingly still intent on returning to Spellbound. Arthur distracted him with the coffee he'd bought, gesturing to it and the paper bag of pastries next to it.

"Come eat."

Louis's eyes narrowed almost suspiciously, but the lure of coffee was too great and he shuffled over to sit beside him at the island, removing the coffee from the holder and taking a tentative sip. His expression shifted and he groaned, attention successfully diverted as he took another sip. Arthur nodded.

"I purposely get off the subway a few stations early to stop at this cafe most days. It's worth the walk."

Louis hummed, looking softer and a lot more human now that he'd had decent rest and caffeine. When Arthur opened the bag of pastries, he sat forward curiously, accepting the croissant with a polite thank you and melting into his seat when he took a bite. While he was distracted, Arthur finally got a good look at him. He wasn't a handsome man at first glance—dark circles under his eyes, a several day old scruff, and messy light brown hair that stuck up in every direction before he'd taken his shower and looked in need of a cut. But looking past that, subtle hints suggest Louis could clean up nicely if he took better care of himself. He had an angular face, striking emerald colored eyes under all that fatigue, and a slender frame. He wasn't sure how much of that lean frame was from him missing meals, but he'd find out soon enough. Even if he wasn't on his team, there

was no way Arthur could watch a man on his research floor wasting away like that without stepping in.

“After you’re finished eating, we’ll go for a walk. Some sunlight will do you some good.”

Louis paused in the middle of another sip of his coffee, his eyes blinking like he was trying to wrap his head around something complicated but wasn’t having any luck. When he set the cup down, he turned to look at Arthur, his brows beetled together, but Arthur wasn’t interested in an argument. Despite a full night’s rest, a shower, and food, the man still looked run down. He needed care and attention, and Arthur would make sure he got it.

“Finish eating. I managed to keep Taron from staying the night and hovering over you last night, but I can’t guarantee he won’t come back today to check on you. If we want to get to the park before it gets overly crowded, we need to leave soon.”

Louis took the warning for what it was, stuffing the rest of his food into his mouth and hurrying to pull on his jacket. Arthur stopped him from running out the door by grabbing the back of his jacket, steering him back toward the kitchen and the mess he left out. “Clean up after yourself first. You’re not the only one who lives here.”

Whenever he spoke, Louis only seemed to grow more and more confused. It was a common reaction when people first started working with him. He’d stop being so overbearing when Louis started caring for himself. Most of his researchers found it easier to just do the normal self care he expected rather than having him chase after them and constantly interrupt their work. It wasn’t like he was asking for much. Putting their health and wellbeing first should be basic common sense.

After depositing the empty bag and cups into the trash, Louis turned for the door again, hesitating and glancing at Arthur suspiciously like he expected him to stop him. Arthur felt his mouth twitch against a smile, sweeping his hand in a ‘go ahead’ gesture before following Louis out the door.

There was a park that was near Spellbound that was nice, but he knew if Louis got anywhere near that building, it’d be a battle to keep him out of it. Instead, he made them turn at a light and cross the street, heading for the bigger park the size of several city blocks that most who lived in the city liked to frequent. Of course, Louis didn’t understand what was happening

and had to be redirected a few times when he tried to turn back toward Spellbound.

“Wha– But– Spellbound is that way!”

“I’m aware. We’re not going to Spellbound. I told you we’re going to the park. You need sunlight, and before you say it, sunlight through filtered windows is not the same as sunlight outside. It’s a few blocks that way. Let’s get going.”

Louis flailed and squawked, but was no match for Arthur’s tenacity. He frogmarched the man to the park and settled him on the bench in the sun so he could get some much needed sunlight. Soaking in the sun was one of Arthur’s favorite pastimes, and once he was sure Louis was settled, he shifted to his lion to give him the time he needed.

Just in time, apparently, because while he was distracted, Louis had tried to sneak away. He froze when he noticed Arthur’s lion, staring at him with wide eyes and his mouth hanging open, and when Arthur gave him a pointed look, he planted his butt back on the bench where he belonged.

With a nod of approval, Arthur settled himself on the grass in front of the bench, soaking up the sun’s rays and enjoying the light breeze in his fur. He heard Louis shifting restlessly and could practically hear the man scheming to get away, but he didn’t open his eyes. If the human ran, he’d catch him. And he’d regret running when he had a four hundred pound lion laying on top of him.

“You can’t be serious…”

Arthur ignored him. The man needed care. He’d learn it was for the best eventually.

“I… I just need to do one thing…” Louis tried.

Arthur opened one eye, giving him a bland look. He wasn’t stupid enough to believe that. He’d heard it before. Researchers getting too wrapped up in their work always had just one more thing to do before they’d take care of themselves. That one thing always turned into one more, and the cycle would continue.

Closing his eyes again, he waited. He got the feeling the human would be particularly stubborn about this. His tail flicked, instincts telling him to prepare for a chase. He almost wanted the man to run. Not because he wanted to hurt him, but because it seemed like a fun way to get the man some exercise. He doubted with how thin and sickly he looked that Louis was getting proper exercise.

With a sulky huff, Louis crossed his arms and sat back, glowering at the grass. Arthur glanced at him before smiling internally and closing his eyes again. Good. They'd get to exercise eventually, but rest was more important right now.

When he heard Louis start to fidget again, hand disappearing into his messenger bag, probably to grab a notebook so he could start working again, Arthur shot him a droll look. Louis threw his hands up, exasperated.

"I don't have time for this! I have to work!"

Sighing deeply, Arthur shifted back, settling beside the tired man on the bench. "You can't expect to do good work when you're exhausted. One day won't kill you. And if you get to work tomorrow and the rest has done nothing to help, I'll accept that and we'll move on."

"You'll let me work?" Louis asked suspiciously.

Arthur scoffed, amused. "Not how you are now, no. What you're doing isn't healthy and I doubt even you could argue with that. But I will acknowledge that forced rest doesn't work and we need to find a new way for you to take care of yourself."

Louis scowled. "I don't even know you."

Nodding in agreement, Arthur replied, "I know. I could say the same about you. That doesn't change the fact that you're driving yourself into the ground and no one else was willing to see it, much less do something about it. I'm aware I can be overbearing, but I can't just sit by and watch someone hurt themselves. Which is exactly what you're doing by ignoring your body's needs."

"I'm fine," Louis argued. Petulantly, and without much bite. He wasn't fine and he knew it. He just wasn't ready to admit it yet.

"Let's see how you feel tomorrow. We'll go from there."

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CHAPTER FIVE

LOUIS

Louis just knew when he arrived at work on Monday that Arthur was going to be incorrigible. Despite waking up in the middle of the night and working on his personal projects the night prior, he could admit if only to himself that he felt more alert than he had in days. He wasn't going to tell Arthur that though. Stupid lion shifter and his stupid insistence that Louis rest. He didn't have time for that. He had work to do.

He arrived early like he always did, finally managing to write down the solution he'd thought of during the weekend. His workstation was still on, thankfully the meddling lion hadn't shut it down and risked any of his work, and he pulled up the coding to work on his solution for the species determination problem. It took a few hours to fully input and he knew there would be bugs while he worked out the kinks, but once it was finally inputted, he felt like he could take a breath.

"Louis, a minute?" his project manager, Mr. Yarrow, said from behind him.

Louis twisted in his seat, studying the yeti with a frown. "Yeah?"

The man looked uncomfortable, massive arms crossed over his chest as he looked Louis over. "You good?"

It took work not to make a face. What was with everyone asking if he was okay lately? He was fine. He was working, which was a vast improvement from where he'd been a few months ago. Was it just because

he was human? Because that was speciesist. He could handle the workload just as well as a supe could.

“I’m fine. Did you need something?”

Mr. Yarrow gave him another considering look before shaking his head. “I want an update on your project. Do you have a timeline yet?”

Well, that at least was a conversation he was fine with. “Not yet, but I feel like I’m getting close. I’m just working out the kinks in the scanning process.”

Mr. Yarrow was one of those hands off supervisors. He didn’t get involved if he didn't need to, and Louis never needed him to. As long as he kept the yeti updated on his progress, he left well enough alone. He nodded his furry head, glancing at his watch and turning away. “I’ve got a meeting to get to. Let me know if you need someone to help you out.”

He walked away before Louis could even open his mouth to say how much he didn’t want that. He didn’t need help. He was doing this on his own.

He ran out of coffee at one point, but he pointedly refused to acknowledge that he had an easier time concentrating anyway after getting some rest on the weekend. His productivity was entirely because he found a solution to his problem, not because of a meddling shifter.

There wasn’t often a reason to leave his workstation, but at one point he had to go looking in the supply closet for a smaller soldering iron tip if he wanted to do the job right. It took him a second to find one that would fit and was the size he needed, but he was feeling good about the work today when he headed back to his workstation.

He came to an abrupt halt when he realized there was someone waiting for him. He almost groaned when he saw Taron standing there, arms crossed and that determined look on his face that made Louis think he was going to say something to make life difficult for him. The shapeshifter was always there. What was it with that guy? He started showing up the week Louis started and came to check on him at least once a week. Did he not trust Louis to get the work done because he was human? Did he think he couldn’t handle it on his own?

“Good morning, Louis,” Taron greeted. His tone was friendly. His expression didn’t waver though.

“Taron. Did you need something.”

“A little birdy told me you’re on the brink of working yourself to death. You do realize there are policies for overtime here at Spellbound?”

He knew that. He also knew those policies rarely applied to researchers. Or at least they were rarely enforced. The company needed researchers to succeed, so they usually gave them special treatment so they could continue to bring in money and clients.

“I’m fine,” he said with a frown. “I’ve got work to do.”

Taron nodded slowly like he understood, and Louis hoped maybe this conversation would be the same as when he’d been visited by Mr. Yarrow, but before he could even finish the thought, Taron dashed those hopes away.

“I’m aware. I’m also aware you’ve been neglecting your health to work. We can’t have that. Researchers make the world go round and I’m not having one of my people working themselves into an early grave just to make clients happy.” He perked up, a smile spreading across his face that was honestly a little unnerving. Why was he looking at him like that?

“So, to ensure you don’t overdo it and hurt yourself, I’m assigning you a new shadow.” He jerked his chin over Louis’s shoulder.

Louis was almost afraid to turn around. He did so slowly, biting back a whimper when he saw who was standing behind him. “You’re not serious…”

Arthur didn’t look surprised by the announcement. He was probably the ‘birdy’ who told on him to Taron. Asshole.

“I’m very serious,” Taron quipped, his smile downright evil now.

“But– I have a supervisor!” Louis argued. “Mr. Yarrow doesn’t have a problem with how I work!”

Taron’s nod wasn’t at all reassuring. He just knew he wasn’t going to like what came out of the shapeshifter’s mouth next.

“That’s true. But I’m not assigning Arthur as your work supervisor. He’s your new life supervisor. Different role, still just as important.” He pursed his lips, looking at Arthur thoughtfully. “More important actually, since you’ll be handling him in and out of the office.”

Louis’s jaw hit the ground and his stomach felt like it dropped several stories. “He– That’s not– You can’t do that!”

Taron gave him a look that was too damn cocky. “Really? You think so?”

“I… yes?” He suddenly felt less confident, both men looking at him like he was being obtuse. “I mean… You can do what you want in the office, it's

your company, but–”

Tapping his chin, Taron asked, “Remind me— who owns the condo? And who runs the pilot program?”

Louis whimpered. This couldn’t be happening.

Taron nodded, snapping his fingers and pointing at Louis. “That’s right, I do. And I just decided I’m going to assign you a new roommate. Until you no longer look like you’re on death’s door, Arthur is your new shadow. It's for your own good, Louis. I like having you here, but I won’t risk your health and wellbeing for work. Arthur has the best track record for happy and well balanced researchers on his team. He’s the best man for the job.”

Feeling his shoulders slump, Louis stopped pretending he had a say in this. Taron was right. Not only was his dream job on the line, since Taron was apparently going to start enforcing the policies about overtime and Louis could get into trouble by ignoring them, he was also the whole reason Louis wasn’t living in a crappy car right now. He couldn’t go back to Terrence’s couch. He was pretty sure his wife was already redecorating the basement into a playroom. He had nowhere else to go.

He glanced at Arthur, who was trying to look calm and collected, but couldn’t hide the smugness in his eyes. He felt like he won. And Louis couldn’t do a damn thing about it.

Maybe this wasn’t his dream job after all.

Of course, Arthur wasted no time taking control of Louis’s life. He studied Louis with narrowed eyes, then tipped his head toward the breakroom, his voice calm despite the insanity of the situation. “Come on. There’s a decent selection of food for breakfast in the breakroom. It’ll be quicker than going to the cafeteria.”

Louis glanced between the stubborn lion and Taron, who looked just as stubborn right now, and slumped. “Fine.”

“Good man,” Taron grinned, clapping him on the shoulder. “I’ll check in later, make sure things are going well between you two. Arthur, call me when you’ve got some free time and we can discuss the housing situation. I’m thinking it should be easy enough to fit two beds into one room, but we can get magic involved if necessary.”

Arthur nodded but didn’t let himself get distracted, guiding Louis with a hand on his shoulder toward the breakroom. Louis shrugged him off, trudging ahead while mentally considering his options. What were the chances he could report this to SR and not cause problems for himself as

well as the other two? If he did report it, they'd probably just report him back for all his overtime. He could lose his job fighting those two. And it wasn't like he could lock Arthur out of the condo. Taron had invited him past the wards and Louis had no idea how to change that. Could he change that? Or because Taron actually owned the condo, did his decision override everyone else's?

"You're thinking too hard about this," Arthur commented, nudging Louis into a chair at one of the empty tables.

"Easy for you to say. Your boss didn't just assign you someone to micromanage your every move. I don't need a babysitter. I'm fine."

"You're not, but we're not going to keep arguing about it," Arthur commented, pulling things out of the cupboards. Louis didn't watch him. It wasn't like he could argue about what was happening. He'd eat because Arthur told him to or he'd risk summoning Taron again. He almost shuddered to think what the shapeshifter might do if he thought Louis wasn't behaving. He'd definitely make things worse.

A bowl of oatmeal was set in front of him a few moments later, as well as a glass of juice. When Louis shot the lion shifter a confused look, Arthur raised his eyebrows slowly. "You think you can survive off of coffee? I read up on human nutrition. You need different vitamins to thrive, along with plenty of water and rest. So you'll drink the juice and take a glass of water with you back to your desk. I–"

Louis shook his head vehemently. "No. I don't want water anywhere near my project. It's not meant to get wet and I don't want any accidents just because you and Taron are being stupid and micromanaging me."

"If you can have coffee at your desk, then you can have water," Arthur pointed out with a smug smirk. "Don't worry. I'll make sure to give you a bottle with a lid so there won't be any risk of spilling. I won't hover, I've got my own work to do, but I will check on you, and if you aren't drinking the water like you should be, I'll start stopping by more often. I'm not doing this to punish you, Louis. Once you start taking better care of yourself, I'll back off."

Louis scoffed under his breath. He didn't believe that for a second.

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CHAPTER SIX

ARTHUR

Louis's behavior was worse than he thought. Even after the meeting with Taron and Arthur's warning, Louis immediately slipped back into old habits once he returned to his work. He ignored the bottle of water Arthur gave him, hunched over his project as he worked, and leaned impossibly close to the monitor to the point Arthur had to wonder if he needed his eyes checked. Why else would he lean that close?

He pretty much almost always kept his office door open unless he had a phone meeting. He wanted to give the impression to his researchers that he was available if they had any questions or concerns. It meant he had a great view of Louis's workstation too, and he glanced up every once in a while to check on him, sighing when he noticed just how close the man got to his work to see.

Picking up his phone, he dialed down to the division's staff healer, watching Louis squint as he soldered wires to his project. Would it benefit him to learn what the man was working on? He and Taron decided not to switch Louis entirely to his team, as that would be a little much and the man had no issues with getting his work done, but maybe if Arthur knew what he was doing, he might have a better idea of why Louis was exhausting himself to get it done.

"Infirmary, this is Tanya."

“Hello, Tanya,” Arthur greeted politely. “This is Arthur from the research floor.”

“Uh oh. Has there been an incident?” she asked, and he could practically see her preparing to run out the door. He was quick to dissuade her, since this wasn’t an actual emergency.

“No, no. Nothing like that. There’s a newer researcher that I’ve noticed is sitting close to his screen or project and squints while he works. You don’t happen to know anything about human vision issues, do you?”

“I do, actually,” she replied brightly. “My mate is human. If he’s leaning close like that, it’s likely either his vision is going bad, in which case he’ll need to see a druid to fix it, or he’s tired.”

“Being tired would cause him to squint like that?” he queried with a frown.

“Yep. Human eyes tend to get dry and blurry when they’re tired. If he’s not getting enough rest, he’s likely leaning and squinting like that to see. Humans need frequent breaks from screens to avoid that issue.”

“How many breaks?”

The clatter of keys told him she was typing before she answered, “Ten to fifteen minutes every few hours. More often if he’s tired. Did you want me to come look at him? I can’t fix vision loss, but I can tell if he’s tired or if he needs to see a druid.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes on the stubborn researcher who finally dragged his gaze away from his project only to return to staring at the screen. He didn’t think it’d go over well having a healer visit, especially not so soon into the change in their dynamic. “Let’s wait just a little bit. I want to see if proper rest will help before we need to get healers involved. Is there anything I should watch out for?”

She hummed thoughtfully, likely scrolling through whatever information she had. “I’d say if he starts bumping into things more often, knocking things over, that kind of thing, then vision loss is a very real possibility. If he’s just squinting and rubbing his eyes, I’d guess he’s tired and needs a break. I’ll look into it a little more, see if there’s anything big we should be keeping an eye on. I’ll email you if I find anything.”

“I appreciate that, Tanya. Thank you.”

He hung up after a polite goodbye, checking his watch. It was lunch time anyway. Now would be a good time for Louis to take a break and rest his eyes.

As he pushed out of his chair, he gathered his phone in case someone needed him, sticking it in his pocket as he headed out. While not all the researchers were headed to lunch yet, most of his team had already left, choosing to eat before the lunch rush and have a snack rather than get stuck dealing with the crowded cafeteria. It wasn't something Arthur wanted to deal with either, so he figured going out for lunch would be better. More restful too since the noise of the cafeteria could be overwhelming.

"Louis," he greeted when he stepped up behind the man. Louis's shoulders went up, but he didn't acknowledge him or look away from his work. Likely thinking if he just ignored Arthur, he'd go away.

He'd learn eventually that wouldn't work.

"It's time for lunch. Save your work and come join me."

"I'm working," was Louis's surly reply.

Arthur fought off a grin. He wasn't sure why he was so entertained by this particular researcher's stubbornness, but he knew better than to let it show on his face. It'd only make Louis more stubborn if he thought this was a joke.

"The work will still be waiting for you when you're finished. Now you can either come with me willingly or I can make you, but I'd prefer for you not to make me do that. I wouldn't want to embarrass you on top of everything else."

That got him a dirty look. Arthur looked past the glare, noting the bloodshot eyes and tension around his mouth. He needed a break, that much was obvious.

When the stubborn man still refused to move, Arthur took that as permission to make it happen. He took Louis's elbow, pulled him out of his seat, and moved him away from the monitor. And because he'd worked with researchers long enough, he held the man at arm's length while pressing the save button on the file just to ensure nothing was lost while they were gone.

"There. Saved. Let's go."

"I'm not hungry! I'm in the middle of something and–"

Arthur ignored him, putting his hands on Louis's shoulders and pushing him toward the elevators. Louis squawked and squirmed to get free, but didn't get anywhere with his little tantrum aside from catching the attention of everyone on the way out. A few looked confused, but those who'd

worked with Arthur in the past just gave Louis commiserating looks before going back to what they'd been doing.

The elevator was crowded when he guided Louis inside, which made it much easier to keep the smaller man from any escape attempts. Not that he was that much smaller. If he stood up straight, he might only be a few inches shorter than Arthur. It was his weight that made Arthur think him small. The man was stick thin, and the few times he touched him, he could only feel skin and bones. Which was why he'd continue to be stubborn about meals until the man put a little weight back on. He got the feeling he wasn't naturally this thin, and he sure as hell wasn't doing it on purpose.

"I hate the cafeteria," Louis grumbled.

"Well, then it's a good thing we're not going to the cafeteria," Arthur said blandly, using his grip on Louis's shoulders to urge him out of the elevator and through the front door of Spellbound. The most popular places for lunch were directly across the street, but the lines were long, which he knew would make Louis antsy. Arthur knew of a hole in the wall nearby that would be both filling and delicious. He fell into step beside Louis when he finally stopped trying to dig his heels in, keeping one arm around his shoulders to keep them from being separated on the crowded sidewalk. Knowing Louis, he'd use the opportunity to run back to the office, and it wasn't a good idea to tempt a lion into a chase in broad daylight. Someone could get hurt.

Arthur's favorite curry restaurant was so small, you'd miss it if you didn't know where it was. Barely big enough for more than twenty patrons at a time, in the evenings it would have a line around the block. Luckily for him, lunchtime was their quiet time since most people who knew of it didn't make the journey for lunch. He took an empty seat, since the business was small enough not to need a hostess, pushing Louis into the long bench seat opposite him. He'd have to go past Arthur to escape, and from the defeated slump to his shoulders, Louis knew that.

"Lunch is on me. Pick whatever you like," Arthur said, handing him a menu he'd grabbed on the way to their table. There was a lunch special with two kinds of curry, a portion of rice, naan, and two small samosas that he preferred if he came for lunch. It was large enough to feed someone like him. Larger shifters, like lions or bears, tended to eat more than the average supe, though not more than werewolves. Those mutts were bottomless pits.

"I'm not hungry."

Louis was starting to pout, which was cute but wouldn’t get him what he wanted. Especially when his stomach growled so loudly in protest that even Arthur could hear it. The stubborn man had the decency to blush after being so vocal about not coming along. Arthur smirked, shaking his head as he returned his attention to his own menu.

“Would you prefer I order for you? I’ve been here a few times and I know what’s good.”

“Sure. While you do that, I’ll just… use the restroom.”

He didn’t need to be a werewolf with top-notch senses to smell the lie. He caught Louis’s arm as he attempted to sidle past, giving him a hard look. “I’m a patient man, Louis, but I guarantee if you run, I’ll be forced to chase you. It's instinct. So unless you want a lion to chase you down the street and drag you back here, I suggest you not make any rash decisions. It’s lunch. It won’t kill you. Sit down.”

“But I just thought of something…” Louis murmured.

“Make a note of it in your phone, then put it away. Who knows. You might think of something better after you’ve eaten.”

Begrudgingly, Louis sat, grumbling the whole time, and when the server came to take their orders, he stayed silent, stewing while Arthur ordered for him. He stayed grumpy the entire time they waited for their food and hunched over his meal as he began to eat. The man had terrible posture. He was going to end up needing druid intervention for back pain if he didn’t straighten up. Exercise would help.

“Do you have trouble seeing?”

Louis’s brows snapped together and he looked up from his lunch with a frown. “What?”

“I noticed you get close to the monitor and squint a lot. Do you have trouble seeing or is it just fatigue?”

“I…” He still looked confused, which meant he probably hadn’t noticed the habit. It only made Arthur more suspicious. If it was just exhaustion, he’d know he was ignoring the squinting to keep working. Right?

“When was the last time you saw a physician?”

At one point, he hoped they’d move on from Louis’s wide eyed confusion to actually having conversations. It was cute watching him flounder, but he needed to know if he needed to be worried about the man. More than he already was, that is.

Louis wasn’t being very forthcoming, so Arthur moved on, tapping the side of the man’s plate with his fork. “Eat. I’m sure you want to get back to your work.”

That got him moving at least. If work wasn’t the issue, he might’ve thought to use it as an incentive. Unfortunately, he couldn’t do that with Louis. The man was already overworking himself. He couldn’t offer work as a reward until Louis was in a better state. He’d need to figure out another way to get him to stop fighting so much.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

LOUIS

Had it been naive to hope Taron had been kidding when he said Arthur would be his new roommate? Maybe. He saw Arthur leave near the end of a normal work day and falsely assumed that meant he was done for the day and would return to his reign of terror the following morning. He didn't expect the man to show back up an hour later, a packed bag in his hand and that stern look on his face.

"Time to go, Louis. You're done for the day."

The office was nearly empty now, save for a few stragglers who were already shutting down their workstations and packing up their things. Louis could argue, there were less people around to see the humiliation if Arthur decided to manhandle him again, but he wasn't sure he saw the point. No amount of arguing had managed to make a difference thus far.

Grumbling to himself, he pushed to his feet, deciding it'd be easier to just go along and work on his at home projects instead of arguing with the man. He'd always thought he was stubborn, but he had nothing on a lion shifter.

"Is stubbornness a trait of your species, or did I just get lucky having to deal with you specifically?"

If the snark offended him, Arthur didn't let it show. He actually grinned and the expression took Louis off guard, his footsteps faltering as he stared at the man. The man was unfairly gorgeous and the smile was disarming.

He momentarily forgot just how annoying the guy could be until Arthur took his elbow to urge him toward the elevator when he hesitated for too long.

“I’m going!” he growled, jerking his elbow away and stomping toward the elevator bank.

Chuckling, Arthur followed behind him, looking up at the numbers above the doors that showed how far away they were. “To answer your question, yes, I’ve been told that stubbornness is common amongst my species. It’d be worse if I had my own pride. Lions are instinctually driven to care for their pride, and they tend to see their way as the right way to do things. I’d apologize, but I’m not wrong about what you’re doing to yourself. I’m not going to apologize for making sure you take proper care of yourself.”

Louis scowled at him. “I do take care of myself. I slept, didn’t I?”

“Mhmm… And how many hours of sleep did you have last night? I’m not even going to pretend to think you managed more than a couple uninterrupted.”

“It’s still sleep,” he argued. “Just because I wake up a few times doesn’t mean I’m not sleeping.”

The doors to the elevator slid open and Arthur's hand settled in the middle of Louis’s back, guiding him forward. “You’re a scientist, so I know you’re not stupid. You’re being purposely difficult when your life would be so much easier if you just rested.”

They argued about it the entire walk to the condo because Louis wasn’t ready to give up just yet. He still felt like Arthur and Taron were overreacting. And besides, it was his life. He should be able to live it however he wanted.

When they stepped into the condo, a few of Louis’s roommates were in the kitchen cooking their dinners. He didn’t actually know any of their names, he wasn’t home often and he hadn’t been here during the move-in day introductions, but he didn’t think that was important. This wasn’t a college dorm. They were grown adults and he didn’t think he was expected to socialize just because they shared a living space.

“Good evening,” Arthur greeted, causing the two in the kitchen to turn in their direction. Louis didn’t pay them any mind, heading for his room so he could at least work on some of his personal projects. They were mostly human oriented which was why he never brought them to Spellbound’s

attention, but he figured if he actually managed to work out the kinks, he could patent them himself.

He left Arthur to socialize, hoping they'd keep him distracted long enough for him to get some work done. And it actually worked for a little while. He sat at his desk, tinkering with the smart lock he hoped one day would be powerful enough to mimic a ward without requiring magic. He didn't mind magic, if he had it he'd be happy to use it, but not all humans could afford to hire a mage to set up a protection ward on their homes and he'd heard maintenance on wards was a pain if there was ever any damage. He wanted to provide humans with non magical solutions at affordable prices at least until they pulled their heads out of their asses and started to collaborate with other species.

He was so distracted by his work, he didn't notice Arthur join him until he was leaning over his shoulder, looking at the parts spread across his desk critically.

"That's clever. Is it a lock of some sort?"

"Yeah," he grumbled, already sensing his new keeper preparing to pull him away. "It'll mimic a ward once I work out the kinks."

"Have you thought about bringing it to a few of your coworkers? I'm sure they'd be happy to help."

He shook his head. "No. I can do it on my own. Besides, I don't want to use magic if I can help it. A lot of humans won't touch it if magic is involved."

Arthur hummed thoughtfully. "That's true. My cousin is working on bridging that gap, but your species doesn't make it easy."

Louis couldn't argue that. It wasn't something he understood. His family, while not outright against supes, didn't like interacting with them if they could avoid it. He got the feeling they didn't like being the weaker species, so they kept their distance. It was better than outright hating them like many of the neighbors in his childhood town had, but not by much. By the time he left for college, he'd been dying to escape. He went to college across the country, then stayed for grad school and his doctorate. He never ended up leaving. The city was the best chance he had at being accepted as an engineer without being hustled into military development. It was the only area that paid a livable wage in the human sector. And there wasn't a chance in hell he'd allow his creations to be used for destruction. That wasn't who he was.

Patting his shoulder, Arthur straightened. “I made supper. Come eat.”

“We already ate,” he countered without pulling his attention away from his work.

“That was lunch. I made salmon. Come eat before it gets cold.”

Louis paused, twisting to look up at the man. “Salmon? Really?”

He happened to love fish, so if he was being honest, Louis might be willing to leave his work for a time to eat. He didn’t get to eat salmon often—he couldn’t afford to eat out and he never had time to make it himself. He usually ate whatever was available. One of the roommates was nice enough to always leave him a portion of whatever they’d made, so if he was hungry enough to leave his room, there was always something for him.

Arthur didn’t coax, that wasn’t his way, so when Louis didn’t immediately stand, he took his arm and manhandled him out of his seat. Despite the rough handling, he never actually hurt him. How the man could be so bossy and not use his brute strength to get his way bewildered him. He was both careful and demanding in the same breath. That had to be some kind of magic power.

“I’m going, I’m going,” he carped, grumbling to himself the whole way to the kitchen and the food already set out for him at the island.

Apparently manhandling employees wasn’t his only skill because Arthur’s salmon was amazing. It had this delicious creamy sauce on top of it along with a side of potatoes and broccoli. Louis tried to pick around the broccoli because he wasn’t a fan, but the stupid lion coaxed him into eating it by smothering them in the same creamy sauce as the salmon, basically forcing him to like it.

Seriously, the guy was really annoying.

It wasn’t until they were getting ready for bed—way too damn early by the way—that Louis noticed the problem. Though, was it a problem? Or was it a very convenient solution?

“It looks like Taron forgot to sort out the bed situation. Aw, that’s too bad. I guess you’ll have to go home. I promise I’ll go to sleep once you leave and–”

“I’m not leaving,” Arthur said. There was no change in his voice, no annoyance or irritation. He just plainly stated it like fact. Meanwhile Louis’s head was spinning.

“What do you mean you’re not leaving? There’s only one bed!”

“And I slept next to you just fine the other night. There’s plenty of room for us both.”

Louis felt his jaw go slack. “You’re not serious.”

There went that stupid eyebrow again. Saying so much without the man having to speak a word. It was too bad Louis didn’t want to hear it.

“This is insane. You can’t really expect to spend the night in my bed for… I don’t even know how long this torment is supposed to last, but I feel like too long is a pretty good guess. There’s no way Taron would agree with this. It’s inappropriate. It’s– It’s–” He growled, running his fingers roughly through his hair. “I don’t even know right now. Illegal? I feel like this is illegal.”

Arthur snorted, completely ignoring all his arguments as he lifted the covers and slid into the bed. On Louis’s side. Because of course he was going to take his side. When would this insanity end?

Sensing he wouldn’t be able to get out of this, Louis growled and stormed out of his room, heading for the couch and snatching up every available pillow he could find.

“What are you doing?” Arthur asked from behind him.

Louis ignored him. See how he liked it.

Back in his room, he built a wall straight down the middle of the bed, jabbing a finger at the side of the bed that wasn’t Louis’s preference. “Your side.” He jabbed again, this time on the opposite side. “My side. Don’t cross that line. That’s the only way I’m agreeing to this stupid idea.”

Arthur looked at the pillow wall, then back at Louis. It looked like he was debating an argument, which was a little concerning honestly. Why would he argue against a boundary between them? Unless he really did plan to do something nefarious and the wards just didn’t kick in yet?

“I’ll agree to the wall if it makes you feel more comfortable, but we’re switching sides. I’m not putting you on the side closest to the door. If you really prefer that side of the bed, I’ll move it so it's against the other wall, but otherwise, you’ll have to sleep on that side.” He pointed to the side farthest from the door, his expression firm and unyielding. He wasn’t going to budge about this. Which made no sense unless he didn’t plan on using his magic to keep Louis asleep like he had the other night.

If he didn’t, was it possible to sneak out even if he had to go around? He could be quiet if he wanted to. And he wouldn’t have to go far. He’d work in the kitchen if the stupid lion was going to be stubborn about it.

Throwing his hands into the air, Louis gave in. “Fine! I’ll take that side! But no using your magic on me! It’s illegal to use magic on someone without permission, that I know for sure.”

“That’s true,” Arthur agreed, climbing back into bed on the right side while Louis grudgingly got in on the left. “And if I was using magic, I’d respect that boundary. But that’s not the case in this situation. I was growling. It's similar to a cat’s purr. It’s magic in that it’s tied to my animal side, but not in the way you’re thinking. There’s no actual spell casting. Therefore, I’ll keep doing it as long as it helps you sleep.”

Arching his neck to look past the pillow pile, he stared at Arthur incredulously. “You’re going to growl all night to keep me asleep?”

Arthur shrugged one shoulder, tucking his hands behind his head. “I told you, it’s similar to a cat’s purr. It doesn’t need much effort on my part and it helps you sleep. I’m capable of doing it and still getting a good night’s sleep. You aren’t capable without it. The growl stays.”

That was it. No argument, no negotiation. Louis glared at the stubborn man, but Arthur just clicked off the bedside lamp, plunging them into darkness aside from the glow of the city lights outside the bedroom window. Scowling, Louis flopped onto his pillow and turned his back on the pillow pile and the stupid lion shifter behind it, tugging the blankets up to his chin. He hated sleeping on this side. The lights were distracting.

That purring growl cut through the quiet of the room, making Louis scowl deepen. He tried to fight it, hoping to wait long enough for Arthur to fall asleep so he could sneak out and keep working on his lock at the very least, but just like last time, the sound was like magic, casting a weight on his eyes and forcing them to close. He really needed to figure out a way to block out that noise. That’d be the first thing he did tomorrow morning.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

ARTHUR

His alarm woke him like it did every morning and Arthur reached for it, pressing the snooze button so he could allow his mind to wake up slowly. He didn’t rush out of bed. He'd forgotten to set his alarms to a later time since he didn’t need to worry about commute for the time being. He was glad he forgot, though. He expected to wake up the same way he went to sleep, with a wall of pillows between him and his charge. He didn’t expect to find Louis pressed against his side, using him as a pillow with one arm curled over his chest.

Arthur felt his breath stutter at the image. The normally grouchy and obstinate man looked content for the first time since they met. His breathing was deep and even, his expression soft and without the frown lines and the crease between his brows that he’d sported all the previous day. He looked… sweet.

Having focused so closely on the man’s health, Arthur had missed the possibility of finding the man attractive. He was stubborn, grouchy, argumentative, and had a complete lack of awareness of his own body’s needs. But right now in his sleep, he was warm, cuddly, and soft, and it made Arthur want to curl around him and touch all that softness. He didn’t, that’d be inappropriate and Louis definitely wouldn’t be receptive to it, but the allure was there.

He was considering slipping out of bed to start his day when Louis began to stir. He curled a little tighter against Arthur's side, his face scrunching as he fought waking up. When he wasn't forcing himself awake to work, his body put him through a workout just getting him to wake up. He was obviously still tired, but Arthur knew better than to think he could convince the man to take a day or two off to rest.

Louis's eyes opened slowly and Arthur watched with amusement as he realized where he was. He jerked up and away, staring incredulously at Arthur. Arthur just shook his head.

"It wasn't me. You're the one who tunneled over here."

Louis whipped his head around, that brilliant brain of his taking in the half formed pillow wall and the obvious fact that they were both on Arthur's side of the bed, not Louis's. He was the one who encroached, not the other way around.

Scowling, Louis grumbled, "You stole my side of the bed. Of course I'd unconsciously try to move back to my spot."

"I'm happy to rearrange the furniture tonight so that you can have your side," Arthur offered.

Louis ignored him, scrambling over the pillow wall and out of bed, scurrying off to the bathroom and away from the conversation. If he wasn't careful, Arthur would develop a soft spot for this one. His reactions were amusing.

Rolling out of bed, Arthur spent a few moments doing some stretching and light exercise. He normally got in an hour of exercise before work, but he'd need to do that in the office gym instead of at home like he usually did. It was the only way he could ensure Louis ate properly before starting his work.

Louis came out while he was doing some push ups and made a choked sound as he came to a halt just outside the bathroom door. "Wha-What are you doing?"

"Exercising," Arthur commented, pushing up and to his feet. "I do most mornings. You will too once you've put a little weight on and gotten some rest. I'm a little worried right now that you'll exhaust your resources if you exercise. It'll wait until you've had more time to recover from your poor life choices."

He'd never seen a human's eyes fall out of their heads before, but it looked like a possibility with the way Louis's eyes bugged out at that

revelation. Arthur couldn't help the chuckle that escaped him as he moved past Louis to take his turn in the bathroom.

"I'll make breakfast after my shower. You should return the pillows to the living room while you're not using them. Your roommates would appreciate it."

He closed the door behind him, still chuckling to himself. Of all the ways he'd thought this morning would go, he hadn't expected it to be this entertaining. And the luxury shower was a nice addition. It almost made up for the fact that when he was dressed and left the room to make breakfast, he realized Louis was already gone.

He rolled his eyes, pulling on his suit jacket that he'd had draped over his arm, since he hadn't planned on wearing it while cooking. A curious face watched him from the kitchen and when he glanced in that direction, the orc flushed and looked away. A shy orc? That was new. A curiosity for another time, maybe. He'd shared only a handful of words with Louis's roommates, but if he got them on his side, maybe they'd be able to help him keep the man from slipping back into old habits once Arthur was no longer acting as his shadow.

"Have a nice day," he said before leaving, just because he was polite. He didn't want to start a conversation when he had a stubborn researcher to chase after.

"Oh, um… have a nice day!" the deep voice called awkwardly behind him.

Luckily for Louis, his scent was weak enough that it didn't make Arthur immediately think to chase. It did make him lengthen his strides, though. He'd wanted to start a habit of eating first *before* working instead of interrupting Louis in the middle of a thought like he had the day prior. It would've meant less starting and stopping. Interrupting his work would be Louis's punishment for sneaking off.

He found Louis at his workstation, already hunched, with his shoulders high like he was just waiting for Arthur to react. Brat.

Arthur didn't comment or try to convince him this time. Instead, he grabbed the chair Louis was sitting in, pulling the man away from the desk and spinning him toward the breakroom. He settled his hands on Louis's shoulders, stopping him from leaping up, and rolled the chair straight to the breakroom without letting Louis get up.

“Now, Louis. You know I wanted you to wait for me so we could eat breakfast together. Had you waited, we would have stopped at that cafe with the nice croissants for breakfast, and I wouldn’t have needed to interrupt your work. Since you decided to act like a brat instead, you’ll have to stay here until I make something for both of us, and even then, you won’t be allowed on the floor until the work day starts at eight.”

“What?!” Louis looked horrified. “That’s not for another thirty minutes!”

Arthur just gave him a bland look. “Maybe next time you’ll think twice about sneaking off.” He pointed a finger at the table. “Now stay put. Don’t make me chase you, Louis. You won’t like the consequences.”

LOUIS

The torture continued for the rest of the week. Every morning, Louis found himself cuddled up against Arthur. Every morning it embarrassed the hell out of him and no amount of hiding in the bathroom helped. So every morning, whether Arthur got in the shower first or he did, he snuck off to the office to work so he could stop thinking about being pressed against all that warm skin and thick muscle. Had he mentioned Arthur slept shirtless? No? It was very, very relevant to his predicament.

Despite the many warnings Arthur gave him about running, Louis couldn’t help himself. He couldn’t look Arthur in the eye after waking up pressed against him. Especially after the last time when he woke up with an erection that he doubted the stupid lion shifter missed pressed against his hip. He didn’t even wait long enough to get dressed that time. He tried to run straight out the front door and had to be dragged back kicking and screaming by Arthur who forced him into the bathroom and told him to get dressed or else. He really didn’t want to know what ‘or else’ meant.

It was no better at work. Arthur visited constantly, reminding him to drink his water and dragging him away from his work to eat. It was distracting. He was distracting. And Louis was close to losing his mind. So

much so that when Taron came to visit and check on their progress, he decided to do something rash.

“I quit.”

Taron’s whole form wavered for a minute from pure shock. “Wait. What?”

“I quit. I can’t do this anymore. The micromanaging and the sleepovers and the constant interruptions to my work. I can’t focus. This isn’t the job I applied for.”

Taron made a face, confused. “Sleepovers? What–” He froze, eyes widening in surprise. “Oh shit. I completely forgot about that. I was supposed to have a bed shipped, but I got distracted and…” He cocked his head, brows beetled together tightly. “If there was only one bed, then how–”

He seemed to be going through the whole range of emotions while running through the reality of the situation through his head. Meanwhile, Louis wanted to climb under a rock somewhere and hide. After this long, he’d honestly assumed Taron knew.

With a cackle, Taron spun and marched off, heading for Arthur’s open office. Louis followed only to make sure the stupid lion shifter didn’t say anything untrue. Maybe after forcing sleepovers for most of the week, Taron would agree to end the torment.

“Arthur, you animal,” Taron laughed. “Have you been sleeping at the condo this whole time? Why didn’t you tell me I forgot to send another bed?”

Arthur, who’d been doing paperwork at his desk, looked up, eyes narrowing ever so slightly on Louis before giving his full attention to their boss. “He’s a proven flight risk and sharing a bed makes it easier for my growl to keep him asleep.”

“Oh-ho, really?” Taron asked, way too damn gleeful about this. He didn’t seem to think at all that this was a violation or a problem. “Did he ask you to leave?”

“No,” Arthur replied, making Louis’s jaw fall open. Then it clicked shut. Wait a minute. Did he tell him to leave? He’d argued against it, sure, but he’d never outright asked him to leave. But that was semantics.

“I– I didn’t think I had to,” he argued. “It was obvious how I felt about it.”

“You were the one who built the pillow wall,” Arthur pointed out. Thankfully, he didn’t point out he was also the one who kept violating it.

Even after Arthur moved the bed to the opposite wall, he managed to roll to whatever side Arthur was on. It was embarrassing.

"A pillow wall?" Taron asked, delighted by this turn of events.

"Now I really quit," Louis snapped, spinning on his heel. He didn't get very far before Taron was dragging him back, still laughing like a demented gnome.

"No, no. No quitting. You're a treasure here and I'm sure we can figure something out," he cajoled. "Maybe for a little while, we'll end the sleepovers, see if Louis can be trusted to get rest on his own. It's been almost a week. Maybe he's learned his lesson."

Louis resented the learning his lesson comment, but he could probably be convinced to stay if it meant no more embarrassing wake ups. He didn't actually want to leave. It was his dream job after all.

Arthur's eyes narrowed in that way that Louis now knew signaled he was going to try to negotiate. It very rarely worked in Louis's favor.

"I can agree to no sleepovers if he meets me each morning for breakfast. Getting him to eat in the mornings has been a chore, and I don't want to have to chase him down to make sure he eats. I'll meet him at the condo and we'll walk to work together, stopping to get breakfast on the way."

Louis's head jerked up. Along the way… Did that mean…?

"I can't afford to eat out every day," he tried to argue, even though he really didn't want to. He was pretty sure Arthur was referring to the cafe from before, and it'd been delicious enough that he could maybe be convinced to go into work a little later if it meant coffee and croissants.

"You won't be paying for it. Put it on the company card," Taron said with a wave of his hand. "I'll approve it. Or I'll get Dorian to do it since this is his division and he'll understand when I tell him why. He was a lot like you once, you know. I should introduce the two of you. He can tell you what happens when you neglect your health for too long. It was just lucky his mate stumbled into his path at just the right time."

Taron continued his rambling, but Louis's attention was on Arthur. He raised that stupid eyebrow, silently asking *Well?*

With a defeated sign, Louis nodded once. *Agreed.*

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CHAPTER NINE

LOUIS

The new arrangement started right away. Arthur escorted him home that evening, coming inside long enough to pick up his things, then told him he'd be back the next morning for breakfast. No arguments, no negotiations. He'd be there, and therefore Louis had to be there because if he wasn't and he snuck off to the office, there would be consequences.

The real problem was just how difficult it was for him to sleep once the stupid lion was gone. He got his spot back on the bed, and despite having the freedom to work as long as he wanted, he found himself getting ready for bed at the same time he had been while Arthur had been staying here. It wasn't until after he'd crawled under the blankets that he realized he didn't have to go to sleep yet. He tossed the blankets aside, debated with himself for a few long minutes about whether he should get up because he could or go to sleep to prove he could take care of himself, and eventually caved and pulled the covers up again.

Only— Sleep didn't come like it usually did. He tossed and turned, tried to switch sides of the bed, and even stole a few pillows off the couch to resemble the pillow wall in hopes the routine would make him tired. It didn't. He couldn't sleep and eventually got up to work anyway in hopes of exhausting his mind enough to pass out.

That didn't work and the sun rose over the horizon while he was still grumbling to himself and poking at his device, not getting a whole lot done

because he was too irritated with the fact that he couldn’t sleep to actually focus.

It put him in a foul mood when Arthur showed up. His eyes were gritty, his mind was foggy, and he had absolutely nothing to show for it. This felt like the lion’s fault. He conditioned Louis to only sleep well when he was doing that stupid growl thing. Yeah. That was the reason.

“Good morning, Louis,” Arthur greeted when he yanked the door open.

Louis didn’t reply, shouldering past him and stomping toward the elevator.

Arthur, ever patient, didn’t comment, following behind him and entering the elevator after he did. He wasn’t wearing a suit like he did most of the week, though his jeans still looked tailored and the t-shirt he was wearing was practically spray painted on. It looked really soft too. How could a t-shirt be soft and that tight at the same time?

“Bad night?” Arthur asked calmly.

“Shut up,” he snapped back.

The whole weekend was a bust. He couldn’t focus on work, despite trying his best. He couldn’t sleep. He couldn’t even sneak off to Spellbound since Taron had warned him about the overtime thing and the consequences if he continued to ignore them. He basically spent the whole weekend stewing, only interrupted by the forced breakfasts with Arthur and the drone of his roommates socializing outside his door.

He was frustrated and grumbling to himself when he finally abandoned his attempt at sleep on Monday morning. He didn’t say a word to Arthur through their meal and the walk to the office, ignoring the glances the lion shifter kept giving him as he tried to figure out what was wrong. He was smart enough to realize now wasn’t the time to ask, though, and left Louis to his own devices, heading to his own office instead once they arrived on the research floor.

Louis headed straight for his workstation, coming to an abrupt halt when he rounded the temporary walls. This time, it wasn’t because someone was there waiting for him. No, this was something worse.

Despite being in the middle of something when Arthur forced him to leave on Friday, he hadn't left his project in disarray like this. No, not quite disarray. It looked like someone tried to clean up, but in doing so, moved everything around and ruined his whole system. The papers with his notes he had spread out with each stage of development so he could see what worked and what changed were all stacked neatly, the sticky notes gone. The workstation had been shut down, and he had no idea the last time he saved before he was abducted. So much work could have been lost if someone wasn't careful about saving…

His attention turned to his project and he made a choked sound, stray pieces all swept together into one pile, wires bent, soldering iron missing. It had obviously been moved because part of it was at an odd angle and the delicate connections he hadn't finished soldering were all ripped out. His heart pounded in his ears, drowning out his shallow breathing. His hand trembled as he reached to touch the project, fingers curling in before he could make contact like he couldn't bring himself to touch it.

"Oh! Hi, Louis!" a bright, cheery voice said as they bounced up next to him. Louis didn't even recognize who was speaking, the words filtering through the static in his mind like whoever was speaking to him was under water. "I'm glad I got here early today. I never get a chance to clean up your workstation, and it really needed it."

Still struggling to breathe, Louis turned slowly to look at the man beside him. He vaguely recognized him as one of the interns, though he couldn't remember his name. He was a young satyr, oblivious to the damage he'd done, and when he looked around Louis's workspace, he gave a sharp nod of approval before turning his big smile up at Louis again.

"What… What did you do?" Louis croaked.

The satyr's smile fell and he cocked his head, confused. "What do you mean?"

"WHAT DID YOU DO?"

ARTHUR

While concerned about how quiet Louis had been during breakfast, Arthur hadn’t thought it was a good time to pester the man. He planned on talking about it at lunch once Louis had some time to work and get back to his routine. He went to his office instead and had just turned on his computer when he heard Louis bellow across the research floor, his voice distraught and so full of anguish, it kicked Arthur’s instincts into high gear. He was moving before he even made the conscious decision to do so, his long strides eating up the distance between him and the researcher he’d taken under his charge.

He arrived to chaos, with the intern sobbing and Louis looking close to tears himself, his hands digging into his hair as he stared in horror at his workstation. More researchers crowded around, asking questions and demanding answers, until Arthur was sure no one could get a word in edgewise to explain what was happening. He stepped in, putting his hands on Louis’s shoulders and squeezing gently when he tried to wrench away, teeth bared in panic and anger before he realized who was touching him.

“I–I don’t– I can’t–”

“Come with me.”

He shook his head, a pained sound escaping him, but he didn’t fight when Arthur steered him away from the chaos and over to his office. He nudged Louis inside, shutting out the noise behind them as he closed the door.

He didn’t have much in the way of seating in here—any meetings he had, he used a conference room—but he guided Louis over to one of the chairs in front of his desk, squatting beside him when Louis sank onto the cushion and practically collapsed in on himself. He still hadn’t let go of his hair, his fingers fisted in it so tightly, Arthur was sure it had to be uncomfortable. Carefully, so he didn’t add any more pain, he freed the unruly locks from Louis’s grip, holding the trembling man’s hands between his own and squeezing them tightly to ground him.

“Louis. Tell me what happened.”

Letting out a choked sob, Louis curled in on himself further, pulling his hands out of Arthur’s grip to wrap his arms around his middle. He couldn’t seem to form words, and while it’d been cute when he’d been confused and trying to figure out what Arthur’s care was all about, now was not a cute moment. The man was distraught, and unless Arthur was willing to leave

him alone to find out why, there was no way for him to know what happened until Louis told him.

And there wasn't a chance in hell he was leaving the man alone now.

Sitting on the arm of the chair, Arthur wrapped his arm around Louis's shoulders, hugging him to his side. For the first time, Louis didn't fight him. He didn't hug him back, but Arthur hadn't really expected that. Just leaning his weight into Arthur's side was a surprise, and it made Arthur's chest ache at just how distraught Louis was that he was willing to lean on someone for support.

They sat in silence for a few minutes before Louis drew in a shaky breath, sitting up and shifting like he was going to push to his feet. Arthur stopped him, taking his hand and squeezing it gently.

"Wait. Not yet."

Louis shook his head, his expression determined, though he still looked like he was fighting back tears. "I need to fix it. I can't–" He swallowed hard, shaking his head again. "I need to fix it."

"And you will. But just take a minute. You've had a shock, Louis. You need a minute."

Finally turning those emerald eyes his way, Louis glanced between him and the door. "I don't know how long I have."

That made Arthur frown. "What do you mean?"

"I just– I need to fix it. Before they decide to– I was almost finished. I need to fix it."

He could tell there would be no changing his mind. Louis had latched on to the one thing he could control and he wasn't going to let go until he could fix whatever damage had been done. Maybe once he was settled again, Arthur could ask around and get the full story.

Releasing a long breath, Arthur nodded and stood, putting a hand on Louis's arm to steady him when he stood as well and swayed a little on his feet. Unable to help himself, he drew the shaken man into his arms for a hug, squeezing tightly and offering him as much support as he could muster.

"Whatever happened, I'll help you fix it. You don't have to do it alone."

For a moment, Louis stood frozen, his muscles taut, but he eventually relaxed, wrapping his arms around Arthur's middle and hugging him back. That he even needed this kind of support was concerning. This was the same man who fought tooth and nail against the idea of going home at a

normal hour. And here he was, clinging to Arthur like someone had taken something important from him and he wasn't sure how to get it back.

"Louis…"

Louis shook his head against Arthur's shoulder. "I can't… I just– Can we just not say it out loud? Please? Just for now."

The heartbreak in his voice made Arthur's chest tight. He squeezed a little harder, resting his cheek against Arthur's temple. "Okay. Whatever you need."

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CHAPTER TEN

ARTHUR

When they finally stepped out of the office, it wasn't to the normal chaos of the research floor. Normally, there would be the buzzing of electronics, the crackle of magic in the air, the murmur of different conversations as small teams worked together on their projects. It wasn't silent, there was still chatter, but no one had started on their work. And all eyes swung their way when the floor noticed they'd come out.

He felt Louis stiffen, his hands fisting at his sides. Arthur put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing supportively, and led the smaller man through the crowd and over to his station, where a familiar demon with a deep scowl stood just outside the temporary space.

"Mr. Washburne," Arthur greeted, tightening his grip on Louis's shoulder. Whatever happened must've been bad if they called in the head of research. Not the head of research in Medical Innovations. No, Hugo Washburne was the head of research for all of Spellbound. What the hell happened?

"Am I fired?" Louis croaked and Arthur whipped his head around, startled by the question.

"What? No. Of course not." He couldn't imagine Louis having done anything to warrant that. He shot a questioning look at Mr. Washburne. "Right?"

Mr. Washburne looked just as confused as Arthur felt. “Why would we fire you?”

The exhaustion on Louis’s face was so deep, it looked like it was carved into his face, his tone resigned when he said, “Because I made the intern cry.”

“That’s the least of his problems,” Mr. Washburne shot back. “If SR doesn’t fire him, I’m banning him from the research floors. It shouldn’t have to be said that no one touches projects without permission. How much damage did he do?”

Arthur’s stomach dropped. “He did what?”

Louis shook his head slowly, his focus on Mr. Washburne. “I don’t know. I didn’t– I couldn’t–”

He couldn’t bring himself to take it all in the first time. That, Arthur could understand. So could everyone else listening in. One of the researchers he was familiar with, Dax, came closer, giving Louis a friendly, if not a little pained, smile. “I can help you fix it, if you want. I’m just gathering data from a test phase on my project right now. I have the time.”

“Me too,” Knox offered from nearby.

More offers of support and help were made, and Arthur could tell Louis was starting to get overwhelmed. He put his hand up, quieting the group, and forced a smile, despite fighting his own instincts to fix the problem. He’d have words with the intern if the company decided to keep him. Everyone knew not to touch a researcher’s workstation without permission.

“Thanks for your offers. I think right now, we should give Louis a minute. If he needs help, he’ll ask.”

Mr. Washburne nodded. “He’s right. Go back to your work.”

He wasn’t someone you wanted to argue with, as he was known to have something of a temper, especially when his mate wasn’t around to soften him. The researchers all dispersed back to their own projects and workstations, leaving Louis, Arthur, and Mr. Washburne standing outside Louis’s workstation.

“Can I…?” Louis gestured awkwardly at the station.

Mr. Washburne stepped aside with a nod. “Yeah. I already took pictures for evidence. Don’t worry, they won’t be handed off to anyone outside of the head of SR. We don’t need to be worried about intellectual property theft on top of everything else. Send me a report of all the damage once you’ve got a better idea. I need to go see what SR’s plan is for this. There’s

no way in hell I'm letting that little shit back on my research floor again after this fuck up."

He stomped away, heading through the doors that led to the other research floors.

Arthur turned back to Louis, watching the man sit heavily in the stool in front of his project, his brows furrowed so tightly, it looked like they'd get stuck that way. "Louis? How can I help?"

Louis shook his head without a word. His hands flexed like he wanted to do something, but he wasn't sure where to start. That gave Arthur a general idea of what to do. He left long enough to grab his laptop and his own chair, wheeling it in to sit next to Louis. Opening the computer, he pulled open a blank document, fingers poised over the keys.

"Okay. Start at the beginning. Everything you touch, you tell me what's changed. If the damage can be fixed, and if it needs replacing. If anything is missing, let me know. Once you have it all written down, I'm sure we can come up with a plan to set it to rights."

Drawing in a long, shaky breath, Louis nodded, following Arthur's directions without complaint. It wasn't easy, he could tell the intern had done some serious damage to Louis's project and saying it out loud probably felt like chewing on glass, but he got through it. And once the list of damages was written down, his eyes started flicking back and forth and his hands started moving, just like Arthur thought they would. It felt overwhelming when it was all sitting in front of him, but he figured once Louis saw the damage more clearly, his scientific mind would kick into gear and he'd figure out where to go from there.

Arthur had already felt inclined to take care of the man, but after seeing him fall apart, he only grew more determined. This might not have happened if he had a team lead who paid attention. Arthur didn't let interns near the projects without supervision from the researchers. That the intern felt like he could mess with Louis's research at all told Arthur there was a serious lack of authority in regards to Basil's team. He made note of that as well, writing up the report so Louis could focus on his work.

Despite having his own work to do, he couldn't make himself leave Louis's side. Every time the poor man reached for something that wasn't where he left it, he froze for half a second, like his body didn't know how to cope. And each time, Arthur stood and helped him find whatever it was he

was looking for because he couldn’t stand to see such a fiery and stubborn man look so heartbroken.

Knox brought over a little mobile workstation for him to use, and he did most of his work on his laptop so he wouldn’t have to go back and forth to his office in search of paperwork. It would mean he would have some catching up to do tomorrow, but it felt necessary. Especially since Basil hadn’t even bothered to check in with Louis after the incident, even though Arthur was sure the yeti knew what had happened. Gossip moved like fire through the office. There was no way to miss out on something so big happening in the office.

After the shock Louis had, Arthur couldn’t bring himself to be so domineering about self care. When he noticed Louis rubbing his eyes and struggling to focus, he brought him a small mug of water, encouraging, “Just drink this and close your eyes for five minutes. Then you can go back to your work.”

Louis didn’t protest, which was telling in and of itself. This had rattled him more than he was willing to admit.

During lunch, Arthur slipped away to the sandwich shop across the street, buying something for him and Louis that wouldn’t take him away from his work longer than he needed to. His opinions hadn’t changed, Louis needed to have a better work/life balance to be healthy and happy at work, but today wasn’t the day to push. He hadn’t missed what Louis had said earlier. He had almost been finished. Being so close and having it ripped away from you wasn’t just something you could walk away from. He’d accept a few long days if it helped Louis get back on track.

It was when Louis couldn’t keep his eyes open that Arthur couldn’t ignore it anymore. The situation was difficult, but he wouldn’t be getting anything done if he was too exhausted to stay awake.

It was well past the normal time people left for the day. Arthur hadn’t been able to make himself leave without Louis joining him. He’d been considering the best approach to getting Louis to leave without upsetting him when he noticed Louis nodding off. Moving slowly, he leaned over the man and pressed the save button on the computer, just in case. Then, with

great care, he pulled the screwdriver out of Louis's hand and set it on the workstation right where he'd had it before.

Louis's brows drew together, his eyes struggling to open. "Huh?"

"Shh… You don't have to get up. I'll take you home."

That made Louis jerk, bloodshot eyes flying open as his whole body went rigid. "No. I can't– I'm not tired. I'm fine."

They both knew that wasn't true. He'd honestly assumed Louis hadn't been sleeping over the weekend, maybe to prove a point or something, so he doubted he'd had much sleep before this happened. Still, he didn't think it'd be easy to convince him to go when he was so anxious about walking away.

The doors to the main research floor opened, with Taron leading the way, along with Mr. Washburne, and a few others Arthur wasn't familiar with. From the look on his face, Louis either didn't know them or was too exhausted to remember at the moment because he frowned at the group, swaying a little in his seat as he tried to track them.

Taron, normally upbeat and jovial, softened his tone when he spoke. "Heya, Louis. I brought some friends with me to help you. I figured after what happened, you'd want a little security over your research. We're going to move it to a private room with a ward, alright? You can trust these guys. They're all researchers like you. They know how to be careful."

Arthur blinked in surprise. Private research rooms were usually held for top secret projects or dangerous ones that couldn't be touched without specific warding to protect those involved. While he didn't know what exactly Louis was working on, he didn't think Louis's device fit either of those scenarios or he would've suggested it earlier.

Rubbing his eyes roughly, Louis looked between them with a frown. "My project doesn't have the classification for that."

"Yeah, well, I'm the co-founder and what I say goes," Taron chirped.

Mr. Washburne shot him a dirty look. "Only you could get away with saying crap like that." He rolled his eyes at Taron's wide grin, giving his attention to Louis instead. "If someone screwed with one of my projects, I wouldn't be able to make myself leave either. We figured behind a ward was better, and wards are more stable with permanent walls to attach to. We can't guarantee it for every project, but for this one, we're making an exception. Walk us through what's going on. We'll help you move it."

The team of researchers helped Louis move his project while Taron and Arthur worked to move the workstation itself. Arthur checked several times that the project information was saved before doing anything and Taron had someone from IT load up all the information at the workstation in the private space so they wouldn't have to move the whole computer. It was a process—with how careful they were about security concerns, most projects were on specific workstations and it wasn't easy to load it elsewhere, but with a whole team, they got it done.

Louis hovered and looked like he'd prefer to stay and get things organized at the very least, but Arthur encouraged him to rest and start again tomorrow.

"We'll get here early and make sure things are set up how you like before the work day starts, alright? You won't be able to get anything done if you're too tired to think and you're more likely to misplace something if you're too tired to remember where you put it."

For the first time since that morning, a flicker of emotion crossed Louis's face. It looked a lot like exasperated annoyance. "Only you could make that argument sound logical."

Arthur felt a smile pull at his lips, his grip gentle on Louis's elbow as he tugged him away. "The ward will keep people away from your work. It's safer here than anywhere else. Let's get you home so you can get some rest."

Louis allowed him to tug him away, following the team who'd stayed late to set this up, but he was shaking his head the whole way, his face twisted into a grimace. "It won't matter. I won't be able to sleep anyway."

"Maybe you shouldn't have been so quick to kick Arthur from your bed then," Taron teased. "Cuddles are the best way to sleep well."

"Shut up, Taron," Mr. Washburne grouched.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

LOUIS

He hated that Taron was right. The stupid lion with his stupid purr/growl thing and his stupid amazing cuddling skills all led to better sleep than Louis had ever had.

He would never, ever say that to Taron, though. That troublemaker would have a field day and Louis really would never get a break. He was bad enough already.

The group split up in front, leaving him and Arthur alone. He stared down the street, counting the blocks until he arrived home and could faceplant in bed and maybe get some sleep. Ten blocks felt like ten miles and just the idea of trudging all that way made him want to turn around and go sleep under his workstation desk for the night instead.

Without asking, Arthur scooped him up, making Louis yelp in surprise and latch onto Arthur's shoulders to steady himself. "Wha-What are you doing?"

"Carrying you," Arthur said matter-of-factly, like this was something he did every day and wasn't incredibly embarrassing.

"No, you're not," Louis squawked. "Put me down."

With a long sigh, Arthur gave Louis a look that made Louis hesitate. He looked almost pleading. "Louis, I've had to watch you struggle all day, both with your ruined project and your exhaustion. I can tell how tired you are. Please, just let me have this. I promise, I won't make this a regular

occurrence. I just can’t stand here and listen to you whimper at just the thought of walking home and not do anything about it.”

Why? Why did he have to sound so sweet and sincere, like he cared about Louis’s wellbeing and just wanted to help him? Why couldn’t he sound like his normal bossy self so Louis wouldn’t feel so guilty saying no?

“I didn’t whimper…” he grumbled, then gave in with a groan and flopped his head against Arthur’s shoulder. “Fine. But I’m closing my eyes. If I have to watch the judgment in people’s eyes, I won’t be able to ever leave the condo again.”

Snorting, he felt Arthur shake his head and tighten his grip in a small hug. “No one is going to judge you. But closing your eyes is a good idea. You need rest. I’ll get you home.”

He chose not to argue with the whole needing rest thing, the argument was getting old, and instead rested his head more comfortably against Arthur’s massive shoulder. Seriously, the guy was all muscle. Was it a lion shifter thing? Or maybe just a shifter thing? Louis didn’t really pay much attention to physique when it came to supes. It didn’t matter. His power was his brain and that couldn’t be measured the way muscles were. Should it matter? Would it change the formula for his project if muscle density was different?

He thought he’d doze during the walk. He didn't think he’d fall asleep, only waking when Arthur carefully lowered him into his bed. He blinked his eyes open, frowning at the dark room as Arthur pulled off his shoes and started in on his outer layers.

“What’re you doin’?” he slurred, too tired for eloquence at the moment.

“Just getting you more comfortable. I’ll leave in a minute,” Arthur murmured in reply. How the man could see was anyone’s guess. Louis was too tired to figure out the logistics right now. He was too tired for much of anything at the moment. Including, apparently, a filter.

“Nooo… Don’t sleep well without you…” he groaned.

Arthur’s hands paused after helping him slide off his belt. Louis latched on to his arm, definitely not pouting or begging when he said, “Stay…”

“Louis…” Arthur’s voice sounded strained, like he was conflicted, which made no sense. The man didn’t have conflicted feelings. He did whatever he wanted, whether Louis complained or not. Like sleeping with his shirt off and exposing all those yummy muscles.

“Stay and I won’t work tonight,” he bartered. It was a lazy barter, he never woke up if Arthur was staying the night, but it was all his brain could offer him right now.

Still Arthur hesitated. Louis scowled.

“Stay and I won’t make the pillow wall,” he tried again. It didn’t ever work anyway. Somehow his unconscious self always found a way, even on that night when he’d tried tying his hand to the bed frame. He’d slipped out of it at some point and still ended up plastered against Arthur’s side.

“You said you didn’t want me to stay over anymore,” Arthur pointed out oh so logically. Jerk.

“I lied. I don’t like being told what to do. Stay or I’ll go back to Spellbound.”

That made Arthur snort. “I doubt you’d make it past the couch before passing out.”

Maybe. But he’d wake up eventually. He always did. He only slept through the night if Arthur was there.

Reaching out in the dark, he caught Arthur’s arm, trailing a hand over all those muscles and up until Arthur was forced to bend so he could reach the back of his neck. He pulled a little more, lifting his head to press a kiss to the stubborn man’s lips.

“Stay,” he murmured.

He didn’t remember much else after that.

After nights without sleep, waking up after a full eight hours was disorienting. The sun was over the horizon, turning the room an orangey-pink color, Louis’s brain felt like it was full of cotton, and it took way too long for him to figure out his mattress was breathing.

Wait. What?

His eyes flew open and he jerked his head up, a horrified sound getting caught in his throat when he realized what was happening. How did this happen? Why couldn’t he remember it happening?

Arthur staying over was… unexpected, but not entirely unwelcome. It explained why Louis had actually slept, as annoying as that was to admit. That part, he could accept. Unintentional cuddling he could accept as well,

since nothing he did ever managed to avoid that. But this wasn't cuddling. This was… intimate.

Somehow, instead of being pressed up against Arthur's side like he'd done a few times before, Louis had somehow managed to end up on top of the man, using him as an actual lion-shifter shaped mattress, complete with legs straddling the man's hips and what looked suspiciously like a drool spot on his naked chest. Did he mention the erection? That felt like it needed mentioning. Because just like the last time waking up with Arthur, his morning wood was very much awake and alert, only this time it seemed to have made a friend. Louis wasn't the only one hard and that just made the whole situation that much more horrifying. The only logical course of action he could come up with was pulling the blankets over his head until he expired from embarrassment or possibly asphyxiation. Whichever came first.

With a quiet groan, he pulled the blankets over his head, knowing it was in vain to try and run from this. Arthur wasn't so deep a sleeper that Louis could escape without him noticing. Not in this compromising of a position. Maybe he could request a transfer. Maybe to Dimensions-based research. A dimension or two between him and this embarrassing situation would be enough, right?

He should've quit while he had the chance.

A hand gently caressed his head over the blanket, Arthur's voice full of gravel from sleep. "You okay?"

How could he ask that question? Like he wasn't aware of the compromising position they were in that was likely—okay, probably definitely—Louis's fault. He'd always been the one to break the barrier and sneak in for cuddles. This was totally his unconscious body's MO.

It didn't help that his erection refused to go away. He was more embarrassed than he'd ever been in his entire life, and yet his stupid dick refused to go down, giving an eager kick when Louis squirmed in an attempt to escape and accidentally slid his body against Arthur's.

Why oh why couldn't the ground open up and swallow him right now?

Arthur rumbled out a sound that was similar to the growling purr he made, but with a lot more heat to it. His hands moved, drifting down Louis's back to his ass, encouraging another squirming wriggle that ground their cocks together. Louis bit back a moan, his breath coming in quick pants as he rolled his hips again.

“If you want me to stop, I will, but if you keep doing that, I’m going to assume you want something from me.”

“Stop talking,” Louis hissed. Talking made it real and something he had to acknowledge. He wanted to keep pretending he wasn’t currently responsible for their positioning and embarrassingly close to coming already.

With a warm chuckle, Arthur resumed squeezing Louis’s ass, grinding their hips together in a slow roll that was too perfect for words. Louis’s eyes rolled into his head and he lost the thread, giving in to his body’s demands. He ground his hips against Arthur’s, gasping against his chest and forgetting entirely about just how embarrassing this situation was. He was so distracted, he didn’t even complain when Arthur drew the blankets down and tipped his chin up, claiming his mouth in a heated kiss.

Muffled groans escaped him as Arthur’s tongue tangled with his. His movements became more frantic, tingling at the base of his spine warning him about his incoming release. With each roll of his hips, each tight grip of Arthur’s hands on his ass, he grew more impatient, his fingers digging into Arthur’s chest for purchase as the larger man readjusted him and the next grind of their cocks hit in exactly the right way.

“Mm!” His moan was muffled against Arthur’s mouth, his cock pulsing between them as his release crashed into him. It burned through him like fire, making him gasp and writhe, and he almost missed Arthur’s response, the man’s back arching as he came with a quiet groan.

As they both fought for breath, Louis’s brain came back online and he remembered who’s fault it was that they ended up in this position. With a whimper, he pulled the blankets back over his head, hiding his face against Arthur’s chest. Did mutual orgasms make it less embarrassing that he’d climbed the man in his sleep and used him as a bed?

No. No it did not.

With a warm chuckle, Arthur tugged lightly on the blankets. “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know. I heard the winter realm is nice this time of year,” he mumbled. He absolutely hated the snow, but he’d take it over confronting what just happened. Just a few days ago he was threatening to quit to get Arthur out of his bed, and now he was using him as a mattress and dry humping him until they both came in their pants.

It could be worse. He could have to work with the man. Oh, wait. That was true too. Maybe he needed to dig his own hole in order for it to swallow him up. Did he even own a shovel?

Arthur's body shook with restrained laughter, his tugs on the blanket a little more insistent as he demanded, "Louis, come out and talk to me."

"No, thanks. I'm going to stay here and wait for inevitable asphyxiation."

"A little morbid after sex, don't you think?" Arthur teased.

Maybe. Possibly. He'd always had something of a dark sense of humor. Not that many people were aware of that. He wasn't really a joking kind of guy. It was mostly comments in his head. Why he was sharing them with Arthur, he didn't know. It was just one more reason not to come out of his hiding place.

"Are you really going to skip work? I thought the world would have to end before you did something like that."

Ugh. The man had a point. He needed to get back to work. The intern's 'mistake' had set him back who even knew how long. He couldn't even guess because he couldn't tell just how much code he lost thanks to the computer being shut down without saving. He didn't want to think about that, though, and pulled the blanket down enough to glare up at Arthur for bringing it up.

Of course, the glare had absolutely no effect on the gorgeous man. "There you are. Can I entice you to come out with promises of scones and coffee?"

Louis wrinkled his nose. "It's really annoying that you know my weaknesses."

Arthur just grinned at him, his eyes wrinkling at the sides in a way that made Louis want to swoon. He wouldn't, he'd embarrassed himself enough, thank you very much, but it was a very near thing.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

ARTHUR

“You’re humming,” Louis complained.

Arthur just smirked. He could tell the man was embarrassed, his face gave him away with flaming red cheeks and a complete inability to look Arthur in the eye. It didn’t stop him from joining Arthur in the shower when he suggested it though. Apparently he’d been coming at this all wrong. He’d tried to care for Louis using usual tactics, demanding obedience and physically intervening if necessary. Even showering had been a battle. He had a much easier time getting Louis to shower if he offered affection instead.

That was definitely not a hardship.

The last thing he’d expected when he woke up was for Louis to be on top of him, grinding on him. He wasn’t complaining, but it did seem to be a little out of left field. He’d thought the man wouldn’t remember the kiss they shared the evening prior and would pretend it didn’t happen. It seemed he needed to get to know the human better before making assumptions.

Grabbing the bottle of shampoo from the alcove in the wall, he squirted a little in his palm and set it aside, reaching for Louis’s hair instead of his own. He got a confused look in response, but no arguments. He could get used to this.

“You need a haircut,” he commented. “Unless your plan is to grow it out?”

“No. I don’t know. I don’t care about my hair. If I wouldn’t look like an alien, I’d probably shave it all off so I didn’t have to deal with it,” Louis grumbled.

Arthur hummed, turning him so he could scrub the back without getting soap in Louis’s eyes. “Shaving your head is more upkeep than you’d think. You’d have to shave it every week to every few days depending on how fast your hair grows.”

He heard Louis’s disgruntled sound and felt a smile stretch across his lips. The man wasn’t happy unless he was working, was he?

“I can cut it for you if you want.”

The offer made Louis turn around, looking at him curiously. “You know how?”

“I do. I wouldn’t say I could replace a hair stylist, but I can do the basics.” He urged Louis under the water, tipping his head back and running his fingers through his hair. “You could grow it out if you’d prefer, but that might be just as much maintenance as shaving it. A shorter cut is easiest to maintain in my opinion.”

“This… is a really weird conversation,” Louis replied.

He chuckled. “Any conversation that doesn’t have to do with work is weird to you.”

Louis shrugged, straightening once Arthur was finished rinsing his hair. He looked awkwardly at the bottle, then back at Arthur. “Am I supposed to wash your hair too?”

Arthur grinned at him. “No. I like taking care of people. There’s not an expectation of reciprocity. Finish cleaning up so we can get going. I wanted us at Spellbound early so we can get your new workstation organized and we won’t have that time if we don’t hurry. It might be better to skip the cafe this morning if you aren’t willing to risk waiting in line cutting into your work time.”

Open conflict flashed across Louis’s face as he soaped up his body while Arthur washed his own hair. “I… I want to get there early. Getting organized is going to be a pain in the ass. But…”

But he really liked the cafe and even grumbling and annoyed, he still enjoyed his breakfasts over the weekend. Arthur snorted.

“Alright, let’s compromise. I’ll go to the cafe to pick up breakfast while you head to work to start in on your organization *only* if you promise not to complain about the interruption once I arrive. Deal?”

That earned him a scowl, but Arthur didn’t budge, smirking to himself when Louis rolled his eyes. “Alright, fine. I wasn’t going to complain anyway. You’d be going out of your way to get me my favorite breakfast. I’m not that much of a jerk.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it.”

The plan worked out in his favor since he needed to stop at home to change anyway. Louis’s plea for him to spend the night had gotten him to stay over, but he hadn’t had anything to change into since he’d brought all of his things home after Louis threatened to quit. He chuckled to himself remembering that particular conversation. Taron was suckered by it, but Arthur knew better. He wouldn’t have actually quit. The man put his job above his own health and wellbeing. It’d take divine intervention to actually get him to leave his job willingly.

Between stopping at home to change and popping into the cafe to pick up their breakfasts, he was a little late when arriving back at the office. The research floor was in full swing, people hard at work and chattering amongst themselves. Arthur went for Louis’s new workroom first, knocking gently so he didn’t startle the man if he’d actually finished setting everything up and started working already.

The door opened just a crack, Louis peeking one eye out suspiciously. Arthur didn’t have a chance to ask what the reaction was about before he opened the door wide enough to grab Arthur’s lapel and drag him inside.

“Louis? What’s wrong?”

“What isn’t wrong?” Louis complained, snatching up his coffee the minute Arthur offered it to him. The room was big enough that he could use the table against the opposite wall to eat without risking any crumbs or spilling near his project, and he slid himself on top of it, glowering at the door like it offended him. “People keep coming to talk to me. I’ve gotten four offers to help me, two just wanting to chat, and Zeraphine at reception keeps asking if I need anything.”

Arthur cocked his head. “It sounds like they’re being kind. Why is that a problem?”

“It’s not kindness, it’s pity,” Louis snapped. “They didn’t make offers like that or stop to chat before the intern messed with my work. They didn’t care. They just feel bad for me so they’re being nice.”

“Ah.” Sitting on the edge of the table next to the surly man, he offered him the bag of pastries and leaned against the wall, his expression

thoughtful. “That’s because they were terrified of you.”

Whipping his head up from where he’d been pawing through the bag for his croissants, Louis gaped at him. “Me? That’s insane! I’m human!”

“That’s true,” Arthur agreed. “But you’re also always scowling, grumbling under your breath, and you either glare at anyone who interrupts you or outright ignore them. You’ve also got access to tools that could seriously injure a person if not handled properly. What part of that do you think invites friendly conversation?”

From the way his expression twisted up, Louis couldn’t figure out a reply. Knowing him like he did, he didn’t think Louis hated people or disliked the idea of chatting with coworkers. He just didn’t like being interrupted and since he hadn’t yet figured out how to balance work with taking breaks, every interaction felt like an interruption. Hopefully, Arthur would be able to help with that. People were only trying to be nice. There was a disconnect if Louis saw that kindness as anything other than what it was.

“Are you against people helping you in general or has the incident with the intern made you more suspicious?”

“I’m not suspicious,” Louis growled. “I don’t need help. Just because I’m human doesn’t mean I can’t handle it myself.”

He sounded like he needed to prove something. Whether that was to himself or to everyone else, Arthur wasn’t sure, but he didn’t want to get him worked up before he had to return to his tasks. He was already tearing bites of his croissant off with significantly more vigor than usual. He wouldn’t be as efficient as he wanted to be if he was too pissed off.

Leaning to steal a kiss was both a ploy to snap him out of his irritation and a treat for Arthur. They hadn’t yet discussed the change in their dynamic, that conversation was better left for after work when Louis wasn’t distracted by all the things he needed to do, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t use it to his advantage now.

Louis blinked rapidly, stunned by the kiss, and like Arthur had hoped, thoroughly distracted from his ranting.

“What was that for?”

“It was a reward for sitting with me for breakfast without making me drag you away. I’ll talk to the staff and keep them from pestering you at least until lunch. You’ll have to deal with them hovering for a little while. *Not* because they pity you but because I think most of them spent yesterday

discussing amongst themselves how they'd handle the same thing happening to them and are a little unnerved by the prospect. They want to help because they'd want help if they were in your shoes."

Louis frowned, but didn't reply. He wasn't ready to accept that line of thinking yet. Which was fine. Arthur realized that morning while waiting for their coffees that he didn't actually know the human all that well. He knew his work habits, both good and bad, and he now knew a few secrets about him that he was sure no one else knew, like his inability to share a bed without cuddling, but he didn't really know the man. And since Louis listened better when offered affection, he figured now was a good time to change that. He'd figure out eventually why the man was so against asking for help. Maybe it'd help Arthur figure out better ways to help him.

"Did you need any help organizing this morning or did you get to a place you're comfortable with before I arrived?"

Talking about work was always a successful diversion and Louis's attention turned back to his workstation, eyeing it critically. "I think I'm good… I haven't ever worked out of one of these rooms before so I'm not sure how much will change, but I've got the basics."

"You let me know if that changes or if you need any help. I'm going back to my office and I need to check in on my team."

Gathering up the mess from their breakfast, he pressed another kiss to Louis's cheek before ducking out and almost running straight into Dax. The kraken looked between the door that Louis quickly shut behind him and Arthur, his brows tight with confusion. "Uh… I was going to offer Louis help again. I've got the free time."

"Let's save that offer for lunch," Arthur suggested. "He's still getting organized after everything moved last night and I told him I'd keep people away for now while he figures things out."

"Oh. Okay," Dax bobbed his head amiably. "He lives with someone I know, so I figured I'd offer, you know?"

Arthur patted Dax's shoulder as he urged the man away. He'd worked with the kraken before. He was a friendly guy, always quick to offer a hand even if the project didn't have anything to do with him. He'd be a good ally for Louis once he stopped being so suspicious of everyone's motives.

"Thank you, Dax. For now, let everyone know to give him some space. He needs to figure out how much needs to be done before he can fully get back on track."

“Ah. That makes sense. Sure, I’ll let people know.”

In the meantime, Arthur had work to do. Aside from checking in on his own team, he still had to pop in on Louis often enough to make sure he was staying hydrated and taking breaks. Intern debacle or not, he wasn’t going to let Louis hurt himself just to get his work done.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LOUIS

With a low growl, Louis shoved away from his desk, pacing the small space of the workroom and running his fingers roughly through his hair. He'd managed to figure out all the damage the intern had done, but fixing it was going to be a huge pain in the ass. His brain felt fried just trying to wrap his head around it. Not to mention, he was starting to worry the device was too small. He'd wanted it to be portable, like a handheld device, but the more he thought about it and the more time he spent around Arthur, the more he worried muscle density was going to become a problem. Not enough that the scanner wouldn't work per se, but it was more likely to miss something if it was too small. How did he combine the complexities of the initial scan with the need to account for body mass at the same time?

He was trying to work it out in his head, wondering where in the code he needed to account for that and if it was possible he might have to input possible density for every species—could he even do that?—when Arthur showed up. He stopped in the doorway, watching Louis pace.

"What's happening right now?"

"It won't work. I didn't build it for only certain species, and I can't figure out how to input all of it without bogging down the code. And each person is unique, even amongst their own species, right? There'd need to be a range. Not to mention the scanner would have to cover all that body mass. It might work for humans, but that wasn't what I wanted. I–"

Mid rant, Arthur stepped into his path, putting his hands on Louis's shoulders to stop his pacing. "Hey, hey. Stop. I need you to take a deep breath for me."

"I can't!" Louis shouted back. He was starting to spiral. He hated when this happened. He couldn't wrap his head around a project and it usually meant the whole thing was doomed to fail. But he couldn't let it fail. This was his first project for Spellbound. He'd been working on it for over a month. If he failed, they could fire him. They would definitely regret hiring him at the very least. What if he made code for each specific species and had a chip or something that could be switched out? It wouldn't be nearly as convenient, and carrying around a box of chips sounded annoying… And that didn't cover the mass issue. Was the scanner even strong enough?

"Louis, I need you to breathe for me. You're trying to figure it all out at once. One step at a time."

What step, though? Did he start with the density issue? Did he continue to fix what the intern broke, knowing it wouldn't be able to do what he wanted anyway? What about the coding? That would take days, and his knowledge of supe anatomy was decent compared to most humans thanks to his degree, but he wasn't all-knowing. Would he have to pause production to do more research? Did he need to do that before anything else?

Warm lips on his snapped him out of his spiral and he jerked back automatically. Did that stop Arthur? No, it did not. He cupped Louis's face in his big hands, claiming his lips in the most demanding kiss Louis had ever experienced. The man was downright rude about it, his tongue pushing between Louis's lips to tangle with his in a decadent dance that made Louis's knees weak. And just to make sure he had Louis's attention, he spun them and pushed him up against the wall, slotting a knee between his legs and caging him in with his big body.

By the time they pulled apart, Louis was panting, his lips felt swollen, and he was trying his hardest not to grind himself against Arthur's leg to get some relief to his throbbing erection.

"Holy shit," he breathed.

"Do I have your attention now?"

Smug bastard. Louis couldn't help but snark back.

"You've got the attention of parts of me. Not sure if you managed all of me yet. Do it again and see if–*mmph*!"

Note to self: Don’t challenge a bossy lion shifter unless you want them to follow through.

A heavy makeout session wasn’t exactly what he’d had planned for the afternoon, but he sure as hell wasn’t complaining about it. It was a lot better than spiraling about his failed project. Any time his mind even swung in that general direction, Arthur did something flirty with his tongue or used his grip on Louis’s hips to drag him closer, putting more exquisite pressure on his dick.

Ripping his mouth away, Louis warned between heavy breaths, “You’re going to make me come.”

Arthur hummed, running his lips along Louis’s jaw and down his neck. For one worrisome moment, he wondered if the lion shifter would actually stop or if he’d do something insane like let him come in his pants in some insane attempt to get him to leave work before he was ready. The bossy jerk wasn’t that diabolical… was he?

“Arthur…”

With a throaty chuckle that sent shivers up Louis’s spine, Arthur finally pulled away enough to give him room to breathe. “As much fun as that might be, I don’t think either of us has a change of clothes here.”

Was it wrong to be slightly disappointed? Did Louis actually want to fuck in his workroom so close to his project?

No…

Well… Maybe…

No, wait, no. The answer was no.

“Right. So, um… Maybe you should…” He gave a pointed look at the leg pressed between his, feeling his cheeks flush as Arthur smirked at him. There had to be some magic that lion shifters had beside that sleep-inducing purr. Something that gave them the ability to addle the brains of poor researchers who really needed to focus to figure out if there was a fix for his project.

Straightening, Arthur smacked one more kiss on his lips before pulling him away from the door. “Come on. A few of your coworkers want to have lunch with you. You’ll suffer the cafeteria for one day and I’ll reward you later for being nice to them.”

“Wait, I don’t want to–” He paused, pursing his lips. “...What kind of reward?”

Arthur’s grin was downright wicked. He didn't even need to say it out loud for Louis to know what kind of reward he was talking about.

Would that work? Sex as a bribe?

He thought about it, the memory of that morning flashing through his head.

Yep. It definitely worked. Damn him.

“It’s too crowded!” he tried, knowing he was going to give in anyway. It’d been ages since he got off, not even with his right hand. He was having a very hard time resisting the idea of another orgasm with a gorgeous, albeit really annoying, man.

“I’ll protect you,” Arthur cooed. “Let’s go, baby. You need to eat to fuel that brilliant brain of yours.”

Louis’s eyes went wide. “Oh, no. Absolutely not. There will be no pet names. I’m not an infant.”

Arthur ignored his complaints, dragging him out of the workroom and over to the elevators where a few other researchers were waiting. Did Louis miss the way Arthur checked first to make sure the door shut and the ward activated? No, he didn’t. Did it make him want to smother the man with kisses? Maybe.

“I really don’t like that you know my weaknesses,” he grumbled.

Arthur just grinned, but another researcher Louis was at least semi familiar with leaned forward to see around the group, giving Louis a commiserating smile. “Did Arthur make you one of his chicks?” Knox asked. “He did it to his whole team. He’s like a big mother hen, chasing us around to make sure we’re resting and eating like we should.”

Dax, who had a tentacle around the waist of someone Louis felt like he knew but couldn’t place, nodded his head enthusiastically. “I’ve got older siblings, so I knew the big brother act when I saw it. Do you know what he did when I pulled something while working out and didn’t immediately go see a healer? He called my older brother on me. I still haven’t heard the end of that, by the way. He calls twice a week to make sure I’m healthy and not overdoing it.”

He gave Arthur the stink eye, and got that all-knowing eyebrow lift in response.

Louis made a disgruntled sound. Why the hell did it bother him so much when he did that to other people?

The others must've thought the sound was in commiseration, not because he felt weirdly jealous over an eyebrow raise because they continued to share stories and tell Louis they understood what he was going through. Louis only half listened. Was that even a thing people got jealous about? Or had he been single and overly focused on his work for too long? When was the last time he dated? Undergrad?

"If you want, I can give you some tricks to get him off your back," Dax offered.

That got Louis's attention, and a dark look from Arthur which was kind of amusing.

"Try it and I'll call your brother again. Does he know about the dehydration incident from last week?"

Dax blanched and his companion coughed to hide a laugh, amused at the look of panic in the kraken's eyes.

The ride down to the cafeteria was crowded, and Arthur used it to his advantage, setting his hands on Louis's hips and leaning in to whisper in his ear.

"You look deep in thought. You're not working, are you?"

"No," he grumbled, casting a glance around to see if anyone was paying attention to them. They weren't, most of them were in discussion about some event they were all going to. Louis was too focused on Arthur's proximity to follow along. "How many people have you done this to, exactly?"

Because if he was doing the purring sleepover thing to everyone on the floor, Louis would definitely have a problem with it. He wasn't sure he had the right to have a problem, they weren't dating or anything, but that didn't stop him from being annoyed about it.

"Done what to? I'm always conscientious of my team and their needs, but I've never actually had to temporarily move in with one of them to get them to sleep properly. You've been a very adorable challenge so far."

He spluttered, twisting to look the man in the eye. "I–Wha–I am not adorable!" he whisper-hissed, flushing when someone glanced back at them with a curious expression. It was pure luck that the elevators opened before he was forced to explain himself.

As they headed for the cafeteria, Arthur leaned in to whisper in his ear. "You can argue all you want, that doesn't stop it from being true. Especially after last night."

“Last night?” He scrunched his face, trying to remember what the hell he was talking about. He didn’t actually remember much past Arthur picking him up to walk home.

“Mhmm. When you decided to bargain to get me into your bed. I tried to do the gentlemanly thing and leave after I dropped you off, but you kept begging and eventually manhandled me into bed with you. It was adorable.”

Was it possible for a human to combust from embarrassment? Why the hell didn’t he remember that happening? It’d been a few days without sleep, sure, and he’d had a rough day with the realization that his project was ruined and he basically needed to start over in some areas, but he hadn’t felt that tired when he left work…

“I’m glad it happened. Now I know what I have to do to get you to sleep. Thanks for letting me know.”

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ARTHUR

Louis looked like he was doing advanced calculations in his head, trying to figure out just how much he gave away the night prior. Arthur wasn't going to give away too much of the details, he'd lose his advantage, but he did enjoy watching the man flounder. He pressed his lips together to hide his grin, leading him through the lines of the cafeteria to grab food and over to a table big enough for their whole group.

"So, Louis, have you gotten an idea of how much needs to be fixed with your project?" Dax asked.

Arthur shot him a scowl. Anyone who worked with him knew they had to save work talk until after they finished eating. They didn't need indigestion on top of everything else they were dealing with.

Dax gave him a sheepish grin, practically hiding behind the human next to him. He wasn't from research, Arthur was generally aware of who was on the floor, but he seemed comfortable with Dax, patting him on the shoulder while trying not to smile. Boyfriend maybe?

While he was still glaring at Dax, he saw Knox out of the corner of his eye lean in to whisper to Louis, "He doesn't like it when we talk about work while we're eating. He thinks we'll get stomachaches. I mean, how cute is that?"

Arthur sighed. "I'm not being cute. I'm caring for your wellbeing. Something you all should be able to do on your own."

They all snickered, aside from Louis, who looked… disgruntled. He made that expression before when they were waiting for the elevator, like something was bothering him, but Arthur hadn't been able to figure out what. He really needed to get to know the man better so he could become more efficient at reading his expressions.

"Eat your lunch," he urged, tapping his fork on Louis's tray.

Louis made a face. "Are you always so bossy?"

Was it his imagination, or was there an inflection of affection in that question? It'd be a first, he'd never had a partner who didn't find his hovering to be too much, but he couldn't ask right now. Not with this table full of brats hoping to cause trouble for him.

"Always. He's always that bossy," Dax informed him.

Lorna, a mermaid who worked with Dax a lot, nodded rapidly in agreement. "Definitely. If project managers could be head of research, he'd definitely take over that role just by default, I think."

"He was okay at first, but it gets worse with time. If you think he's bad now, wait until he's known you for a few months." Marlie, a usually shy and very sweet cyclops, added.

Arthur felt his expression flatten. "Keep it up. I can assign team building activities all day long if I feel like there's too much strife on the floor. I'm sure you'd all love to be pulled away from your projects to play games all day."

Louis actually shuddered. "I'm glad I'm not on your team."

Marlie cocked her head. "You're not? I thought that was why he was hovering around you. I figured after Mr. Washburne showed up that you were switched onto his team or something."

Louis's whole body stiffened and he shot Arthur a horrified look. Had it been anyone else at the table, with their comments about him being bossy, he might've shared the details just for a little revenge. Louis's comment hadn't been malicious though, and he definitely hadn't intended to start teaming up with the others. He barely interacted with his fellow researchers.

"Louis isn't on our team. He's on Basil's team, and he does well there. I took a special interest in him when I saw he wasn't sleeping well and we agreed to work together to find him a better work/life balance."

"We agreed, huh?" he mumbled under his breath, but seemed to think better about saying it too loudly. The lie had kept them from having to share

the full truth of what Arthur's connection to Louis was and just how far he'd gone to get the man to relax.

Lorna huffed, an amused smirk on her face. "Let me guess. He thought you looked tired and decided you were now his problem to fix?"

"Something like that," Louis agreed, poking at his food. Without thinking about it, Arthur picked up his tray and switched it with his own, since he'd seen Louis glance at his lunch a few times like he regretted what he chose. The move got him a quick smile and he dug into the pasta without another word.

"See? Mother hen," Dax snickered, earning another scolding look from Arthur. When he pulled out his phone threateningly, Dax blanched, shaking his head rapidly. "I'm done. I swear. I'll be good."

The man beside him outright laughed, drawing Dax's attention away from Arthur and onto him, giving Arthur leave to actually eat his lunch. There wasn't much in the cafeteria he hated, the owners spent good money on high quality food service, but Louis had chosen a burger and fries, and it wasn't very healthy. He'd need to eat something better tonight to balance it out a little.

"Do you want more fish for dinner tonight?" he murmured low enough not to draw attention to the group, since he wasn't looking to share their current sleeping arrangements. The gossip would spread like wildfire.

Louis looked up mid bite, pasta still hanging out of his mouth and the most hopeful expression on his face, it was a little entertaining. He swallowed his bite quickly, asking, "What kind of fish?"

"I was thinking Mediterranean. Something healthy."

Louis's eyes got impossibly wider, his nod rapid and enthusiastic. "Yes. That sounds good."

"We'll have to leave here on time," he warned, trying really hard not to laugh. "I'll probably have to stop at the store on our way back to get everything we need."

It took no time at all for a man as smart as Louis to figure out his plan. He scowled, but couldn't resist the offer for a favorite dish. The man did love his fish.

"Fine."

LOUIS

“You’re pouting.”

Was he pouting? Possibly. Would he admit it? No, absolutely not. “No, I’m not.”

He followed Arthur around as he pushed the cart through the grocery store, grumbling under his breath about sneaky lions and inefficient workdays. He hadn’t figured out the problem with his project issues and he’d received an email from Mr. Yarrow saying he wanted an update soon so he knew what kind of timeline to expect after ‘the setback’. That was what he’d called it. A setback. Not a sabotage attempt by a presumptuous little jerk.

The more he thought about it, the more Louis felt like the incident had to be on purpose. He’d worked at Spellbound for six weeks and never had any issues with anyone entering his workspace or touching his things without asking first. Even the few times the cleaning staff came through, they asked first before emptying his waste bin and never touched anything on his workstation.

He hadn’t brought up his theory with anyone yet, but it’d crossed his mind a time or two.

“Halibut or cod?” Arthur asked, drawing him out of his thoughts. “I’m partial to cod, but I like both.”

“I don’t think there’s a fish I don’t like. You choose,” Louis replied distractedly, his mind a dozen miles away as he tried to come up with some sort of reason the intern thought it’d be okay to touch his project. Even if he was a complete idiot, he’d know not to touch someone’s active work, right?

A hand caught his elbow, stopping his forward momentum. He hadn’t actually been watching where he was going, just kind of following along with the direction of the cart, and he startled when Arthur stopped him from walking into a display of canned soups.

“Alright, Louis. Tell me what’s on your mind. Whatever it is has to be important if you can’t focus on walking.”

His normal response would be to jerk away and insist he could handle it himself. That’s what he’d done his whole life. But… Arthur had never given him any reason to distrust him or make him feel like he had to prove

himself to earn respect. He cared, which was more than Louis could say for most of the people in his life.

“I think… I think the intern sabotaged my project on purpose.”

Arthur’s brows drew together, but he didn’t immediately dismiss Louis’s claim. “Okay. Why do you think that?”

“Think about it. I’ve been working at Spellbound for over a month now. I’ve never had anyone go anywhere near my workstation while I wasn’t there. Not interns, not cleaning staff, not even other researchers. When a workstation is signed out, it’s respected as our space and no one goes near it. So why, right when I’m getting close to reaching my first testing phase, did an intern think it was okay to go into my workstation at all, much less move things around and throw things away. I get that he’s just an intern but surely Spellbound wouldn’t allow interns that stupid. Right?”

Arthur’s expression was harder than Louis had ever seen it, even after Louis had tried to run away when he was embarrassed and very nearly tripped down the stairs to get away. It didn’t feel directed at him, though. His eyes were narrowed, but his gaze was distant, like he was running through the possibilities the same way Louis had been.

“You have a point,” he conceded. “I haven’t heard what happened to the intern yet, but if it was deliberate sabotage, we’ll need to get security involved, and contact Mr. Washburne again. If this is another act of corporate espionage in any way, we may have a much bigger problem than just your project. We’ll need to look into every project to see if there’s anything that’s been tampered with. Or at least every project in the office not warded.”

Louis’s stomach swooped at the implication. “It’s… only a theory. I could be wrong.”

“That’s why there’s an investigation,” Arthur pointed out. When Louis only frowned at him, he cupped his jaw, stroking a thumb over his cheek in a way that made Louis’s breath catch. “Whether or not it's true, it warrants looking into. You’re right in that this has never happened before, at least not as far as I’m aware. And while we’re actively trying to fix what was broken, you still lost time and data that was crucial to what you were working on. Not to mention the pieces that are still missing. If there hasn’t been an investigation started, I’ll start one myself. You deserve to know where the disconnect happened to allow this to occur.”

His whole life, Louis had faced his challenges alone. From a family too afraid of supes to let him go to a decent public school to professors who thought he was aiming too high and should stick to ‘where he belonged’. Any time he faced pushback, he had to face it alone. Having Arthur not just defend him but insist on taking action to find out what happened, meant more than the lion shifter knew.

“Thank you… I don’t– I’ve never had someone who had my back like that before. So, uh, thanks.”

His expression softened and he smiled, leaning in for a chaste kiss. This time, Louis didn’t freeze when their lips touched. He leaned into it, dragging it out a few extra seconds to really show Arthur how much it meant to him.

Louis blamed the devastating effect the man’s kisses had on muddling his brain when they pulled apart and he blurted, “So you’re staying over tonight, right?”

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LOUIS

The lion was a lot more wily than he thought. Apparently when he'd stopped at home that morning to change, he'd packed an overnight bag just in case Louis wanted him to stay. He'd only intended to leave it at the condo in case he needed it, but still. The man came prepared. Louis hadn't even noticed the duffle bag Arthur had slung over his shoulder, his attention too wrapped up in his work and the incident.

It meant they didn't have to make an extra trip to Arthur's home to pick up stuff for him to stay overnight, but Louis wasn't sure how he felt about the presumptuousness of it all.

He helped carry the groceries back since he wasn't completely inept when it came to social expectations, and his face flushed when Arthur took his free hand and held it the entire walk home. He wasn't really a public affection kind of guy. Then again, he wasn't really a dating kind of guy either, but that didn't seem to faze Arthur in the slightest. He'd at some point decided they were dating and that was that. Louis couldn't tell if he liked that or not. He liked that he didn't have to have any awkward conversations, and Arthur wasn't coming into it blind thinking his attention would be diverted often from his projects, but it felt like he should have a say in it… right? Was it weird that he kind of wanted to just keep things going as they were?

"You're concentrating hard over there," Arthur commented.

Louis blinked and realized they were in the elevator of the condo. When had they gotten back?

Arthur was watching him with that calm and steady patience he always had when dealing with Louis. He never raised his voice or complained. He did manhandle if Louis didn't listen the first few times, but not in a painful way. Just in a 'you didn't move so I'll move you' kind of way. Was that odd?

Arthur released his hand, tapping on Louis's nose with a smirk quirking his lips. "Always so distracted. You're helping me with dinner tonight. If you're thinking this hard, your brain needs a break to process."

He hated that he was right. There was too much going on in Louis's head right now. And while normally he'd latch onto one of his projects and ignore literally everything else, he didn't see the harm in taking a short break. He was hungry, and if he helped, he'd get to have the cod they'd picked up sooner.

"Fine. But I'm going to do a little work on my personal project after dinner. If I don't get at least something productive done today, I won't be able to sleep."

"I think I'll be able to help with that, but sure, I don't see a problem with a little time on your project. Do you know how to cook?"

The elevator dinged and Arthur took his hand again, leading him out and to the condo, holding the door open for him so Louis could go in first. "I know the basics, I guess. I never really had the patience to learn anything complicated."

"That's fine," Arthur replied. "We'll walk through it together."

He shrugged out of his suit jacket, draping it over his arm and stepping out of his shoes. Louis did the same because it seemed like everyone else was doing it, and dropped the grocery bags onto the counter, looking around with a frown. He hadn't spent much time in here. He didn't know where anything was.

"I'm just going to put these in your room. I'll be right back," Arthur informed him, lifting the jacket and duffle.

Louis waved him off, pulling the groceries out of the bags and setting them aside. He didn't know the specific recipe Arthur was going to be making, but he had a general grasp of cooking and could at least prep it for him. He preheated the oven since baking was better for flaky fish, and

managed to find a cutting board and baking dish. He was patting dry the fish filets when Arthur came back.

“Okay, so to start we need to–” He froze, halting mid sentence as he noticed Louis already working. “Oh. I thought you said you didn’t know how to cook.”

Louis made a face. “I can manage. I needed to take general courses for my undergrad and my roommate at the time asked me to take a course on basic cooking with them. I figured if I had to waste time on general education courses, they might as well be something I’d use in the future.”

He sliced the vegetables they’d picked up, his mind tracking tasks like he was completing an experiment. He’d struggled with his cooking course at first until his roommate put it in a way he understood. Treating the whole thing like an experiment with specific steps, he could generally do a decent job finishing it.

As Arthur handled the seasoning, Louis put the roasted baby potatoes into the oven since they’d take longer to cook. The thin asparagus was laid on a pan with a drizzle of olive oil and went in with the fish. And finally, the bread replaced the potatoes when they were finished so it was warmed by the time the meal was ready.

When it was all pulled out, Louis tipped his head with a frown. “This is a lot. Why did we buy this much?”

“Because its polite to feed others when you’re cooking in a shared kitchen,” Arthur answered. It was then that Louis noticed they weren’t alone in the kitchen anymore.

“Louis! I didn’t know you could cook!” Dax exclaimed.

Louis’s confusion deepened. “Dax. I didn’t know you lived here.”

Arthur made a choked sound, spinning to look at him incredulously. “You don’t know who your roommates are?”

He shrugged. “I only come here to sleep. I never paid attention to who else was here.”

Why the lion shifter looked so horrified by the revelation, he wasn’t sure. It was the truth. Though he was kind of surprised he hadn’t noticed Dax before. The man had tentacles. That seemed like something he would’ve noticed.

“I, uh… I’m not one of your roommates, Louis,” Dax said, looking a little bewildered himself. “I’m here because I’m seeing Mateo.”

He gestured to the man beside him with the caramel skin and dark hair. The same man who'd been at the lunch earlier that day. Louis snapped his fingers and pointed at him. "That's where I know you."

"Oh gods," Arthur groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I have a lot more work to do than I thought."

Louis ignored him. Knowing your roommates wasn't a requirement for healthy living or whatever else he and Taron wanted from him when they'd come up with this whole life supervisor idea. Though, how it was going to wrap up when he couldn't seem to sleep without Arthur present was something he'd need to ask the two in charge of this stupid experiment. The minute Arthur went back to his life, Louis would return to old habits.

Was it his fault Arthur had trained him to sleep using that purring thing? Now he couldn't sleep without it.

Dishing out portions to the two other men who were joining them for dinner, he nudged Arthur out of his way so he could set them on the island. There wasn't a table in the condo, and whenever Louis ate here, he always ate at his desk in his room, but he got the feeling Arthur wouldn't allow that. He was still gaping about Louis not knowing who his roommates were.

"Are we going to open the wine we bought, or was that for another occasion?" he asked in an attempt to get the lion moving. He wanted enough time to get to work on his magicless ward project before bed.

With a growl that was very much not human, Arthur spun and pulled out glasses for the wine, pouring some for the four of them and sitting next to Louis at the island with a scowl.

"Didn't you warn everyone against eating while upset because it'd give them indigestion? Does that premise not apply to you?"

He'd said it partly because he wanted to enjoy his meal without Arthur growling, but also because he wanted to see what he'd do if someone called him out about his own behavior. He was not disappointed, smirking when Arthur's expression flattened and he narrowed his eyes.

"Don't start. I'm just trying to understand how you can live under the same roof as a group of people and not know who they are. Where are the others? Do you all generally avoid each other or that a Louis specific thing?"

Dax tipped his hand side to side. "They're not unkind to one another, but they're not close either. When Taron created this program, I don't think he realized how awkward it would be putting five grown adults with jobs

and lives of their own into one space. I think the program would do better if each person had their own private apartment."

"Goddess, no," Arthur argued. "If Louis lived alone, he'd starve or die from dehydration. He needs people to keep him alive."

Louis looked up from his plate, his eyebrows practically pinned together in confusion. "No, I don't. I'd be fine."

"Have you ever lived on your own before?" Arthur countered.

He opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again. Okay, so technically, no. He'd never lived on his own. He lived with his family until undergrad, then in the dorms until he graduated with his PhD, then on Terrence's couch until he got hired at Spellbound and Taron created the program. No one ever babysat him like Arthur did, though. It was just easier living in the dorms because there were always snacks on hand or his roommate was nice enough to share meals with him.

"I don't need a babysitter," he finally replied. He didn't know what else to say. He got the feeling whatever he said, it wouldn't be good enough for Arthur.

"Mhmm… Eat your fish," Arthur instructed.

"As for the others," Dax continued after a moment. "I think Owen and Kaz went to try out that food truck park experience a few blocks away. They're friends I think. I mean, most everyone is friends with Kaz since he feeds everyone whenever he cooks. I'm not sure where Nylian is right now, but he wouldn't want to share the meal anyway. He's vegetarian."

Louis pulled a face. He couldn't even imagine doing that. Who would want to go their whole lives without eating fish?

"Well at least someone is feeding Louis. Though I don't understand why you can't just feed yourself. You obviously know how," Arthur said, giving him an exasperated look.

"Cooking means shopping and planning. Both take time I don't have."

Dax snorted, shaking his head when Louis glanced at him. "Oh man, you really don't know who you're up against, do you? If you aren't careful, Arthur will do something crazy like mate you just to make sure you're taken care of."

Louis stiffened, though he was careful not to look at Arthur again. Was that all the kissing and stuff was for? Was it all to make sure Louis was taking breaks like Arthur wanted? Because that… hurt. More than he was willing to admit.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ARTHUR

Arthur had thought getting both his favorite food for dinner and time to work on his personal projects would've been enough to put Louis in a better mood. He wasn't sure why the man was grumbling and glaring at his project like it somehow offended him.

For a little while, he left it alone. Louis had a lot going on and he didn't want to be so overbearing that he only pissed him off more. He got changed and ready for bed, and spent the evening reading the newest book the CEO's mate had just released. They were a fan favorite around the office and Arthur had been lent the first one from someone in the office when it first came out. He'd been buying them on release day ever since. This one had come out around a week ago, but he hadn't gotten a chance to read it until today.

He lost himself in the storyline until the grumbling from the desk got too hard to ignore. Louis talking to himself while he worked wasn't unusual, Arthur had heard him do it before—usually when he was too tired to think straight and needed to hear himself say what he was doing to stay alert. It wasn't usually so irritated and sharp, though, and he glanced up from his book to watch as Louis actually glared at his device, his movements jerky like he was too pissed off to be careful with the delicate device. When something snapped, Louis let out a frustrated shout and lifted the thing like he intended to smash it to pieces.

Moving as fast as his shifter speed would allow, he caught Louis's arm before he could break his project, pulling it out of his hands and setting it aside. He squatted beside the fuming man, grasping Louis's hands in his to stop him from picking anything else up to throw instead.

"Louis? What's going on? Why are you getting so pissed off right now?"

Louis turned that glare onto Arthur, and if looks could kill, he'd be dead on the floor. The man was beyond pissed.

"Why are you here?"

Blinking, Arthur cocked his head slightly. "You invited me. Don't you remember?"

Louis shook his head roughly. "Not that. Why are you here helping me? Am I just a project to you?"

Arthur felt his eyebrows lift into his hairline in surprise. "I– What?"

"A project, Arthur! Am I just a project to you? Is that why you– Why we–" He flapped a hand at the bed, his cheeks red but the anger still firmly in place. "That's messed up, I hope you know. Using *that* to control me. If you're only doing it because you and Taron decided I needed help, then you should just go home."

Pressing his lips into a tight line, Arthur took a breath before responding. He didn't want to match Louis's energy, even if the question was insulting. "Need I remind you, I didn't initiate *that*. You did. Just like you asked me to stay and you kissed me first."

Louis opened his mouth to protest. "No, I didn't–"

"Yes, you did," Arthur pushed. "The night before when you were begging me to stay and offering every bargain you could come up with to get me into your bed. I'm only a man, Louis. Having a gorgeous, sweetly stubborn man tugging me into his bed and kissing me isn't something I can easily dismiss. And need I remind you, you're the one who climbed on top of me, not the other way around. So why are you really angry right now? Because to me it looks like you're looking to blame me for something that was consensual between the two of us."

The man looked disgruntled by Arthur's arguments, but couldn't seem to come up with a response back. Arthur squeezed his hands gently.

"If you regret it–"

"I don't," Louis snapped, then dropped his tone into an unhappy grumble. "Dax said you'd mate me just to make sure I was taken care of.

The thought bothered me.”

Drawing in a breath, he let it out slowly, keeping his tone patient. “First of all, Dax was joking. Second, not even I am that overbearing that’d I’d permanently bind you to me just to make sure you were taking care of yourself. Mate bonds are sacred to supernaturals. The only way I’d bind myself to you is if you turned out to be my mate.”

There was no way of knowing who his mate was off the bat. Only a few species knew at first meeting. Mating magic was convoluted and often inconvenient, so most supernaturals didn’t recognize it until at least a month into knowing they’d met their match. There were matchmakers out there who could tell before things got serious, but they were expensive and a good portion these days were a scam. It wasn’t something Arthur had ever bothered to look into. He figured if he ever met his mate, he’d let things happen naturally. He certainly wouldn’t bind himself to someone just because they seemed incapable of taking care of themselves.

It was kind of nice that Louis cared enough not to want something superficial. But it did beg the question, “You started this, Louis. What were you hoping for? Did you just want a bit of fun, or were you looking for something real?”

“I don’t know!” Louis slumped, grumbling under his breath, “I’d really hoped I didn’t have to have this conversation.”

“Mm. Healthy communication between partners is such a bother, isn’t it?” Arthur drawled, smirking when Louis shot him a dirty look. “I can tell you I’m not great at casual. A one night stand here and there is fine, but if I’m spending a lot of time with someone I’m also sleeping with, I’d have a really hard time compartmentalizing like that. If we’re going to repeat more of what happened this morning, I’d prefer an established relationship.”

Louis made a face, admitting, “I’ve never been in a relationship before.”

Arthur blanched, eyes wide, but before he could start panicking about ruining Louis’s first time with a rushed frot, Louis corrected his train of thought.

“I’ve had sex before. My roommate in college showed me how to use the apps so I could deal with tension. I just never had time for more.”

That was a relief. And it honestly matched Louis’s personality. If he could find a quick and efficient way to deal with tension so he could get back to work, it wasn’t surprising he’d use that and not try for anything more.

“Well, is it something you’d want to try, or would you prefer to go back to the way things were?”

He knew what he wanted, but he wasn’t going to force Louis into more just because they’d hooked up that morning. No matter how much he liked the man.

Louis glanced at the bed, then down to his hands, his cheeks turning a light shade of pink as he mumbled, “I don’t know. I guess I could try it. I never had time before but with you forcing me to go home early, I have time at least.”

Arthur resisted the urge to roll his eyes. The man was such a brat. Still, he couldn’t help the smile stretching across his face. Louis wanted to try a relationship. He wasn’t willing to let that morning pass unnoticed. Arthur liked that.

And because he knew his companion well enough by now, he chose to tease instead of continuing with the heavy conversation for Louis’s sake. “I don’t force you to go home early. I force you to go home on time. There’s a difference.”

“Time is a construct,” Louis said, a smirk pulling at his lips.

“Correct. A construct all of society adheres to so they can maintain healthy lifestyles and get fresh air and rest every once in a while. You’re not philosophizing your way out of rest. Now come on. You need to get ready for bed. You’ve been working long enough.”

Louis frowned at his project, then back at Arthur. “But I barely started. I couldn’t concentrate before. I just need to–”

“Sleep. You just need to sleep. You’ll be more productive tomorrow if you sleep tonight. Come on. I’ll grab you some pajamas while you brush your teeth and wash your face. Up.”

He hoisted Louis out of his chair, ignoring his arguments for why he should continue to work on his project. Dating or not, Arthur was not going to give into his demands. He cared for the man too much to see him work himself to death.

“Aren’t people who are dating supposed to be nicer to each other?” Louis grumbled around his toothbrush. He likely thought Arthur couldn’t hear him since they were in separate rooms and when Arthur came back out, he was busy scowling at the sink.

“People who are dating are nice to each other. If you’re good and get some sleep, I’ll be very nice to you tomorrow morning. Tonight, you need

to get some rest.”

That got Louis’s attention. He turned his heated gaze onto Arthur, eyeing him up and down like he was a particularly tasty looking snack. Arthur grinned. He never thought about dating someone he was helping before. This would be fun.

“Bed. If you want sex at night, you need to put down the project a lot earlier than this. I’m going to grab a glass of water. If I catch you working on your project when I get back, I won’t let you touch it at all tomorrow.”

That got him another scowl. “Bossy.”

“Stubborn,” Arthur shot back, smacking a kiss on Louis’s forehead. “Hurry up. It’s getting late.”

“It’s barely ten thirty!” Louis shouted behind him when Arthur left the room. Arthur just chuckled.

He came back with the water to find Louis dressed and in bed on his side, still looking adorably stubborn and grouchy, but when Arthur crawled in next to him, he noticed Louis staring at the spot between them.

“Want to know one of the nice things about established relationships?” Arthur asked as he got comfortable.

Jerking his gaze away from his actual preferred spot, Louis looked around the room like he was trying desperately to avoid eye contact. Arthur bit back a smirk.

“Cuddles are not only welcome, they’re expected. So come here already and stop pretending you won’t end up against me after a few minutes anyway.”

Louis whipped his head around, eyes wide. “A few minutes?”

Arthur’s grin turned wicked. “That’s usually all it takes. You’d pass out, and a few minutes later, you’d be wriggling under the pillows until you were cuddled against my side. I honestly thought you were doing it on purpose until I realized once asleep, you sleep like the dead. The only time we bypassed that little song and dance was last night, when you–”

“Okay! I get it!” Louis yelped, sliding across the bed until he was up against Arthur’s side.

Arthur chuckled, putting his arm around Louis’s shoulders. The man was stiff at first, uncertain now that he was starting this position while he was fully awake and aware of what was happening, but once Arthur started growling quietly, he melted and fell asleep fast. And a few minutes later, he

wriggled closer until Arthur had himself a Louis-blanket and a smile stretched across his face.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LOUIS

Waking up on top of Arthur for a second time was no less embarrassing than the first time. He'd thought since he went to sleep cuddling with the man, he would be less inclined to use him as a mattress sometime in the night. But nope, he was asleep on top of the lion shifter, his body buzzing like that purr thing was inside him instead of just against his ear.

Maybe it was a comfort thing. His body recognized that he couldn't sleep without the purring thing, so it tried to get as close to it as possible so he could sleep without interruption.

Of course, that didn't explain him waking up hard and aching. That, he blamed on biology. Or more specifically, on morning woods and sexy lion shifters sleeping shirtless underneath him. Who wouldn't wake up aroused when pressed up against all that warm skin?

He somehow always managed to wake up before Arthur, and he took the opportunity to shift his weight so he could really look at the man. His hair, which was gelled and immaculate during the day, was soft and tousled, taking the edge off that overwhelming bossy presence he always seemed to have. His expression was relaxed, his breathing deep and even, somehow not interrupting that purr that quietly rattled in his chest all night long. Louis put a hand against it, tipping his head curiously. Maybe he needed to do some research on lion shifters. He wanted to know where the purr came from and why it put him to sleep so effectively. Was something he could

replicate? They had sound machines out there with noises to help people rest. Would the lion purr thing work just as well? Or maybe even better than simple rain sounds or white noise?

Arthur's mouth quirked up at the sides, though his eyes stayed closed, his gravelly morning voice twinged with amusement when he asked, "Are you studying me, doctor?"

Louis felt his cheeks flush, and if it weren't for Arthur's erection pressed against his hip, he'd be more embarrassed. "A little. I'm wondering where the purr comes from. It sounds like it comes from your chest, but if it was, then wouldn't breathing at the same time be difficult?"

Arthur blinked his eyes open, his brows furrowed. "It's not a purr. I'm not a house cat. It's a growl."

"What's the difference?"

Arthur looked a little confused for a moment, so Louis continued.

"If it is a growl like you say, then wouldn't it be impossible to continue it all night long?"

"Maybe for a human. I'm not human. And humans notoriously have bad education on supes. It's a growl."

If he thought Louis would be deterred by that argument, he was sorely mistaken. He took classes in college on supes and the basics of their anatomy and magic. He had to in order to be able to create things that worked for all species. He wasn't as clueless as an average human might be and he was more than a little familiar with supes using that argument to deter him from a certain thought process.

"So you're saying it's a sustained growl that doesn't interfere with breathing patterns or your ability to sleep, and is at the right frequency to help me sleep at night as well?"

"...Yes." Arthur looked suspicious when he replied, his eyes narrowed on Louis like he knew what was coming.

Louis bit back a laugh, raising his eyebrows. "That's a purr."

"It is not! It's a–"

"Purring growl?" he offered with a smirk.

With an actual growl, Arthur twisted and put Louis underneath him, his voice firm. "Yes. A purring growl is still a growl. No more talking."

Then he shut Louis up in the most effective way possible. With his tongue in his mouth.

With a groan, Louis let himself be distracted. He didn’t actually care about being right anyway. He just liked ruffling Arthur’s feathers, since he so often was in control and seemed so unflappable. It was nice knowing he wasn’t completely unaffected. Even bossy lion shifters lost their control every once in a while.

The thought made him want to push buttons and see how much it would take to make him really lose control. He wrapped his legs around the larger man’s hips, fisting his hair and giving it an experimental tug. The growl got louder, almost like a warning, which was almost like proof that the purring thing wasn’t a growl since they didn't sound remotely similar, but before he could break the kiss to point it out, Arthur lifted off him enough to shuck both their sleep pants and fisted Louis’s cock, scattering his thoughts entirely.

“Lube?” Arthur murmured against his mouth.

How he expected Louis to answer when he immediately tangled their tongues together again, Louis couldn’t be sure. It was hard to care when the sexy man was stroking with a firmer grip than he was used to. Goddess, it felt good.

“Come on, baby. Focus,” Arthur teased, stopping Louis from complaining about the pet name by rubbing against the spot just below the tip that made Louis’s back arch and his breath catch.

Since he couldn’t find enough brain cells to rub together to form words, he flapped a hand at the nightstand before pulling Arthur down for another kiss. The lion shifter allowed it for a few moments, but his bossiness came back eventually. Louis didn’t see it coming when Arthur grasped both his wrists and pulled them over his head, pinning them to the pillows. He looked incredulously up at Arthur, who grinned at him, leaning enough to pull open the night stand and pull out the bottle of lube.

“Unused? Baby…”

His tone was so filled with disappointment, Louis felt his face flush. He rarely indulged in sex anymore. He was too busy trying to find work that was actually in his field of study, and then once he started Spellbound he didn’t have time.

“Shut up,” he grumbled.

Thankfully, Arthur didn’t comment further, it would’ve pissed Louis off if he did and ruined the mood, and once he opened the bottle, he dribbled a

small amount of the slippery liquid directly onto both their cocks, making Louis twitch and shudder at the cool slickness.

“Oh, gods,” he groaned when Arthur fisted him again, his strokes slow and methodical, like he wanted to completely obliterate Louis’s brain cells and was in no hurry to do it. No amount of bucking or writhing did much good, especially because he didn’t have great leverage thanks to Arthur still pinning him down and straddling his thighs.

“More… Arthur, more!” he demanded. Or, he tried demanding anyway. Arthur didn’t budge or change speed. If anything, he slowed even further. Was he… punishing him?

“Careful, Louis,” Arthur purred against his ear, readjusting to take them both in hand and stroking with that same psychotically slow intensity. “You’re in bed with a predator. Keep making noises like that and you’ll force me into a rut.”

“I don’t… *Ngh.*.. know what that is…” he panted. “But if it means you stop torturing me, then– Ahh!”

His toes curled as Arthur picked up speed, stroking their cocks together, the slipperiness making the feeling divine. Louis twisted and writhed, babbling nonsense as tingles started at the base of his spine and spread outward. Before he could tip over the edge, Arthur’s hand stopped and Louis let out a small sob of frustration.

Leaning in to whisper in his ear, Arthur told him, “You don’t want me losing control right now, baby. Not unless you want to be trapped in this bed for the next few hours at least. Shifters like me, if they lose control, don’t just fuck you once. I’d keep you under me until you were so sated and sore, you couldn’t even think of going again.”

Goddess, why was that so hot? It couldn’t be a shifter thing, could it? Louis had been with other shifters before. Never a lion shifter, though. Was it species specific?

Like he could tell he didn’t have Louis’s full attention, Arthur’s hand shuttled over their cocks again, making Louis shout and his back arch. He came close to coming again, but the evil sadist in his bed stopped before he could reach that peak, nipping his neck lightly when Louis let out a growl of his own.

“What do you think, Louis? Do you want to skip work together? Or are you going to behave?”

He just knew if he agreed to behave, Arthur was going to take it as a cascading agreement and hold it against him if he didn't listen later. But as tempting as it was to skip work, he couldn't make himself stay. And he couldn't take another round of denied orgasms. His brain was going to start leaking through his ears at this point.

"I– Please– I need–"

He couldn't string enough words together to agree, shaking his head as tears pricked his eyes. He was so aroused, it bordered on painful.

Arthur, seemingly able to read Louis's mind, changed the question to something he could answer while in this state. "Are you going to behave for me, Louis?"

Louis nodded rapidly, whining deliriously when Arthur readjusted his grip again. But he wasn't releasing him, no he was just readjusting to give himself enough room to start thrusting. Louis's eyes rolled back into his head as Arthur's massive cock dragged against his, the head rubbing against that sensitive spot his thumb had found earlier. The shift in position gave him enough room to move as well and he thrust in counterpoint to Arthur's grinding movements, a thrill zipping through him when Arthur let out a groan that sounded less in control and more feral than he'd sounded earlier.

It wasn't much longer before Louis's release slammed into him. It'd been way too long since he got off, much less with a lover, and he couldn't take the bombardment of stimulation. He moaned into Arthur's mouth, cum splashing between them, and felt Arthur throb against him a moment later, a sound similar to a snarl ripping through him that made Louis's breath catch.

The sound settled into the purr again as they both melted into the bed, making Louis's mouth twitch against a smile as they traded lazy kisses. Arthur drew back, running his nose against the length of Louis's neck as he asked, "What's so funny?"

He pursed his lips, considering not saying anything that might ruin the moment, but couldn't seem to help himself when it came to this man. "I assume you set out on this little foray to distract me, but all you did was prove my point."

"Prove your point how?" Arthur asked warily.

Louis tried his best to hide his smug smile, but really, what did Arthur think he would say? "You made a lot of animalistic noises, but none of them sounded remotely similar to the purring sound. Which means either you've got different growls for different occasions, or it really is a purr."

Giving him a warning growl that was entirely ineffectual with the grin that came with it, Arthur nipped at his chin. “Stop pulling my tail, Louis. You won’t like the consequences.”

“Mhmm… Something tells me I might,” he grinned.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ARTHUR

After making sure Louis was all good to start his day, Arthur headed into his office to get some work done. Seeing Louis's damaged project reminded him of the conversation they'd had the night prior and the promise he'd made to Louis. If there was sabotage involved in what happened to Louis's project, he needed to know about it.

He checked in with his teams first, making sure things were progressing as they should and getting Lorna in touch with a member of research in tech who could assist her with the coding she'd been struggling with. Once that was done, he made a phone call to Mr. Washburne, since he'd been the one to show up when the incident happened.

"Washburne," the terse voice on the other end answered on the second ring.

"Good morning, Mr. Washburne. This is Arthur from Medical Innovations Researcher. Do you have a minute?"

"Do I ever?" Mr. Washburne grumbled in reply. "I've got like twenty minutes before my next meeting, so make it quick."

It seemed to be a common theme among researchers that they didn't know how to manage their time and often worked until they dropped or someone stepped in to help them. He'd actually met Mr. Washburne's mate and heard all about how the little fairy reorganized his life once they were mated. Maybe researchers needed to be mated. It'd help them stay healthy.

“I’m calling in regards to the incident that occurred to Louis Dubois’s project. He said something to me the other day that I want to make sure is looked into.”

“What’d he say?”

Resisting the urge to growl, since the idea still pissed him off, he took a deep breath before speaking to the surly demon. He didn't want to piss the man off just because the idea of someone purposely messing with Louis made him want to tear into them with his claws. “He said he believes the intern’s actions weren’t an accident or well intentioned. He thinks it might’ve been sabotage.”

There was an irritated sound on the other end, followed by the sound of typing. “The thought crossed my mind as well. Interns are idiots, but either someone doing the hiring for the intern program didn’t do a good job of it or the man’s actions were deliberate. I said as much to SR, but without proof, they’ve got nothing to go on, and the intern is refusing to meet with Elijah. He’d rather be fired or put on probation than face my brother.”

Which was telling in and of itself. “So where do we go from here?”

“Has anyone made any more attempts to mess with his project?” Mr. Washburne asked.

“Not as far as I’m aware. The wards have been untouched since he was moved into a private room, and the only people who’ve approached him have all offered to help him. I haven’t noticed any animosity–”

“Don’t let anyone touch his project but him,” Mr. Washburne interrupted. “If there’s actual sabotage involved, then someone could be willing to play nice long enough to screw with him later. I’m doubting that the intern acted alone. The man didn’t strike me as all that intelligent.”

Arthur blinked in surprise. He’d intended on convincing Louis to let others help him, especially since he seemed so overwhelmed, but he hadn’t thought of anyone trying to get close to him just so they could finish the job. Just the idea made him want to move his things to Louis’s new office so he could be nearby in case someone caused trouble.

“You know what, I’m going to send my brother to your floor. Even if people aren’t willing to do interviews with him, he can catch general vibes as long as he opens his magic to it. He’d be able to at least give us a direction to look.” And, like he expected Arthur to protest, he added, “He’s not dangerous. He’ll be there to help. If anyone causes trouble for him, they’ll face me instead.”

Arthur shook his head with a small smile. “I’ve met Elijah, Mr. Washburne. I’m not worried about him.” His eyes narrowed as a familiar figure of white fur headed toward Louis’s new office. He wanted to ask that Basil be interviewed, but he didn’t want to sway any judgments just because he didn’t like the yeti’s management style. He kept the thought to himself. “I’ll let Louis know Elijah will come to see him and I won’t let anyone work with him on his project unless they’ve spoken to Elijah at the very least.”

“Good. I’ll have Elijah contact you then.”

He hung up without much fanfare, which Arthur didn’t begrudge him for. He was a busy man. Head of all of Spellbound’s research divisions, plus a researcher himself, and newly mated. The man had his hands full and Arthur was glad he was prioritizing Louis’s project in the midst of all that.

The door to Louis’s small office opened again and Basil stepped out, closing the door behind him. Arthur narrowed his eyes. Was it him or did he look smug?

He was on his feet and moving in an instant, tracking the yeti as he headed back for his office while Arthur made a beeline for Louis. When he knocked, no one answered, which was worrisome. What was worse was when he poked his head inside and saw Louis. The poor man looked dejected and a little lost, staring at his project like he was seeing right through it.

“Louis? What happened?”

Louis shook his head slightly, but didn't respond, which was very unlike him. Even when he was exhausted, he had something to say. What the hell had Basil said to him?

Striding over to Louis’s desk, he kneeled beside him, putting a hand on his knee. “Louis?”

“It’s fine,” Louis croaked.

It wasn’t fine, whatever it was, and he didn't need to be a genius to see that. Instead of demanding answers like he normally might, he tried to ease into the conversation, gesturing toward the scattered pieces on the table.

“I never did ask what you were working on. Can you tell me what you’re hoping to achieve?”

Louis’s brows furrowed and he shook his head again. “It doesn’t matter. It won’t work.”

If that was what he got from his conversation with his superior, then Basil really was shit at his job.

“Try me. I’ve heard my fair share of insane ideas in the past. Let me hear it.”

He could make a guess, but he wanted Louis to tell him. Sometimes reminding the researcher of the big picture helped them work out the bugs.

“It was supposed to mimic a druid’s magic, scanning an injured party in a matter of seconds in the field so EMTs or non-druidic doctors could have a better idea of where to start so they could give the injured person more time to get to a hospital and be treated. There’s something similar that can scan like that in human medicine, but it needs a giant magnet and a specific dye and it's also massive and not at all portable. By the time an injured human gets to a human hospital and into that machine, it could be too late. Supes too, since not all EMT teams have druids or teleportation magic to get them to a hospital quickly. But it doesn’t matter. I can’t make it how I wanted it. Between the code, the scanner strength, and species specific body specifications, it would need to be the size of a bus to handle it all. Not to mention the species who are too big to fit in an ambulance. I was being too ambitious. I should’ve started on something smaller.”

Those didn’t sound like Louis’s words. He’d been stubbornly confident about his skills from the start. Those sounded like the words of someone else. Probably Basil, since he hadn’t been talking like that before Basil had the meeting with him.

“Do you mind if I help a little?”

The one area he’d promised he wouldn’t get involved was Louis’s work. He and Taron both agreed that was too much and he’d been fine before this incident happened. He didn't want to overstep or push too hard, especially right after their relationship changed. But if there was anything he was familiar with, it was spiraling researchers. He might not have the education to be able to make the projects himself, but he knew enough to get by.

“How?” Louis grumbled.

“I think you’re trying to solve all the issues at once, and that’s too much to ask from one person.”

He saw Louis open his mouth, probably to say something about not needing help, but since that wasn’t an option right now anyway, Arthur held up a finger to stop him.

“I’m not saying looping in others. We can discuss that at another time. I’m saying focus on one project point. If you had to make it work for just one species, what code would you need? How would you make your scanner powerful enough to do that? Pick one species to start. Once you see it working, you’ll understand better how it works, and how you’ll need to change it to include more.”

Louis’s brows furrowed, his eyes dashing back and forth in that way they always did when he was trying to figure out a problem. “But what species? The variables for supe body mass alone would get complicated once the device is built. What might be able to scan a fairy or a human wouldn’t be big enough to scan an orc or a troll.”

“You don’t know that yet,” Arthur argued. “And if you’re truly asking my opinion, I think you should try for humans first. You’d be surprised how many supes have similar anatomy to a human. Take shifters for example. In our unshifted forms, our anatomy is the same as humans. If you need to scan our shifted sides, then you’d need to include magic in the scan, and we’re not at that part yet. Just figure out how to make that human machine into a handheld device that would work on humans. Once you figure that out, we can get other researchers involved who can help with understanding supe physiology and how to change the device to fit everyone.”

He wasn’t entirely sure it would work out. Not all projects panned out in the end. Some were abandoned halfway through. Some got through testing before the researcher realized the project wouldn’t work the way they wanted. And sometimes they changed the project halfway through and got it to work better than they’d imagined. What mattered right now was momentum. They wouldn’t know if it worked or not if he gave up.

Slowly, he saw Louis’s expression change, the defeat replaced by intrigue and determination. He picked up the biggest piece of the device and turned it over in his hands, his eyes moving constantly. When he started muttering under his breath, Arthur knew he’d gotten back on track. He didn’t even care that Louis had yet to say anything to him. It was more important to him that Louis felt confident than to finish the conversation properly.

Patting him on the shoulder, he stood. “I’m going to let you work. Write down a general idea of what you’re thinking so when I come steal you for lunch, you won’t feel like you’re losing your momentum.”

“Uh huh,” Louis murmured distractedly, already snagging a notebook and looking around for a pen. Arthur produced one from his pocket, handing it to him, and smiled as Louis’s hand started flying across the paper, notes and sketches quickly covering the page. That was much more Louis.

He turned to leave, pausing on his way out when Louis called out to him.

“Arthur?”

Glancing over his shoulder, he tipped his head slightly. “Yeah?”

To his surprise, Louis was looking directly at him, not at the device or his notes. His eye contact was unwavering and his voice was clear and undistracted.

“Thank you. I mean it. That… helped.”

Warmth filled Arthur’s chest and he turned fully around, returning to Louis’s side long enough to dip down and press a chaste kiss on his lips.

“You’re welcome. Let me know if you need anything else. I might not be a scientist, but I’ve been doing this job a while. I might be able to help you find a path at the very least.”

Surprising him yet again, Louis nodded in agreement. “I will. Thanks.”

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

LOUIS

Thanks to Arthur's pep talk, Louis felt like his project was less daunting. He felt that same excitement he got at the start of a project, only this time he had the scaffolding for the thing already. He'd need to make some changes, remove some code since he wasn't yet looking to cover every species, but honestly, that made it easier. Human anatomy and variations he knew well. He could figure that part out easily enough. And Arthur was right. Once he knew it worked, then he could work on upgrading it to include more.

He'd heard Arthur's warning, the stubborn lion wasn't going to let him skip lunch just because he'd found his flow, so he'd scribbled everything he was thinking down in a notebook before starting on his work. He was working on eliminating superfluous code when a knock at the door tried to pull his attention away from his work.

"Yeah?" he called offhandedly without pulling his gaze away from the computer. If it was someone asking to help him again, they'd see he was busy and leave. Hopefully anyway. He didn't want to be distracted right now.

"Lunch time, Louis," Arthur said as he strode in.

Louis jerked his head up in surprise. "What? No. It hasn't been that long!"

Arthur looked amused by his complaints, giving a pointed look at his watch. Louis did the same, groaning in dismay when he noted the time.

How was it that time always seemed to disappear when he was working? He didn't have time to stop now!

"I can't stop right now. I'll lose track of what I was doing. It's one meal, I'll live without it–"

He knew the minute Arthur's expression went hard that he wasn't going to win this battle. He scooted closer to his desk anyway. Maybe if he held on tightly enough, Arthur wouldn't manhandle him out of the room. He'd risk knocking around Louis's project and he knew the man wouldn't be able to forgive himself if something happened.

"You're not skipping meals. Make note of what you were doing and save your work. We're meeting someone for lunch today and you won't want to miss it."

That made Louis frown. "What? Who?"

"The man who's going to be investigating the damage to your device. You've got five minutes, Louis. Save your work."

Well, it was hard to argue that, wasn't it? And technically, that was work related, since he didn't want a repeat of that offense to happen. If someone was willing to look into his concerns about sabotage, it was worth pausing for. He was already worried about leaving his device behind, even in a warded room. He stuck his notebook into his messenger bag just in case, since at least with his notes, he'd be able to start over if the worst would happen, and saved his work like Arthur suggested, hesitating when he noticed a part of the code that would be worth saving for the expansion later.

"It'll be here when you get back," Arthur told him, putting a hand on his shoulder and pulling him away from the screen. "I waited for a late lunch on purpose so that the office would be busy while we were out. A few researchers I trust are nearby and wouldn't hesitate to report it if someone was trying to access the room without you present. It'll be fine."

Surprised, Louis looked up at him. "You… You let me take a late lunch so my project would be protected?"

Arthur smirked at him, tapping his nose gently. "See? I'm not so bad, am I?"

The teasing tone made him blush and he finally relented, checking his bag one more time for his notebook before following Arthur out of the office and into the elevator. Since they were taking a late lunch, it was less crowded than it would've been if they'd taken it on time. He liked that he

was able to breathe without feeling like someone was about to elbow him in the ribs.

“Maybe we can take late lunches from now on? This is nice.”

Arthur snorted. “And how often will you use a late lunch as an excuse to stay at work late? Later lunches mean you won’t have as much time after we get back to get work done before it's time to go home. Having lunch in the middle of the day at least feels more even, and for workers like you who lose track of time, stability like that is important.”

Louis made a face. “You don’t know that. We’ve never done this before.”

“At this point, I know you well enough to guess what would happen. But let’s see how today goes. If you whine about leaving at the end of the day, we’ll know I was right.”

Which meant he couldn’t say a word about it when they left for the end of the day or Arthur would never let it go. Gods, the man was evil.

The person they ended up meeting with wasn’t who Louis was expecting. He recognized the SR rep from his hiring interviews, but he had been expecting someone from security. The guy next to him seemed more the type to do this kind of investigation than the gentle spoken SR rep.

“Good to see you, Arthur. I hope things are going well,” the SR rep said with a polite smile in greeting.

Arthur offered a hand to shake, greeting both men and introducing them to Louis. “It’s good to see you too, Mr. Washburne. Louis, this is Elijah and Alistair. Elijah is the VP of Supernatural Resources. He’s the one who will be looking into what happened to your project. Alistair is his anchor.”

Louis blinked a few times. There were so many threads to follow with that introduction. Of course, the one his brain latched onto was, “Anchor?”

“I’m a telepath,” Elijah explained. “An anchor is similar to a bonded mate, except Alistair also acts as something like a magnet to my magic. Our connection helps me focus and not overextend myself or accidentally pick up on thoughts and emotions I wasn’t invited to pick up.”

That was… fascinating. He’d never heard of a telepath before. When he’d introduced himself during interviews, he hadn’t mentioned his species.

Though, was it a species? Or was it more like a focus of magic? Maybe he was psychic in species but with advanced training? What did it take to do that? What did being a telepath even entail? Louis had thought he'd done research on the different supernatural species while in school. It'd been a long time since he'd heard of something new.

"Why is he staring like that?" the other man, Alistair, grumbled.

Elijah smiled, shaking his head at his anchor. "Relax, love. He's curious, not uncomfortable. I'll take that response over what I usually get."

Arthur put an arm around Louis's shoulders, giving him a gentle squeeze to urge him to focus. Louis blinked rapidly, looking between the three men in confusion. "Sorry. What?"

Chuckling, Arthur shook his head. "Nothing. Is this everyone?"

"Not quite," Elijah replied. "Taron requested to join us. When Wash mentioned your concerns, Taron happened to be in the room and he wanted to be part of the conversation."

Louis's eyebrows shot up. "The co-founder of the company wants to be part of the investigation? But I'm not even sure I'm right. It's just a hunch."

"It's a hunch worth looking into," a familiar voice said. Taron loped over, tossing an arm around Elijah's shoulders and beaming at him. "Long time no see, my friend."

Elijah snickered, completely at ease with Taron's behavior. It was Alistair who looked annoyed, though there was a fondness in the exasperation on his face. "You just saw him an hour ago. Stop hanging on my mate, Taron."

Taron stuck out his tongue, but quickly retracted his arm when Alistair reached for him with lightning literally dancing on his hands.

Like the bossy control-freak he was, Arthur stepped in before things could go too far. "If this is everyone, then we should get going. Louis hasn't eaten yet, and he'll complain if we don't get back to work on time."

Louis felt his face flush, there was nothing wrong with wanting to get back to work, but the group moved on without comment so he kept that to himself, shooting Arthur a dirty look as they headed outside.

Arthur smirked at him, squeezing his shoulders again. "What? It's true."

"You didn't have to throw me under the bus," he hissed back. "Where are we going anyway? It's not far, is it?"

"I thought we'd go back to that curry restaurant I took you to on our first lunch together. You seemed to enjoy it."

Ugh. Why did he have to be so good at getting Louis to do what he wanted? Of course he'd be willing to take the time to eat if he was getting good food in exchange. That curry was amazing. And it was close enough that they could walk and didn't have to worry about traffic or finding a taxi.

"Oh, I love curry," Taron said brightly. "I'm good with that plan. Anyone object?"

No one else had a problem with the decision, so Arthur led the way, and they made their way to the tiny hole-in-the-wall restaurant that Louis would've assumed was abandoned if not for the lights on inside. How did a place this good end up looking like a hovel on the outside?

Tables were pushed together to accommodate their party, with Taron in between him and Elijah, while Arthur and Alistair sat on the other side. Taron looked pleased as punch to be there too, completely unbothered about being trapped like that. Louis would've complained. He didn't want to have to climb over people to use the restroom or leave early if he needed to get back to work.

Arthur raised an eyebrow at him when he saw Louis glance at the door. Maybe he was the telepath instead. How the hell did he always know where Louis's mind had gone?

After they placed their orders, Taron clapped his hands, pulling the focus to him. "So. Before we start discussing the 'how', I want a clearer idea of the 'why'. We've never had sabotage to this degree on the research floor before."

"There's been sabotage before?" Louis asked warily. If he'd known that, he would've been more careful in the first place.

Taron waved a hand dismissively. "Not to the point of destroying people's projects. More like researchers working on similar projects refusing to work with each other and racing to get their papers published first, or purposely blocking off time at specific stations to block another researcher from using it, that kind of thing. People are petty sometimes, but I never would've suspected someone of being willing to go so far as to destroy another researcher's project."

Alistair nodded in agreement, adding, "Is there a reason you're thinking along these lines? Have you made any enemies since you started at Spellbound?"

Louis's brow furrowed as he shook his head slowly. "No, I don't think so. I don't really interact with my coworkers that much. I'm too busy. The

only people I regularly interact with are Mr. Yarrow and Arthur.”

“And Dax,” Arthur added. “He’s offered to help you in the past and brought you lunch a few times.” To the others, he explained, “Not that I think he’s a potential suspect. He’s a nice person and an older brother to over half a dozen siblings. He thinks similarly to the way I do, and was one of the first to notice Louis was struggling.”

Louis looked between them, confused. “You think it goes beyond the intern?”

“Possibly,” Elijah answered. “Wash thinks it's worth looking into. He believes the intern… Well, I can’t say I agree with his thought process, but–”

“He said the intern lacked the intelligence to mastermind something like this,” Alistair explained when Louis and Taron both looked confused.

Taron snorted. “Wash is so mean. I love him.” He paused the conversation long enough for the waiter to drop off their food before continuing. “While I can’t comment on the intern’s intelligence, it did strike me as odd behavior. Interns aren’t guaranteed a position at Spellbound. If there’s misconduct, they could end up losing their position and future opportunities in any sister company we have. Wash might be right. I don’t think an intern would risk that much unless they had someone backing them. Likely someone higher ranking than them, someone to make them feel like they could get away with it.”

Louis’s heart sank. It’d been bad enough thinking the intern had done it on purpose. He didn't know the guy, but if he’d accidentally offended someone, maybe by never letting him clean his workstation before or ignoring a request to assist him and get experience, that would at least be something he could prevent in the future. If there was more than just the intern targeting his project, then…

A hand took his on the table, and when he looked up at Arthur, his expression was fiercely determined. “Whatever the reason, it won’t happen again. We’re going to make sure of that. That’s why we’re here now. If there was more than just one culprit, then we’re going to figure out who else was involved and deal with them. You’re not dealing with this alone.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY

ARTHUR

While the lunch was technically a working lunch since they were discussing Elijah's involvement in the investigation, it was better than Louis's idea to skip lunch entirely. And the conversation didn't ruin his appetite. He ate almost as much as Arthur did, using his naan to scrape his plate clean and making a happy humming sound when he was done. Goddess, the man was adorable.

"It looks like project shadow is working," Taron commented, making Louis stiffen and Arthur hang his head for just a moment. Taron, being the slightly oblivious man he was, just beamed. "I'm glad. You don't look like you're one foot in the grave anymore, Louis. Good job."

"What's project shadow?" Elijah asked curiously.

Arthur watched as Louis sank lower in his seat, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. A smile tugged at Arthur's lips. If he took better care of himself, they wouldn't be having this conversation right now.

"Our dear Louis has an issue with work-life balance," Taron explained. "He was working so hard, he'd fall asleep at the office and he was skipping meals too. A few weeks ago, he looked a little like those zombies from those horror movies, you know? He even did that shuffling walk thing because he was too tired to move normally. Arthur and I agreed the problem needed intervention or we'd risk losing one of our bright new stars, and I wasn't willing to let that happen."

“Respectfully, shut up, Taron,” Louis grouched. “I’m fine.”

“You are now,” Taron agreed with an eerily shark-like grin. Maybe he wasn’t as oblivious as he came off. Arthur was starting to feel like he knew exactly what he was doing by bringing this up in front of the SR rep. Like he was trying to remind Louis of the consequences if he went back to the way things used to be.

“That’s unfortunately common at Spellbound, I’m afraid,” Elijah said, surprising Louis into sitting up again.

“It is?”

Elijah nodded. “Brennus and I have been meeting with Ozen to figure out how to fix that, but aside from stronger punishments for too much overtime, we haven’t figured out a way to end that behavior. Spellbound is the dream job for many workers, and they feel like they have to work themselves over to keep their position.”

“Sounds familiar,” Alistair commented dryly before popping a piece of naan into his mouth. He raised an eyebrow at Elijah who blushed under his scrutiny, but didn’t pretend to not understand what he meant.

“I realize I was part of the problem, but my circumstances were different.”

“Everyone’s circumstances are different,” Arthur interjected. “That’s why I make it a priority to get to know each member of my team personally. If I’m going to make sure they’re able to continue to do their job well, I need to know more than surface level issues.”

Taron snapped his fingers, pointing at him. “That’s right. Your teams have had the highest ratings of work/life satisfaction in every survey we’ve sent out. What are you doing that makes them so willing to not overwork themselves?”

Pressing his lips together, Arthur thought about the question. “I don’t think I’m doing anything special. I get to know them as people, not just as researchers or team members. If I know more about their personal life, I’ll know who needs more of my attention. I also keep my door open so my team knows they can come to me no matter what they need to talk about, whether work or personal issues. I just try to be there for them.”

“He’s also really bossy and will manhandle you into leaving if you don’t go quietly,” Louis added. “I’m apparently not the only one he does it to. I had lunch with a few of his team. They all said he treats them like chicks and he’s a mother hen.”

That made Taron cackle, but Arthur narrowed his eyes on the feisty man across from him. “Like I tell my team, I wouldn’t have to mother hen you if you took care of yourself. Since you’re incapable of doing that, I’m happy to make sure you get back on track.”

“So what I’m getting from this conversation is that in order to see more improvement in our researchers’ work-life balance, we need project managers who have more daddy vibes?” Taron asked innocently.

Arthur made a face at the same time Louis did. There was no way in hell he wanted anyone to call him ‘daddy’.

“Or,” Elijah interrupted, giving Taron an exasperated look. “It means we need more training for our project managers. Maybe some people-centered leadership training modules? Something to encourage project managers to treat their team members as more than just cogs in a machine.”

Alistair nodded slowly in agreement. “When I was in the military, it was my job to monitor morale amongst my team. I couldn’t keep them upbeat and continue on with the mission if I didn’t know them as individuals as well as members of my team. If I mentioned getting home to family and one of my team members didn’t have family to go home to, I’d be making it worse for them, not better.”

“That’s how I treat my team,” Arthur agreed. “They’re individuals with their own lives and problems, and if I have not just open communication, but safe communication so they know their personal troubles won’t be held against them, they’re more likely to tell me what’s happening so we can adapt to what they need. That’s a problem I noticed a lot of researchers have. They don’t think about adaption.”

Something about what they were saying must’ve struck a chord with Louis. He wasn’t even subtle about pulling his notebook out of his bag and flipping through it, his eyes darting around as he looked for whatever the conversation had reminded him of. When he started patting his pockets for a pen again, Taron pulled one out of his breast pocket without even considering the message he was sending, handing it to Louis while he continued to discuss training for project managers with the rest of the group. Arthur sighed. At least he’d finished his lunch before getting distracted.

“Arthur, what’s your workload look like right now?” Taron asked, pulling his focus away from Louis’s chaotic scribbling and back onto the troublemaking shapeshifter.

“Not terrible right now. Most of the projects my teams are working on are in testing phases and don’t need me hovering to keep them on track. Why?”

“Maybe once we get Louis’s stuff handled, we can borrow you for a little while to help us with setting up some training. I know I’m not one to talk, I worked a ton before I mated, but I really don’t like the idea of people in my company working themselves to death. That wasn’t at all what Ozen and I were hoping for when founding Spellbound. If changes can be made to encourage our people to accept breaks and take the plentiful vacation days we offer them, then I want it to happen. Seriously, it’s basically free money. Everyone from research to mail staff gets guaranteed paid vacation time. But after reaching a certain career stage, half of them aren’t using it. That’s just not right.”

Alistair snorted. “When do you think the last time your brother took vacation?” he asked Elijah.

Elijah just sighed. “I’m not sure he ever has. And with Peri busy with his bakery, I don’t think that’ll change any time soon. They go on dates and he no longer works on weekends. That’s enough for now.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes on Louis. Since he hadn’t been working for Spellbound all that long, it wouldn’t surprise him if he hadn’t taken any days off, but what about before then? He knew Louis had a doctorate, he saw it poking out of one of the boxes in his room that he never bothered unpacking. The man barely lived in the condo, and decorating wasn’t a priority for him. If he couldn’t be bothered to move in fully, it wasn’t likely he bothered to go on vacation. He honestly wouldn’t be surprised if the man had never gone on a vacation in his life.

“I’ll be happy to help if I can,” Arthur finally answered Taron’s initial question. “Let’s schedule that for after this investigation. I want to make sure no one on my research floor is at risk for that kind of sabotage before I do anything else.”

Taron snorted. “Your research floor, huh? I wonder what Reggie would think of that?”

Arthur gave him a droll look. “Reggie is great at his job, but he’s a researcher himself and a busy man. He’s not on the floor half as much as I am. I’ve also worked with more of the researchers than he has. They’re my people. And I’m going to keep watching over them so long as I have a job at Spellbound.”

They arrived back at work with a plan set into motion. Elijah would begin making rounds on the research floor to talk with the researchers about whether they noticed anyone acting strangely and getting a general vibe of the situation, and Arthur would continue to keep an eye on Louis to make sure he took breaks.

And since he decided to work while at lunch, he didn't count that as a proper break.

Snagging the distracted man's elbow as he tried to shuffle off to his office, Arthur redirected him to his office instead. "Nope. You didn't really think I'd let you get away with working at lunch, did you? You owe me at least fifteen minutes of a break before I'll let you go back to work."

Louis squawked in protest, but as he'd learned in the past few weeks, Arthur wasn't easily deterred and Louis didn't have the muscle strength to get away on his own. He tried digging his heels in, but on the smooth laminate flooring, there was no purchase to speak of and he only succeeded in looking ridiculous.

"This isn't fair! You didn't say I couldn't work! You could've stopped me!"

"Could I? Or would you have picked a fight with me about needing to 'just write one thing' and done it anyway?"

"I– It was just a quick thought!" he complained.

"Exactly. Which is why you're giving me fifteen minutes and not longer."

Louis's attempt to go dead weight didn't slow Arthur down, though it did threaten to break his countenance watching the grown man flop like a toddler having a tantrum. Since Arthur already had an arm around him to get him moving in the right direction, he didn't go very far and he was light enough that Arthur didn't even falter.

He dragged Louis into his office, closing the door behind them and pushing Louis into the chair behind his desk because it was more comfortable and farther away from the door in case Louis got any bright ideas for any escape attempts.

Louis likely noticed the positioning because he gave up trying, drooping into the chair with a heavy groan.

“What am I even supposed to do for fifteen minutes? I’m just going to think about work. I might as well just go back to my office.”

“Oh, I’m sure I can think of something to keep your mind off work for a little while.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ARTHUR

He'd closed his eyes after Arthur deposited him on the office chair. Not because he was tired, but because the man was more dramatic than Arthur had expected when first meeting him. He only opened them when he heard the door lock. Arthur shrugged out of his suit jacket, his expression downright wicked, and Louis suddenly clued in on the tone he'd had before.

"You… You can't be serious. Here?"

"I guarantee we wouldn't be the only ones who've tried it. As long as you're quiet, no one will know. Just give me a minute, I'll let reception know I'm in a meeting so we're not disturbed."

He enjoyed watching the play of emotions on Louis's face while he dialed reception to let Zeraphine know he had an unplanned phone meeting and he wouldn't be available for a little while. Confusion, horror, intrigue, arousal, all crossed his face in quick succession as Arthur spoke. Zeraphine was entirely oblivious to what he actually planned to do, chirping happily about letting his team know if any of them came looking for him. He didn't even have to worry about someone knocking. If the door was shut, his team knew he wasn't there or was unavailable and to go to reception to ask for him or send him a message. They had privacy for at least a little while.

Putting the phone back on its cradle, he offered Louis a hand, pulling him to his feet. He heard his breath catch when Arthur dipped to kiss along his neck, his fingers digging into Arthur's shirt as his lips coasted along his

jaw. Which was why he took his jacket off. It was easier to hide wrinkles if he wasn't wearing it.

He claimed Louis's lips in a fierce kiss, determined to follow through on his plan to get Louis out of his head for a while. His fingers dug into that messy hair, and he had a thought that no one would notice the difference since Louis never did his hair anyway. He would've chuckled if he wasn't so distracted.

He wanted to take his time, he liked dragging things out, but he knew he was on a time limit and he didn't want to ruin Louis's trust in him by taking longer than he'd promised. He broke the kiss, hands moving down his chest as he returned to that slender column of skin and muscle that was just begging for a mark or two.

"What… What's the plan here? Are you so well prepared that you carry lube with you wherever you go?" Louis asked breathlessly.

He nipped at the juncture of Louis's slender neck in retribution for that attempted dig. It fell flat when Louis was too busy trying to pull him closer to actually sound judgmental about it.

"No, I don't carry lube. If I got inside you, we'd be busy a hell of a lot longer than fifteen minutes."

He didn't miss the way Louis shivered and his fingers tightened in Arthur's clothes. He grinned.

"You like the sound of that, don't you? You'd have to give up a night of working if you wanted that from me. I wouldn't be satisfied with just one round."

Louis swallowed thickly. "I'm only human. I can't go more than maybe two rounds a night. Humans need recovery time."

Reaching between them, he deftly undid Louis's belt and zipper, tugging the material down to free his cock. When he fisted it, Louis's breath stuttered and his hips jerked, thrusting into Arthur's palm eagerly.

"Oh, I think I could get more than two out of you."

"Cocky," Louis huffed, groaning quietly when Arthur rubbed against the spot just beneath the head of his cock.

"Confident," Arthur argued. "I'll prove it to you. Later. Right now, I want dessert."

He didn't give the man time to argue before hoisting him bare-assed onto his desk and dropping into his seat in front of him. He drew in a deep breath, calling on every ounce of control he had. The image of Louis on his

desk, leaning back on his hands, legs spread and lips swollen from their kisses, was so incredibly sexy, he doubted he'd be able to sit at his desk again without getting an erection. And they hadn't even started yet.

"Goddess, you're beautiful," he commented, running his hand up Louis's stomach and chest and pushing the clothes out of the way at the same time. He didn't remove them, but he did want to admire the view.

"You're lying," Louis began. "I'm not– *Nngghhh*!"

To shut him up, since nothing he could say would change Arthur's mind, Arthur wrapped his lips around the head of Louis's cock, pushing down to take half of him in one go. Another time, he'd enjoy tormenting the man for a little while, dragging this out so he could find out just how many sounds he could pull out of the beautiful man. Later, though. Right now, his one goal was to make Louis's brain melt so he stopped thinking so much.

With that in mind, he set to work, bobbing his head and swirling his tongue, paying extra attention to the spot beneath the head that seemed to drive Louis wild. His scientist was writhing in seconds, biting his lip to stay quiet like Arthur had warned him. When Arthur scraped his teeth very lightly against that spot, he slapped his hand over his mouth to muffle a startled cry, his whole body jerking like he'd been hit with an electric shock.

Pulling off, Arthur fisted Louis's cock again, stroking him roughly enough to make the man whimper without hurting him. "Still thinking about work?"

"You– You– Oh, fuck, don't stop!"

While he'd been scrambling to think of a snarky reply, Arthur had moved lower, sucking and licking at his balls and growling low to give him a pleasant vibration. His noises got louder and Louis's free hand reached for him, gripping his hand when Arthur laced their fingers together.

If he wasn't careful, they'd get caught and he wanted this kind of thing to be available in the future if Louis ever needed the distraction. It was better to end this sooner rather than later. Swallowing Louis's cock again, he sucked him down his throat, letting out another rumbling growl that seemed to set the man off. Louis's hips bucked, his eyes squeezed shut and his head thrown back as his orgasm overtook him. Thankfully, he had enough presence of mind to cut himself off mid moan and his noises dropped to whimpers as the aftershocks coursed through him.

Arthur let Louis slip from his lips, a predatory growl rattling his throat as he took in the man sprawled on his desk. His instincts demanded he rut and claim, consequences be damned. The thought startled him enough to snap him out of it and he pulled himself away from his panting lover before he did something insane.

When had he become so possessive of the researcher? And how the hell did he get them both out of this situation without making things worse?

LOUIS

Somehow, despite having been distracted through the morning and through most of lunch, Louis's mind was completely blank. It was like Arthur had sucked the ability to think out through his dick. And he wasn't sure he minded so much. Who was he to complain after an orgasm that intense?

When he finally forced his eyes open, it was because the AC in the room was directly over the desk and not entirely comfortable on naked skin. He readjusted his clothes, sitting up and looking at Arthur with a frown. The last two times they'd had sex, he'd been all over Louis afterward, kissing him and touching him until Louis seriously considered the option of staying in bed all day. It was usually that thought that made him start to squirm to get free. This time, Arthur was nowhere near him. His chair had been pushed so far back from the desk it was against the wall behind it and Arthur was gripping the arms of it so tightly his knuckles were white. Like he was fighting to keep himself there.

"Arthur?"

Sucking in a sharp breath, Arthur's amber eyes jerked to him and he masked whatever he'd been feeling, clearing his throat. "You should get back to your project."

Louis's brows furrowed. His gaze dropped to the prominent bulge in Arthur's lap and then back to Arthur's carefully masked expression, his tone more than a little confused when he asked, "What about you?"

Arthur shook his head and was it Louis or was he avoiding eye contact?

“I only said fifteen minutes. You’ll be late back to work if we keep going. I’ll be fine.”

Yeah, no. Louis was a workaholic, sure, but he wasn’t so much of an asshole that he’d take what he wanted and walk away. He slid off the desk, sinking to his knees between the lion shifter’s thighs.

“So I’ll be late,” he murmured, running his hands up Arthur’s thighs. When Arthur’s hand caught his to stop him, Louis considered that maybe the lion shifter didn’t know how to let others take care of him. Arthur was always the one in control. He was so focused on Louis and making sure he was happy, he was willing to ignore his own pleasure to make sure he got back to work on time. “I promise, Arthur, I don’t mind. I won’t even demand to stay at work later. Let me take care of you for a change.”

Surprise flashed across Arthur’s face, and his grip on Louis’s hands loosened. He looked uncertain, which was a first since they’d met, and Louis made a mental note to do this more often. Arthur was always busy taking care of everyone else. He deserved to be taken care of too.

Arthur’s hands returned to the arm rests as Louis opened his belt and pulled down his zipper. His breath caught when Louis reached inside to pull out his cock, and when Louis looked up at him, his eyes were locked on Louis’s face.

Louis felt a blush tinge his cheeks, he wasn’t used to such scrutiny during sex, but then again, he didn’t often even look at his hookups. It was for stress relief, and neither party was there for anything other than to seek their own pleasure. It never bothered him, he preferred to keep things simple since he was too busy for more, but Arthur watching him so closely made his stomach flutter and if he hadn’t just had an explosive orgasm, he would’ve been rising to the occasion feeling watched like that.

To distract himself, he focused on Arthur’s cock. Both times they’d hooked up before, he hadn’t gotten a good look at the man. He was long and thick, with a fat mushroom head and a thick patch of golden curls at the base. Louis leaned in, running his lips along the length of him, breathing in his scent, and felt Arthur shiver above him.

“It’s kind of nice being in charge for once,” Louis commented with a grin, flicking his gaze up to meet Arthur’s again. “I should do this more often.”

Huffing out a strained laugh, Arthur replied, “You like it when I take control. You like not having to think.”

True. Louis's mind was almost always running and the ability Arthur had to turn his mind off and force him to just feel was nothing short of magic. Still, he felt powerful like this, and when Arthur shifted restlessly, he couldn't help the wicked grin that spread across his face.

"Louis," Arthur growled in warning. "If you don't want us interrupted, you need to hurry."

The man had a point. They'd already been in here a minute, and if Mr. Yarrow came looking to talk to him again and found Louis missing, there would be questions. He'd play more later. There wasn't a chance in hell he wasn't going to find an opportunity to do this again.

"Alright, alright. Bossy," he teased, wrapping his lips around the fat head of Arthur's cock just as he opened his mouth to respond. Instead of saying something, a groan ripped out of him, almost loud enough that someone might overhear. He lifted his eyebrow a lot like Arthur did, and didn't start again until Arthur pressed his lips together and Louis was sure he'd stay quiet.

Cradling the underside with his tongue, he lowered his head little by little. It wasn't physically possible for him to take the whole length, the man was well endowed, but Louis dealt with that by wrapping his fist around what he couldn't reach, stroking as roughly as Arthur had stroked him.

"*Ungh*, fuck!" Arthur gritted out, his whole body jerking in response.

There was something about making such a powerful and contained man lose control. Louis felt his cock swell, which was shocking because it usually took him way longer to get back in the game after an orgasm. It made him double down, determined to drag as many sounds as he could out of the man, spit leaking down Arthur's length and easing the glide of his hand as he stroked and bobbed his head.

When he glanced up, Arthur was biting his fist, his face flushed and his whole body rigid to keep himself in place. His eyes were still glued to Louis, and when Louis sucked him down again while maintaining eye contact, he swore he saw some kind of magic flash behind the man's eyes for a second. He didn't have time to ask before Arthur's eyes finally slammed closed and his head flew back, flooding Louis's mouth with his release as he came with a quiet groan.

"Fffuuucckk…"

Louis groaned with him, hard again and throbbing between his legs. Maybe he wasn't being cocky when Arthur said he'd get Louis to go

multiple rounds in one night. If he made sounds like that, Louis was damn well willing to try.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

LOUIS

Was it naive to think that after they started dating that Arthur would be nicer to him? It wasn't like he was expecting to suddenly be able to return to his own work schedule, but this? This was just cruel.

"You're not serious."

"You say that a lot," Arthur pointed out with a smirk. "Have I ever not been serious whenever you've asked?"

Dammit, he was right. Louis whimpered. "But…"

"No buts. You don't have work today. You're waiting on a part for your personal project. You've got nothing better to do right now than this."

Louis shot him a look, and Arthur corrected himself, smug grin still in place. "We're not doing anything like that until you've exercised. Get on the mat, Louis. We need to warm up."

Well, that certainly got him moving. They hadn't gotten to do much of anything since the mutual blowjobs in Arthur's office. Louis could only blame himself. He'd been so fixated on repairing his project, getting it back into working order, that he even brought work home with him, which meant a battle with Arthur every night. Louis had thought replacing the time he worked on his personal projects with work from the office would've been the same thing, but Arthur didn't see it that way, and he hadn't been happy with Louis's logic about the exchange.

Arthur became the one who was always grumbling under his breath, and by the time he forced Louis to go to sleep, he was in too foul a mood for Louis to think it was a good idea to bring up sex.

This was probably punishment. It was the only explanation on why Arthur would be making him exercise at the crack of dawn.

They started with stretching, which made Louis feel absolutely ridiculous. He wasn't afraid to let Arthur know about it either. "This is stupid. What exactly is this doing other than making us look like idiots?"

That stupid eyebrow lifted, and Arthur's tone was droll as he said, "It's to warm up your muscles so you don't hurt yourself. Since you look like you haven't exercised a day in your life, you need to warm up first."

Louis made a disgruntled sound. "I've exercised before… Most human primary and secondary schools require physical education courses."

"And since then?" Arthur challenged.

He made a face. He didn't want to give Arthur the satisfaction of admitting it'd been a while. Even in college when they had requirements for physical education, he'd chosen to take the health and anatomy courses as opposed to any that required actual physical exertion. Anatomy could be useful in his research. Huffing and puffing while playing stupid games or running around a track was a waste of time.

"Exactly. So we'll start with a warm up every day and ease our way into a proper exercise routine. You hunch when you work, so we definitely need to focus on your back muscles and–"

Dropping the weird stretch, he waved his hands rapidly to stop Arthur's rambling. "Hold on, hold on. Did you just say… every day?"

Drawing in a deep breath, Arthur let it out slowly, his words tight with forced patience. "Yes, Louis. Every day. Taking care of your body is part of self care. You need exercise. Especially when you spend all day hunched over a desk."

"You can't be serious," Louis muttered under his breath.

"Very serious, Louis. Now get your scrawny ass on the bikes. I want to get your heart pumping before we start."

With a dramatic groan, Louis moved to do as asked, grumbling the whole time while Arthur readjusted the seat and checked the straps on his feet. He set a timer on the bike, climbing onto the one next to Louis so he could lead the exercise. It was stupid, he felt stupid, and it took maybe two

minutes to realize he couldn’t keep up with Arthur even if he had a gun to his head.

“Faster, Louis. You can do better than that.”

“Not everyone is built for physical exertion like you are,” Louis panted. “I’ve never even ridden a bike before.”

That made Arthur slow, pressing a few buttons on the machine to slow himself down. “Wait. Really?”

“Yes, really,” Louis grumbled, smacking the button to shut off the bike entirely. He was already sweating and it’d only been five minutes. He hoped Arthur didn’t plan to keep this up for much longer. He said he’d ease into it, right?

“Well, we’ll have to fix that. Later. Let’s do some weights. I want to strengthen your back since you’re always hunching like a goblin.”

“Isn’t that offensive?” Louis commented, nearly tripping as he scrambled to get off the stupid bike. Arthur caught him against his chest and Louis got a face full of muscles before he was righted back on his feet again. “You know there are more pleasurable ways to exercise than this, right?”

Amusement tugged at Arthur’s lips, but he didn’t take the bait, smacking Louis on the butt to get him moving toward the weight rack.

It felt like they were down there for hours. Every time Louis thought they’d be finished, Arthur would urge him to try something else. He swore they touched every single machine the condo gym had, including a weird stair stepper thing that made Arthur’s ass look amazing, but made Louis contemplate his life choices very seriously when it was his turn. If he promised to sleep regularly, would the evil lion leave him be with all this exercise stuff?

One look at the man and he knew his answer. No. No, he would not.

“Alright, time for cool down. Ten minutes on the treadmill.”

“Running? You want me to run?” Louis complained. “We’ve been at this for hours now!”

Arthur gave him a droll look. “It’s been an hour, Louis. Which is a healthy amount of time someone spends in the gym. We’ll be back in here doing the same thing tomorrow, so you might as well stop complaining and get on the treadmill. We’re going shopping after this so we can make some meal preps for you in case I’m not around to feed you and I don’t want to spend the whole day cooking.”

Louis had to be mistaken. There was no way Arthur wanted him to exercise, then spend the day shopping and cooking, without making any time at all to work on his project. That couldn’t possibly be how he was going to spend his Saturday.

He threw out a last ditch attempt to avoid the torture, though he wasn’t entirely sure it was any better, since it still wouldn’t give him any time to work. Still, it was better than running. “Don’t couples go on dates or something? Exercising and cooking aren’t dates.”

Something in Arthur’s stubborn expression twitched and for a glorious moment, Louis thought he’d said the right thing. But the falter was there and gone again in a flash and Arthur looked almost smug when he replied. “You’re right. Couples do go on dates. In the evenings, after chores are done and self care has been accomplished. We’ll go out tonight for dinner and a movie. A very common date for newer couples.”

“Dinner and a–” He cut himself off, trying to mask the horror in his voice. In his attempt to avoid the list Arthur had for him, he’d inadvertently taken more time away from his work. He hadn’t thought there would be two activities on a date! And he couldn’t take it back either, since he’d been the one to bring up the date thing in the first place.

Goddess, he was an idiot.

Letting his shoulders slump, Louis gave in. “Fine. But nothing cheesy. Movies are bad enough without all the cheesy romance scenes and miscommunication drama.”

“I’ll make sure to choose something you’ll enjoy,” Arthur soothed with a grin.

He doubted that, he didn't like movies all that much, but he didn’t want Arthur to think he didn’t want to spend time with him so he kept that comment to himself. Though, he’d start rethinking the whole relationship thing if exercise was truly going to be a daily occurrence. He got the feeling he’d be in pain tomorrow from all this.

While Arthur showered, Louis was relegated to searching the internet for meal prep options he might enjoy. That he wasn’t even allowed in the

shower with Arthur felt a lot like punishment, which– when would it end? Would he need to not work at all this weekend to make the man feel better?

He chose a few recipes that sounded decent enough and made an attempt to sneak into the shower to join the wily lion shifter, but Arthur had already gotten out by the time he joined him and Louis was quickly ushered into the shower himself with an urge to hurry up so they could get the shopping and cooking done with enough time to spare for their date.

Grumbling to himself, he showered and got dressed *alone*, stomping out of his room to find Arthur in the kitchen with two of Louis's roommates.

"Louis, we're going to have company for shopping. You need to get to know your roommates better."

"Why?" he asked, confused.

Arthur rolled his eyes. "Because you should know the people you're living with. I'm assuming you never properly introduced yourself? This is Nylian and Kaz."

The fae with long blond hair dipped his chin in polite greeting, while the orc gave an awkward little wave. "We, uh… We're waiting on Owen. He wants to come too, but he spilled his breakfast on his shirt and had to go change."

Louis grunted. Apparently, the more the merrier for this little outing. Could it get any worse?

Owen came hurrying out of the hall, still trying to pull his shirt over his head, and tripped over his own feet right as he got close to the group. Arthur, being the closest to him, caught him before he could smack his head on the island. Louis's eyes narrowed. Apparently it could get worse.

Seeing Arthur with another man in his arms, a man not even fully dressed, irritated him so much, Louis felt his eye twitch. His scowl deepened and he turned on his heel, heading for the door without a word. This whole situation was stupid. He'd wanted to spend the morning in bed with Arthur and then get some work done on his project. Instead, he had to watch Arthur holding another man and feign politeness around strangers just because they shared the same living space.

Maybe he should just head back to Spellbound. Arthur would be pissed at him, but he was too distracted with Owen right now anyway. He might not even notice.

His foul mood followed him throughout the shopping trip, where Arthur casually conversed with Louis's roommates and ignored him, and Louis

silently stewed in annoyance he couldn't fully explain. Something just felt… off. It had all morning. Maybe even all week.

When they got back to the condo, Louis dropped the bags onto the kitchen island and headed for his room. He needed to walk away before he took his mood out on someone else. They could do meal prep tomorrow or something.

Dropping into his desk chair, he glared at the projects scattered on the glossy surface. When did it become a punishable offense to work on his passion? Why did it feel more and more like he needed to choose between his work and Arthur, who cared more about his health than the kind of effect not working would have on him? And why the hell did that feel like such an impossible choice? When did what Arthur wanted become more important to him than his work?

"Louis?"

Clenching his hands into fists, he refused to look at the man. He felt like he was going around in circles and he hated it. This was why he never bothered with relationships. They were complicated, and he didn't have time for complicated right now.

"Is something wrong?"

"I'm sorry, okay?" he growled. "I'm sorry I brought the project home with me. But I hardly feel like that justifies this amount of punishment. It's partially your fault anyway. You're the one who inspired the corrections. I'm getting close to reaching a testing phase and I need to focus. I thought if I brought it home, I'd be done sooner and I'd get Mr. Yarrow off my back and get back on track. I wasn't trying to piss you off."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ARTHUR

Louis's apology made Arthur realize he was being unfair. He'd been attempting to put some distance between himself and Louis, worried about the way his instincts seemed to be getting more and more demanding about claiming the man. He'd never experienced something like that before, and it was disconcerting to feel that at war with his own self control. But in his attempt to rein in his instincts, he'd accidentally made Louis feel like he'd done something wrong.

Closing the bedroom door quietly behind him, he moved to Louis's side, turning his chair and squatting in front of him so Louis could see his face. "I'm sorry. I never meant to make it feel like a punishment. I… may have been neglecting my own self care. I could use a break. How about we make our dinner date into a lunch date instead? We'll have a nice meal and go see a movie and not focus on work or self care or anything important for a little while. Does that sound good?"

He saw Louis's mouth twitch, and he knew part of that was because he wanted to work on his project, but he tucked away the instinct and nodded, taking Arthur's offered hand and pushing to his feet. Arthur noticed the effort he was making, despite his complaints, and made a mental note to reward him later. The lessons on self care wouldn't stick if it only felt like a chore. He deserved to be rewarded for doing the right thing.

The kitchen was empty when they came back out, and someone had kindly put away the groceries they'd bought and the counters had been cleared. Louis's roommates were kind and he'd hoped shopping and meal prepping together would've been a bonding moment for them, but he considered he might be pushing too hard too fast. If Louis thought he was punishing him for something, he was doing too much and it'd backfire. He'd already shown signs of regressing by disappearing to his room without a word. He hadn't done that after a shopping trip in days.

"Does pasta sound good?" he asked, still holding Louis's hand as they stepped past the wards and headed for the elevator.

"It's fine," Louis grumbled.

Still unhappy with him then. Arthur really had been too wrapped up in his own head recently.

After they hit the street, he aimed them for a restaurant he thought Louis would like. The walked in silence for a few blocks, but it wasn't the companionable silent they had when Louis was thinking about his work and Arthur was reading. This was tense and awkward and it bothered him that they seemed to have taken several steps backward because he was too in his head to focus on what was important. Pulling them to a stop, he tried to figure out what to say to fix the situation. He wasn't ready to talk about what was going on with him. He hadn't fully figured it out himself. But he didn't want to let Louis continue to feel like it was his fault either.

"Listen, I–"

Before he could get the words out to explain himself, the sky, which had been rumbling and dark all morning, ripped open, sending a downpour of icy cold rain down on the both of them. Arthur, who'd never been a big fan of the rain, yelped and grabbed Louis's hand again, yanking him down the street to get under the awning of the nearest shop.

They weren't the only ones to duck under the space to escape the rain, making it kind of cramped, but Arthur truly did not care. Anything to keep him out of the rain.

"What… just happened?"

His gaze dropped to Louis, who was staring up at him with wide eyes. Arthur grimaced.

"I don't like the rain."

A huge grin overtook Louis's face, his eyes so wide he looked almost manic. "Wait, wait. You purr and you're afraid of water? So you basically

are a big house cat, aren't you?" He cackled, the earlier tension erased as overjoyed mirth took its place.

Arthur shot him a dirty look. "I'm not a cat. I don't think I've ever met a lion shifter who likes the rain. Just because house cats react similarly doesn't mean–"

"You squeaked," Louis pointed out, still laughing. "Like actually squeaked." He wrapped his arms around his middle, almost doubled over he was laughing so hard. "Oh, gods, that was amazing."

The other supes who were crowded under the awning all watched on with amusement at Louis's hysterics. Arthur could only growl. And because he was embarrassed and hated that the man he was seeing witnessed his complete loss of control, he reacted petulantly and pushed Louis back into the rain in punishment.

Louis stumbled, scowling at him. "Hey! What was that for?"

"Maybe you needed to cool off," he grumbled.

The human seemed to contemplate the response for a moment, but eventually he shrugged, lacing his fingers behind his head and grinning at him when Arthur eyed him incredulously.

"You're getting soaked!"

"Yeah? So? I'm not made of sugar and neither are you!" Louis pointed out with a smirk. "Stop being a big chicken and come out here."

He took a step back automatically, narrowing his eyes suspiciously at the now rain-soaked man. "I'll pass," he grumbled when Louis raised a challenging eyebrow at him. Louis just laughed.

While he didn't love the change in weather and it'd make the rest of their date incredibly uncomfortable if they followed the plan Arthur had made, it did take the edge off the awkwardness. Louis practically swaggered closer, throwing his arms around Arthur's neck and rubbing their noses together, dampening Arthur's clothes even more.

"See? It's not that bad," he teased.

Arthur rolled his eyes, smacking a kiss on Louis's lips and immediately jerking back in surprise. "You're freezing!"

Louis shrugged. "It's fine. Now are we going to lunch or not? Because I'm hungry."

Arthur eyed the rain pouring so heavily, they couldn't see the condo a few blocks down. Did he want to step out into that? No, he did not. But he didn't want Louis to starve either.

A tinkling bell distracted them both as the shop door behind them opened and a head stuck out. Human by the scent of him and confused about why so many people were standing outside his shop. When he noticed the weather, he stepped back and gestured inside. “If you don’t mind waiting, I can have the stoves fired up in a minute. I don’t normally open for another hour.”

The rest of those hiding from the rain shuffled inside and Arthur dragged Louis with him, grimacing at the feel of his wet clothes against his skin. Cold and wet was basically his worst nightmare.

After seating everyone and handing out menus, the shop owner disappeared into the back to fire up the oven. They’d stumbled upon a small pizza shop. The menu didn’t have a ton of variety and it looked like there was only one person working, but the pizzas were stone-fired and the heat from the oven quickly warmed up the shop. Arthur relaxed in his seat, ignoring the grinning man across from him as he looked at the menu.

“So I guess movies are out?” Louis finally said, dragging his attention to his menu to consider the options.

Arthur cast a glance out the window and wrinkled his nose. “Unless the weather eases, I don’t see there being much of an option. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to sit in an air conditioned theater with wet clothes for a few hours, even if there was something I was interested in seeing, which I’m not sure there is. I haven’t looked in a while.”

Louis shrugged, unbothered by it all. He didn’t even seem to notice that his wet hair was plastered to his head and dripping down his neck. Arthur wanted to drag the man home and into a warm shower. Didn’t humans get sick if they were out in the rain? He swore he heard something about that once.

The shop owner came back out, pad and pen in hand, and started taking orders. When he came to their table, he looked between them consideringly. “What’ll you have?”

“I’ll have a large veggie pizza,” Arthur requested politely.

Louis made a face, mumbling something about him being a health nut before tipping his menu and pointing toward an item on the menu. “Can I get this in a large as well? And do you make garlic knots?”

“I do, but it might be a minute. I’ve got a lot of pizzas to make,” the owner replied, glancing behind him with a frown. “I’ve never had a crowd

like this before I’ve even opened. I only just bought the place a few months back.”

Louis waved a hand dismissively. “We’re not in a hurry. This big baby wants to wait until the weather passes before heading home.” He gestured to Arthur with a devious grin. He was taking way too much enjoyment out of Arthur’s discomfort.

The shop owner’s brow furrowed. “Oh. Wasn’t it supposed to be raining all afternoon? I’d honestly been prepared for a slow day since the weather was supposed to be so crappy.”

Arthur’s stomach sank. “All afternoon?”

The owner nodded, tucking the pencil he’d been using behind his ear and shoving the notepad into his apron pocket. “Yup. Might even be thunderstorms later tonight. I’ll get started on your pizzas. Hopefully there will be a break in the weather long enough for you to get home at the very least.”

He walked away, and Arthur cast another wary glance at the weather. It didn't look like it would be stopping any time soon. It drummed against the windows so loudly, it was hard to hear himself think. And he’d felt how cold Louis was from the few seconds standing out there. The brief contact he’d gotten would be nothing compared to the walk back to the condo.

Reaching across the table, Louis took his hand and squeezed gently. “Hey. Do you mind waiting here for me? I’m gonna run out for a second.”

Arthur frowned at him. “What for?”

“You’ll see,” Louis replied vaguely, shoving his seat back and popping to his feet. He rubbed his legs with a grimace. “This would be a lot faster if I wasn’t already worn out from this morning. Let this be a lesson to you that exercise should be reserved for emergencies only.”

He stayed only long enough to hear Arthur snort before ducking out of the shop and into the rain.

What were the chances he was going to go to the condo to work on something ‘really quick’ and Arthur would be forced to carry the pizzas home in the rain?

He’d be pissed if that turned out to be true. Like, go back to his own apartment and let Louis sleep on his own for a while pissed.

He didn’t have a lot of time to contemplate the possibility and really get worked up about it before Louis came back. He was even more soaked than before, and he shook out his hair like a dog before pushing into the shop

again. He handed the object he was carrying to Arthur as he dropped back in his seat, his chest heaving from running and a smile on his face.

“Here. They only had one left, but I figured it’ll keep you dry until we get back.”

Arthur’s eyes widened as he looked at the umbrella. Brand new with the tag still on it, likely from one of the convenience stores nearby. Given that he wasn’t gone that long, that had to be the only option. His chest tightened and that possessive feeling that had been growing in his chest roared to life. Why did he have to do something so sweet while Arthur was trying to figure out the best way to get himself back under control?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

LOUIS

The pizza place ended up being really good. And run by a human too, which made Louis want to stop by more often. Opening a restaurant in the city was hard enough without the potential for discrimination thanks to the owner's species. If he could patronize human owned companies just to balance the scales a little, he preferred to do that. As long as that shop was open to all species and not humans-only. Thankfully, this wasn't one of those, and the owner was polite and kind to everyone who set foot in his shop, including a couple kappa who had been enjoying a walk in the rain and decided to stop in for lunch, dripping puddles of water all over the floor as they headed for their table. The owner didn't even blink before picking up a mop and continuing on with his day.

The longer time dragged on, the more uncomfortable Arthur seemed to get, his gaze every once in a while dragging to the big bay window and the pouring rain just outside. Louis did his best not to laugh. He didn't really care about the rain, it never bothered him all that much, but he could tell Arthur didn't like it and the umbrella would only do so much. They'd have to face the rain eventually.

"Should we head out?" he suggested, pressing his lips together to hide his smile when Arthur looked downright dejected at the thought. He'd never seen the bossy lion shifter look so… human. In that moment, he wasn't a powerful supe, he wasn't a project manager or a life manager or a bossy

boyfriend. He was just a guy who hated the rain, and looked close to pouting at the idea of having to go out in it.

Leaving a heavy tip on the table for the owner, who'd been nice enough to open early for them, he stood, shivering as a cold droplet of water slid down his back. He didn't hate the rain, but going out twice meant he'd gotten soaked and he could really use a change of clothes right about now.

Arthur's arm came around his waist, pulling Louis against his side as they stepped out of the shop and under the awning. He shook open the umbrella, holding it over their heads, and smiled softly down at him. "Let's get back so you can warm up. I don't want you getting sick."

Louis's heart skipped at the sweet expression and he stumbled over his own feet when Arthur urged him forward, too distracted to watch where he was going. He straightened, putting his arm around Arthur's waist as well so they could stay close and under the umbrella as much as possible on the way home. It was also a good way to hide his expression while they were moving so Arthur didn't notice the flush in Louis's cheeks during the walk. The man had a way with words that was seriously disarming at times.

They hadn't actually gotten that far from the condo when the weather took a turn, but thanks to the rain coming sideways, the umbrella didn't actually end up doing that much good and they were both soaked when they came into the apartment.

"Stop!"

He froze, one foot in the air to step past the doorway. He looked around in confusion, noticing several of his roommates on the couch bundled in towels and a very harried looking one headed his way.

"Wet clothes and shoes come off at the door," Mateo instructed, handing him and Arthur both towels and pointing to another at their feet. "Don't go past that point until you're no longer dripping. We've already had one incident, we don't need more."

"Uh… what?"

Mateo waved a hand behind him, which was when Louis finally noticed Owen on the arm chair, a towel held to his nose that was soaked in blood.

"Is he alright?" Arthur asked, concerned.

Was it wrong to be annoyed that Arthur was asking? They'd just gotten back to normal and he kind of hated Arthur's comforting attention being on anyone else but him.

“We’re not sure. He slipped on a puddle someone left when coming in and fell face first onto the tile. There was blood everywhere. I just got things cleaned up, so could you just–” Mateo gave their pants a pointed look.

Well, shit. If Owen had gotten hurt because of the water, he could see why Mateo was being so fastidious about no more puddles. With a shrug, he wrapped the towel around his waist and removed his pants, shoes, and socks. His shirt was only damp at the edges, and he’d remove the damp boxers in his room. Neither were dripping or would make a mess in the short distance.

“Louis? Can you look at his nose? You’re familiar with human anatomy, aren’t you?” Dax asked. He was sitting on the arm of Owen’s chair, his phone out and a frown on his face as he poked at the screen. “I’ve tried looking it up, but I can’t tell if it's just swollen or if there’s potentially an issue that needs a druid.”

Did he want to help the guy who kept drawing Arthur’s attention? No, not really. But that was just him feeling petty. He was getting possessive of the lion shifter. He wasn’t sure whether it was because it was his first relationship or just because he was the first person to ever support Louis in his work. Either way, it was rude to let Owen suffer just because he was jealous.

“I guess. I’m not that kind of doctor, though.”

Owen shrugged, his voice muffled thanks to the towel and the injury to his nose. “I’m fibe.”

“Let him look anyway,” Dax chastised. “I swear I heard a crunch.”

Moving to stand in front of Owen, he gave a pointed look at the towel Owen still held against his face. Reluctantly, the small man removed it, wincing at the change in pressure. Louis winced right along with him. He didn’t even need to look that hard to know what was wrong.

“That’s broken. Start with ice for the swelling. It’s not life threatening, but unless he wants to return to work with two black eyes and forever have a slightly crooked nose, he needs to see a healer.”

Owen’s shoulders slumped. “That’s my third break this year,” he whined.

“Do you need to ask about a potential curse?” Arthur queried. He stood near Louis’s back but didn’t push to get closer. It was stupid that it made him feel better. Right?

Owen shook his head, accepting the ice wrapped towel Mateo handed him. He was wearing cleaning gloves and plucked the bloody towel away from Owen with a grimace, scurrying away again to clean up. Maybe he was squeamish?

“He already explained that,” Dax answered for him. “He’s got PCR.”

Louis’s brows snapped together in confusion, but Arthur’s grimace said he knew what it was. If it was something that could be fixed, he’d probably say something about it. The mother hen wouldn’t be able to help himself.

“Is anyone else hurt?”

He knew the basics of supe anatomy, but he’d have to look up specifics if one of his supe roommates was injured.

“Thankfully, no,” Mateo said as he came back over, his phone pressed to his ear as he listened to someone on the other end. “Owen, Taron says he knows a druid who could help and he’ll be over in a minute to pick you up. Did you need someone to go with you?”

“No, I’m good,” Owen mumbled, though it sounded more like ‘I’m goob’ thanks to his broken nose. Louis had never been treated by a druid before, but hopefully it’d be faster than human medicine. There was a reason he’d steered away from becoming a human doctor like his parents wanted. Human medicine was achingly slow.

“If my project was finished, we could get a better look at how bad it is,” he grumbled under his breath.

Arthur huffed, pulling him back by his hips and nudging him in the direction of the bedroom. “That’s not going to get me to change my mind about you working on weekends. Come on. I need a shower. Dax, do you have him for now?”

Dax nodded. “We’re good. Thanks, Louis. I know who to go to the next time I’ve got human questions for my project. Some of the reference material we have is really old and I’d rather get an expert opinion, you know?”

Louis blinked in surprise. No one had asked for his insight on their projects before. He’d honestly assumed their projects weren’t functional for humans, which was why he wanted his projects to work for all species, not just supes or humans. He hadn’t realized he should’ve asked.

Ugh, if Arthur overheard his line of thinking, he’d be a tyrant.

Since he didn't answer right away, Arthur answered for him. “Sounds good. We’re going to take a hot shower to warm up, then watch a movie.

Let us know if you need anything else."

Louis's mouth fell open. "But you said you didn't want to go to the movies anymore!" he complained. He'd thought he'd gotten out of that particular torture.

Arthur just chuckled, dragging him to the bedroom and into the bathroom as well. Louis had honestly thought after days of not showering together that Arthur would want him to wait. So when Arthur turned on the water, Louis turned for the door, figuring he'd work on one of his home projects while he waited. He grunted when Arthur snagged him around the waist, dragging him back and spinning him to face the running shower.

"Take off your clothes," he purred in his ear.

Louis shuddered. Did the man have to be so effortlessly sexy?

"You can go first," he argued. "You're the one who hates the cold. I don't mind waiting–"

"We're showering together, Louis," Arthur interrupted. "After watching you earlier, all I can think about is getting my hands on you."

Blinking, Louis let Arthur strip him, too confused to participate much outside of lifting his arms when Arthur pulled his shirt over his head. "Watching me doing… what?"

Whatever it was, he obviously needed to do it again if it got this reaction.

Arthur didn't stop to explain, and eventually Louis was too distracted with groping hands and toe curling kisses to think about it. He'd figure it out later.

With his eyes closed and his attention focused on his hands skimming Arthur's muscular frame, he didn't notice Arthur backing them up until the spray of the heated water hit his back. He shivered from the sudden change, but it didn't deter him from what he was doing. It'd been days since he got to touch Arthur like this. He wasn't stopping unless he absolutely had to.

He gasped into Arthur's mouth when he got a grip around Louis's cock, whimpering when he started stroking so slowly, it should be considered criminal.

"Arthur…"

"Hmm?"

Louis tipped his head, giving the man more room as his lips skimmed along his neck. "This is– *Ungh*, gods– This isn't another punishment, is it?"

Slowly, and with careful control, Arthur bit the muscle of Louis's shoulder just hard enough to feel the pressure of his teeth and make him whine. Why did the idea of Arthur biting him turn him on so much? Since when was he into biting?

When Arthur released him, Louis let out a ragged breath, reaching between them to touch Arthur's cock as well. The stubborn man stopped him, taking both his wrists in one hand and pinning them behind his back, leaving him entirely at the mercy of the lion shifter and his teasingly slow touch.

"I'm not punishing you, baby. I'm savoring you. There's a difference."

"What if I don't want to be savored?" he rasped, moaning when Arthur rubbed his thumb over the head of his cock in just the right way to make his toes curl. "What if– What if I want you to take me hard and fast?"

Huffing a small laugh, Arthur nipped at his ear and tugged lightly on the lobe. "That's what you do when you want to get off quickly so you can get back to your work. I'm not doing that with you. I told you, Louis. If you get into bed with me, I'm going to make it last. I'm not in a hurry. Are you?"

"I mean… a little," he whined, thrusting into Arthur's grip. He wasn't sure how he felt about making it last, especially since Arthur had the penchant for tormenting him, but he wasn't exactly opposed to the idea either. Letting Arthur have his wicked way with him seemed like a much better way to spend the afternoon than watching movies.

Arthur's hand suddenly sped up, stroking Louis so fast, it felt like he was speed testing how quickly he could make him come. Louis lifted onto his toes, eyes crossing as his release barreled down on him so fast it took his breath away. "Ah! Ah! Arthur! Fuck!"

He came with a surprised shout, his knees nearly going out from under him as the force of it bowled over him. It was only Arthur's hold on his wrists against his lower back tightening and pulling him closer that kept him from collapsing. When he finally could stand on his own, he lifted his gaze to look at Arthur incredulously, his whole body tingling.

"What was that for?"

"I said I'd reward you," Arthur commented easily. "You wanted it fast, so I gave you what you wanted."

He groaned, resting his forehead against Arthur's shoulder. Now, of all times, the lion shifter had to listen to him.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ARTHUR

Watching Louis's face as he realized he was the one who rushed his own orgasm was both entertaining and reassuring. He might complain about Arthur's inclinations to take his time in bed, but that didn't make him want it less. And from the disappointed groan, he'd been hoping Arthur would take charge and do it his way anyway. He'd be sure to do that next time. If he could get himself under control by then, that is.

His instincts were getting harder to ignore and when he realized he was almost obsessed with Louis's neck, to the point that he very nearly bit him, he decided he needed to hurry things along or risk an incident. He still wasn't sure why Louis was triggering his instincts so much, but seeing the gorgeous man in his element, diagnosing Owen and giving orders on what to do next, was too much to resist. Competence is sexy. Not to mention Louis being all sweet during lunch and running in the rain to get him an umbrella. He hadn't been lying that he'd been dying to get his hands on the man. It'd felt like a necessity at the time.

Now that Louis had come, though, he was concerned about going any further. Handjobs were simple enough for him to keep his control, but if he dragged Louis to bed, he really would be in danger of going into a rut. It was better to keep things simple for now.

Since they'd showered that morning, they didn't need more than a rinse to warm up. He turned off the water, snagging new towels and wrapping

one around his waist before giving his focus to Louis. He was moving a little sluggishly, and he had a goofy grin on his face that was entirely too cute. He hummed a happy sound when Arthur dried his hair, and it wasn't until he was dried off and getting dressed while Arthur got dry himself that he finally realized he was the only one who'd gotten off in the shower. Was it wrong that Arthur had hoped he hadn't noticed? Louis touching him was too much for his self control right now.

"Wait. What about you?" he demanded.

"It's not about reciprocity, Louis. Sometimes, I just want to take care of you."

Louis didn't look convinced and it seemed like it bothered him to leave things one-sided. Arthur tied the towel around his waist again, moving to join Louis in the closet and cup his face in his hands. "I promise, I'm not lying. For me, bringing my partners pleasure is sometimes better than receiving it myself. I don't need anything in return."

That was true even before his mind became so turbulent about a certain human. He'd always gotten pleasure from giving pleasure. He was just as satisfied as if he'd be if he had come himself, knowing his partners were sated and happy. It probably had something to do with his intense need to take care of people.

Intent on distracting the man, he leaned down for a soft kiss, rubbing his thumbs along Louis's cheeks and chuckling at the rasp abraiding his skin. "You need a shave."

To his surprise, Louis didn't argue, scratching at his jaw with a frown. "Yeah, probably. If I don't keep up with it, I really do start looking insane. It's not even or nice like yours and it's still pretty patchy fully grown. It's easier to just shave it off since it doesn't grow all that fast."

There were probably potions and spells out there to help it grow more evenly if he really wanted a beard, but Arthur wasn't entirely sure how many of those were made for humans and if Louis didn't care either way, it wasn't something he needed to worry over. Louis wasn't shy about saying what he wanted. He'd mention it if he wanted to change his looks.

"Sit on the counter. I'll help you with it."

Louis made a face, confused. "You're going to shave my face?"

"I like taking care of people, Louis. Stop complaining and sit."

He paused long enough to pull sweats and a sweater out of his bag, glad he'd packed enough to have warmer options. He'd stayed with Louis more

than he’d been at his own home the past few weeks. The condo was convenient and he wanted Louis near his roommates to make more connections if possible, but he’d need to go home at some point to get more clothes.

If he wasn’t careful, it’d start to look like he was moving in.

Louis tugged off the baggy t-shirt he’d put on, pulling himself up to sit on the counter. His entire wardrobe was worn and threadbare in places. The nicest things he owned were what he wore to the office, and even that had some rips and oil stains, probably from working on his projects. Maybe Arthur could buy him some clothes too. If he could find other ways to take care of the man, his instincts might settle and stop demanding he do something permanent.

“How exactly do you enjoy this?” Louis asked as Arthur pulled out the necessities to clean up his face. “I don’t even enjoy it. I only do it because I have to.”

Lifting Louis’s chin, he slathered on a good amount of shaving cream while filling the sink with hot water. “Part of it is just my personality. I like pampering my partners. But part of it has to do with my species. Lions are similar to werewolves in that we thrive best in a unit that takes care of each other. It’s literally in my DNA to care for those in my pride.”

“But I’m not in your pride.”

Arthur’s mouth twitched against a scowl in response to that comment, but he pushed it aside. “Maybe not, but I haven’t found my pride yet. Unlike werewolves, we don’t spend our whole lives in the same unit. Which means my instincts are unmet while I’m on my own and can usually be satisfied by taking care of those around me until I find my pride.”

He could tell he sparked Louis’s scientific curiosity, his eyes fully focused on him and intrigued. He opened his mouth to ask questions but Arthur silenced him with a kiss, shaking his head.

“Close your mouth or you’ll swallow some on accident. Save your questions for when I’m finished explaining.”

That got him a grumpy look, but he did as asked, rolling his lips to prevent Arthur from getting any of the cream on them. He tipped his head when Arthur guided his chin, not an ounce of fear or distrust on his face. He gave Arthur an expectant look instead, distracting him from the flutter in his chest the open trust gave him.

“Brat,” Arthur chuckled, carefully shaving down Louis’s cheek and around his jaw. “Like I said, lions thrive in a pride. But staying in the pride you grew up with is pretty rare. Male lions especially are territorial, though female lions can be just as ruthless if they feel they needed to be. In my experience, female lions are more patient.” He thought about his mother, who would fight with teeth and claws if she felt the need for it, but could easily handle a situation with words, while his father, when he’d been alive, was overprotective and quick to violence if he felt like his family was being threatened. Arthur was a cross between the two of them, patient, but also protective, and his mother said he got the best of them both. He took pride in that.

“Once a male lion reaches adulthood, his pride gifts him with the tools and funds needed to start on his own. Eventually, he’ll make his own pride with his mate and his chosen family, and that need to coddle and protect will become more focused on just his pride. I haven’t found a mate, but my team is like my family. Which is why they call me a mother hen. My instincts see them as mine to protect and thankfully, they allow me to do that without getting irritated with my sometimes overbearing nature.”

“Sometimes?” Louis mumbled, a smirk twitching his lips before he smoothed it out so Arthur could continue what he was doing.

“Yes, sometimes, brat. I told you, I’m not that bad if you just take care of yourself properly. My team figured that out pretty quickly. You’re the one being so stubborn about it.”

Louis rolled his eyes, but for once chose not to argue, instead waiting for Arthur to be done with his upper lip before asking, “So they just kick you out when you become an adult? What if you’re not prepared for it? Or what if they don’t have the funds to do it? And isn’t that kind of cruel? Sending someone used to being in a unit out on their own to be alone however long it takes to find a mate and their own pride?”

Arthur smirked at the long list of questions. He couldn’t help himself, could he? The scientist in him always needed to know the answers to everything.

“They don’t kick anyone out before they’re ready. It’s a mutual decision, usually when instincts start telling us the pride is getting too crowded and we need to move on. As for funding, prides pool money specifically for the younger members to branch off eventually. Like I said, a pride is a unit, not just a group of people who like to be near each other. If

one family is struggling financially, the pride steps in to support them until they're back on their feet, then they do the same when the next issue comes up. So, no, no one is sent out into the world without the proper funds to start fresh. And it's not like once we leave we're not allowed to visit or even come back if it turns out we're not as ready as we thought. It's happened from time to time that a lion or lioness will leave home too early and realize the world is a lot bigger than they expected. They're allowed to come back home to prepare better before trying again. I didn't have to come back myself, but I do visit at least once a year during the holidays. They're still my family, even if they aren't my pride anymore. And they'll be introduced to my chosen pride when the time comes."

From Louis's expression, he couldn't quite grasp the concept of being separate but still connected. It brought up a few questions for Arthur as well.

"What about you? Do humans stay with their families until mating?"

Louis wrinkled his nose. "Humans don't have mates. Or, at least, there's not a mate bond if you marry another human. Not as far as I'm aware, anyway. And it depends on the situation, I suppose. Humans from isolated families tend to stick close to their family since they're either uncomfortable around supes or outright hostile. The number of humans who leave home on their own is pretty small. Most who do leave tend to leave for an education and then decide to stay gone."

"Is that what you did?" Arthur asked, tipping his chin up to get underneath it.

Louis hummed, waiting for Arthur to move on from his jaw so he could speak more freely. "My family doesn't hate supes, but they are afraid of them. My grandparents had bad interactions with supes and they taught their kids to be afraid too. My parents weren't happy about me leaving and whenever they call, the first thing they ask is if I'm safe, but they also knew I couldn't stay. I didn't fit in there. I had too many questions they couldn't answer and I would've gone insane sitting in that quiet town forever." He huffed a laugh, though it sounded strained. "It would've been nice to have a fund to start my life though. I'm up to my eyeballs in student loan debt. Even with the pay I get at Spellbound, I likely won't be able to pay it all off until I'm well into my sixties, and that's if I don't try to find a place of my own and add more debt to my plate."

Pulling back, Arthur cocked his head. “Wait. What? Spellbound offers student loan forgiveness for all its employees. Didn’t your manager tell you that when you got hired?”

From the stunned look on Louis’s face, no, he hadn’t. He growled in annoyance. Basil was getting on his last nerve. It wasn’t possible that he was this bad at being a manager even after all these years at the company. Right?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

LOUIS

Arthur… might be an evil genius. Instead of making Louis suffer through a marathon of cheesy movies with little plot and scientific inaccuracies that would've been more likely to send him into a rant than actually relax and enjoy it, Arthur found a docu-series on supe innovations over the years, and how it had changed to include more technology as time went on. Louis was enraptured, and when Arthur shifted and curled around him like a big, furry space heater, Louis melted. The man could apparently control the volume of his purr because it was light enough to not interrupt the show while also vibrating pleasantly against his back.

Between the series and the fluffy distraction against his back, who was unbothered by Louis tracing his fingers along his muscles and exploring the pads of his paws while watching the series, Louis didn't even realize he made it through an entire day without even reaching for his projects. He didn't even care that Arthur chose to sleep in his shifted form and basically dragged Louis underneath him to make sure he stayed put. The lion was warm and it was only fair given how often Louis used Arthur as a mattress.

Did his good behavior spare him from another workout session the next morning? No, it did not. And no amount of whining changed Arthur's mind. By the time he returned to the office Monday morning, he was so sore he was limping and he had aches in places he hadn't even realized could ache.

Meanwhile, Arthur looked entirely unbothered, ushering Louis through the lobby with a hand on his shoulder, completely ignoring Louis's scowl.

"Louis!" Taron's familiar voice called out over the noise of the lobby.

Louis groaned. He didn't have the energy for this. How did he feel more exhausted now than he did when he wasn't sleeping regularly? At least when his sleep schedule was messed up, he wasn't in any pain. This was just cruel.

When Taron clapped him on the back, Louis grunted and edged away from him, feeling every movement and wishing he could just melt onto the floor and cry a little. How was it that he chose the meanest, cruelest, most evil first boyfriend–

"What's up with him?" Taron queried curiously.

"We started an exercise routine this weekend. He's a little sore, that's all," Arthur explained with that stupid smug tone of voice that made Louis wish he could kick the lion shifter in the shin. He couldn't, it'd hurt him more than it'd hurt Arthur, but he wanted to.

"A little?" he croaked incredulously, barely able to stand straight thanks to the pain in his back muscles. "This is 'a little' sore? Are you saying it can somehow get worse?"

Taron, for his part, looked thrilled by this new development. "An exercise routine? I wouldn't have thought of that. That definitely will get him healthy, though. My mate's been doing more physical therapy after work with one of the staff here. Maybe I can join you guys while he's doing that on Zephyr's days. He only ever needs one of us to be around to assist at a time, so Zeph and I take turns so he doesn't get overwhelmed or feel rushed."

"Sure," Arthur agreed, completely ignoring Louis's very legitimate questions. "I was going to do another round this morning, but this one wouldn't stop complaining. We'll save it for the afternoon instead."

"Why do you hate me?" Louis whined.

Taron laughed outright, squeezing his shoulder and making Louis wince. "No pain, no gain, am I right? A little soreness is worth it if you get back to full health. You're looking a lot better ever since Arthur took over. You're not as pale, you've put on some healthy weight. Last week, you didn't even have dark circles. Can't say the same today, you look tired, but that'll pass when you get used to the exercise."

Louis didn’t even have the energy anymore to argue or complain. He just wanted to get upstairs and work on his project. Arthur bribed him to run a little longer yesterday and he might’ve figured out how to get past the last snag in his project before he could start his first testing phase during the run.

Not that he’d ever admit that to Arthur.

He slumped against Arthur’s side, too sore to even hold himself up anymore. This had to be considered cruel and unusual punishment. He was sure he’d find someone who’d agree with him.

“I’m going to take him to see Tanya before we start for the day. She’ll at least have a pain potion for him so he can function.”

Oh, goddess, yes. Maybe Arthur didn’t hate him after all.

“Sounds good. I’ll pop in later to check in. I want to see how the project is going. I read through the proposal when the incident occurred. It’s got some real promise. I’m excited to see it working.”

Arthur’s arm around his shoulders steered him away from the main turnstiles and toward their building, where the elevators were at least slightly less crowded. He kept his eyes closed for most of the ride, since even his eyelids hurt. Was that a thing? It felt like a thing. Or maybe he was just so sore that literally every inch of him was sending up pain signals.

“Come on, baby. Tanya will have a potion for you,” Arthur urged, ushering him along out of the elevator and into a brightly lit room that made Louis grimace. He didn’t even have it in him to complain about the pet name.

“Good morning, Arthur,” a female voice greeted. “Who do we have here?”

“This is Louis. He had a rough workout this weekend and he’s been complaining he’s sore. Do you have anything you can give him so he can get through the day?”

The female voice hummed and Louis found himself being moved along without much effort on his part, nudged onto a seat and urged to recline slowly. He still hadn’t bothered to open his eyes. If he didn’t open his eyes, that meant he didn’t have to face the day and the sheer amount of pain he was in. Right?

“Well, let’s have a look. I’ll start with a diagnostic spell just to be sure he didn’t pull anything. If all is good and this is just regular muscle soreness

after exercise, I’ve got a potion that will help. If he’s pulled anything, then I’ll need to create something more specific.”

Louis finally forced himself to open his eyes, curious about the diagnostic spell. The druid sitting on a stool next to the bed he’d been nudged into smiled at him, tipping her head curiously.

“Hello there. Can you tell me when the pain started?”

“The day after our first workout,” he grumbled. “Arthur said more exercise would help the soreness go away. He lied.”

His grouchy response made the druid laugh. “It can help, at least with increasing blood flow and reducing stiffness, but there are limits. If you’re too sore, exercising can make it worse.” She gave Arthur a chastising look that was ruined by the smile that tugged at her lips. “If he can’t fully straighten or is limping, then it's better to let him rest. Or if you’re worried about cold muscles making it worse, try active recovery. A walk, or maybe some time walking the length of the pool to take some of the stress off the muscles. Don’t push so hard that he can’t function the next day. Humans don’t recover as quickly as shifters do.”

Arthur had the decency to look remorseful. “I hadn’t thought of that. I’ll be more careful in the future.”

Which meant he still planned on making Louis exercise. He shot his boyfriend a dirty look. Wasn’t this suffering enough for him?

“Louis. I’d like to do a diagnostic spell now. Can I take your hand?”

She was polite to ask and he set his hand in hers with only a little grimacing.

“Tanya, can you make the spell visible?” Arthur requested. “Louis is researching diagnostics right now, and could benefit from seeing the spell working.”

Tanya looked surprised, but please, by the request. “Not many people do research into diagnostic medicine. I can do that, sure.”

Her eyes flashed and warmth spread along his hand and down his arm. Thanks to Arthur’s request, Louis could see the green magic spread down his arm, lifting an image of what looked like lines of color that spread throughout his whole body. He dropped his chin, looking at the tangle of it in his chest, most of it green and pulsing lightly. Along his arms and calves was more of a burnt orange, and there were a few lines of darker blue in his thighs.

“Green means healthy,” she explained. “The color will darken the more pain you’re in, and certain types of pain will show up a different color to let us know what we need to tackle first. For example, I’m seeing soreness in your calves and upper arms, while more strain in your thighs that would worry me if you planned to keep pushing on exercise without rest and treatment first. Blue means it could become more of a problem if not monitored properly. I think if you would’ve kept pushing, you would’ve likely pulled a muscle or two. It’s good that Arthur brought you in today so we can prevent that.”

Louis didn’t even glance at the lion shifter, too fascinated by the magic to pay attention. He’d never thought about assigning color to the reading. At the moment, his scanner produced an image in black and white with brighter spots where the injuries were. If he added color to the mix, maybe someone with multiple injuries would be able to be treated based on the most severe thing first. It was a problem he’d been trying to work out before Arthur made him pull back to the basics first. Though, how he would be able to do that without magic involved, he wasn’t sure. That’d take some more thought.

“We’ve lost him to the science,” he heard Arthur comment with a smile in his voice. “Keep going. He’s listening, I promise. He’s just thinking about six different things at the same time.”

Tanya chuckled, continuing her explanation of the diagnostic magic and what she was seeing. The burnt orange was pain, but without any internal damage. When she handed him a mirror, he could see a lighter sort of green in his head, which she said was normal, since the mind changed the magic ever so slightly, making it closer to white when things were healthy. There was a pink thread that twisted through his chest, but he couldn’t see where it went, and she didn’t explain it. She made him stand instead, showing him what it looked like when he did and his muscles protested the movement, a darker flash of blue and orange rippling along all the sore muscles before settling again.

She dropped the spell, urging him back to his seat with Arthur to help him since it hurt to do it. “Now that I know there aren’t any pulled muscles or deeper issues I need to deal with first, I can whip up a simple potion that will help manage your pain and encourage healing so you’ll be back in tip top shape in a few hours.

“A few hours?” he repeated, surprised. “It’s that fast?”

“For things like this, yes. If it were something more complicated, like a broken bone or torn muscle, the spellwork would be a lot more complicated, and a trip to the clinic would be necessary.” She gestured to a red pouch on her belt. “I’ve always got teleportation charms on hand in case an experiment goes wrong and my magic isn’t enough to fix the issue. Thankfully, I only need to use those about once a month or so.”

Once a month?!

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ARTHUR

Seeing the damage he'd caused made Arthur's stomach churned. Louis no longer looked upset about it, chattering with him about the possibilities of adding color to his scanner and how complicated that might be without more research, but Arthur still felt awful. He'd admit he hadn't even thought about the human aspect of it. He wanted Louis to be healthier, he needed to exercise to fix his posture, so he'd done what he would've done for anyone on his team that needed a push in that area of their life. But none of his team members were human. Supes in general healed faster than humans did, and most only needed a good night's sleep and to keep their muscles warm to feel better after a hard workout. It wasn't until Louis was limping that he'd realized he'd gone too far.

"If there aren't any more delays, I should be able to start testing the scanner mid week or maybe next week if I run into any issues. Once I'm sure it works, I'm honestly not sure which issue to tackle next. Do I focus on the scan to give back colors and isolate the injuries, or do I add in data for supes with similar anatomy? But magic could throw off the scan, and some supes throw off magic when they're knocked out, right? Maybe I need a case for it first to block any magical interference?"

Arthur was so used to Louis mumbling and talking to himself, he honestly hadn't expected to be asked his opinion. He listened because he

cared about Louis and wanted to see him succeed, but he'd never outright asked Arthur's opinion without Arthur himself initiating the conversation.

"Arthur?"

Blinking, he glanced down at the man still sitting on the clinic bed, his eyes bright with excitement and intrigue. He got that look when he was close to a breakthrough for an issue he'd been having. Arthur loved that look on him.

"Sorry, what?"

Louis's brows furrowed. "Are you okay? You seem distracted."

Drawing in a deep breath, he let it out slowly. "Yes, I'm alright. I was just thinking." He ran through what Louis had said, realizing where he'd missed the question. "I think you should write down each path you want to take to expand the device first, and decide amongst them which matters to you most. Both are important, but weren't there more that you'd mentioned before I told you to pull back?"

Louis wrinkled his nose. "True. Actually, I have my notebook here…"

He trailed off, already distracted as he pulled out his notebook and started patting his pockets for a pen like he always did. Arthur felt a smile pull at his lips as he pulled one out of his jacket pocket and handed it over. He started carrying extra pens on him a few months after becoming a project manager. His researchers always seemed to be losing their pens. Louis was no exception.

As Louis bent to the task of writing down all the ways he wanted to expand his sensor, Arthur watched him with a soft smile. He didn't like when Louis overworked himself, but he loved watching him when he was in the zone. Watching such a brilliant mind work felt like a privilege.

"Okay," Tanya said, interrupting his train of thought as she swept out of the back room. "Potion is ready. It'll take the edge off the pain and help healing. I'd say he should be back to normal by lunch. Did he eat breakfast? Humans tend to get upset stomachs if they don't eat before taking a potion. I've got some snacks here just in case."

"He ate," Arthur reported since Louis wasn't at all paying attention right now. He was muttering again, talking to himself as he scribbled something down, then drew a line to something else and wrote on top of it. If Arthur thought he could train the man to use a better note taking system, he might try it since his few glances at Louis's notes had been pure chaos, but that wasn't a primary focus right now. He narrowed his eyes as Louis started

squinting, leaning closer to the paper as he tried to write smaller notes between the ones he'd already written down. "Hey, Tanya, can you look at his eyes? At this point, I feel like he's resting enough that he shouldn't have to strain like that to read, especially first thing in the morning. Right?"

She hummed, sitting on the stool again and tipping her head to look at Louis. She didn't make him look up at first, and Arthur felt her magic as she tested the waters. She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Louis, can I have your attention for just a moment?"

"Hmm?"

He didn't even look up. Arthur rolled his eyes, carefully masking his smile so Louis didn't discover that he found the man amusing. Gripping his chin, he forced Louis to look up, silencing his protest with a quick kiss. "Focus, Louis. Tanya needs to check something before you can take your potion and head upstairs."

The affection seemed to take the sting of being pulled away from his work and he turned those emerald eyes onto the druid who used her magic again to check his eyes. She nodded mostly to herself. "I do see some extra strain there. Louis, do you have trouble seeing things closer to you?"

"No. I'm fine," Louis answered.

Arthur bit back a sigh. "Don't just answer. Think about it. Is it hard to see smaller screws or notes that you'd written before?"

"Uh… I don't know. Maybe? When I'm tired at least." He suddenly scowled at Arthur. "Is this another attempt to get me to not work so much? I already go home when you ask and sleep through the night. What more do you want?"

Arthur snorted. "Don't ask questions you don't want the answer to. No, this isn't about your workload. I'm concerned you struggle to see things up close. I've noticed you lean into your screen a lot and while the hunching might be lack of exercise, it could also be because you're trying to see better. Have you ever had an eye exam?"

"Not since high school," Louis shrugged.

"It might be worth looking into," Tanya suggested. "I'm not an expert on human vision, but an older druid would be able to help with that. You could also get him fitted for glasses if he'd prefer to avoid too much magic."

He understood why she'd suggest it, there were humans who were bothered by magic and avoided it if they could. Louis wasn't one of them

though and looked confused why she'd bring it up. Arthur stopped him before he could get into that line of questioning.

"I'll make sure we make an appointment. Thank you Tanya."

She beamed at him. "No problem. Louis, here's your potion. It should help right away with your pain, but if you notice any breakthrough pain, just let me know. Sometimes human bodies fight magic if they aren't used to it. Take it easy for the morning, and if you do plan on exercising today, make it something light, like a jog or a brisk walk instead of a full workout."

Louis tossed the contents of the potion back while Arthur gathered their things. He was relieved to see the potion work its magic right away, and Louis stood with a lot less wincing than he'd done when he came in. He still had a limp, but that would go away with time. With his mind on his work, he didn't even notice the difference, his nose practically glued to his notebook as he tried to scribble notes and walk at the same time. Arthur had to physically steer the researcher to the elevators and then to his office, checking over the space while Louis dropped into his seat and immediately started working. Thankfully, nothing looked tampered with and Louis was in a good mood, so he didn't think there was anything to worry about on that end.

"I'll be in my office if you need me," he murmured so he didn't interrupt, pressing a kiss to the top of Louis's head. It still stunned him when Louis looked up long enough to steal a kiss and smile at him before giving his attention back to his work. For a workaholic, Arthur had expected him to be a lot more distant of a partner. Apparently, Louis had hidden skills to prioritize his partner while dating. He wondered if the man knew that if he would've stayed single so long.

When he stepped out of the office, he nearly bumped into Elijah, who was walking around similarly to how Louis had been, half distracted with unfocused eyes. Arthur caught his arm to stop them from crashing into one another, cocking his head when Elijah blinked rapidly and focused on what was in front of him.

"Oh. Apologies, Arthur. I didn't see you there."

"Yes, I could see that. Is everything alright?"

Elijah's expression twisted and he looked around the room again with a deep frown on his face. That look made something in Arthur's gut tighten and he gently urged the telepath into his office so they could talk in private.

The minute the door closed, he asked again, “What’s wrong?”

Elijah shook his head slowly. “I’m not sure yet. I’m getting weird vibes on the floor. Something feels… off.”

“Off how?”

“I…” He looked lost for words, like he hadn’t gathered enough information to fully grasp the situation just yet.

Arthur’s protective instincts flared hot and he immediately turned for the door. He didn’t care if he had to act as a bodyguard for Louis, he wasn’t letting anyone hurt that sweet man again.

“Arthur, wait,” Elijah protested, stepping in front of him. “I understand you feel protective of Louis, but I don’t think making a scene is a good idea right now. It’s possible people will become more guarded if you do. I can’t get all the information I need if that happens.”

He swallowed down a growl, trying and failing to rein in his instincts. He knew Elijah was right, and going on a hunt right now wouldn’t get him the results he wanted. His instincts were hard to ignore, though, and for the first time in a long time, he felt a partial shift overtake him, his arms going furry and his fingers turning into claws. No one would get near Louis if there was a lion standing in their way. And he could claw anyone who tried–

He heard Elijah murmur to himself, but it was getting harder to focus. It wasn’t until he lifted a hand, catching Arthur’s eye and drawing his attention that Arthur heard what he was saying.

“I’m going to use my magic, Arthur. Just to help you settle. I promise, I won’t do any more. Is that okay?”

It was a battle with his instincts, but he forced himself to nod, careful not to move a muscle when Elijah’s hand touched his arm.

Magic like cool water trickled through his mind, soothing the more violent instincts and giving him back his control. When he took a deep breath, he no longer felt like he was going to have an uncontrolled shift, and when he looked down at his hands, they were no longer all furry.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what just happened.”

“It’s okay,” Elijah murmured, tipping his head to see him better. “Do you feel like I can open the door? If Alistair can’t see me soon, I’m going to have to settle him too.”

Arthur dipped his chin once, fully aware mates were overprotective and Elijah being in a room alone with him while he was so unstable probably

sent his anchor into a tail spin. When the mage stepped into the room, his expression was dark and dangerous, but Elijah was quick to move to his side, rubbing a hand on his chest.

“It’s okay, Alistair. I wasn’t in any danger. His mind wasn’t on me at all.” When Elijah looked over his shoulder, he gave Arthur a small smile. “He might not be on your team, but Louis is part of your pride, isn’t he? That’s why you’re so protective of him.”

Disgruntled and suddenly unsure of himself, Arthur just shrugged. “I just don’t want him to get hurt again.”

Elijah nodded. “And we’ll work not to allow that to happen. For now, I need you to keep things business as usual. People are always more guarded when I’m on the floor. If they get used to me being around, I’ll be able to pick up more. Louis is safe for now. You’re nearby and he’s never alone on the floor. Let me see what else I can pick up first.”

He had no other choice but to accept. And while Elijah was getting more information about the energy of the floor, Arthur needed to take a deeper look at what the hell was going on with him. He hadn’t lost control like that in decades. Why the hell was this one human triggering his protective instincts so intensely?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

LOUIS

The day flew by as Louis put in the final touches to his device. It wasn't anywhere near what he wanted it to be, and could only give data for humans and other human-like anatomy, but it was a start.

How pissed would Arthur be if he tested it on himself first?

Despite knowing the answer to that question, he couldn't quite let the idea go. Finding volunteers to test the product would take time. Finding human volunteers who were comfortable visiting a supe company like this one would be nearly impossible.

He could possibly go home for a visit and take the device with him… His parents always let him create little devices at home and test them out when he was a child. Granted, none of them had been used on people and mostly made the house more convenient, but still…

He eyed the device, then dragged his gaze to his body. He wasn't as sore as he had been before Arthur got chastised by the druid, but he still felt muscle twinges from the daily work outs, especially in his thighs this morning since yesterday it'd been what Arthur called 'leg day'. Would the scanner be able to see that?

He was just picking up the device to hold over his legs when someone knocked, making him jump and almost drop it. He scrambled to catch it, letting out a breath when he carefully set it back down. Standing, he moved to open the door a crack, peering out at whoever was visiting. His gaze

traveled up to meet Mr. Yarrow's face and it took work not to grimace as he opened the door wider to greet his supervisor.

"Mr. Yarrow. Can I help you with anything?"

"Yes. I need you on clean up. Nadine ran experiments and we're low on interns right now to clean up the lab." He shot Louis an accusing look, like he was somehow to blame for that and not the intern himself for damaging his project. His attention flicked over Louis's head and the yeti's scowl deepened. "Are you still working on that? I thought we agreed it wasn't possible."

"I, um… realized I was trying to do too much all at once. I've got a basic model now that's ready for testing on humans, but–"

"Humans?" The yeti practically sneered. "This isn't a human-only company, Louis. We make products for all species. Just because you're human doesn't mean you can be selective on who your products help."

"Yes, I know that. I plan on–"

"You're wasting company time by continuing if it won't work for all species. Go help Nadine instead. At least then you'll be doing something useful."

He spun on his heel and stormed off, leaving Louis a little shell shocked. He'd never had such a contentious conversation with his supervisor before. It felt almost like Mr. Yarrow was being outright hostile. He understood the confusion, it sounded like Louis had decided to only help humans, but the man didn't even give him a chance to finish his explanation that it was just the first phase and he'd be adding other species once he'd worked out the kinks. And demoting him to cleaning duty? What was that about? Louis wasn't an intern and even if he wasn't working on this specific project, he didn't think he would be relegated to tasks like that. He'd earned his position through years of hard work. He'd surpassed being the errand boy by now.

He must've stood there frozen long enough to catch Arthur's attention. He didn't even see him coming before his familiar scent filled the air, along with that demanding tone that would normally piss Louis off. This time, it barely registered.

"Louis? What's wrong? Why do you look like that? Did something happen?"

It took a second for Louis's brain to reboot, and once it did, the incredulity came online as well. He clenched his fists and gritted his teeth,

spinning on his heel and retreating back to his office. He wasn't going to be bullied by supes unwilling to listen to him. He was going to prove he'd earned his position here and they'd all realize eventually that they were wrong about him.

Grabbing his project, he hooked it up to the monitor on the opposite wall, balancing it on a few stacked books since it was supposed to be handheld, but he couldn't get the same results if he was holding it himself. He pressed a few buttons, stepped back, and was about to do his first scan when Arthur stopped him.

"Louis, what the hell are you doing?"

"I don't have time to wait around for volunteers. Don't get in the way, Arthur. You'll skew the results."

He pressed the button, closing his eyes so the red laser didn't cause any damage if it accidentally scanned too high, and held his breath. He heard Arthur curse and the door slam shut, but he didn't open his eyes again until the buzzing of the laser eased into a hum and the scanner let out a familiar two toned beep that said it was finished scanning.

His eyes popped open and he watched, wide-eyed, as a scan of his torso appeared on the screen. Still black and white, he hadn't gotten around to changing that, but–

"Oh, fuck. It's live."

That… hadn't been what he'd intended. He thought it'd be a picture that the EMT could study to know what needed the most attention. But he'd forgotten to set the scanner's limit to one round of scanning. The red laser was still trailing up and down his torso in quick scans, giving what looked like an actual live image of what was happening inside him. His heart beating, his lungs moving, it was all there.

"You really did it," Arthur said in an awed voice.

Louis startled, he'd thought the lion shifter had left, and laughed to himself when the whole image jumped with him.

"How did you do this?"

He didn't sound accusing or disbelieving like most people did when he created something new. Just curious and surprised. Louis felt his cheeks warm, a pleased smile overtaking his face. It was nice to share something like this with someone who wasn't going to find some reason to put him down. And he trusted that Arthur would never do that.

“I, uh… basically combined the processing idea of a few machines that humans use to see inside bodies with a lot of advanced technology and a little imagination. It’s just a prototype. I’ll need to make the image clearer, add color so we know what’s happening, that kind of thing, but…” He huffed a laugh, a little awed himself. “I hadn’t thought of a live video. I guess in all the coding I did, I forgot to set a limit for the scanner. It’s continuously scanning, so it looks live.”

The image got fuzzy and the laser flickered, making him lunge forward to turn off the device before it did something crazy and exploded. Now that he was paying attention, he could smell the melted plastic, which made sense since he hadn’t made the device to be capable of handling a scan quite like that. He thankfully shut it off in time to save it from any permanent damage.

When he turned back to Arthur, he felt the excitement build in his chest until he could hide the grin that spread across his face. “It works.”

Arthur’s smile was proud as he dipped his chin in agreement. “It works.”

With an elated laugh, he threw himself at Arthur, squeezing him hard, grinning ear to ear as Arthur hugged him back so tightly that his feet left the ground. It honestly felt like they never came back to earth. He was so damn excited, he was practically vibrating. He started talking a mile a minute, still clutching to Arthur as his brain tried to process everything he’d just seen.

“There’s so much to do now. Obviously a live scan would be better because we’d be able to see everything in real time, but the device isn’t built for that. It’d need to be bigger to handle that kind of scanning capability, and there’d need to be some kind of coolant to keep it from overheating. And I need to work out how to sharpen the image because not all injuries are so major that you’d be able to see what’s happening if it's that fuzzy. And adding color. Gods, that might get complicated, but it’d be beyond helpful. Not everyone has the medical knowledge to know what they’re looking at with that kind of imaging, so showing where the healing needs to be and what needs to be prioritized is so important, and everyone can understand color theory as long as they’re trained in it. It’d be easier to train than medical knowledge for every species and–”

Arthur’s deep rumbling chuckle interrupted Louis’s train of thought, along with Arthur’s hands on his shoulders, squeezing tightly enough to get his focus. “Alright, alright. It’s a lot, I know. But don’t skip what’s

important. You did something amazing, Louis. It might just be stage one, but you still made that happen. It’s important to celebrate each step, otherwise you’ll risk burning out trying to make it perfect.”

Right. Right, he had a point. No one thought he’d get this far. Not his family, not his professors, not even his supervisor. They all saw his work as a waste of time. This device was proof that he could do it. For fifteen glorious seconds, that image showed exactly what was happening inside him. And it was even better than he’d planned for it to be.

It was a matter of luck more than anything that Louis remembered to set the monitor to record the scan. He’d been so determined and upset by the interaction with Mr. Yarrow that if he hadn’t set the recording to start earlier when he’d still been contemplating whether it was a good idea to test it on himself or not, he would’ve missed it. And then he wouldn’t have proof that it actually worked. He wasn’t sure he could do the scan a second time without risking overheating. He’d need to remove the casing at the very least and find something better that wouldn’t overheat before trying again.

His hands trembled as he reached for his laptop, pulling up the recording of what he’d done. Seeing it pop up again, the scan of his torso more real now that he wasn’t distracted by how he hadn’t meant to do it in quite that way, made tears prick Louis’s eyes. He was so distracted by it, he didn’t even notice Arthur moving around him until he plugged something into the computer and copied the recording onto it.

“What are you doing?” he squawked, spinning to look at him.

“Saving it in multiple locations,” Arthur explained, pulling up the storage site all researchers used and doing something crazy with it to create an unfamiliar account. He copied the file there too before making Louis log into his personal account to upload it there as well.

“Okay… but why?” he asked, confused. He still did as he was asked, Arthur was the project manager and probably knew better than he did, but this felt a little excessive.

“Because there’s still an active investigation going on in regards to this project, and if we save it to multiple places, the proof that you did it is a lot harder to get rid of if it's not just in one place. If you’re comfortable, you can put the code and data files onto the flash drive as well. I keep it on my keys in a protective case and its password protected and encrypted so no one can get into it even if they stole it from me.”

Louis’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head. “That’s… intense. Why are you being so intense? Did something happen to make you think we needed to be this careful?”

Maybe it’d be better to bring the device home with him. Yes, it was behind a ward here and yes, bringing it home might risk damage in a multitude of ways, but was leaving it here really better?

Arthur’s warm palm on his cheek drew his focus out of his head, his smile soft. “No. Nothing like that. But you’ve been hurt once before. If I can prevent that from happening again, I’m going to do everything in my power to ensure you’re safe.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

ARTHUR

Was it possible he was being overprotective? Maybe. But seeing the elation and excitement on Louis's face made Arthur feel like he wasn't doing enough. He had to do more to protect that joy. Seeing Louis so purely happy for the first time was worth the trouble he might get into for making a burner account on the company cloud storage so he could hide a copy of Louis's results from anyone smart enough to try to hack the system.

Louis's confused expression shifted to something more pensive, like it held a wealth of baggage and remembered pain. "Thank you. It means a lot that you'd support me like that. No… No one ever has."

That confession wasn't helping. It made Arthur's protective instincts roar inside his head, and if he didn't get ahold of himself, he'd lose control again like he had in his office the other day.

Leaning to press a kiss to Louis's forehead, he murmured, "I'm always here to support you. Do you have more work to do, or are you ready for lunch?"

Louis scoffed, which surprised him. "I'm technically not supposed to be doing this at all. Mr. Yarrow wants me to drop my project and go assist Nadine in cleaning up from her most recent experiments. He says I'm wasting company time and should be doing something *useful*."

His tone was filled with disdain and righteous fury. Arthur felt it too. A growl started low in his chest and got louder, his claws coming out as he

thought about going after Basil for insulting his–

“Woah, hey! You can partially shift?”

Louis touching his hands tore Arthur’s attention away from his admittedly violent train of thought. He looked down at the researcher, watching the fascination and awe overtake his face as he turned Arthur’s hands over to look at the claws from each angle. Drawing in a deep breath, he let it out slowly, forcing himself to settle. He didn’t pull back the partial shift just yet, he didn’t want to interrupt Louis’s exploring, but he made himself let go of any irrational urges and focus on Louis instead.

He really needed to get ahold of himself.

“Yes. It’s not a common practice. Some shifters may experience a partial shift when they’re feeling strong emotions or feel like they’re under threat, but I can actually do it on command. It’s a family trait. My whole family can do it.”

He unbuttoned his shirt cuff and pushed his sleeve up while letting the shift move up his arm so Louis could see the fur appear there. Watching Louis explore him was soothing in a way he hadn’t expected. His touch settled him. It likely helped his instincts settle knowing the person he wanted to protect was close enough to touch.

“That’s amazing,” Louis breathed. “Is it just the claws, or can you do more?”

“How about I show you the limits of my shift at home tonight. You’re getting that look in your eye that says you want to explore and I don’t think stripping in the office is appropriate.”

Louis waved that away without even bothering to look up at him. “Plenty of people do it during testing phases if access to different parts of their bodies is needed for the experiment. You’d be fine. I wonder if I’ll need to account for something like this in my scan. You said shifters do a partial shift if they’re scared or feeling emotional? Most people injured in an accident are feeling all kinds of emotions.” His brows furrowed as he turned Arthur’s hand over again. “How do I input the data for two different species in the same body?”

“That’s where magic will likely get involved,” Arthur informed him, letting the partial shift go for the time being. He’d allow Louis to explore more later.

Louis looked up with a frown. “I can’t use magic. If I do, humans won’t touch my projects. I want it able to help everyone, not just supes or

humans.”

“Unfortunately, if you want to be able to scan magic, you have to use magic to see it.” He caught Louis’s hand before he could pull away, smacking a kiss onto his lips. “Don’t get too bent out of shape just yet. Your solution might be as simple as making two versions of your device. If the humans want the scanner, they won’t need all the extra data for supes, nor the magic that would help scan different species. They’d have a more simple version of the device that’s human specific.”

The way Louis wrinkled his nose said he wasn’t happy with the plan, but there wasn’t much of an option in that regard. He understood Louis’s wish to help everyone with this device, but until humans were more open to accepting magic, or even just magically enhanced devices, there would always be a need for separate products. And likely Louis selling the human one through a different company or shadow company. He knew of one that Spellbound worked with to get their products made for humans to the right people. Just because humans weren’t ready to reintegrate into the world didn’t mean the government—and Spellbound—was willing to leave them behind.

“Why don’t we pause for now and celebrate with lunch. Basil can’t pressure you into cleaning up Nadine’s work if you aren’t around and it's lunchtime anyway.”

Louis looked longingly at his work, then back at Arthur, giving him the sweetest pout when he asked, “Five more minutes? I just want to jot down my ideas for the next steps.”

Arthur knew five minutes was never just five minutes. Louis would work through his lunch and throughout the rest of the afternoon if he could get away with it. And half the time, it wouldn’t even be a conscious decision. He’d get so wrapped up in his work, he wouldn’t even notice time going by. Arthur knew it was better to stop him now before he got on another roll and interrupting would be more distracting, but after his win, he couldn’t quite make himself take away the man’s joy. Besides, if he took those five minutes to make a phone call to report Basil’s behavior, he would be in a better headspace himself before lunch.

“Alright. Five minutes. But I’m setting a timer. And you’re not allowed to complain when I come get you–”

Louis cut him off by smacking a kiss on his mouth and spinning to return to his work. “Five minutes. Got it. Thanks, Arthur.”

Blinking in surprise, Arthur stood there for a long moment just processing what just happened. Who was this sweet, agreeable man, and where did his Louis go?

Chuckling to himself, he stepped out of Louis's office, coming face to face with Basil as he stepped out. The yeti looked between him and the door, a sour expression on his face.

"So you're the reason he's back on that project?"

Arthur lifted his chin, narrowing his eyes on Basil. "I'm the reason he didn't give up too early, yes. Something you should've been doing instead."

That got him a scowl. "You need to stay in your lane, Arthur. You're filling his head with nonsense and he needs to accept the reality of the situation. If he wants to make human products, he should have gotten a job at a human company."

"He doesn't just want to help humans," Arthur argued. "You'd know that if you even looked at his project instead of criticizing him."

He could explain what he'd told Louis, about how he helped Louis get the device to work and how it'd change in the future, but he wasn't going to waste his breath. If Basil actually cared about Louis, he would've been supporting his research, not tearing him down and diminishing him. Which was what he was going to tell Mr. Washburne when he reported Louis's project success and the pushback he was getting. Louis deserved more than just Arthur to support him. He said no one ever had his back before. Arthur was going to prove him wrong. Just as soon as he dealt with the annoying fluff ball first.

"I'm keeping him grounded. It's my job. It's not my fault he is reaching too far for someone like him. You're setting him up to fail by pushing him on a useless product."

Arthur's brows snapped together so fast, it almost hurt. "What the hell does that mean, someone like him?"

Basil didn't explain. He stepped forward, pointing one thick finger at Arthur's chest. "Just mind your own business. Louis is on my team, not yours, and I've got no problem reporting your interference to the higher ups."

"Do it," Arthur growled. "They'll have to look into your team to find out what's going on. I wonder what they'll say when they realize you've been systematically undermining your researcher's confidence and trying to force him into doing intern work in retaliation for reporting the incident last

week.” He stepped closer, going chest to chest with the yeti. “Would they find anything about you backing the sabotage, Basil? Because I’ve been wondering who the hell made the intern so confident that he could get away with what he did. It wouldn’t be you, would it?”

“Gentlemen, step back please,” a familiar voice insisted.

Arthur didn’t respond immediately, a low threatening growl in his throat. It was Basil who backed off first, stepping back and away from Elijah like the man carried the plague. It only made Arthur more certain he was hiding something. The only people who needed to be afraid of the SR rep were people who had something to hide.

“Do we have something we need to discuss?” Elijah asked, looking between them with a deep frown.

Arthur raised an eyebrow at Basil, daring him to make the report he’d threatened. Basil seemed to realize how stupid the idea was. He backed off, shaking his head and putting more space between himself and Arthur. “No, Mr. Washburne. There’s no problem. We were just having a discussion.”

“Hell of a discussion,” Alistair murmured from where he stood at Elijah’s side. “Does this have something to do with the incident the other week?”

Basil was quick to deny it, his arms crossing over his chest defensively. “No. It’s got nothing to do with that. It was just a discussion. I’ve got a meeting I need to get to.”

He turned to leave, shooting Arthur one last dirty look over his shoulder before stomping off to his office.

“Arthur?” Elijah’s concern was obvious in his voice, but Arthur chose not to say anything just yet. Thus far, Elijah had picked up on some concerning vibes on the research floor but no one had dropped their guard enough for him to get anything more and the only ones willing to do an interview were members of Arthur’s team who didn’t have any reason to hide. Maybe it was time for Arthur to get more information. He wasn’t a telepath, but he was sure he could figure out a way to get people to talk.

“I’m going to have to ask that you don’t get involved,” Elijah insisted, jerking Arthur’s attention to him. He shook his head before Arthur could even ask if the telepath was reading him. “I can pick up intense emotions without reading someone, Arthur. You’re feeling very protective of Louis right now and that combined with the rush of determination makes me think that you’re thinking about getting involved. I need you not to do that. This

is a Supernatural Resources issue, and you getting involved will create more trouble than it would do any good. Stick to what you're doing. Watch out for your team, keep supporting your boyfriend, and leave the investigation to me."

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CHAPTER THIRTY

LOUIS

Arthur was grouchy. The fact that Louis even noticed when he was so locked into his project and the next steps in upgrading it told him just how much Arthur's mood was radiating off him. They never actually went out for lunch. Arthur said something came up and he had a meeting to get to, so he brought Louis a sandwich instead and told him he'd check in later. He didn't show up again until the work day was done.

While it was nice that he got so much uninterrupted time to work, and Arthur must've said something to Mr. Yarrow because he didn't even get interrupted to go clean like Mr. Yarrow had demanded earlier, it felt weird not to have seen him most of the day. Especially on such an important day. He felt Arthur's absence like a physical thing and it was just distracting enough that he checked his watch several times throughout the day, wondering where he was and when he'd be back.

Arthur was quiet when he finally returned, helping Louis pack his bag with his notes and save all the data and plans he'd input since that morning. Louis found himself trying to fill the silence, updating Arthur about the plans he'd run through and the spec changes he was thinking of making because he wasn't sure what else to talk about. Arthur only grunted and nodded the whole elevator ride, his expression carefully neutral like he didn't want Louis to know what he was thinking.

It got to be too much and when they stepped into the condo elevator after an almost painfully awkward walk home, Louis decided this would be the best time to confront him. The lion was cornered until they reached the right floor anyway.

“What’s going on with you?”

Arthur’s expression twitched ever so slightly before he responded. “What do you mean?”

“You’re acting weird,” Louis insisted. “You’re quiet and grouchy, and since when do you skip an entire day of pestering me to drink water or take breaks? You didn’t even force me to go to the gym. Not—” he pointed a stern finger at the stubborn lion—“that I’m complaining about that. I’m just saying. It’s weird for you. So what’s going on? Because I’m in a really good mood today, and you’re kind of dragging me down.”

Arthur’s expression hardened. “You’re right. I’m sorry. Maybe for tonight, it’s best that I go home and–”

“No!”

That was basically the opposite of what he wanted, and the fact that Arthur suggested it freaked him out. Why was he so quick to leave? Did he decide he was tired of taking care of Louis so much? He didn’t have to take care of him. He could just be his boyfriend without all the extras if it felt like too much.

Louis’s eyes took in Arthur’s face, trying to figure out what was happening right now. What had changed since that morning when Arthur kissed him so sweetly and told him he’d always be there to now? And how the hell did he fix it?

“Louis,” Arthur sighed, like he could read what Louis was thinking on his face. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I just… I won’t be very good company tonight. I don’t want to ruin your excitement. You had a breakthrough today and you deserve to have a good night. I don’t want to ruin that for you.”

As he spoke, Louis saw hints of a deeper emotion on Arthur’s face. He looked… tired.

For the first time since they met, it was obvious it was Arthur who needed to be taken care of. Louis could handle that. Probably, anyway.

Taking Arthur’s hand, he gave it a tug as the elevator stopped at the condo floor and the doors slid open. “Come with me.”

Despite his offer to leave, Arthur didn’t fight him when Louis pulled him down the hall and into the condo. He stepped out of his shoes, sweeping them out of the way of the door and encouraging Arthur to do the same, then dragged him to his room. Pushing the larger man to sit on the bed, he put his hands up in a staying motion.

“Stay there. I’m going to run you a bath. Just wait.”

Once he was sure Arthur wasn’t going anywhere, he rushed off to the bathroom, turning the taps to the bath on high. He wrestled off his jacket, tossing it onto the floor, and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt and the cuffs so he could roll up his sleeves to test the water properly. After it reached the right temperature, he plugged the drain and hurried back out to the main room where Arthur was still sitting, staring at his hands with a frown on his face. Louis took them without a word, pulling him to his feet and urging him into the bathroom.

Ever tried to undress an unhappy lion shifter? It’s harder than it looks. He wasn’t that much shorter than Arthur, but the man’s shoulders were the definition of broad and wrestling off his jacket was more of a challenge than Louis initially expected. His tie was luckily already slightly loose, so that wasn’t too bad, but the shirt wasn’t any easier than the jacket, and the man wore an undershirt as well. Maybe it was a good thing they skipped the gym. Louis was getting a workout from just undressing the man. If he was sore from a workout, he might not have been able to do it.

He paused in undressing Arthur long enough to turn off the water and grab a towel from the linen closet. When he came back to finish the job, he found Arthur watching him with predatory focus, making Louis’s cheeks flush as he pulled Arthur’s belt free and undid his pants.

Pushing away any lecherous thoughts that flashed through his head when he knelt in front of the sexy giant, he tapped each leg to help Arthur out of pants and boxers and stood quickly so he wouldn’t end up staring at the man’s equipment. He was gorgeous, but now was not the time.

“Get in the tub,” Louis urged, pushing on Arthur’s massive shoulders to get him moving. The fact that Arthur didn’t protest or even growl at Louis giving orders was a huge red flag. The man really did need someone to take care of him tonight.

After he was settled in the water, Louis turned on the jets and wet a cloth, putting it on Arthur’s forehead after encouraging him to recline. He

swore he'd seen someone do that once and thought maybe it'd help. Or at least force Arthur to close his eyes for a little while? Who knew.

"While you're resting, I'm going to make dinner. Any preferences?"

Arthur shook his head minutely.

"Right. That's fine. You rest here. I'll be back in a little while."

He made a basic spaghetti carbonara since he wanted something comforting, and he made Arthur eat it in bed, ignoring the man's unhappy mumbling about it being unsanitary. While they were eating, Louis pulled up the website where they could watch tv and chose something Dax had suggested when they'd bumped into each other in the kitchen. Louis hadn't gone into details about what was happening, but when he said he wanted something comforting, the kraken had made a few suggestions for him. Louis chose the first one, setting it between them on the bed so they could watch something while they ate.

It was… awful. Seriously. He might not have gone to medical school, but even he knew they were spouting gibberish half the time. And did the writers even know any humans? Why did the medical show even include humans if they had no idea about their anatomy or the basics of their lifestyles? Humans did not have two puberties!

"You look disturbed," Arthur murmured.

Louis forced his face to go blank, shaking his head minutely. "It's nothing."

"Liar."

There was a hint of amusement in Arthur's voice and when Louis cast a glance in his direction, there was a smile tugging at his lips for the first time in hours. He'd already set his empty bowl on the nightstand and was reclining against the pillows, watching Louis instead of the stupid show.

"You're supposed to be watching the show," he accused half- heartedly.

Arthur's smile ticked up a little more. "You're more interesting than the show. Tell me what's wrong with it."

Well… he asked for it. "It's scientifically inaccurate! But that's true for most tv and movies these days. And I really hope if I'm in the care of medical staff that they aren't *that* distracted over their own personal lives.

At least two of those patients would've been dead already from medical neglect."

"You'd be surprised," Arthur commented, putting his hand out and snagging Louis's, drawing him into the man's lap. "The alpha's mate to the pride I was born into is a doctor. Apparently they've got an incredible ability to compartmentalize. Their lives could be falling apart, but the minute they pass through those doors, they stuff it all away."

Louis hummed, wriggling to get closer. He'd felt their separation all day. Now that they were finally together in bed, he couldn't get close enough.

"Maybe normal doctors do, but these TV doctors don't. You'd think the writers would try to make it a little more true to reality."

Arthur chuckled, dragging him down for a quick kiss. "People don't want reality. They want drama. They have medical shows that are more about the medicine itself, but they're not nearly as popular as shows like this."

Louis made a face. "It's still inaccurate. Humans don't have two puberties. What even is that?"

Finally, after hours of stoicism and silence, Arthur smiled at him, like somehow Louis's irritation over the show was what finally broke through whatever was weighing on him. Louis would take it. Whatever he needed to do or say to make Arthur smile again, it was totally worth it.

When Arthur drew him back down, he went happily, flicking his tongue along the seam of Arthur's lips in a silent demand for entry. Of course, because he demanded it, the evil lion held back, nipping his bottom lip and sucking on it instead. Only when Louis gasped and moaned did Arthur let the kiss deepen. He took control like he always did, one hand sliding into Louis's hair to cup the back of his head while the other gripped his hip to keep him closer. Louis had no problem with that plan. He wanted to get closer if he could.

"Arthur…" he murmured between kisses, groaning when Arthur did a flirty little flick of his tongue that made Louis's cock twitch.

"Hmm?"

He moved on to skim kisses down Louis's neck, using his grip on Louis's hair to make more room for himself. Gods, Louis loved it. He wanted nothing more than to let this gorgeous man have all of him. He didn't even care if he couldn't work tonight. He remembered Arthur's

warning. If he wanted more, he had to be willing to accept the consequences.

Totally worth it in his opinion.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

ARTHUR

After his confrontation with Basil, Arthur had to spend the rest of the afternoon getting himself under control. Elijah made it clear there would be consequences if he got involved. He had to pull himself together.

He thought by giving himself space away from Louis, he'd have a chance to get his head on straight, but the longer he was away from Louis, the more irritated he got. It got to the point that when he and Louis headed home for the night, he didn't trust himself to speak. He was worried about what might come out of his mouth when he was this riled up.

He hadn't expected Louis to notice or do anything about it. He thought going home would be for the best. But his sweet boyfriend refused to let him leave and decided it was Arthur's turn to be pampered for the night. It wasn't something he'd enjoy all the time, he preferred to be the one taking care of Louis, but it was nice getting to experience how much Louis cared.

Apparently he cared enough to watch a tv show he hated just to make Arthur smile.

It was watching his face twitch as he tried to hide his opinion about the stupid show that broke through Arthur's mood. He wasn't good at hiding his expressions and at one point, he saw Louis roll his eyes so hard, it looked painful. Listening to him rant about the show's inaccuracies and complain about realistic television made Arthur itch to be closer to him, and

when the sweet man climbed into his lap, he couldn't resist the siren's call of his lips.

"Arthur…" Louis whimpered, shivering when Arthur forced his head to the side for better access to his neck.

"Hmm?"

"I—*Fuck*— I want you," Louis confessed breathily, rocking his hips in a not-so-subtle demand.

Arthur knew what he was asking for. He wouldn't be satisfied with just handjobs or blowjobs. He wanted Arthur to take him. And while every instinct in Arthur's body clamored to give him what he wanted, he couldn't help but hold himself back.

Lifting his head, he looked Louis in the eyes, his expression apologetic. "I don't think that'd be a good idea tonight. I've been struggling with my instincts. I don't want to get too rough and hurt you."

Louis scoffed, locking eyes with Arthur and leveling him with a look. "You would never hurt me. I know that. I trust you."

It was like Louis knew exactly what buttons to press to change his mind. His breath left him in a rush, his brow furrowed as he studied the gorgeous man's face. He meant it. He trusted Arthur. And not a single part of Arthur would allow him to break that trust in any way.

Louis looked like he was going to start whining, a pout forming on his lips, but Arthur yanked him closer before he could, tangling their tongues in a heated kiss that made Louis groan and melt in his arms.

The man somehow knew exactly how to trigger Arthur's instincts, a growl working its way up his throat as he twisted to put Louis beneath him. He made a disgruntled sound when the movement caused the dishes to clatter from where Louis had left his bowl near the edge of the bed and the laptop to shift enough to bump into their legs. This was why he didn't eat in bed.

Pushing himself up, he picked up both bowls and headed for the door. He heard the sheets rustle, Louis's voice incredulous as he demanded, "Where are you going?"

"To clean this up," he replied calmly, though he was glad he was facing away from the bed or Louis might've seen him fighting a smug grin. "I'll only be a minute."

He was only gone long enough to put the dishes in the sink and grab two bottles of water. They'd need it.

When he came back, Louis was seething, sitting on the edge of the bed with his arms crossed. When Arthur pushed the door closed, he locked it behind him, watching Louis carefully while setting the bottles down and pulling out condoms and lube from the bedside table. He watched as Louis's ire slipped, his attention more on the promise of what Arthur was doing than the annoyance he'd felt earlier. When Arthur slipped his t-shirt over his head, he saw Louis's lips part, the pink of his tongue flicking out to lick dry lips.

"Move to the middle of the bed," Arthur instructed.

For once, Louis didn't argue with him. He scrambled backward on the bed, moving to sit with his back against the headboard. His breath was already unsteady, the front of his slacks tenting with his arousal. When Arthur raised an eyebrow at him, Louis's cheeks flushed and he swallowed hard, reaching for the hem of his shirt to pull it off.

"Don't," Arthur growled in warning. "I'll do it."

Louis's brows twitched ever so slightly, but he released his shirt, putting his hands on the bed instead. Arthur let out a hum of approval, circling the bed slowly to see the beautiful man from all angles.

"What are you doing?" Louis croaked.

"I told you. I want to savor you."

Louis licked his lips again, eyes glued to every movement Arthur made. "What… What does that entail exactly?"

The only answer Arthur gave him was a smirk and a simple, "You'll see."

He stopped at the foot of the bed, crawling across the soft surface until he was close enough to reach Louis's ankle. With a swift tug, he pulled Louis toward him, forcing him flat on his back and making him gasp. Arthur moved to loom over him, a growl rattling his throat as he admired the man entirely at his mercy. Louis didn't move an inch, just staring at him wide-eyed like his own instincts were telling him he was in the presence of a predator and it was better not to fight.

Smart instincts.

"Why does it look like you want to eat me?" Louis breathed, arching his neck in a bid to reach Arthur's lips when he bent closer. Arthur pulled back before he could get close enough, sliding a hand into Louis's messy locks and gripping them just tightly enough to hold him still as he trailed his mouth along Louis's jaw and down his neck.

“Because I do,” Arthur admitted. “Every noise you make, every little gasp and whimper, makes me want to sink my teeth into you.” He nipped lightly at the juncture of Louis’s neck and shoulder, smiling to himself when he felt the man shiver. “I want to spend the entire night devouring every inch of you, until you can’t remember your own name. Until you forget anyone else who ever touched you. Until the only name you’ll know is mine.”

For a second, Arthur felt the distinct urge to cringe. He sounded like a possessive asshole. But to his surprise, Louis groaned and lifted his hips, seeking friction for his aching cock.

He liked it.

It was a really bad thing for Arthur to know that.

Since he was concerned he couldn’t trust himself to linger near Louis’s neck, he moved on, unbuttoning Louis’s shirt and pulling it slowly free of his slacks. He saw Louis’s hands twitch, likely fighting the urge to help move things along. He narrowed his eyes at the movement.

“Don’t move, Louis. I don’t want to have to tie you to the bed.”

Louis’s eyes widened. “You wouldn’t–” He stopped himself from finishing the sentence, taking in Arthur’s expression. “Oh, fuck, you would,” he moaned.

He had no idea just how far his instincts would take him. All he knew was tonight, he needed Louis to behave. Him staying in control was the only way he could think to keep himself from being completely overwhelmed by his instincts.

He divested Louis of his shirt, but didn’t immediately pull off his undershirt like he knew Louis wanted. Instead, he trailed kisses up his belly as he slowly pushed the material up his chest, stopping with it just under his arms so he could lave at his nipples.

“I’m not… really sensitive *there*–”

Before he could finish the sentence, Arthur very gently bit down, causing Louis’s back to arch like he’d been electrified. He glanced up, flashing the man a smug grin. He knew not everyone experienced pleasure the same way. Which was why he spent so long savoring his partners. He wanted to know exactly how to bring them the most pleasure. He’d learned a thing or two over the years.

When he switched to the other side, he felt Louis hold his breath, no longer so quick to argue now that he knew Arthur had some tricks up his

sleeve. He gave the rosy peak a light nip just to make him jump before sucking it into his mouth with enough pressure to make Louis writhe.

He stopped when Louis's hands dug into his hair. He didn't think the man did it consciously, he looked too delirious to truly consider the consequences when Arthur lifted his head, and when he slipped out of range, Louis's hands dropped to rest on either side of his head, his gaze heavy lidded and his mouth parted as he breathed heavily.

Arthur couldn't resist the call of his mouth, tangling their tongues together in a hot glide before pulling away again. This man… He couldn't get enough. He wanted to touch him everywhere, to taste him everywhere, all at once, and he got the feeling he'd put them both through the wringer before he was done for the night.

Pulling the undershirt off, he went for Louis's belt and slacks next, the material irritating him the longer it separated him from touching Louis's skin. Louis moaned when he roughly ripped the material down his legs, pausing long enough to rid him of his socks and boxers as well.

Sitting back on his heels, he took in every inch of the gorgeous man beneath him. Louis was still thin, though not rail thin like he had been before. He'd put on some weight thanks to Arthur feeding him regularly. The reminder of how well he'd been caring for the once overworked researcher made him growl out a pleased sound, his hands tracing over every inch his eyes took in. Pale creamy skin, a smattering of freckles on his shoulders, his nipples tight and swollen from Arthur's attention. He had a very thin line of hair leading to his groin where his cock was throbbing and leaking a small pool of precum onto his belly. It twitched under his hungry attention and a predatory grin spread over his face as he dipped down for another drugging kiss.

The cadence in his head was a steady *mine, mine, mine* that slowly got louder with each noise Louis made. His canines ached, his body demanding a partial shift so he could bite at that creamy skin. It didn't help that Louis started moving again, his hands coasting up Arthur's arms and around his back, drawing him closer and risking triggering his instincts by allowing him to get that close. Arthur felt his control slip just for a second, a harsh growl vibrating his chest as he nipped harshly at Louis's lip. If he couldn't make a claim tonight, he needed to leave a mark somehow. He needed the world to know Louis was his. His Louis. His boyfriend. His… mate.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

LOUIS

Louis felt Arthur stiffen, his whole body going taut like something had crossed his mind and pulled his focus.

Well, that needed to change, didn't it?

He knew the risk when he got more demanding, Arthur liked to be in charge, but obviously he needed a little distraction if he was so far into his head. Curling one leg around Arthur's knee, he wrapped the other around his hip, using what strength he had to drag the man down. At the same time, he tightened his hold on Arthur's neck, twisting his body so that for just one second Louis got the upper hand and switched their positions.

He didn't even get a chance to celebrate his win before Arthur rolled them again, that growl no longer a purr but more animalistic, like a warning. He did manage to successfully distract the man, though. He'd take the win.

Their tongues tangled in a bid for dominance he had no hope of winning. Not when his head went all fuzzy whenever Arthur kissed him. He tried his best, though, and even managed to push Arthur's sweats down over his ass before Arthur gathered his wrists and pinned them harshly to the pillows.

"You're asking for it, baby," Arthur growled.

"Yeah, I am," he panted. "So what are you going to do about it?"

He’d need to take some time to think about his responses to Arthur growling at him. As a human, that noise should’ve terrified him. Instead, it turned him on and he tugged uselessly at the hold Arthur had on his hands in an effort to get more sounds like that from him.

The sound of shredding fabric made Louis’s eyes jerk open. He looked down in time to watch Arthur toss what was left of his sweats over the edge of the bed, his normally controlled boyfriend looking more and more feral as time went on.

Was it wrong that Louis liked pushing him to his limits like that?

Before he could say something else to rile the man up, the sound of the lube cap caught his attention. He’d been so distracted by how much he enjoyed riling Arthur up that he’d missed the man leaning to snag a condom and the lube from the nightstand. Planting his feet on the bed, he tipped his hips eagerly, his cock twitching when the move made Arthur groan.

“You’re so damn sexy, you know that?” Arthur murmured, pressing kisses along the inside of Louis’s knee and down his thigh as his fingers reached between them to rub over his hole.

Gasping, Louis choked on a laugh. “No, I’m not. I think you have us confused–” He cut himself off with a hiss, his body clamping down on the intrusion as Arthur pushed a finger inside him.

Arthur, being the sweet and observant man he was, froze. “Want me to stop?”

Shaking his head rapidly, he gasped, “Slow. It’s been a while.”

Arthur snorted. “Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me.”

The teasing did its job in distracting him when Arthur pulled away, and when he came back, he had more lube on his fingers, the glide a little easier as he pushed in inch by torturous inch.

“I said slow, not glacial,” he complained, lifting his hips in an attempt to demand more. Of course, that only made Arthur go slower, that smug expression firmly in place as he stopped his movement entirely until Louis gave in and collapsed into the bed.

“I’ll go as slow as I need to in order to make sure you feel no pain,” Arthur insisted in that stupid sexy bossy way of his that made Louis want to scream and submit at the same time. “I’m going to take care of you, Louis.”

The sweet sentiment made Louis’s eyes prick with unexpected tears. He blinked them away, stubbornly refusing to ruin the moment by getting misty-eyed. He didn’t mean forever. He’d get tired of dealing with Louis

and his insane work schedule eventually. There was no reason to get so emotional about it.

“Could you take care of me a little faster? I thought this was supposed to be a multiple rounds kind of experience. We won’t have time for multiple rounds if you keep dragging your feet,” he challenged, trying to steer them back into safer waters. Sex was sex. It was easy and simple. It wasn’t supposed to be this emotional.

“Oh, believe me, baby, you’ll get what you want. There’s no way I’ll be satisfied with just once with you.”

“I’ll believe that when I see– *Nngh*!”

He’d been trying to be snarky, but Arthur had surprised him by pushing a second finger inside him and going straight for his prostate. And he wasn’t polite about giving it a quick swipe, no, he pressed intently on that little pleasure button, making Louis’s hips buck and causing him to hit it again.

His orgasm swelled, leaving him breathless. Somehow, even though he’d never much liked foreplay, having Arthur touching him got him to that edge without even a stroke of his cock. The man had more magic in him than just the ability to turn into a lion.

“Arthur– I-I’m–”

Arthur withdrew his fingers before he could fall over the edge, and Louis let out a sob of regret. If he’d known Arthur would do that, he wouldn’t have said anything.

“Not yet, Louis. Not until I’m inside you. Think you can wait for me?”

Ugh. Did he have to be so sweet about it?

“I… I’m not going to like this whole savoring thing, am I?” he breathed, finally coming back from the edge with a sigh.

Arthur’s slow grin made Louis’s neglected cock kick despite his denied orgasm making his balls blue. “Don’t worry, baby. You’ll like it.”

Did the near miss with his orgasm make Arthur go any faster? No, of course it didn’t. If anything, it only slowed things down even more. Any time Louis started squirming and gasping, he drew back and let his body settle before starting again. It got to the point that Louis’s whole body was buzzing and he was pleading with Arthur to put him out of his misery.

“Arthur, *please*! I need– I can’t– Just, please!”

With a pleased purr, Arthur pulled his fingers free, pressing a soft kiss on Louis’s lips when he sobbed again. “Alright, baby. I’ll take care of you.”

Louis didn’t have enough brain cells to rub together to argue that what he was doing wasn’t his idea of care. He almost didn’t notice the sound of the condom wrapper or Arthur pushing his knees to his chest until the stupid gorgeous evil man was leaning over him. He only paid attention when he felt the head of Arthur’s cock bump against his entrance, rubbing in just the right way to make him twitch and writhe.

“Fuck, you’re evil,” he gasped, then nearly swallowed his tongue as Arthur responded by pushing inside him in one hard thrust. “Oh, fuck!”

Thanks to the careful prep, he didn’t feel even a pinch, his body accepting Arthur like he belonged there. That was a heady thought wasn’t it? Arthur’s cock somehow being made for him. If he was a less logical person, he’d think it meant something. However, a romantic he was not, and any thoughts of perfect fits fled when Arthur drew his hips back a few inches and thrust forward again, dragging his cock over Louis’s prostate in just the right way.

“More! Oh, fuck, more!” Louis begged, wrapping his legs around Arthur’s hips and digging his heels into his ass in a demand for more. It was the only leverage he could get with Arthur still pinning his hands above his head.

Arthur groaned, still rocking his hips slowly. “I’m trying not to hurt you,” he said between gritted teeth. “I don’t want to–”

“You won’t,” Louis insisted. “I trust you. Just– Please!”

That seemed to be the tipping point. Arthur snarled, snapping his hips roughly, wringing a cry from Louis. The noise seemed to spur him on and he lost that careful touch, his thrusts turning rough and demanding.

Louis lost all sense of reality after that. Somehow, despite having plenty of experience before, including one particularly intense night with an incubus right before finals week, Louis had never experienced sex like this before. Like Arthur knew exactly what to do to bring him the most pleasure. His free hand held Louis’s hip, keeping him where he wanted him, and he leaned down to fuse their mouths together right when Louis needed the extra connection. He nearly lost his mind when Arthur’s growl got intense enough for Louis to feel the vibration through his whole body, including where they were connected. So when Arthur’s hand slipped between them to wrap around his aching erection, he didn’t stand a chance.

Two pumps of Arthur’s fist in that tight grip he always used that drove Louis wild and Louis exploded, his cries muffled against Arthur’s lips. His

body clamped down hard, causing Arthur's thrusts to stutter, and he followed Louis over the edge with a long, satisfied groan that gave Louis goosebumps. He didn't even complain when Arthur's big body collapsed on top of his, just enjoyed the pressure after such an intense release.

For a little while, he stared at the ceiling, catching his breath, and didn't feel the need to fill the silence. It wasn't until Arthur shifted that Louis noticed the lion shifter was still hard inside him. His breath caught and his eyes went wide as Arthur's hips began to move in slow thrusts.

"A-Arthur?"

Arthur lifted his head, a slow grin overtaking his face as he lifted that eyebrow in that smug way he always did. "I told you once wouldn't be enough for me, Louis. Or did you forget that?"

Louis's mouth fell open in shock. He'd said that, sure, but Louis had assumed he'd meant it as like a sexy tease. He hadn't thought he'd actually meant it.

"What if I can't go more than once?" he tried, because if he was being honest, that one orgasm was enough to knock him on his ass.

"You can," Arthur smirked. "I'll prove it to you."

Louis limped into the office, his whole body aching, though for an entirely different reason than last time. When Arthur said he'd prove it, he meant it. Louis hadn't thought it possible to go more than maybe twice, but Arthur showed him just how naive he was.

If anyone said he'd go more than two rounds with the insatiable lion shifter, he'd think they were insane. He didn't think he'd have to tell them they weren't aiming high enough.

Five. Five rounds of mind-numbingly amazing sex later, he was officially humbled. And somehow, despite a long night with very little sleep, he was already wondering when they could do it again. Some of the positions Arthur had put them in were… He shuddered. He'd be hard just thinking about it if he wasn't so exhausted.

"Hey Louis!" Knox called as he limped toward his office.

Louis barely bobbed his head in greeting. He'd adamantly refused to see the healer this morning since he wasn't willing to explain why he was so

sore to a near stranger, much less someone he might see in the office. He'd hoped he'd get to his office undiscovered and hide long enough for Arthur to return with the pain potion he'd promised to pick up from the pharmacy after he stopped at home for more clothes. Apparently, after getting lucky so many times the night prior, his luck had run out.

Dax, who was standing near Knox's workstation, looked him over with a smirk. "What's the matter Louis? Did Arthur work you over again? Didn't learn your limits the first time?"

Louis blushed so hot, it felt like he might spontaneously combust. There wasn't a chance Dax was talking about what actually happened. He thought Louis was sore because of exercise. He'd seen the after effects of Louis's first day of exercise with Arthur. He didn't mean it the way it sounded.

"You sure you're not overdoing it? Arthur doesn't exactly strike me as the type to go easy once he gets started," Knox asked, concerned.

They had no idea how right they were.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

LOUIS

Distracted by the aches and his eagerness to escape the line of questioning from his coworkers, Louis almost didn't notice that something was off. It took a minute for his brain to register the lack of ward on his office. He froze, backing up a few steps to pass through the door again.

He couldn't see wards, nor could he manipulate them in any way, but he could feel them just fine. Passing through the door to his office always felt like the air was thicker when he stepped past them, and the stronger they were, the more disconcerting it felt. The ones on these smaller offices were so intense, they made his ears pop every time he stepped inside. The fact that it didn't happen this time set off all his internal alarms. Something was wrong.

Throwing the door open wide, he flicked on the light, a whimper catching in his throat as he took in the devastation of his office. Somehow, it was even worse than the last time. Notes were tossed around, ripped and scattered, the table was actually flipped, the monitor hanging lopsided from the wall where someone had attempted to yank it down. The computer itself was fine, but that was alarming in and of itself because he immediately thought back to Arthur making him back up his notes and the proof of his success to several places. Had the person who'd done this hacked his computer? Had they just destroyed the evidence, or was it possible they

stole it and would hand it over to someone who could get the project done faster than he could?

That thought unnerved him, but when his eyes scanned over the room again, all thoughts fled except for one.

The project itself was missing.

It wasn't in pieces like it had been last time. There were no parts scattered amongst the papers or anywhere that he could see. It was just… gone.

"Louis? What's wrong?"

Louis didn't even fully register the question, nor who was asking it. He couldn't think. It felt like the floor had been ripped out from under him and he was in a freefall, all the long nights, work, and effort torn away from him for a second time in a matter of weeks. What the hell had he done to deserve this?

"Oh shit. Louis, don't touch anything," Dax said from behind him, his words muffled like Louis's ears were blocked. "Zeraphine, call security. Someone text Arthur. He'll want to know. Knox, can you get Mr. Washburne? I think we need him."

Louis tuned it all out. It didn't matter who they called. The device was gone. Even if he managed to salvage his notes, he doubted he'd be able to recreate it exactly. He tried to take notes as thoroughly as possible, but he might've missed something. And if it was gone, there was no telling what was being done with it. By the time he rebuilt, it could end up finished by someone else and put on the market.

Everything he ever worked for was gone.

ARTHUR

Letting Louis go to the office without him was strategic, since he was still reeling from his realization from the night prior. He needed a few minutes to wrap his head around it. Louis was his mate? How did he not notice that sooner?

He thought about what he knew of mates and there honestly wasn't much. Mated supes tended to be secretive about the mating process, and didn't even share it with their children. He remembered asking his parents about it once when he was younger. The only answer he got was a vague 'you'll know when it happens'. Neither of them ever said it'd happen so slowly, he wouldn't notice until his instincts were already locked onto the man and there was no escaping it.

If they had, he might've been more cautious about his interactions with others.

Not that he was unhappy about it. The more time he spent with Louis, the more he craved being near the man. He was addicted to the way Louis carped and complained without pushing Arthur away. Like he wanted the care but was too stubborn to take it. It made him smile every time Louis gave in, knowing all the fuss had just been for show. That he could accept Arthur's hovering without frustration or eventually pushing him away. It seemed like the longer they were together, the more Louis accepted his fussing and hovering and learned to roll with it. Like there was real potential that they could have a future and he wouldn't eventually get tired of Arthur's overbearing nature.

He'd thought about bringing it up with Louis the other night. He wanted to know how Louis felt about it. But being distracted with his mate's body and the noises he made in bed made it impossible for him to focus for long periods.

He made a mental plan to have a dinner date on the weekend instead. That way he could have Louis's full attention and not compete with his project or any other work related things that might come up. They still hadn't finished the investigation for the intern's interference yet.

For the second time since he started spending time with Louis, he arrived at the office to pure chaos. Last time, he'd at least had time to make it to his desk before the chaos started. This time, he'd barely stepped off the elevator before the sound of people shouting caught his attention.

Instincts took control and he only just held back his shift as he hurried for Louis's office. He froze when he noticed Louis sitting against the wall by the door, crumpled in on himself with his hands fisted in his hair and an anguished look on his face. The snarl that ripped through him in response to his mate being hurt made several people jump back and scramble to get away from him, giving him a clear path to Louis's side.

Kneeling in front of the despondent man, he put his hand on Louis's shoulder, quietly asking, "What happened?" to no response. Louis was too distraught to answer him. It was Dax who spoke from somewhere behind him.

"Someone broke through the wards. It looks like a tornado passed through there and–"

The way he cut himself off made Arthur drag his gaze off his mate, looking over his shoulder with a frown.

"And?"

Dax looked almost green saying the words out loud but gamely pushed past his discomfort. "His project is missing. Not broken like last time. It's gone."

Horrified, he finally looked in the direction of Louis's office, taking in the scattered papers and the damaged furniture. There were no pieces of electronics on the floor or around the tipped over table. No bits of plastic or wires that would make him think it was just wrecked beyond recognition. Someone stole Louis's project.

The urge to shift and find exactly who did this was like a physical pull and a full body ripple of a partial shift passed over him before he managed to pull himself back. He couldn't leave Louis right now. His mate needed him more than he needed to find the culprit. So instead of following his instincts, he pulled out his phone, typing out a single text and sending it to the one person he knew had the power to do something about this. He didn't explain himself, didn't say what it was regarding and who was involved. He sent a simple '911' to Taron. And a minute later, got a 'on my way' in response.

If Arthur couldn't fix this for his mate, then he was going to the top to get the issue handled. Either that, or he was taking Louis out of here. If his mate couldn't be safe to do his work in the office, then Arthur would find him somewhere better. Even if Spellbound was the dream for most, he wouldn't stick around if it meant his mate suffered.

Giving his attention back to Louis, he squeezed his shoulder gently. "I won't say it's okay because I know it's not. But we'll get this figured out, Louis. I called in reinforcements."

Louis didn't look up. He didn't even blink. He looked frozen in his own mind, too heartbroken and horrified by what happened to listen properly.

Arthur didn’t blame him, nor did he force the issue. He just kept his hand on his mate and waited.

It didn’t take long. Of course it didn’t. Taron wasn’t the one to drag his feet. He showed up with a small security team of werewolves and a dark look on his face that didn't match the normal bubbly personality of the shapeshifter. He barely glanced at the destroyed office before stepping aside and letting one of the werewolves take over, his attention moving to Louis, then to the researchers surrounding him.

“Where’s Wash?”

“Knox went to get Mr. Washburne a couple of minutes ago,” Dax offered. “He should be here soon—”

He didn’t even finish the sentence before the doors to the main building slammed open and Mr. Washburne stormed in, with Knox at his heels and an unfamiliar fairy hovering at his shoulder. Arthur recognized the fairy as Mr. Washburne’s mate, but didn’t know why he was there. He honestly didn’t care.

“How’d I beat you?” Taron demanded.

Mr. Washburne waved a hand at the fairy. “Either I got him, or I risked losing my temper. Which would you rather happen?”

Taron pursed his lips, then nodded once. “Good point. We’ve got a broken ward, a destroyed office, and missing tech. Which do we want to tackle first?”

Mr. Washburne’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Missing tech?”

“The project is missing,” Arthur explained without getting up. He couldn’t make himself move. He was a living barrier between Louis and the rest of the office right now. No one was getting close to his mate without his permission.

Mr. Washburne’s gaze flicked to the office, then back to the group. “No, it isn’t.”

His response was confusing, and made everyone around them frown. Even Louis twitched, like he’d heard and the shock was wearing off enough for him to look up.

“What are you talking about?” Taron asked, flapping a hand at the room in question. “Everything in there is destroyed. I think we’d notice if the project was still there.”

With a sigh, Mr. Washburne explained, “Ever since Elijah told me he’s been getting bad vibes on this research floor, I’ve been moving Louis’s

project to my office after he goes home for the night for safe keeping. I got here late this morning, so it's still in my office."

A choked sound escaped his mate and Arthur watched as Louis's mind took that in. He looked too overwhelmed to ask the important question. Arthur asked it instead.

"Why didn't you tell him?"

Mr. Washburne's dark eyes shifted to him and held no remorse whatsoever when he replied, "I didn't know who was responsible for the first setback. I didn't want him telling someone he'd regret trusting later."

That felt almost like it was aimed at Arthur and he stood with a snarl, baring his teeth at the demon furiously. "I would never betray him like that! He's my–"

Before he could finish the sentence and say something he'd regret while Louis was so upset, a familiar and entirely unwelcome voice snapped behind them. "Louis, why the hell did you think it was okay to bring your device home? That's company property. If you think you'll get away with that without consequences—"

"How did you know it was missing?"

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

LOUIS

The range of emotions Louis felt in the last half hour were giving him whiplash. He was devastated when he saw his destroyed office, terrified when he noticed the project was missing, elated and relieved when Mr. Washburne said it was safe in his office, then confused and upset that he hadn't been informed about the device being moved. He couldn't wrap his head around it all, and when the weight of Arthur's hand disappeared, no longer grounding him in the present, he felt a little lost. He stood, forcing his brain to focus just in time for Mr. Yarrow to join the conversation.

"Louis, why the hell did you think it was okay to bring your device home? That's company property. If you think you'll get away with that without consequences—"

"How did you know it was missing?"

His quiet question made everyone pause, the noise of the crowd going eerily silent as all attention swung his way.

Mr. Yarrow's shouting cut off and he spluttered at the interruption. "I– What?"

Slowly, he lifted his gaze to Mr. Yarrow, repeating the question slowly. "How did you know it was missing?"

During his little lecture, Louis's mind latched onto the first question he asked. He wanted to know why Louis thought it was okay to bring his device home. He wouldn't be asking that question unless he'd gone looking

for the project *before* Louis had arrived. There wasn’t a chance he got close to the office since then and not known what was going on, not with the crowd that had gathered and the arrival of the higher ups. And with the damage, coming to the conclusion that he’d taken it home and not that it’d been stolen or destroyed was so far-fetched, it didn’t make any sense.

He studied his supervisor with more suspicion than he had the last time something like this happened. Mr. Yarrow had been dismissive of his turmoil the first time, saying Louis could fix it and it wasn’t that big a deal, but Louis hadn’t thought much of it at the time. He’d been too shell-shocked by the incident itself to come to any conclusions. Now, he had a comparison for how a good supervisor would react and Mr. Yarrow’s actions became even more suspicious. Project managers were supposed to want their people to succeed. It reflected positively on them and meant raises and recognition and things like that. That Mr. Yarrow had ignored the damage in the first place was wrong, but he had also been actively campaigning for him to drop the project and take over intern tasks instead. He wanted Louis to fail.

“Answer the question, Basil,” Taron demanded.

Mr. Yarrow didn’t answer, stubbornly keeping his mouth shut.

“We all wondered why the intern thought they could get away with touching someone’s project,” Dax commented thoughtfully.

There were murmurs of agreement, and all the attention on Mr. Yarrow turned suspicious. Mr. Yarrow backed up a step, glaring at the group at large.

“I didn't do anything.”

“That’s not what we asked,” Mr. Washburne replied, his voice going cold as ice as he demanded, “Why do you have a problem with Louis?”

“I don’t!” Mr. Yarrow growled.

“The wards weren’t damaged or tampered with. They were removed,” Arthur said, his body almost swelling as he fought to keep himself under control. “Not even researchers can remove the wards completely. Only management has that ability.” His gaze flicked to Taron. “His magical signature would be on it. You can’t just remove it without a supervisor’s magic signing off on it. Which also means he’s not working alone.”

It took a second for Louis to understand why. Yeti didn’t have the kind of magic needed to remove a ward. They would need a witch or a mage to assist with that. Just how many people wanted his project destroyed?

Mr. Yarrow's eyes darted around the room, his hands clenched at his sides. He looked like a cornered animal, and Louis knew trapped supernaturals were dangerous. He took a step back automatically, his back hitting the wall as he tried to put space between him and Mr. Yarrow.

His movement must've caught Mr. Yarrow's attention because the yeti's focus snapped to him and a furious mien overtook his face. "I told the hiring committee not to let you in here. They didn't listen to me. All humans ever do is cause problems. No one is going to want your stupid project anyway. Why would they want anything made by a human?"

Louis felt his stomach sink. He'd heard this argument before. This wasn't about his skill as an engineer, or his interpersonal skills in the office. It wasn't even about him ignoring Mr. Yarrow's demands to act as an intern the day before. This was because of his species.

Mr. Washburne huffed, the sound filled with disgust. "So that's your problem? That he's human?"

"He doesn't belong here! He's never going to bring anything worthwhile to the company! He's a waste of space! It's been months since he got hired and he's got nothing to show for it!"

"That's because you've actively been working against me," Louis tried, though he didn't have much fight behind it. Why bother? It never made a difference. The only difference he could make would be to prove the yeti wrong.

"You shut the hell up," Mr. Yarrow snarled, taking a threatening step closer. Louis didn't even have a chance to react before Arthur stepped in front of him, claws out and a very dangerous growl rattling his throat.

"Try it. I dare you," he warned.

The tension in the room swelled to the point where it felt like electricity in the air. Like a single spark, a single comment or word would set off not only Mr. Yarrow and Arthur, but every other powerful supe in the room who stood at his side or against him. Louis wasn't sure how many exactly were on his side. He'd never expected the problem to be his own supervisor. Just how many people who he worked with resent his presence?

Before he could even contemplate the possibilities, a blast of energy exploded through the room, startling everyone enough that the tension died with a snap. Everyone's attention flew to the elevator bank, where Elijah stood with his anchor at his elbow, the head of Supernatural Resources and…

The CEO.

ARTHUR

Even without looking behind him, he could feel when Louis shut down. It felt like his light went out. No doubt, every word out of Basil's mouth felt like a physical blow. Arthur wanted to attack the man for hurting Louis, for making him believe for even a second that his species made him less valuable than he truly was. He would've been willing to face the consequences if Elijah hadn't stepped in with his magic, forcing everyone to calm down and take a breath. Even after that blast of telepathic energy, Arthur still felt like he was hanging onto his control by a thread. Only knowing he was what currently stood between Basil and Louis kept him in place. He couldn't move without leaving his mate unprotected.

Basil shifted his stance, trying to keep everyone in his line of sight without making it look like he was afraid. He should be afraid. Arthur wasn't the only supernatural in the room who took exception to his line of thinking. The CEO especially wouldn't react well. He was mated to a human too.

"Gentlemen," Ozen Hawksley greeted without an ounce of warmth. "I believe it's best that we move this conversation to the conference room. Now."

He left no room for argument, turning on his heel and leading the way to the bigger conference room on the opposite side of the elevator bank from the project managers' offices. Only once Basil finally followed him did Arthur lower his guard enough to turn around and look at his mate.

Louis no longer looked heartbroken or overwhelmed. He looked… empty. Like he'd drawn so far into himself that he was at risk of fading away entirely. It scared him, but there was nothing he could do about it at the moment. Not when everyone else would no doubt be waiting for them in the conference room.

"Louis–"

Louis didn't say a word or even acknowledge him, just shuffled past toward the conference room with that blank look on his face that hid everything he was thinking. Arthur had no choice but to follow, stepping around him and opening the conference room door to put himself between Louis and Basil. He needn’t have bothered, several members of security were in the room, including two werewolves who somehow managed to be bigger than the yeti they were standing over. It didn’t stop him from hovering like a shadow until Louis sat at the end of the table nearest the door, a thousand yard stare pointed firmly at the opposite wall.

“Thank you for joining us,” Mr. Hawksley said to both him and Louis. He was watching Louis with a narrow eyed expression, but it didn’t feel threatening. Arthur’s instincts were on high alert, so he’d know if it came off that way. It felt more considering than anything else. “Taron has kept me updated on what’s been occurring, but things have obviously changed since our last meeting.” He dragged his gaze away from Louis, turning his attention to Taron. “What happened this morning?”

Drawing in a deep breath, Taron let it out slowly. “I got a text from Arthur letting me know there was an emergency on the research floor. I called security to meet me there and arrived to complete chaos. We’d moved Louis’s project into a private research room for better protection after the intern debacle, but somehow someone had gotten past the wards and destroyed everything that was inside. I didn’t go in myself, I left that to security to process, but I saw it. It was by sheer luck that Wash had removed Louis’s project the night prior and it wasn’t destroyed as well.”

Mr. Hawksley’s attention moved to Mr. Washburne, who leaned against one wall with his arms crossed, glare locked firmly on Basil. “Wash? Want to explain that?”

Making an irritated sound, he tore his gaze away from the still scowling yeti to look at Ozen. “I asked Elijah to walk to the research floor after the first incident, to see if he could figure out where the trouble started. When he informed me of some concerning energy, I started moving Louis’s project to my office at the end of the night for safe keeping. I didn’t tell him about it, nor did I tell anyone else. Which means the only one who should’ve known the device was missing before Louis arrived at work was me. Basil has yet to explain how he knew it was gone.”

Basil raised his chin defiantly. “Gossip spreads fast, you know that. I knew before I even stepped through the door that–”

“Mr. Yarrow, don’t speak,” Mr. Hawksley said tersely. “Your turn will come.” He turned his attention to one of the werewolves who stood near Basil’s back, her intimidation in full swing, keeping him from running or attacking. “Tasha, what did you find in the office?”

“Three distinct scents. Louis was obviously the most potent, but the newest scent, the one laced with disgust and hatred, wasn’t human. It was yeti.”

Basil spun around with his teeth bared, only to flinch when both werewolves stepped forward with threatening growls in their throats. He shrank in his seat, his voice a little shaky as he tried to prove his innocence. “I’m his supervisor! Of course I’ve been in the room before! That doesn’t mean it was me!”

“Only you could authorize the removal of the ward,” Taron pointed out. “We made it that way on purpose so there wouldn’t be any petty acts of sabotage on the research floor.” He glanced at Tasha. “Do you know who helped him remove it?”

She shook her head. “No, but I left Emmett out there to see if he could catch a distinct scent on the magic. He’ll find them.”

“Have him start with the research floors,” Arthur insisted. He hated even suggesting it, but Elijah wouldn’t have picked up vibes like that coming from just one person. To muddy the floor enough to make it hard to pinpoint a source would mean multiple researchers or team members on the floor had to have similar thoughts to Basil.

Ozen’s attention turned to him. “Arthur? Do you have something to add?”

Arthur glared at Basil as he reported, “He’s been undermining Louis’s confidence and trying to get in the way of his progress. When Louis struggled with the setback after the intern sabotaged his work, he told me Basil demanded he drop the project and act as a clean up team for another researcher, implying that he’d at least be useful in that position. He’s also made several anti-human comments around me and others on my team. He–”

“I’m not the only one,” Basil snapped. “No one wanted him here. He doesn’t belong. Humans only ever cause trouble for us.” He lifted his chin, daring to sneer in Louis’s direction before turning to face the CEO. “Unless you’re willing to lose half your research team, you’d do better kicking him to the curb. We don’t want humans here.”

For a split second, Arthur’s breath froze in his lungs. If they fired Louis just to keep the peace, he’d absolutely lose his shit.

Thankfully, it didn’t come to that. Mr. Hawksley did something he hadn’t expected instead.

“Let’s see if that’s true.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

LOUIS

The CEO ended up going onto each research floor and demanding to know who had a problem with humans in his company. Most didn’t say a word. The few who did were fired immediately for creating a hostile work environment, discrimination, and more. Louis stopped listening after a while. He knew there were those who were smart enough to keep their mouth shut that thought like Mr. Yarrow did. Making big scenes like this would only make people hate him more.

He returned to his office while they were still questioning each research floor. He didn’t need to watch and see just how many people blamed him for things like this. He might’ve been lucky enough to escape losing his project, but it didn’t change the fact that people didn’t want him here. If he wanted to earn his place, he needed to keep his head down and get back to work.

He was picking up and organizing the papers that weren’t torn into shreds when Mr. Washburne showed up with his project in hand. He set it carefully on the table Louis had righted, dark eyes watching him closely.

“I’m sorry I didn't tell you. The fewer people who knew where it was after hours, the less risk there was that it’d be damaged.”

Louis didn’t reply, just picked up the device and looked it over. Then he set it aside. He’d need to start over anyway. There was too much he needed to change to build off of what he already had.

“Did you need any help? I can delegate for a bit to give you a hand–”

“No. Thank you,” Louis replied without looking at him. He sat in front of his desktop, typing in his password, not at all surprised to find the whole system wiped. He’d need to get the backups from Arthur at some point. Once he got himself organized, that is.

“Alright. I’ll leave you to it. Someone will be by later to set up a new ward. I’ll ask the mage who set up mine. Not even fae can get through it.”

Louis nodded, but didn’t say anything. It didn’t matter. He wasn’t going anywhere. He’d stay in the office with his project until it was finished. That way he didn’t have to worry about who might be hiding in the woodwork.

Arthur stopped by a little while later with someone from cyber security who looked over the computer for any potential viruses or backdoors Mr. Yarrow might’ve installed. Louis had no idea what that was, but he didn't care. He turned to the table instead, drawing out new schematics for the upgraded device that would accommodate the size and power he needed.

When Arthur tried to insist he take a break or go home, Louis ignored him. He didn’t even look in his direction. He’d gotten too lax since Arthur stormed into his life. If he’d been here working instead of spending time with Arthur, he wouldn’t have been left open for the attack. He needed to get his head back in the game where it belonged. He’d never make it if he let himself get distracted.

“Louis, you can’t stay here all night,” Arthur growled. “I understand you’re concerned about leaving any of this behind, but–”

“No.”

It was the first thing he’d said in hours and he was proud of himself for keeping his voice firm and unwavering. If he wavered even a little, he felt like he might break and he didn’t have time for that. He’d faced this kind of discrimination before. He’d face it again in the future. He couldn’t let himself get sidetracked every time it happened.

“Louis…”

He didn’t repeat himself. He made himself perfectly clear. He wasn’t going anywhere. And if Arthur tried to force him, he’d report it. He was hired to do a job. Anything outside that job wasn’t anyone’s business but his.

His eyes burned as he squinted at the tiny screw that kept popping out before he could get the damn thing fully in. Why were motherboard screws so damn tiny?

The door to his office opened without a knock, but Louis didn't bother to look up. He knew who it was. Arthur had shown up in the same way every day for… Well, he wasn't even sure how long he'd been here at this point. There were no windows in the tiny office.

"Louis, enough is enough. It's been three days."

Well, that answered that question.

"You need to leave this office. You haven't even stopped for a nap."

Not true. He nodded off here and there. At one point he got at least an hour with his head on his desk. He was just careful about when he did it. He only let himself relax even that much when there were plenty of witnesses around just outside his door who'd see it if anyone came in here to cause trouble for him. While he wasn't sure how many of them would care, most had at least felt that a line was crossed when it came to messing with his project. Besides, with Arthur hovering like he did, most were probably too terrified to approach. He'd gone half shifted at least twice now and he'd heard murmurs of people who passed his door who said Arthur would hurt anyone who came near him. It meant he wasn't interrupted, so at least he had that going for him.

"Louis!" Arthur demanded. He'd been reluctant to force the issue since Mr. Yarrow's confession, but apparently he'd lost his patience. He grabbed the back of Louis's chair, forcing Louis away so he would at least look the man in the eyes, and squatted in front of him. "This has to stop!"

"What has to stop?" he asked blandly. He wasn't doing anything wrong. He was working. He'd gotten the structure done for his upgraded project in just the three days he'd been here because he hadn't let himself get distracted.

"This!" Arthur insisted, gesturing at him. "Working until you pass out and refusing to do normal things like sleep and shower! Why are you working yourself to death when no one asked you to?"

With a blank stare, he finally replied, "Because they're waiting for me to fail. I'm not giving them the satisfaction."

His comment made Arthur freeze, his face twisted in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

He didn’t want to get into this. He wanted to get back to his work. But Arthur wouldn’t let it go and he needed the lion shifter to leave so he could focus on anything but how much he wanted to lean into the man. It was stupid how much he missed him when they saw each other every day. If he let himself focus on that, he’d get distracted again and he couldn’t afford to fall behind.

“It’s true. It’s always been true. If I want their respect, I have to prove I can earn it.”

Letting his head drop forward, Arthur groaned. “You don’t need to do that, Louis. You can at least accept help–”

“No.”

“Why the hell not?”Arthur snapped, looking up at him again. “You don’t need to do everything alone! Why won’t you let people help you?”

“Because no one ever has!” he shouted. He hadn’t meant to. He was exhausted and he just didn’t have the patience for this anymore. He wanted to get back to work.

Arthur’s golden eyebrows furrowed tightly. “What are you talking about? Of course people have–”

“No, they haven’t. I’ve been on my own since the start. I’m fine with that. I can handle it. I don’t need help.” Pulling away, he edged around the lion shifter, returning to the spot in front of his project. “I need to get back to work. You don’t have to keep checking on me. I’m fine.”

He could get through this. He’d done it before. He spent his whole life succeeding on his own. He didn’t need help.

With a frustrated growl, Arthur stood. Louis braced himself for more arguing, trying and failing to focus on his project while Arthur was in the room with him. He really needed the man to leave.

“You’re a brilliant man, Louis. I can’t even begin to understand even half of what you know. But somehow, despite all that, you’re really fucking blind to what’s right in front of you.”

That made Louis frown, glancing over his shoulder in confusion.

Arthur’s glare was halfhearted at best, disbelief and resignation just barely masking the pain that was hidden underneath. He shook his head, running his fingers roughly through his hair. It was so unlike him that it ensnared Louis’s attention, his eyes lingering on all the tell-tale signs that someone wasn’t quite right with the normally controlled lion shifter. His tie was loosened and his hair was a mess. He wasn’t even wearing his suit

jacket and he had dark circles under his eyes like he was sleeping about as much as Louis was. He had no idea why, but Arthur spoke before he could ask.

“I’ve known you long enough by now to know you wouldn’t have survived this long on your own without help.”

Offended, Louis opened his mouth to argue. “I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself!”

“Really?” Arthur asked, that stupid eyebrow raised defiantly. “Who’s been feeding you the past few days? Who’s kept you hydrated? You wouldn’t have done it on your own. If you had the ability, you would’ve done it a long time ago just to get me off your back. This behavior didn’t start at Spellbound. You’re so used to it, I’m betting you’ve been like this for years. You’re telling me behaving like this, you managed to feed yourself and keep yourself healthy in college with absolutely no help?”

Louis glowered at him. “I don’t need a babysitter, Arthur.”

“No. But you sure as hell need someone to support you. I want that person to be me, but I’m not going to force you. You’re my–” He cut himself off with a grimace, shaking his head. “Nevermind. Just, do me a favor and eat. I brought your favorite.”

He gestured to a bag he’d left by the door before stomping out again. Louis blinked at it in surprise. When had he brought that?

He tried to get back to work, figuring the adrenaline from the argument would get his mind moving, but he couldn’t focus. Something Arthur said kept replaying in his head. Arthur was certain he wouldn’t have made it this far without help. The assumption irked, and he found himself pulling his phone out of his pocket and dialing a familiar number. Terrence was his friend all through college, grad school, and getting his doctorate. They’d been roommates for at least half that time. If anyone could back him up on his ability to take care of himself, it was his best friend.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

LOUIS

He probably should've checked the time before calling Terrence, the man had his own job and life, but he answered on the second ring, a familiar teasing lilt to his voice when he greeted, "Well if it isn't my wayward best friend. Finally remember I exist, huh?"

Louis frowned. "I remembered you existed. I've been–"

"Busy," Terrence finished with a chuckle. "Believe me, I know. You're always busy."

Why did this conversation feel like it was off to a bad start already?

"So, tell me. What's the occasion? Do you need a sounding board for your newest project? Or have you finally found that sociability gene you lost and actually want to hang out without working?"

Confused, Louis struggled to figure out how best to respond. "I don't– I'm not–" He growled, frustrated, and forced himself to answer. "I just need an outside perspective. My boyfriend thinks I'm incapable of taking care of myself. He insinuated someone had to have taken care of me in college for me to survive. He doesn't believe me when I tell him I don't need help."

Terrance went quiet for a long moment, and when he huffed out a laugh, it was more astounded than disbelieving on his behalf. "You really didn't notice?"

Louis blinked in surprise. "What… What are you talking about?"

He heard a creak like Terrence was leaning back in that godsawful office chair he had at home. Louis finally checked the time and made a face at his watch. For a moment he felt vindicated that it was only just after suppertime, not nearly as late as he normally stayed at the office, but then he saw what day it was. No wonder Arthur was so pissed off. He hadn't let Louis work on a weekend since they started spending time together.

"I'm honestly not surprised. You take oblivious to another level sometimes."

For the second time that day, Louis took offense. "I am not oblivious!"

Unlike Arthur, who had been frustrated with him, Terrance only laughed at his vehemence. "You really are. One of my groomsmen was hitting on you for more than half my wedding reception and you didn't notice. Do you remember why?"

His brows furrowed as he tried to remember that event. Honestly, he barely remembered the ceremony.

"You had just figured out how to finish your thesis. You were so excited about the possibility of your research getting you the recognition you needed to find yourself a job that you couldn't stop talking about it. Poor Tom was trying so hard to get your attention, and the only thing he left with that night was an in depth explanation on the cross species variables of– Shit… What was the rest of it? I had it memorized at one point."

"Cross species laser modulation for variable biological systems," he grumbled.

"Right!" He heard the snap of Terrence's fingers as he laughed again.

"I don't see how that's relevant."

"Still not surprised," Terrence replied, that familiar smirk in his voice that said he was teasing. One of the reasons they were friends, aside from Terrance basically demanding they be after Louis helped him study for a biology class in undergrad, was that he didn't ever take offense to Louis's distractions. He didn't care that Louis didn't go to parties and only ever let Terrance drag him to clubs if he was meeting a hookup from one of the apps. He was a good friend like that.

"You're a smart guy, Louis, but I'm honestly surprised you lived as long as you did given how shitty you are at taking care of yourself," Terrence continued. All kind thoughts Louis had about his friend died an instant death and he glowered at the wall. Terrence was oblivious and Louis felt a

distinct urge to switch to a video call so he could glare at his friend properly.

“Your first roommate tried his best to keep snacks around and stuff, but he eventually asked for my help because he couldn’t keep up with school, his part time job, and taking care of you all by himself. I hadn’t realized just how bad it was until he proved it to me. We switched off who brought you food, I paid for the snacks since I could afford it more than he could, and I had you move in with me our sophomore year so I could keep an eye on you. How else did you think food kept showing up? Divine intervention?”

“No,” Louis grumbled, though his answer wasn’t much better. “I didn’t… think about it much.” Or at all. He never gave it a second thought. Whenever his stomach got too hard to ignore and he finally looked up from what he’d been working on, there were snacks within range. His roommate had said it was fine to take some, and Terrence had bought snacks specifically with Louis’s preferences in mind. “You always said you got extra dinner and couldn’t finish it.”

“Uh huh. I did. Do you remember any of that food being touched before I handed it to you, though? It wasn’t actually leftovers. I stole your student ID and bought you your own meals and just brought them back to the dorms for you. It was easier than trying to convince you to come to the cafeteria with me.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Louis tried to argue.

“Really? Because your first roommate said he started feeding you because he hadn’t seen you eat in days and you were starting to look like a zombie. It was freaking him out. At least if he fed you, you didn’t give him nightmares that you’d wake up and try to eat him instead.”

Louis blanched. “That– You’re not serious.”

“Oh so very serious,” Terrance replied, still sounding amused. “He wasn’t the only one. Junior year, one of your few decent professors noticed I was always picking you up from class and handing you food. She was the one who gave me suggestions on how to get you to sleep at least semi-normally. Your grades were always perfect, but you kept nodding off in her class, and she was concerned. She said she’d been the same way when she was younger and had a whole list of shit I could try to get you to sleep. Once I started doing some of them, you actually slept for more than a few hours at a time.”

“I…” He felt a little like a jerk admitting, “I don’t remember that.”

“Like I said, I’m not surprised,” Terrence said amiably. He didn’t sound pissed or like their friendship had been one sided. He was the same easy going guy Louis had known for years. But that seemed off. If Terrence had spent the better part of a decade acting as Louis’s caretaker, wouldn’t he be tired of him by now?

Like he could hear what Louis was thinking, he continued. “No one blamed you for it. You were getting pushback from all angles. Parents, guidance counselors, student advisors, more than half your professors. Hell, even the dean of students pulled you aside and tried to suggest you switch to something more–”

“Human-friendly,” Louis finished with a growl. He remembered that conversation. He’d basically started living in the library where he could be close to the research he needed to write his thesis and the librarian got concerned after finding him sleeping on a table in the back after the library had already been closed for a while. She’d reported it, and it made its way up to the dean, who tried telling him he was smart, but maybe it was better to stick to the kind of career fields that were better suited for fragile human bodies. Louis had very politely told him to go fuck himself.

“Right,” Terrence agreed, pulling him out of the memory and back to the present. “You were taking it from all sides and working to prove yourself. Trying to do that and keep up with things like eating and sleeping was asking too much from you. So me and a few others picked up the slack.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” he asked helplessly. He didn’t know what to do with this new revelation.

“Why would I? I didn't need recognition or thanks or whatever. You were my friend and you needed help. There’s nothing wrong with that.” His tone brightened a little. “Besides, now when you become a famous engineer making those insane gadgets you were always sketching in your notebooks, I get to say I had a part in that. I’m only a data analyst, man. I gotta get my props from somewhere.”

Louis snorted, but the momentary amusement slipped away and he frowned at the project in front of him. He lived with Terrence through his doctorate and in his basement for two years afterward, trying and failing to find a job while working on personal projects in his free time in hopes of creating something that would get him recognized. He only moved out after he’d been working at Spellbound and the condo program opened up. Before

that, he worked long hours but people didn't really pay much attention to him. It was only after he moved away from Terrence's care that people started to get concerned. Maybe because the convenience of the condo meant he no longer had to catch a specific bus to get back to Terrence's home, so he could leave whenever he wanted, and Terrence was no longer around to keep him fed and force him to rest.

Shit, Arthur was going to have a field day when he found out. And there was no getting around it. He'd been right. Apparently, the only time he was in charge of his own care was when he'd gotten so bad that he was falling asleep at work and going days without eating. And he had no one to blame but himself.

"I can practically hear your brain running overtime right now. What's going on?" Terrence cajoled after a long moment of silence.

"I just– I thought I could do it on my own. That I didn't need help. Turns out, I'm just an idiot who doesn't pay attention. Arthur called me blind. Apparently, he's right."

"Hey, hey," Terrence chided. "None of that. You're not an idiot. You're an ambitious and intelligent guy fighting against institutionalized discrimination of your species and your own limitations in a magically dependent world. The cards were stacked against you from the start. You prioritized proving yourself— and honestly, to make it as far as you have, you had to."

Maybe. But now that he was aware of it, he found it hard to see it that way. Making himself a burden to others just because he wanted to prove himself wasn't how he wanted to succeed.

"Don't stress too much about it, Louis. Those of us who want to see you succeed are happy to support you. Tell me about this boyfriend. I thought you weren't interested in dating. Tom's going to be devastated," he teased.

"I still don't know who that is," Louis grumbled, slumping in his chair. "Arthur is… He's great. Really annoying at times about taking care of me, but he's also good at getting me to relax and helping me when I get stuck and can't figure out what my next steps need to be. He's a project manager on my floor, so he actually knows what he's talking about."

"Damn. He sounds a hell of a lot more equipped than I was," Terrence chuckled. "Your notecards made no damn sense to me. I was basically reading you gibberish and hoping your answer matched what was written

on the back closely enough that I didn’t have to guess if you were on the right track or not.”

Louis huffed a laugh at that. Terrence was a terrible sounding board when it came to work. Most of the time, Louis was mostly talking out loud and didn't actually expect his friend to answer. Whenever he tried, he ended up asking something completely off the wall that distracted him instead of actually helping him. He was willing to listen to him ramble, though, which was what made him such a good friend.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t fully present at your wedding,” he murmured apologetically. “I only planned on taking a few notes and focusing on you and your big day, but–”

“That’s okay,” Terrence interrupted with a smile in his voice. “You showed up. In the middle of writing your thesis, with the school administration breathing down your neck about not making them look bad, you showed up. That meant a lot to me. You’re a good friend, Louis. A little oblivious, but you still care. That’s all that matters.”

He did care. He cared that Terrence was happy. He cared that his friend was still in his life even after a decade of secret caretaking. Terrence knew that because Louis did his best to show him. He made little gadgets while staying with him and his wife to make their lives easier. He did a few repairs on electronics in the house because he knew what he was looking at and could save them a few hundred bucks doing it himself. Little things that he didn’t think about at the time because it wasn’t much effort on his part. But he realized it was his way of showing Terrence he mattered. He also realized that he hadn’t done a single thing like that for Arthur.

His boyfriend had supported him in his bossy, demanding way, and Louis had fought him every step of the way. He argued and complained and when things got hard, he shut him out. He hadn’t been fair to Arthur. And if he didn’t want to lose the only person in the world who meant more to him than his work, he needed to do better.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

ARTHUR

Arthur was trying to get comfortable to spend another night on the tiny couch in the breakroom when his phone rang. He couldn't make himself leave when Louis was still here, and he could see it in Louis's face that trying to force him to go would only make things worse. So he spent the last three nights having fitful sleep in the breakroom before going home long enough to shower, change, and make something for Louis to eat before coming back. Thus far, Louis hadn't noticed, and he hoped to keep it that way.

The phone rang twice before he managed to fish it out of his pocket and answer it. Long enough, apparently, for Louis to hear it.

"Hello?"

"...Are you still in the office?"

He sat up when he heard Louis's voice on the other end of the line. Louis hadn't spoken more than a few words to him in days, aside from their argument earlier. He ignored any texts Arthur sent and barely acknowledged his existence most days. It hurt, especially so soon after Arthur recognized their bond, but he tried not to take it personally. Louis had spent months working for someone who was actively undermining him, found out there were more who were against him in the woodwork, and had his work space violated twice in a matter of weeks. The man had a good reason for shutting down like that.

“Arthur?”

He realized he hadn’t answered and grimaced, clearing his throat. “I am. I’m in the breakroom.”

To his surprise, he heard footsteps on the main research floor heading in his direction before Louis poked his head into the room. If calling him was a shock, Louis actually leaving his office to come see him was even more so. So much so that he just stared dumbly at him, phone still pressed to his ear.

Louis hung up first, sliding his phone into his pocket and stepping farther into the room. He didn’t have the same blank stare he’d had for days, emerald green eyes trailing over Arthur’s makeshift bed, a deep frown pulling at his lips.

“Are you… going to sleep here?”

“I’ve been here every night you’ve been,” he said as he tucked his own phone away.

His response made Louis stiffen and a wide range of emotions passed over his face, the most predominant being pain and regret. He looked a little uneasy as he stepped closer, his eyes on the floor as he mumbled, “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I did.”

He wanted to say why. He wanted to tell Louis that they were mates and there was nothing that could be said that would get him to leave Louis alone and unprotected. He bit his tongue to stop himself. Now wasn’t the time. He wasn’t even sure if this visit was because Louis finally stopped to take a break on his own or if there was something more.

Goddess, he hoped he hadn’t pushed too far during their stupid argument. He hadn’t meant to lose his temper like that. He’d heard rumors that humans didn't have mate bonds the same way supes did. It was possible Louis could walk away without the kind of excruciating pain and heartache Arthur would experience.

“I, um… I was hoping we could talk. I was going to meet you at home, but then I realized you don’t actually live with me and probably wouldn’t be there if I went to the condo.” Louis shrugged, clutching awkwardly to his messenger back strap. It was then that Arthur noticed that he was dressed to leave, jacket on, bag packed. This wasn’t just a break then. He couldn’t tell if that was a good thing or not yet.

“Did you want to go back to the condo or would you prefer to stay here?” Arthur asked, still confused.

Louis shifted awkwardly again, looking much more uncertain about himself than Arthur had ever seen him. He cocked his head, studying his mate more carefully. Something had changed since their argument, and he wasn’t sure what.

“We can, uh… We can go to your place if you’d prefer,” Louis offered awkwardly.

They’d never done that before. Arthur recognized early on that he was pushing enough by making Louis share a bed with him. Forcing him away from his home and farther away from Spellbound had felt like the wrong move. Though, he could admit a small part of him wanted Louis in his space.

“Are you sure? Spellbound is closer to your apartment. We’d need to take the subway to get to my place.”

A flash of uneasiness swept across Louis’s face, but he masked the discomfort, nodding his head once. “It’s fine. Wherever you want to go is fine.”

Pushing to his feet, Arthur considered this new and accommodating version of Louis. He wasn’t sure he liked it. Not only because he knew Louis was hiding how he really felt, and Arthur preferred his honesty, but also because he enjoyed their banter. Louis whined and Arthur proved he’d like whatever the plan was for him to relax. It was fun. He didn’t want to give that up. He didn’t want to push right now either, not when Louis was actually willing to leave the building for the first time in days.

“Let’s go to the condo. It’s closer. Did you eat yet?”

Louis lifted the canvas bag Arthur had stored his food in with a grimace. “Not yet. I wasn’t sure if you’ve eaten or not. I was going to wait for you.”

He had, though not nearly as much as he normally ate. It was hard to have an appetite when your mate was in such turmoil in the other room. He gathered his jacket and tie that he’d thrown over the arm of the couch, checking his pockets to make sure he had everything.

“You, uh… forgot your badge,” Louis informed him, pulling it out from where it’d gotten tucked into the cushions and handing it to him.

The gesture was thoughtful, if not a little odd that Louis was being observant enough to notice. He really wished he had some kind of teleportation ability right now. Waiting the ten blocks to get to the condo to

have whatever conversation Louis was hoping to have was going to be excruciating. He was normally a confident man, not much could unsettle him, but knowing his mate was right there next to him, likely unaware of their connection, and holding the fate of their future in his hands was unnerving. He was prepared to spend the whole walk to the condo spiraling until Louis slipped his hand into Arthur's, threading their fingers together.

Arthur bit back a gasp, looking down at their connected hands, and hope swelled in his chest. If it was a bad conversation, then Louis wouldn't be touching him like that. Would he?

They took the elevator to the lobby in silence, his attention so tightly wrapped around Louis that he noticed every fidget and grimace. He was uncomfortable leaving the office, that much was clear, and after what happened with Basil, he didn't blame him. He was leaving anyway, though, which was major progress on his part.

Louis paused just before they stepped out of the main doors the weekend guards kindly unlocked for them. Arthur considered that maybe they'd reached Louis's limit and he couldn't go farther, but before he suggested just staying here for now, Louis pointed out, "It's raining."

Whipping his head around, Arthur grimaced. It wasn't nearly as bad as their date at the pizza restaurant where the rain came down in sheets, but it was a steady drizzle that would soak them to the bone by the time they walked ten blocks.

Louis squeezed his hand before pulling away, stopping when Arthur didn't let go of his hand. His lips quirked up at the sides and he looked amused when he glanced at him over his shoulder. "I'm just going to hail a taxi. Wait here. That way you only have to get wet for a few seconds."

Reluctantly, he released Louis's hand, watching as he jogged toward the street and lifted a hand. A taxi pulled to a stop after about a minute and Louis opened the door and poked his head in, saying something to the driver before closing the door again. Arthur watched, confused, as the taxi pulled around, taking the driveway the CEOs and guests used for pick up and drop off and pulling to a stop right in front of the door.

Louis, who'd jogged back to meet him, opened the back door of the taxi and smiled at him, making Arthur's heart lurch once again. Nothing about Louis's actions made him think he had any reason to worry. It made him hopeful that their talk wouldn't be as bad as he feared.

Thanks to traffic, it took probably twice as long to go ten blocks in the taxi as it would've taken if they walked, but they were mostly dry when they pulled up in front of the condo and the doorman met them at the car with an umbrella to keep them out of the rain as they slid out of the car. Louis even paid for the ridiculously expensive ride before sliding out and taking his hand again, leading him into the building and into the elevator without a word.

The tension in Arthur's chest came back when they stepped into the bedroom and Louis gestured for him to sit down on the edge of the bed. He did so, watching his mate carefully as Louis paced in front of him, seeming to grow more anxious as time went on.

"Louis–"

"You were right," Louis blurted, interrupting him.

Arthur's eyebrows flew up in surprise. He'd been in the middle of standing so he could reach for Louis and pull him into his arms, but he sat back down slowly, studying the man in front of him who finally stopped pacing long enough to look him in the eye.

"About what?"

"About–" Louis paused, making a face. "Well, everything, I guess. But I was referring to when you said I hadn't made it through college on my own." He scowled, though the expression looked like it wasn't directed at Arthur specifically, but more inward toward Louis himself. "I couldn't get the comment out of my head and I thought I'd prove you wrong by calling my best friend for back up. He was my roommate through most of my higher education years. Apparently, I never noticed how many people helped me get where I am now. I was too busy trying to prove myself to notice."

Arthur blinked a few times, surprised. He'd said that out of frustration. He hadn't meant to get into Louis's head. "Louis, I–"

"No, wait. Let me finish," Louis pleaded. "I know what you're going to say, and I need to explain myself first. I wasn't lying when I said people were waiting for me to fail. That's been true my entire life. Family members would tell me to get my head out of the clouds and that my goals were fantasy. Guidance counselors and advisors would question me constantly on whether I was sure I was making the right choice and if I understood how next to impossible it would be for me to be hired as an engineer at a species-mixed company. Even professors who saw my grades and how hard

I worked told me I was wasting my time. That no company was going to want to hire a human. My life span was too short, I didn't have any magic, I couldn't keep up with the demands of the job like supes could. For every one person who supported me in one way or another, there were another ten that told me I couldn't do it. Those voices were so loud, and I was so determined to prove them wrong, that I didn't even notice the people quietly working in the background to make sure I succeeded."

He sighed, looking so remorseful, Arthur itched to drag him closer and reassure him.

"I know I've got work to do on that end, and probably more than a few apologies to make, but I hope you understand that I wasn't being blind on purpose. And I noticed what you were doing for me, even if I complained about it. I would've given up on my project weeks ago if it weren't for you. So I hope you can forgive me for being a jerk and give me a chance to do better. I can't promise I'll be perfect, but I'll try–"

"I don't need you to do better," Arthur interrupted.

Louis looked heartbroken for a split second and Arthur realized how that sounded. He rushed to explain himself better, standing and taking Louis's hands. "I mean, I like how things work with us now. Supporting you, taking care of you, feeds certain instincts I struggled to manage with past partners. Instincts that, admittedly, might be a hell of a lot worse when it comes to you."

Louis's brows furrowed. "Why? If it's because you think I can't take care of myself, I said I'd try–"

"No, no. That's not what I meant," he continued with a shake of his head. "I… I've been struggling to figure out how to tell you this. I'd planned on taking you this weekend actually, but everything fell apart before I could even ask…"

Louis's eyes searched his, the confusion obvious on his face. "What are you talking about? Tell me what?"

Drawing in a deep breath to steady himself, Arthur admitted, "You're my mate."

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

LOUIS

Maybe it was naive of him to think he'd had enough shocks in the last week and that nothing could shock him anymore. Somehow, that didn't seem to be the case. Louis stared wide-eyed up at Arthur, who looked unsure for the first time since they met, his grip on Louis's hands just shy of painful as he waited for Louis's response.

"I– Wha– How?"

"How what?" Arthur frowned. "How did it happen? I'm not entirely sure. There's a surprising lack of information about mating magic and the process of finding your mate–"

Shaking his head rapidly, he demanded, "How do you know?"

The answer was incredibly important because he needed Arthur to be right, and if there was any chance he could be wrong, Louis needed to figure out a way to fix that. He might find Arthur's unending demands that he take care of himself annoying, but he also craved every single moment with him. He didn't even bother trying to catch more than a cat nap the last few days since he knew he wouldn't get any decent sleep without Arthur there with him. If there was some magic out there that could ensure Louis could keep him, then he wanted to make sure it was one hundred percent certain.

"Instinct, mostly," Arthur unhelpfully explained.

Louis growled. “That’s not an answer. Is there like some kind of magic involved? Something we need to solidify to make it permanent? Because instincts can be wrong, couldn’t they? Is there some kind of device that can tell us if your instincts are right or not?”

As he rattled off questions, a slow smile spread across Arthur’s face. Louis felt his face flush in response to that expression and he shot Arthur a scowl. “Stop grinning at me and answer the questions!”

The bastard didn’t even try to hide the grin. If it wasn’t so important to him, Louis would take back everything he’d just said just to wipe that smile off his face. Maybe then he’d deign to answer the questions.

“Arthur–*mmph*!”

Arthur cut off his complaint by capturing Louis’s lips in a fervent kiss, finally releasing his hands so he could plaster them together instead. Louis couldn’t help the groan that slipped out, the relief he felt being pressed against all that heat and muscle again out of this world. He would’ve been happy to set the conversation aside long enough for a little naked cuddle time, but before he could force himself to break the kiss long enough to ask, someone knocked on his door.

Growling, Louis broke the kiss and spun around, stopping just before he reached the handle with Arthur’s hands on his hips, pulling him backward and behind him. He shot the sexy lion shifter an incredulous look—why was he protecting Louis inside the apartment?—but didn’t have time to argue about it before Arthur opened the door to greet the person on the other side.

“Yes?”

“Um… Sorry to interrupt… Dominic said a taxi driver dropped this off, said it was left in the back seat. He said you two were the only ones who’d come home in a taxi today, so…”

Louis had to practically stand on his tiptoes to look over Arthur’s shoulder to see what was happening. Kaz stood outside the door holding a familiar canvas back that–

“Oh shit.”

Arthur gave him a flat look over his shoulder before forcing himself to smile for Kaz’s sake. “Thank you. I appreciate you bringing it to us. Did you need anything else?”

Kaz shook his head rapidly, already taking a big step back, his cheeks turning an even darker shade of green. “Nope. I’m good. You two have a

nice night.”

Arthur closed the door as the giant orc scuttled away. Turning slowly to face Louis with the bag held accusingly in his hand. The bag that held the meal Arthur had brought him so he’d actually eat something. The bag Louis had ignored in favor of going to find Arthur to apologize.

He chuckled awkwardly. “In my defense, apologizing to you felt more important than eating.”

The flat set of Arthur’s lips softened and he leaned in to steal another kiss. “I can accept that. But you’re eating it now. Then you’re going to shower. It’s been days, and I know you didn’t bother to go down to the gym to even rinse off the past few days.”

“There are showers in the gym?”

If he knew that, he might’ve been willing to take a small break to use them. Maybe. Okay, probably not without prompt, but he’d go if Arthur reminded him to.

Arthur wouldn’t let them return to the conversation until after he was satisfied Louis was properly cared for. He couldn’t force him to sleep before they’d finished talking, not even the purring thing would get Louis to fall asleep before he had his answers, but he made Louis eat, shower, and get into comfortable clothes so they could cuddle in bed before finally giving in to Louis’s demands.

“Tell me about the mating thing.”

Arthur sighed, but the exasperation was ruined by the smile on his face. “I told you, it’s an instinct thing. The more time I spent with you, the more I craved. It got to the point where my instincts were screaming at me to claim you loudly enough that I couldn’t ignore it. I tried, I wasn’t sure what was going on with me, but then you manipulated me into bed and it became a lot more obvious what you were to me. I wanted to claim you because you’re my other half.”

“So, do it then.”

Louis’s insistence seemed to stun Arthur because his mouth fell open in shock and he stared at him with eyes so wide, it’d be comical if it wasn’t also distracting him from the purpose of this conversation. If Arthur needed

to claim him to make it permanent, then he wanted it to happen sooner rather than later. He'd screw this up enough. He wasn't going to do it again.

"Louis, I can't just–"

"Is there like a ceremony or something involved?"

Blinking rapidly, Arthur answered, "Well, no… but–"

"Paperwork that needs to be done?"

"No, but–"

"Is it against the rules to mate with someone you work with?"

Arthur snorted. "No, that'd be hypocritical of the higher ups. But I don't think we need to rush this. Claiming is permanent. There's no going back after and–"

Frustrated, Louis rolled and threw his leg over Arthur's hips, sitting up and straddling him so he could frown down at the stubborn lion. "Is there a possibility that you're wrong?"

Arthur stared up at him, hands automatically going to his hips to support him. For a long moment, he didn't say anything, but right before Louis completely lost it, his expression firmed and he shook his head. "No. My instincts aren't wrong. You're my mate."

Elation filled Louis's chest, followed quickly by determination. "Well, good. Then if there's no ceremony or paperwork and your instincts aren't going to change, then there's no reason not to. How does it work? Is there something we need to do to prepare or–"

Once again, Arthur cut him off with a kiss, but this time, he didn't let them get distracted, pulling back bare millimeters to speak against Louis's lips. "I can't explain it to you. I have to show you."

Somehow, despite being given the opportunity to properly claim him, which Louis had thought all supes coveted, Arthur still wanted to do the whole savoring thing again. He fisted Louis's hair, dragging him down for a drugging kiss that had not even a hint of urgency in it. Louis could just tell this was going to drag on forever if he didn't do something about it.

With his position on top of the man, Louis had a slight advantage. He kept Arthur distracted, sucking on his tongue and making him fight for who was dominating the kiss, while his hands set to work unbuttoning his shirt and pulling it free of his slacks. Arthur actually helped him in shrugging it off his shoulders, but it got caught on his wrists because Louis hadn't been able to think straight long enough to unbutton the cuffs. He pulled back, frowning at the trapped material before a wicked grin spread over his face.

It’d be hard for Arthur to take control with his hands stuck. There was no way Louis was letting this opportunity pass him by.

“Louis, what– *ungh*, fuck…”

Since he knew he had to be quick about it or risk Arthur getting out his claws to fix the situation himself, he slid down Arthur’s body with alacrity, grinning to himself as the lion shifter struggled to free his hands. Thanks to years manipulating complicated parts in tight confines, Louis had Arthur’s belt open, pants undone, and his cock out in quick succession, running his tongue up the length of him to stall him just as he started asking questions.

Flicking his gaze up to the gorgeous man, he raised a challenging eyebrow, silently asking *do you really want me to stop right now?*

The answering growl he got in response made him snicker, but he finally had the lion’s full attention. He wrapped his lips around the tip, swirling his tongue and teasing just a little. It only seemed fair. Arthur was always driving him nuts in bed. Louis wanted a little payback.

“Louis…” Arthur growled in warning, then dropped his head back on another groan as Louis started bobbing his head. It was hard to stay mad when someone was sucking you off. Louis had learned that since starting this whole thing with Arthur. It was even harder to stay mad when they were fucking. With that in mind, he lifted off to reach for the nightstand, squeaking in surprise when he suddenly found himself pinned on his stomach with Arthur growling predatorily against the back of his neck.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Fuck, why was it so hot when he got all dominant like that? Also, how the hell had he gotten his hands free so quickly without Louis noticing?

“Lube,” Louis gasped, his body jerking as Arthur literally ripped his sweats from his body. There were definitely claws involved. “Kinda thought we might need it.”

Arthur hummed, nipping lightly at the back of Louis’s neck before his weight lifted long enough for him to yank open the drawer and pull out the lube. Louis tried to wriggle free, wanting to get the upper hand again, but a hand pressing between his shoulderblades flattened him against the mattress again, pinning him there.

That should not have been as hot as it was.

He’d kind of hoped he’d riled Arthur up enough to skip the slow torture, and for a minute it seemed like he was going that way, but instead of a quick prep with his fingers, he felt Arthur’s hot breath against his ass just

before his free hand spread Louis's cheeks and a slick tongue trailed over his hole.

"*Ah*, fuck!"

Louis hadn't thought he could be considered inexperienced since he'd hooked up plenty in university, but apparently his disinterest in anything to do with foreplay meant he missed out on a lot. Like–

"Oh, shit, Arthur, what—*Ngh*!"

Never in his life did he think the rough texture of a lion's tongue would be anything but uncomfortable on his ass, but apparently he was very very wrong. So wrong in fact, he was going to–

"Shitshitshit, Arthur, I–"

Of course, the bastard stopped before he could actually tip over the edge, a whimper caught in his throat as his body throbbed and tingled with lingering pleasure. Arthur didn't touch him again until he settled, panting against the pillow with his fingers clutching at the bedding. Arthur didn't even need to hold him down anymore. Louis had gone pliant, not willing to do anything that might make the pleasure stop. He really needed to stop warning the man of his incoming release, though. It never worked out in his favor.

When Arthur touched him again, it was with fingers, not his tongue, stretching and scissoring, until Louis was back to squirming and groaning. He was close to begging when Arthur removed his fingers, pulling him to his hands and knees and positioning himself behind him.

Louis blinked for a moment, amusement making him want to comment on the very appropriate position for a shifter, but Arthur pushed inside him before he could, cutting off all trains of thought and making Louis's eyes roll into his head.

"Gods, you feel so good," Arthur groaned, sliding his hips back and pushing forward again, wringing a moan from Louis's lips. He wasn't anywhere near as good at sexy talk as Arthur was, the man spent as much time complimenting him as he did fucking him, but Louis wasn't going to judge himself too harshly. Not when Arthur was pumping into him like that.

"Faster, damn it," he complained, biting back a yelp when Arthur thrust his hips hard in punishment.

Of course, his complaints only dragged things out, and Louis felt a bead of sweat slide down his neck, soaking into the collar of the shirt he was still wearing. He grimaced at the thought, reaching back to pull it over his head

and toss it away. In doing so, he exposed his neck, which apparently was all he'd needed to do to trigger Arthur's instincts.

A low, intimidating growl filled the room, making Louis freeze in place. It sounded almost threatening, and if he trusted Arthur a little less, he might've been terrified by it. Despite knowing he could trust Arthur with his life, the hairs on the back of his neck still stood on end and his heart hammered in his chest as he felt Arthur's breath trail up his spine toward the back of his neck.

Louis hadn't thought he'd had much in the way of instincts, he was human, not a shifter, but instinctively, he knew to drop his head forward, giving Arthur more room. The pleased growl preceded a soft kiss against the skin on the back of his neck, Arthur's words barely a murmur.

"Don't move. I'll be quick."

He squeezed his eyes shut, bracing for the pain, and sucked in a sharp breath as Arthur's teeth sunk into his skin.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

ARTHUR

He'd expected the rush of pleasure, relief, and elation at sealing the bond with his mate, but he hadn't expected it to shove Louis so quickly over the edge. His mate's body tightened around him, his shout a cross between pleasure and pain as he came all over the bedding beneath them. He was smart enough not to move, though, with Arthur's teeth still buried in the skin of his neck. Half shifted like he was, there was the possibility he could seriously hurt him if Louis started squirming.

Arthur groaned feeling Louis clench rhythmically around him, dragging his own orgasm ever closer. He refused to let himself tip over the edge, though. Not until he could bring Louis with him.

Releasing the tender skin of Louis's neck, he shifted back and retreated enough to give himself room to move. He couldn't force himself farther away than a few inches, but Louis didn't seem to mind, making little mewling sounds as Arthur slowly coaxed him back to full hardness with gentle thrusts. For someone so insistent that he couldn't come more than twice in a night, Louis didn't have any trouble following Arthur's lead. It wasn't long before he was rocking his hips, meeting Arthur thrust for thrust, and the little moans he made got louder and louder as he got closer to another release.

Arthur's eyes were riveted to the mark on the back of Louis's neck, his instincts finally satisfied after so long being denied. He was so distracted by

it, he didn’t notice his orgasm creeping up on him until it slammed into him, a strangled shout escaping his lips. Thankfully, Louis wasn’t far behind him, a long moan signaling he came only seconds after Arthur did.

Quick reflexes saved Louis from collapsing into the mess of their love making and he rolled onto his side with Louis against his chest to avoid it. Resting his forehead against Louis’s hair, he fought for breath, still staring at that mark in equal parts awe and relief. He’d claimed his mate. A sweet, brilliant, exasperatingly beautiful man with zero self preservation instincts and a fiery spirit. He was both incredibly blessed and in for a wild ride. Despite his best intentions, he didn’t think Louis would ever be able to completely stop his overworking tendencies. When he got sucked into a project, it was hard to get him to focus on anything else. Arthur didn’t mind. He got to fuss to his heart’s content, and no one could call him overbearing because his mate needed him. He loved that more than he could put into words.

“You’re purring again,” Louis teased a little breathlessly.

Arthur nipped carefully at the mark on Louis’s neck, grinning when he clenched and shivered. “It’s a growl, not a purr.”

“I’m going to prove it to you at some point, I hope you know that,” Louis sassed.

Arthur grinned. “I’ll just have to keep you distracted, then.”

He hadn’t actually intended to do more, he figured he’d wait a little while before trying for another round so soon after Louis came twice in quick succession. So it stunned him when Louis wriggled until he was free of Arthur’s hold and could flip over, shoving at his shoulder until he was flat on his back with Louis straddling his hips like he had earlier.

“Maybe I’ll be the one to distract you this time,” Louis grinned.

Arthur lifted his chin, his own smirk stretched across his face. “Do your worst. Mate.”

He was always reluctant to wake Louis when he was sleeping so peacefully, especially after the… active weekend they’d had. He’d thought his instincts to claim his mate would be satisfied after he bit him, but apparently that hadn’t been the case. He wasn’t satisfied until he’d fucked Louis into a

stupor, let him get a little rest, then woke him up to start again the next morning. Only his need to care for his mate stopped him from spending the whole weekend in bed. He needed to give Louis breaks to feed him at least.

It was the reminder that Louis hadn't slept more than a few hours in the past few days that got him to settle enough to let Louis sleep properly. And now, after he'd slept for almost ten hours, Arthur was forced to choose between continuing to let him sleep or facing his wrath when he woke up and realized it was a work day and Arthur hadn't given him enough time to get there without being late.

He knew which option Louis would choose. And because he respected his mate's wants, he bent to the task of waking him by pressing soft kisses across his face as much as he could reach with Louis asleep on top of him.

Louis's brows furrowed and he groaned, trying to tuck his face under Arthur's neck to escape the affection. He mumbled something that wasn't in any language Arthur was familiar with, melting into Arthur's hold before falling asleep again.

Chuckling, Arthur moved back enough to reach Louis's face again, peppering him with kisses and grinning when Louis flailed and whined without making any real progress in pushing him away. Since getting closer hadn't worked in his favor, he changed directions, wriggling farther down Arthur's body and pulling the blankets over his head to escape him.

"Louis," he chided, trying very hard not to laugh.

"No," Louis whined back.

"Yes, I'm afraid it's time to get up," Arthur chuckled, tugging lightly on the blankets that hid his mate from him. "Come out from under there unless you want me to get other ideas."

Grumbling, Louis peeked out from under the blankets, giving Arthur the most pitiful scowl he'd ever seen. "You're always complaining that I never sleep. Why are you waking me up?"

Arthur raised one eyebrow. "Would you prefer to skip work? I'm happy to call in for both of us, but I didn't think that was what you wanted."

Louis's scowl deepened for just a second before he dropped his forehead onto Arthur's stomach and groaned. "I don't think my brain can function right. Is it possible to be fucked stupid? Because that's what feels like happened."

Arthur barked out a laugh, pulling Louis up from under his arms so they were face to face again, smacking a kiss against his lips. "I'm not sure

whether to take that as a compliment or not. But I'm sure we can get your brain back online with a little food and some coffee. Did you want to stop at our cafe on the way to work or would you prefer caffeine sooner and we can eat here?"

The pout that formed on Louis's lips made Arthur's heart swell, but he kept the comment to himself. No need to poke the grumpy engineer so early in the morning.

"You don't have to take care of me, you know," Louis grumbled. "I can do it."

Ah. So that was what the pout was about. He smoothed his hands through Louis's unruly hair that was still in desperate need of a cut, giving him a reassuring smile. "I like taking care of you, Louis. I told you, lion shifters are natural caretakers. Caring for you feeds my instincts. And it's not like I don't get anything out of feeding you either. I need to eat too. Unlike you, I can't skip meals without noticing."

He gave Louis a pointed look, a gentle chastising for skipping the dinner he'd brought him, as well as a reminder that several times the day prior, Louis tried to distract him with sex to keep him from getting out of bed to make food. Arthur was ashamed to admit it worked at least once.

Maybe twice.

"Are you hungry?" Louis asked, looking genuinely worried. It was the first time he ever had to ask that question since usually Arthur would be the first to notice it was time to eat. He appreciated that Louis cared enough to ask.

"We could both use a decent meal," he answered, hugging Louis to him and rolling out of bed since the stubborn man still hadn't moved. Louis grumbled about it the whole way to the shower, but once they were dressed and headed to the cafe, he looked happier, a bounce to his step and his fingers laced with Arthur's.

"Do you think you should move in?" Louis asked out of nowhere.

Arthur had been scanning ahead of them, his protective instincts still charged after their recent mating, and the question came so suddenly, he almost tripped over thin air. Luckily, he caught the misstep before Louis could notice, glancing at him in surprise.

"You want me to move in with you?"

"Well, yeah. We're mated, right? Mates stick together. At least, that's all I've ever heard about them. Besides, I can't sleep well without you, and the

condo is closer to the office as well."

Arthur blinked, still trying to catch up, and just stared at Louis in shock. Louis finally noticed his expression when they arrived at the cafe and he held the door open for Arthur to go through first. He did a doubletake at Arthur's expression and frowned.

"What?"

"Nothing," Arthur answered, shaking his head. "I guess you just never struck me as a romantic."

Louis wrinkled his nose. "I'm not. It just makes sense. I'm being pragmatic. Besides, aren't you tired of having to go home so often to pick up more clothes? Wouldn't it be better to just bring it all to my place?"

Pragmatic. Sure. He was just going to glance over the comment about him not sleeping well unless they were together. Arthur just shook his head, hiding his amusement by giving Louis a chaste kiss.

"If that's what you want, I'll look into it. It's a residential pilot program, so I'm not sure if there's regulations in place for that. I have a meeting with Taron this morning anyway so I'll mention it then."

Louis frowned up at him. "You think he'd have a problem with it? Aren't there like mate laws or something preventing them from being separated?"

Since he sounded legitimately concerned, Arthur took his question seriously. "There are protections in place for mates, and yes, it is considered a crime to forcefully separate mates, however that's not the case here. If the pilot program doesn't allow for me to move in, then you would just need to move in with me instead. Or we can find a place together closer to work if you'd prefer," he added when he saw Louis's face twitch in an attempt not to give away his displeasure at the idea. He hadn't even been to Arthur's place yet, but Arthur knew it wasn't about him. Louis liked the convenience of being close to the office, and he thrived on routine. Where he was now suited him, at least for the time being. That might change in the future if they decided they wanted their privacy, but Arthur wasn't sure that would be a problem for either of them. Lions were naturally group oriented and Louis didn't pay enough attention to his surroundings to care if there were roommates in the house or not. Though Arthur was still determined to change that.

"Let me talk to Taron first. I don't actually think he'd have a problem with it, he's mated himself after all, but in case there's any red tape, it's

better to talk to him first. I'll handle that. You handle your work. Have you met with your new supervisor yet?"

He almost rolled his eyes when Louis gave him a blank look. "I have a new supervisor?"

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CHAPTER FORTY

LOUIS

Louis hadn’t given much thought to his supervisor since the confrontation with Mr. Yarrow. He’d stopped thinking about anything outside his project at all for a little while, so focused on proving himself that he thought about nothing else. So when Arthur mentioned a new supervisor, he had no idea what he was talking about. It made sense, Mr. Yarrow obviously had a problem with him and the fact that he’d broken into Louis’s office to sabotage his work had likely been enough to warrant a supervisor change, but he hadn’t heard anything or even thought about it. The only person he’d spoken to since that day aside from Arthur was Terrence.

“Can they make you my project manager if we’re mates?” he asked as they grabbed their coffees and the bag of pastries from the barista who’d called their names. She gave them a look Louis didn’t understand, almost like she thought they were cute, but Arthur guided him away with a hand on his lower back before he could figure out why.

Arthur hummed thoughtfully. “That’s a good question. I feel like there might be a conflict of interests there, and the potential for favoritism, but I’m not sure how comfortable I’d be with someone else being your project manager after what happened either.”

“Maybe I could manage myself?” Louis offered, more focused on snagging a croissant from the bag than he was where he was going. Arthur

had to physically stop him from accidentally crossing the street when he wasn’t supposed to.

Arthur snorted. “Baby, you can’t even manage to not walk into traffic. I don’t think you should be thinking along those lines. Besides, it's a lot more paperwork than you’d expect, and you’d have to meet and update clients regularly. Do you want to have to pause your work to do all that?”

Wrinkling his nose, he capitulated. “Okay, maybe not. So who do you think it is? Do you know anyone who wouldn’t be uncomfortable working around humans?”

He couldn’t ask for everyone to like him, that was likely asking too much, but at least not actively working against him didn’t feel like too much to hope for. He’d thought he’d gotten that impression from Mr. Yarrow, but apparently he’d missed some major red flags.

Arthur looked pensive, but Louis couldn’t tell if that was because he didn’t trust his coworkers, or if it was about Louis specifically. He’d been very upfront that mates were protective and sometimes even possessive of their partners. Handing off Louis’s care, even on a work-related basis, might be a sticking point for him so early in their mating.

“I’ll talk to Taron about that too,” Arthur finally grumbled.

“Do you want me to go with?”

The way Arthur’s eyes went wide and he turned to look at him like he’d grown a second head was a little insulting. He’d promised he’d try harder. Arthur was obviously uncomfortable, and he shouldn’t have to do everything alone. Louis could take an hour and go meet with the higher ups if it made his mate feel better.

Scowling back at that shocked face didn’t make it go away and he eventually stomped forward, shoving the rest of his croissant into his face as he contemplated some way to get back at his mate for being so annoying. Maybe if he hid when Arthur normally came around for lunch and forced him to go alone, he’d stop being such an ass.

Arthur caught his hand, lacing their fingers together and kissing the back of it. “I’d love for you to come with me. I think it’d be helpful. You’re sure you don’t have too much to do?”

If he thought about it, he could probably come up with half a dozen things he’d rather do than go to a meeting, but the soft smile on Arthur’s face, so full of pride and adoration, was worth the hour of discomfort.

“It’ll only take an hour, right?”

“Well, the meeting includes Taron. Does that answer your question at all?”

“No, not really,” he replied, scanning his badge at the turnstiles to pass through them, then waiting for Arthur to do the same. He didn’t spend much time in the main division of the company, though that was where he’d applied first. He specialized in medical devices because he enjoyed learning about biology and had an entire notebook filled with ideas on potential future projects, but he’d have taken any position available if given the option when he’d applied. Getting the position he’d dreamed about had been one of the reasons he’d worked himself so hard when he first started. He wanted to earn it.

Arthur pulled him into a gold elevator, shooting him an amused smile. “You haven’t been paying attention, then. Taron, while the friendliest and most enigmatic person in the company, is also one of the most chaotic men I’ve ever met. I believe he has a vendetta against any and all time constraints, including meeting times and deadlines.”

Louis hadn’t noticed that the few times he’d met the man. Then again, he hadn’t really paid much attention. He noticed the friendliness, since it was Taron who offered him a place in the residential pilot program, but not any of the rest of it. “Wasn’t Taron the one who showed up first when my office was trashed?”

“While chaotic, one of Taron’s good traits is that he can be serious when he needs to be,” someone said from behind them.

They both turned to find a small blond with blue eyes standing near the back of the elevator, a diaper bag slung over one shoulder and a sleeping baby resting on the other. Louis didn’t recognize him, but Arthur did, greeting him with a polite nod.

“Mr. Hawksley.”

Louis looked between the blond and Arthur in confusion. “That’s not Mr. Hawksley.”

He’d met the man last week. Mr. Hawksley had platinum blond hair and blood red eyes. This man had honey colored hair and blue eyes and was at least a head shorter than the man they’d met the other day. Not to mention Mr. Hawksley didn’t strike him as the type to be toting around a baby at work. He seemed too formal for that.

The blond’s smile grew as he explained, “He’s my mate. I’m Avery. And don’t worry about Taron dragging out the meeting. His mate Tony is there

to keep him on track. He's been loads better in the past few years."

The door to the elevator slid open and Arthur held the door for both of them, nodding his head at the baby. "Is that the future CEO?"

Avery snorted, rubbing the baby's back soothingly. "That's what Ozen is hoping for. I'm more open minded. If he's anything like me, he'll be more interested in books than running a massive company."

"And if he does, I'll open a publishing house at Spellbound so he can continue to work with me," a familiar voice said. Mr. Hawksley, the one Louis remembered from the other day, strode to join them, leaning to kiss Avery's cheek before pressing a kiss onto the baby's forehead. "I've got a meeting with Taron, but I'll see you two after."

"That's fine. He'll go to the nursery for now, and then Collette offered to watch him while I get my chapter done. Can you bring Maverick the copy in the bag for me? I was supposed to stop in his office on my way up, but then this one fell asleep. I've been riding the elevator for the last twenty minutes to keep him that way."

Mr. Hawksley's eyes danced with amusement as he dug through the diaper bag at Avery's request. "So that's where you've been? You said you were going for a walk."

"He didn't care for the walk," Avery shrugged. "He likes the elevator though."

Louis watched the exchange with only a mild interest, seeing the man who'd been seething and barking at each research floor the other week act so domestic was a little fascinating, but when he glanced at Arthur, he did a doubletake when he noticed the soft look on his face. Louis shook his head rapidly.

"Absolutely not."

Arthur dragged his gaze away from the baby, frowning at him. "What?"

"No. No babies. I don't have time for that right now. I saw the look on your face. No."

Both of the Hawksleys grinned at him, and the CEO Mr. Hawksley looked between Arthur and Louis with amusement. "You mated a lion shifter, Louis. They're notorious not only for having big families with lots of kids, but also for going a little baby crazy right after mating."

Louis blanched, staring at his mate with horror. He hadn't even finished his first project yet. He didn't have time for babies.

"You can't be serious."

ARTHUR

He was still chuckling when they were ushered into Taron’s office by the intern sitting at a desk next to the man’s assistant. While normally what Mr. Hawksley said would be true, Arthur didn’t think it’d be too much of a problem right away. He had his hands full taking care of Louis. He could be patient for a few years so Louis could get more established in his career before broaching the baby subject. It didn’t sound like he was outright against the idea, just not right now. Which made sense, he’d only just started working at Spellbound. Arthur felt comfortable waiting for now.

Louis would just need to accept his hovering and babying him instead.

He clocked the few covert glances Louis was shooting him, trying to gauge whether Arthur was as baby hungry as Mr. Hawksley suggested, and it took work to keep his face straight and not start laughing outright.

“Gentlemen!” Taron greeted the group. “Thanks for joining us!”

Arthur took in the others in the room, unsurprised to find both Washburne brothers and Brennus in attendance. Everyone looked to be in a much better mood than the last time they’d all been in the same room together and were relaxed on the mismatched couches near the window when Arthur guided Louis to join them.

Taron beamed at Louis, patting the seat beside him. “Louis! I didn’t know you were coming. To what do we owe the pleasure? Somehow I don’t think you’re here to talk about management training courses.”

Louis made a face. Arthur didn't even need him to say anything to know he wouldn’t want to stay for that. “Arthur’s concerned about who might be my new project manager. I honestly hadn’t heard anything so I couldn’t tell him who it was. Unless Mr. Yarrow–”

“Basil Yarrow was let go,” Brennus interrupted.

Arthur already knew that, but apparently Louis hadn’t been aware. His shoulders slumped ever so slightly in relief, and he leaned into Arthur’s touch when he squeezed his shoulder.

“As for who your project manager is, Wash and I agreed that would be split between him and Arthur himself. Wash will handle your work stuff, while Arthur can continue to pester you to his heart’s content to make sure

you’re healthy and happy and doing well,” Taron grinned mischievously. He likely thought he’d get a reaction out of Louis for giving Arthur that kind of power permanently. He hadn’t yet noticed they were mated, and Louis himself had given him that permission when demanding they bond immediately.

“Does it matter that he’s my mate?” Louis asked, and Arthur felt his heart swell. He might not see the significance in how easily he announced their bond, but Arthur did. There was no ounce of hesitation. Humans might not experience matings the same way supes did, but Louis had no problem claiming him publicly.

Taron’s eyes lit up with excitement, but before he could speak, Mr. Hawksley spoke over him. “That’s not a problem. Anything work related will go through Wash, including raises and performance reviews. That way there isn’t any issue with potential conflicts of interest.”

Arthur let out a slow breath of relief. It hadn’t been an outcome he’d come up with himself, but it was an elegant solution. There was too much that could go wrong if he was made Louis’s project manager, including Louis getting tired of him when he was already prone to hovering. And while Mr. Washburne would likely be more of a hands off supervisor and just let Louis do what he wanted, he’d be a good resource if he was stuck and could help his work along as needed. Arthur could handle the rest.

Louis nodded along, seemingly happy with the outcome as well, and the conversation moved on to Arthur’s part in the management training programs they would be developing. Arthur noticed Louis’s eyes flick more than once to the door, his fingers starting to fidget with the zipper on his messenger bag as he got more and more antsy to get to his office. Rolling his eyes with a smile, Arthur cleared his throat.

“Excuse me, gentlemen. I don’t think Louis needs to be here for this part.” He cast a look at his mate, chuckling at the raw relief in his eyes. “Go. I’ll see you at lunch.”

There wasn’t an ounce of hesitation in his response. Louis launched out of his seat, smacking a kiss on his cheek on his way past. “Okay, see you later. Bye!”

Tipping his head back to summon his patience because Louis didn’t even give a second glance at the other men in the room before he dashed out the door, he fought hard not to laugh.

“You’ve got your work cut out for you with him, don’t you?” Taron asked teasingly.

Arthur hummed, giving his attention back to the room. “Maybe. He’s worth it, though.”

Mr. Hawksley nodded in agreement. “Mates always are. Shall we continue?”

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EPILOGUE

ARTHUR

Three months later…

Arthur checked his watch for the dozenth time, wondering if perhaps he'd finally found Louis's limit in being forced into an event like this. He'd tried to talk his way out of being part of the showcase, even trying to use his connection to Taron to find a way out of it, but Arthur wouldn't let him, and neither would Wash. They both wanted to see him succeed and hiding in the background while someone else presented his work wasn't going to do that.

"Think he won't show?" Taron asked curiously. He was dressed to the nines and had already been weaving his way through the crowd making connections and schmoozing potential investors when he noticed Arthur frowning and watching the door.

"He'll show," Arthur insisted. He believed in Louis, even if he'd said multiple times that the idea of presenting his project to the masses made him want to vomit and tried to make the argument that they shouldn't announce outright that it was a human who'd created it… Shit, maybe Arthur should've escorted him like he'd planned. Louis had convinced him to go ahead, he had more than just Louis to worry about at this event, but he should've known that was just an excuse to escape–

Taron let out a low whistle and when Arthur glanced at him, he looked impressed. "Damn. Louis cleans up nice."

Whipping his head around, Arthur scanned the crowd. His gaze almost skipped over his mate before he finally took in the man standing in the doorway. He felt his lips part in a quiet gasp.

His Louis, with his perpetually messy and overgrown hair and scruffy face, had gone out and gotten himself a haircut and a shave, making him look less like a sleep deprived hobo and more dashing than Arthur had ever seen him. He wore the suit Arthur had picked up for him, grey with a fitted vest and baby blue tie that matched Arthur's, but somehow, it hadn't looked that good on the hanger. The man looked ready for a runway.

A low growl rattled his throat, both in appreciation and possessiveness. Three months since they'd mated hadn't made him any less possessive of his mate. If anything, it'd gotten worse. While Arthur often encouraged Louis to spend more time with his coworkers and roommates, he didn't like other people touching him. Even Dax, who'd found his own mate amongst Louis's roommates, had gotten snapped at when he'd lifted Louis with a tentacle around his waist to show him the strength capabilities of his many limbs. Louis had not been pleased when Arthur dragged him away, complaining that they'd been discussing work and pointing out that Arthur was the one always telling him to work with others, but Arthur ignored him. He didn't feel better until several hours and several rounds later, when Louis was panting and laying across his chest, thoroughly sated and no longer smelling like another man. He'd since learned to ask others to experiment in the demonstrations or risk Arthur pouncing on him.

Louis's expression twisted into a grimace and Arthur could see the discomfort in his expression. It only eased a little when his gaze finally drifted in their direction and Taron waved to get his attention. He made a beeline for Arthur, forcing a pained smile at coworkers who greeted him as he passed, and didn't stop until he was almost flush against Arthur's side, a grumpy frown taking over his face.

"I showed up. Can I go home now?"

That made Taron snort. "Aw, come on, Louis, you just got here."

"I was told I had to show up," Louis insisted. "I did that."

"You were also told you needed to present your project to see if we can get volunteers and more help on board," Wash commented as he came to join them. "Relax. These events are tedious, but important. You can handle it."

His mate snickered and poked him in the cheek, his wings fluttering long enough to lift his feet off the ground, expressing his amusement. “You’re not helpful. Say something that’ll actually help.”

Wash nipped playfully at his mate’s finger, making him squeal, but gave in with a sigh, turning his attention back to Louis. “You told me once that no one believed in you. That you’ve been fighting to prove your worth.” He gestured to the room at large. “This is the proof. None of those professors or so called friends could ever manage to make it as far as you did. So go up on that stage, explain your project and do your demonstration, and you’ll be giving a middle finger to every single person who told you that you couldn’t do it.”

While a little rough, Wash’s encouraging speech seemed to help. A familiar flash of determination crossed Louis’s face and when he looked up at Arthur, he dipped his chin ever so slightly. He’d get it done. And Wash was right. He’d prove to everyone who ever doubted him that he was right by going up there. It was a big deal for him.

“Oh gods, Avery brought my nephew. I need baby cuddles,” Taron said, quickly distracted by the Hawksleys as they joined the party. He paused to squeeze Louis’s shoulder reassuringly, giving him a nod of approval. “I’ve seen the results of your first round of experiments, Louis. You’re doing fantastic and you deserve to be up there. I hired you personally for a reason. Show them what you’ve got.”

He practically skipped away, leaving Louis blinking rapidly in shock and unable to ask any follow-up questions. He asked them to the room at large instead. “Did he just say he hired me personally?”

Arthur had wondered when Taron would bring that up. It’d been a shock to him as well when he’d mentioned it the first time. When Louis looked up at him in confusion, Arthur grinned at him. “You’ve always had support, baby. We all want to see you succeed.”

LOUIS

He was starting to feel like he should make it a rule that Arthur wasn't allowed to say things like that when he was going to be forced onto a stage to present his work in under an hour. Knox had spent a good amount of time getting him to look presentable, and he didn't want to ruin that by doing something embarrassing like crying.

Yes, he'd gotten to know his coworkers at Arthur's encouragement. He'd needed more information on supes of different species and Arthur said he'd never learn as much from a book as he could from talking to real people. The man had a point. He was friendly with Dax and Knox, as well as a few other people around the office. He got to know Dax's mate Mateo who'd been thrilled when Louis mentioned his room was chaotic trying to fit all of Arthur's things and he needed help reorganizing before he lost his mind. He'd never been particularly messy or tidy, more in the middle, but he'd found out really fast after Arthur moved in that he couldn't concentrate on his work unless the room was at least semi-organized. He and Mateo had worked together to reorganize and even moved some of Arthur's things to the living room to make space, and as a thanks, they'd gone on a double date to their favorite pizza shop and Louis paid for the meal.

"He hadn't told you that yet?" Wash asked, drawing Louis's attention. He was also something of a friend, and had even asked Louis to call him by his preferred name since they worked so closely with each other now. The man worked almost as much as he did, so he wasn't always available when Louis needed him, but Arthur always picked up the slack if Wash was too busy to help.

"No," Louis finally answered, still confused by the announcement. "Is that even– How did that even work?" His stomach sank. "Did he override the decision or something?"

A warm arm wrapped around his waist and Arthur pressed a kiss to his temple. "No, baby. He didn't mean it like that."

When Louis just stared at him in disbelief, Arthur sighed and looked around, waving someone over to join them. "Elijah, can you tell Louis how Taron hired him?"

Elijah had looked confused at being summoned, but a smile warmed his face at the question and he readily answered, "Sure. I can do that." He turned that gentle smile onto Louis. "Taron's a good friend of mine. He sometimes sits in with me and goes through applications to see if there are any that stand out to him. He's got an amazing eye for potential and when

he came across your application, he felt like you'd fit in well with the company. He asked me to keep an eye out for you during the interview process and if I got good vibes from you, then he wanted to back your application. You were one of three that round, so he definitely saw something special in you."

One of three. Somehow, that made him feel better.

"So he didn't override people and force them to accept a human?" he clarified.

Elijah shook his head, his smile understanding. "No. He can put in a recommendation, but final decision on who gets hired is actually Brennus, with me as his second pair of eyes, as well as the lead of Medical Innovations and the head of research for that division. We all saw your potential, Louis. I'm looking forward to seeing your presentation."

Louis felt his stomach flip. He hadn't realized he'd had that much backing when he got hired here. He figured he got lucky. He'd heard there was a coup and a mass exodus and Spellbound was hiring fast to fill positions. He figured the timing had been right, and he'd filled a slot, and they'd take it away just as quickly when they found someone better. That's why he fought so hard to prove he was the best.

Arthur squeezed him again, giving him silent support as he tried to wrap his head around this new reality. They hadn't just filled a slot. They'd wanted him. Taron had backed him. That was… a lot.

"Come on, Louis. Time for your presentation," Wash demanded, already heading toward the stage. "The sooner you get it done, the less you have to stress over it."

Louis made a choked sound, dragging his feet as Arthur pushed him to follow. Somehow, despite trying to make him feel better, everyone had made it ten times worse. Now he wasn't just proving it to those who'd wanted to see him fail. He had to prove himself to those who'd backed him to, to show them they'd bet on the right horse.

"I can't do this."

"Yes, you can," Arthur encouraged, both hands on his shoulders as he steered him toward the stage. "You're going to go up there, and you're going to look for me in the crowd. You're just saying the presentation to me, right? Just like we practiced." He actually laughed when Louis leaned heavily against his chest to stop their forward momentum. "I had no idea you were this uncomfortable with public speaking."

“I’m not,” Louis croaked. “I just don’t want to let anyone down.”

“Which is why I brought you this.”

Louis jerked around, shocked to find Terrence in a nice suit, holding out two shots of some kind of alcohol. He grinned as he handed Louis the first one. “Down the hatch.”

“What are you doing here?” he asked, taking the shot and throwing it back like Terrence insisted.

“Arthur invited me. No way in hell was I going to miss my best friend’s big debut! One more, then you’re getting your butt on that stage. Remember, this isn’t just about you. It’s about every human kid out there who wants to be an engineer and is facing down the kind of pushback you got. Seeing you on that stage, showing off your big project, will open a lot of doorways for the next kid like you. So be the guy you would’ve looked up to when you were starting out.”

“Ugh, you’re all awful at giving pep talks,” he growled, tossing back the second shot. “It’s too much pressure.”

“Yeah, well, I’m your best friend, and I’m not as nice as your mate is. Go up there or I’ll tell him every embarrassing story I have about you in undergrad. Including that time you dressed in drag for extra credit during your final in International Engineering.”

That got him moving. He did not want that story shared.

Stepping out onto the stage, where Taron was announcing him with a bright smile and a speech about ending the separation of species and learning to work together for a bright future, Louis felt his stomach twist tightly. But when he looked out into the crowd, he spotted his coworkers who were smiling at him and giving him thumbs up. He saw his best friend, cupping his hands around his mouth as he cheered him on. And he saw Arthur. Front and center where Louis could see him, giving him a proud smile and a nod, telling him without words that he believed in him.

Louis had always thought in order to succeed, he needed to do it alone. To prove his worth and show the supe world that humans were just as capable as they were. And while he stood up here by himself, he’d learned that he didn’t have to do it all alone. He had more support than he could’ve hoped for. And thanks to the man who refused to let him sabotage himself, he could see it for what it was. Not something that would take away his achievement, but something that would strengthen it.

He might have been one in one hundred thousand who made it, but thanks to the people who mattered, he didn’t just make it because of luck.

He earned it.

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This book has been edited and reviewed to find any typos and mistakes, but alas, we are only human. If you spot an error, please let me know! I want to hear from you so I can fix it!

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Amy is an introverted squish who loves Happily Ever Afters, Magic, and True Love. While she doesn't stick with one specific sub genre, her favorite tends to be fluffy paranormal romance. In between writing books (like several. At one time. Because squirrel.) Amy likes to read and play relaxing video games. Her kindle is stuffed with romance and she hoards trophy books on her shelves. You can find her most nights pretending to be fancy with a glass of sparkling cider and a good book.

Send her a message. She might be an introvert, but she won't resist being adopted by an extrovert.

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