

Future Starts Slow

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Future Starts Slow

by [Aurora Cee \(SC182\)](#)

Summary

In the beginning, their job was to secure their freedom. In the end, they have to save the future.

Notes

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This will be an interesting ride; that I can promise. Beware: emotional whump lies ahead, especially for Dom who is still very much grieving for much of the early part of the story. There are significant religious themes as he uses his faith to cope with his loss.

Comments welcome.

Enjoy!

Chapter 1

These days Dom stopped by St. Michael's after closing the garage. After their parents died, neither he nor Mia attended mass every Sunday. They kept their faith as a watered down facsimile that was easy to follow and custom fit for their world: grace before dinner, no hard cursing, honor thy mother and father eternally, and have faith in family always, even if nothing else in life could be trusted.

Now that they were back home, Dom found the familiar habit of sitting in the pew with a bowed head and the rosary sliding through his fingers familiar and comforting.

He hadn't taken communion yet. Not entirely sure that he was ready to have his sins absolved or if he was ever fully contrite for the things he'd done or been forced to do. The saints that got his prayers had seen every mile of his journey, each turn marked by some high curve or ragged edge where concrete met rebellious earth and knew that his prayers were never for himself. The new Padre, the replacement for the always ancient yet friendly Padre Jose, left him alone with his thoughts, only offering a faithful ear should Dom ever seek to confess. His confessions had already been given an audience once, one that never betrayed his trust. It felt like tempting fate to try the same thing twice.

As he rounded through the verses of the Hail Mary, he tucked his secrets further and allowed himself to blend in with the crowd of parishioners who were here praying for their lost ones.

Pray for us sinners...

He crossed himself once slowly before tucking the rosary away in the front pocket of his work shirt. He rose quietly from the bench and waited in line behind an old woman who clutched the school photo of her granddaughter between her hands, finely wrinkled and fragile like warm terracotta, shuffling in a swaying list as if her old bones moved to the music of the angels. The girl was forever frozen at eight inside the glossy front of the picture with long black pigtails, smiling brightly in a white shirt and a hot pink jumper, clutching a large plush Dora the Explorer doll as she flashed her missing teeth to the world.

The old woman lit her solitary candle, then turned away, only offering Dom a small thin-lipped smile as she tottered down the narrow aisle towards the confessionals. They were all alike—the people inside this church, each looking for answers to the same series of questions about life and death, and what the things they had to live through meant for those that remained.

Dom found a row with enough candles for his prayers. He lit a series for his dead --the first for his parents, the second one for Jesse, the third for Letty, the fourth for Vince; then he moved on to his living, and, finally, one for his missing. Dom held no pride in his hands not shaking as he lit the last one.

Exiting the church, Dom entered into the wall of dry heat and the rising twilight where streetlights shyly rose into bloom. He didn't need light to walk back to the Charger where it

sat five cars down from the church steps. Light foot traffic moved over the sidewalk as restaurants came alive and Mom and Pop shops shut down for the night.

From all sides, the neighborhood appeared just the same as before he'd left years ago. Most of the stores were still open. Kids scrambled over the park, screaming as they climbed the monkey bars and fought for ownership of the high slide, mothers scolding them to hurry up and come home. Open bar doors spilled music and beer onto the street. Street art covered any vacant surface.

It was all the same.

Until he got to the black spray paint scrawled over the obnoxious billboard for some useless thing hocked on late night TV or soon-to-be cancelled show or blocky graffiti tags on bus benches, buildings, and the occasional sidewalk asking the same thing:

Where are they?

Dom didn't have any answers. Was just like the rest of the world, waiting for a sign.

What he did have was a home where his sister was waiting for him, two businesses that were thriving, and the freedom to come and go as he pleased without having to look over his shoulder. Because his previous sins were forgiven by the government, he hoped that between the prayers, candles, and pure intentions that he'd garner some sway with anyone listening upstairs.

Dom entered the house to find the living still far too empty compared to memory. "Hey." His voice carried loudly in the big house.

"In the kitchen, Dom." Mia called from the kitchen. "Dinner's almost ready."

They hugged each other more now. Between every coming and going. Forever marked by what had happened and holding on to the small corner of their family. He was so grateful to still have his sister and her love for him was never questioned.

Over dinner, Mia said, "Rome called. He's coming this time." She took a careful bite of her food and subtly waited for Dom's reaction.

At first, Dom just made a small noise as he chewed, then gave in to her quiet demand, "Okay. It'll be good to see him." He and Rome had gotten off to a rocky start in Rio, but they'd buried the hatchet once they had the hot sum of millions to share. Fundamentally, he knew their strife came as a result of them acting like junkyard dogs starving for the wet bone of Brian's affection; both failing to see that said affection was a steak juicy enough to feed an army.

But that good will was before the Event. Before Brian became one of *them*: the Missing. Before Dom was the last person to see Brian before he disappeared.

“Yeah, that makes everybody coming.” Mia sounded so happy. She kept her task as logistics coordinator in Rio going despite the rigors of being fully employed hospitalist at East L.A. Memorial Hospital and kept tabs on each of their number. “It’ll be a good day.”

His strength had always been apparent, but hers was deep like iron ore buried beneath the earth. His sister could take on the world and keep going. Her optimism was inexhaustible. When his ran dry, he knew he could always borrow a share of hers.

“I think you’re right, Mia Bella. It will be a good day.” Imagining the house full again, if only briefly, made him smile. A rare action for him these days. “Can’t wait to see everybody.”

He washed the dishes. Because Brian always made a point of saying that the cook didn’t clean and press-ganged Dom into joining him. He still struggled to not handover a plate to a hand that was not there waiting to receive it.

Everyone looked for a reason behind the Event. People looked for a cause. Dom looked inward and only found guilt.

At night, Dom pondered the one tally that was forever skewed in Brian’s favor. Brian had taken it upon himself to become the undisputed negotiator of Dom’s freedom. After the Event, the government was so eager to get a count of the Missing that anyone who could prove that their loved one had been taken got the equivalent of one get out of jail free card. The fact that Brian had left a paper trail tangling Rome, Mia, and Tej in his legal affairs, as emergency contacts and medical proxies, created a scramble that provided Uncle Sam with enough evidence to let the Lompoc smash and grab and previous transgressions be swept under the rug. All under the proviso that each *family member* behave and leave their previous bullshit across the border.

Easier said, of course.

He wanted to blame Brian for putting them in this situation. Blaming him for going missing was as irrational as being mad that the sun continued to rise and set in spite of the shit storm they’d been forced to weather.

The hours ticked down slow and quietly like drops raining into an already full bucket. It was so strange to possess such a deep well of energy below the surface but lacking in a direction to aim it—now listless and trapped within walls that couldn’t protect any of them any longer.

He sank down into his pillows, the movement of his body disturbing the air as he searched for a good spot. The noise was a sad reminder of the empty state of the house. Pushing towards optimism, Dom thought of the noise as a harbinger of better things to come.

In his head, he’d relived those final moments over and over and had crafted thousands of things to say *before*...before Brian was just gone.

Dom could see the glass door leading into the gas station, stickers for junk food, football teams, and the lottery filling up much of the glass. Brian had the pump in hand and had flashed him an uncharacteristically shy grin as he waited for the gas to flow.

“I’ll let you think about that,” he said and had licked his lip slow and sweetly like he was collecting fresh sugar on his tongue. “When you come back, we’ll figure it out.”

Five minutes ago, they had been standing in front of the Challenger—balanced by it as they watched the ocean and made moves that opened an infinite series of doors and answered questions left half-buried since the first day they’d met. Dom had the taste of Brian on his mouth. It already felt like it belonged there.

Dom hadn’t answered with his words, had kept his voice idling in his throat until it was just them again in the safety of the Challenger. So, he’d nodded and had strode over the soft yellow dirt and out of the hot Spanish sun to enter the gas station. Fourteen steps to the inside. He fisted two liters of water by the tops and had considered picking up a stick of the Gatos Licorice that Brian liked.

He had the perfect view of Brian’s back as he leaned against the car, though Dom doubted he imagined the slight shift of Brian’s head, reacting as if he could feel Dom watching him; nonetheless, he caught the unmistakable shadow of a silhouette of a smile.

Dom had his turn at the register and a slow crawl of ice traveled down his back; an unforgettable feeling that struck as suddenly as a skipped heartbeat. A woman’s voice called from the back of the store for her baby. Each call—*Esteban, Esteban, Esteban!*—growing more fearful and edging closer to the ledge of panic until it finally tipped over into a knee-dropping shriek.

When he looked back at the Charger, it stood alone under clear Mediterranean blue sky. He took the bag with the water and the lone stick of candy and stepped out the door, blocking out the sound of the mother’s screaming for the confused whisperings of the gas station lot.

He stood there for a beat too long until his mind caught up with the input from the rest of his senses: Brian wasn’t there.

Seven footsteps back to the Challenger.

The pump was still feeding the tank, working independently despite the sudden onset of chaos. The dirt told the truth even if it all appeared to be a bunch of lies when Dom replayed the moments: Brian’s long tracks in the dirt, running the length of pump platform, five sets of steps with the Converse logo in the top soil, and then no more.

Those thousand replies to Brian saying they’d figure it out when *he* came back go unheard.

Three years later, Dom would lie in his bed trying to sleep, still counting steps and rehearsing the things he could have said before and after on the same smooth tread of words.

Closing his eyes, he geared up for the one thing he hadn’t finished for the day and moved easily through the words.

Now and at the hour...

When he finished his prayer, he could sleep knowing that the rest of his family was coming together again, even if only for a short time.

two

Chapter Summary

One day closer to the reunion.

Chapter Notes

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A/N 2: Dom is not a reliable narrator in this story. His grief continues to affect his judgement.

Comments welcome.

Enjoy!

It was Sunday again, and as Dom listened to the Padre wrap up his final blessings, he felt a smile tugging at his lips. This might have been a lesson that he missed once upon a time when he prepping for his Confirmation, but he was pretty sure that laughing out loud in church was some sort of sin. Definitely not a mortal one, but cushioned somewhere between being cruel to kids or not holding a door open for an old person.

Beside him, Mia yawned tiredly from behind her hand. He gave her full credit for attempting to be polite but the bone-deep fatigue was written across her face and the devilish mix of a cup of his extra strong coffee and sheer Toretto stubbornness had kept her upright and sitting next to him for the service.

Dom rocked into her shoulder as the Padre and the altar boys cruised down the church's center aisle. The Padre offering the pair a small wink as he recited Latin verses during the recessional. Dom gave the Padre a respectful nod, thinking about the ironies of life, because twenty years ago, if a wager had been made on which would've been a man of the cloth and the other an ex-fugitive, it would've looked like a sucker bet.

Most things hadn't changed; he still zoned out for the majority of the service. Just took more comfort in just being here—a place that he recognized as being a part of his foundation that hadn't changed—without having to stare too hard at the details. But the Padre had kept him interested today. The homily hovered over the only two things that anyone could think about: the Event and the day that commemorated the Event, Remnant's Day. Very little did Dom take away from these trips but today the Padre's words had burrowed deep.

"I still can't believe how it all played out," he said lowly to Mia who waved to a pair of older women—*tias*—that had been friends of their mother's once upon a time.

"Is it better or worse than you expected?" His sister might have had a smile on her face, but she was tired and not up for walking too far down memory lane. Another Sunday, she would've been game. Might've even invited the pair to dinner if her twelve hour shift hadn't bled into a rollercoaster twenty. "My money's on better," she added, giving him a bright look behind tired eyes.

Remnant's Day was like any other holiday that wrapped people up in the extremes of happy or despairingly sad. Each year, someone—or many someones tried to prove that they knew how the Event happened and tried to recreate the magic and ended up flooding Emergency Rooms everywhere. Mia wasn't an ER doc, but when the shit hit the fan, she was always perfect in the clutch.

So as they merged into the slow tide of parishioners making rounds to speak to the Padre, Dom answered, "You know I always put my money with your money, so I agree." An old joke from forever ago when she was too little to have a piggy bank of her own, so he shared his with her. Not that where they were post-Rio was very far from the same mark.

He kept his eye on the *tias* as they reached the Padre who kept the handshakes polite and friendly, though the man proved he was really of the cloth when he kissed his sister's cheek and didn't express an ounce of wistfulness afterwards. Padre Miguel Francisco was five years older than Dom, and unlike Dom, he had always been riding on the dirtier side of life, in and out of juvie as they were growing up and was almost wrapped up in a murder charge until he came up close and personal with divine intervention.

Standing inside the wide arms of the church's mouth with early morning sun streaming in, he looked like he was being spotlighted by the angels, who were only helping just a little to make his already cool look in the black vestments and white robe seem trendy.

Clapping Dom on the shoulder, he made his offer again. "You know I always have Corona on hand if you want to talk." Like kryptonite was to Superman, Corona was Dom's well known weakness.

“I hear you, Padre.” The title fit just as well as Huesos had. “Maybe one day but not right now. We’ve got some stuff going down at the house soon.”

Padre grinned broadly at his answer. “Oh, the family’s coming in?” Dom nodded. “Say no more. Just know that these doors are never closed. I may not have every answer, but I’m sure I can offer some decent advice and a cold beer.”

“I’ll remember that,” Dom answered, gave the Padre another small nod and walked into the sunshine to join his sister.

After descending the short series of steps, Dom came to stand beside his sister who was wrapping up the first of several post-service meet and greets slash sick calls. She was the little girl who’d done good and stayed in the community, so each besito and exchange of gossip and superficial forays into street-side medicine were a demonstration of trust and pride for her still being there.

“Do you need some crowd control?” He asked her, knowing that she had ten—fifteen minutes tops of polite small talk in her before her eyes got too heavy for her to do anyone any real good. “You know I’m always up for playing bodyguard.”

He let her lean against his shoulder in between the next set of long absent tias and one tio. “If I tell myself I can do ten minutes, then I know I can stretch it to fifteen before I start swaying on my feet.”

Dom took on more of her weight and lifted a brow as he looked down at her. “You sure? Cuz that ten is looking more like five.”

That was the fuel she needed. Give his sister a challenge and she would move mountains to prove him wrong. “Trust me, I can make the fifteen.”

“Okay, I’ll text you in fifteen and if you’re not walking through the door then I’m calling in an emergency.”

“You’re the best brother, Mano.”

“Gotta be when you’re my sis, Mia Bella.”

She quit using him as her resting post when the new trio of comprised of two matching black linen scarf laden women and one of their Pop’s old poker buddies came tottering over. He greeted them in a way that would have made their mother proud and took his leave when Mia offered him an out: “I’ll see you as soon as you get back from the market.”

“Fifteen minutes,” he reminded her and did a final exchange of besitos and handshakes.

Even though, she told him to go, there was guilt as he left her behind on the bottom of the church steps. A new needle prick of panic as he got into the Charger and watched her becoming smaller in the rearview window; that prick growing sharper as he caught the reflection on sunlight off the blue body of a car and felt the whisper of a smile passing over him.

As he rolled right and three blocks from the church, Dom didn't fight the feeling that even now he continued to make the same mistakes.

As soon as he made a left off of Echo Park Avenue, Dom felt better. The worry he had for Mia was unfounded, and normally would've been replaced at the front of his mind by the mission at hand—prepping for their fragile family reunion.

Dom had been so close. Inside the Charger, he'd always found a separate peace. He could focus on the whine of the wheel's leather between his knuckles, the low whir of the air conditioner, the soft buzz and darting of commercials leading back to music, and, of course, the raspy growl of the engine. She voice ringing out just for him, always happy to welcome him back without questions asked.

Dom had questions, too, and simply added them to the growing list that would never be answered one day. Maybe he'll get an answer if Rome felt like sharing. The only time he wanted that motor mouth to keep on going.

Questions in threes equal to the number of saves...

1. Was there a time *he* hadn't loved cars?
2. What was *his* worst heartbreak
3. Why had *he* kept saving Dom?

Just another series of questions for which Dom would never have answers.

Padre Miguel spoke about faith today, though not in the fashion that's usually followed up with again; from behind the lectern, he raised two fingers over the flock of parishioners and asked them for two things as they went into the week and got hours closer to the third Remnant's Day. He asked that they have faith which he said wouldn't be easy. Then he asked one more thing of them: to stop asking why and to starting asking what. Why didn't matter because those that were gone came from across the globe, all colors, religions, ages, and sexes. Basically, a neat swath of the fabric of humanity all packed up for something.

The yellow ribbons hanging from banners on the streetlights and every noticeable surface in between the street and the rooftops along Echo Park Avenue had it hard to stop asking why when there were so many reminders.

It was the paint set against the rough surface of an old drug store that really got him and made Dom detour early. The yellow paint still too fresh, dripping in little fingers along the edges of the twelve foot high ribbon that loomed on the building's side and the question of his thoughts loomed in an alternating sequence of yellow and black: *what do we do now?*

Then he went left, then rode north for eight blocks and went left for another six until he pulled up in front of the market. The store had bloomed after an unexpected windfall. Even in his head, Dom supplied the word *alleged* before describing anything related to their time in Brazil per the agreement the State Department had made with the Brazilian government. It seemEd that *allegedly* taking out Reyes had been a state goal for the last ten years, only to be met with numerous attempts and spectacular failures.

The family had *allegedly* taken Reyes and his entire empire out with one shot. The damage done to the rest of Rio was high collateral, though there weren't any civilian deaths as a result. So Reyes's money that went missing, if they happened to find it then they were allowed a certain finder's fee, *allegedly* speaking of course.

The market was now a full service café, open six days a week, except Sundays when the hours were limited to pre-ordered pick up orders only. He and Mia had hired a local kid to come in for the post-Sunday Services hours to distribute the big family style orders.

They'd kept many of the original posters that their parents had put up to highlight their heritage and their spread history across the Old Country and la patria. Now it reminded him of the comfort of being in his tia's kitchen and days long gone when everyone was where they were supposed to be.

Dom didn't bother turning on the lights as he moved between the tables and headed towards the kitchen. If the topside awnings were up, then light would've poured across the floor. He couldn't think about those stupid awnings without experiencing an emotional twinge. Back when the interior of the market was about seventy-five percent done, leaving the outside as the only unfinished element, he and Mia had started discussing design, and ended up somewhere completely different. He still blamed the argument that followed on them drinking too much and talking but not really saying much to each since the Event.

So, as Dom grabbed the pans for the barbecue in two days, he could still hear the ghostly echo of an argument that been brewing longer than the six months since the world had changed. He flipped the light switch and let the memory play back.

Mia wanted the roll down shutters. Dom argued for the awnings. In retrospect, they would agree to both in less than twelve hours from this moment. In this moment that was so hot with anger and quietly tense, neither one was actually thinking about the market.

Dom remembered asking Mia, his voice low and angry, "Just put it out there already. Whatever it is that you think I owe you--that I need to apologize for, just tell me already so I can do it and it will be done."

For an instant, Mia jolted back before leaning across the refurbished bar top. Her jaws clenched so tightly that Dom could see the fluttering of the muscles in her cheeks. "You're asking me to tell you what I think you *owe* me..." She took a controlled breath, barely keeping her voice level. "It's not about what I *think* is owed. It's what I *know* is owed. You were gone, Dom, and when you left, you took *everything*—our family, our friends, our reputation, and I had nothing."

"I'm sorry." He said too quickly.

"I know you are, Dom. But you couldn't write or call. I knew you would've if you could've, so I kept going. I survived and rebuilt without you."

She'd always been tougher than he'd given her credit for being. "You did a great job." Mia wasn't looking for his congratulations, just wanted her due.

“What’s made me angry—no, pissed me off is you acting like you’re the *only one* with pain around here. Or in here.” She pointed at her chest. “I tried to lie to myself by trying to believe that *he* came back for me. He didn’t. He never did. He always came back for you. Not me, Dom.”

Saying Brian’s name had become harder and harder since they came home, and for a rare time, Dom hadn’t been inclined to figure out why. It hurt too much when he tried. But he was still certain of some things, despite the sudden craziness of the world. He knew that Brian had loved his sister. “He loved you. We both know that.”

Mia gave him a watery smile that hurt more than rolling the Charger ever had. “I’m sure he did, Dom. But when I try to remember how specifically, I can’t make it add up. So, what do I have after five years of you being gone? It wasn’t him until you came back. What do I have now, Dom? I wasn’t his wife. I didn’t have his baby? Where does that leave me?”

He wanted to pull her into a hug, but rigidity of her body said no. “He loved you.” This was a hurt he couldn’t protect her from. Couldn’t protect himself from either.

Her smile narrowed. “But he always loved you more.”

To that, Dom couldn’t respond. In the minutes preceding the Event, he and Brian had sat on a rocky ledge in Spain and had kissed for the first time, and it had felt like the only answer needed to those tumultuous series of questions that connected them. Neither of them had said that four letter word, but Dom had felt it straight and hot in his soul. He’d known that Brian had felt it, too.

So Mia wasn’t completely wrong, nor was she totally right. “You got his last moments...be grateful.” She’d said and grabbed her purse, a motion that told him that she was going home.

The next morning, they had apologized to each other. In the course of doing the easy acrobatics between *I love yous* and *sorry*, they hadn’t returned to the heart of the argument. Decided not to discuss Brian and how he was positioned between them. This was a rare stone that Dom figured was best left alone.

Now, the chimes above the door clanged airily as the front door opened just as Dom hit the light switch in the kitchen, putting the room back into total dark. “We’re closed,” he called out.

When Dom had been a teen, he’d been forced to work the counter in the market more afternoons than not until his Pop let him go to work in the shop. He’d always hated the sound of the chimes, especially when he’d been dozing off in the back. Now with thousands of miles that he used to dream about under his treads and too many close calls, he found a satisfaction in hearing them. Not on Sundays when they were supposed to be closed, but he could make the exception if it was Jamal coming in early for his short shift.

“Um, sorry,” An unfamiliar voice responded. “Thought you were open.”

The sign across the door was still flipped to *closed*, so Dom waited for the kid to get to the point about what he was selling or trying to buy. “We’re definitely closed.” Dom repeated.

The kid wasn't actually a kid. Tall and narrowly too thin for his height, he reminded Dom of Jesse who hadn't fully transitioned in adulthood from a long adolescence. He was dressed in a red and black checkered flannel shirt with dark jeans and knit cap; all shit that was worn in places far colder than L.A. for warmth and not style points.

"Yeah, I'm sorry, sir." Oh, *sir*, Jesus, Dom wasn't that old yet. "I saw your ribbon sticker in the window and hoped that I could catch someone here to ask a few questions."

Squirrelly-looking twenty something coming around to Dom's neck of the hood to ask questions? The kid was probably from UCLA or USC, definitely working on some sort of paper or project, and looking for eyewitness accounts. He wasn't the first one to come around, but each time they did, Dom found his hospitality and his desire to turn on the front hose rising reciprocally.

Dom knew from tried and true experience what folding his arms over his chest did to people on the blunt end of his *do not cross* glare. This kid was either stupid or illiterate at reading the warning signs of when not to fuck with a private business owner. "Kid, every shop on this block has one of those stickers. We ain't unique, so I'm gonna tell you one last time: we're closed."

The would-be reporter's hesitation sold him out. "I know and I'm sorry about lying. I just want a moment of your time. You were on a list—" Of course, Dom was. Nothing was private anymore. Not the names of the missing or their eyewitness contacts. "You're one of the few close contact eyewitnesses in the county that hasn't gone off the grid."

Dom walked towards the kid, who took a smart step back. "I wonder why." He replied flatly. Every couple of weeks, there was always a new invitation to talk about what he saw, the experience of watching someone he knew disappear, and each time Dom chuckled them, sometimes burned them over the grill in the back if he was angry enough. Other times, there were offers to join groups who claimed to understand why the Event happened and needed the support of the ones left behind to validate their bullshit. There were very few people that Dom would crack open his chest for, and none of these bozoes made the cut.

"Last chance, kid to leave standing or else it's gonna be by flying." Dom warned, coming closer with hard deliberate steps. Each boot fall had the kid backing up towards the door.

"I just wanna know more about Brian and what you saw." Which was the worst thing this kid could have said.

Dom was a second from grabbing the kid by the collar when the chimes rang again, this time a familiar rasp from directly behind the kid's back snapped, "You hard of hearing, Kid? Or just dumber than a doorknob?" Letty crossed her arms over her chest, looking intimidating in a way that had once made Dom's heart flutter. Now it left him cold. "Must be stupid like that otherwise, it wouldn't be right for you to be harassing my family like this."

Sensing that he was literally trapped between the wide rock and a hard place, the kid eased backwards and Letty pushed the door open and scowled at him until he beat feet on the pavement.

Dom's one major sin was that he was liar. Maybe a part of him—that subconscious part that was too deep for him to reach—decided to fill in Brian's void. Fill some of that empty space with lies in order to make himself feel better. A thought that was entirely unfair to Brian. If anything, his greatest sin wasn't lying; it was stubbornness.

He regarded Letty for a couple of seconds before giving her a tight nod. "Thanks," he said.

He knew it was wrong to mourn the living and wait for the dead.

He couldn't shake that feeling in his gut that said Giselle was still out there because there was no body.

Letty was alive but the woman he knew was gone.

She looked at him a little uncertain now that they were alone. They still hadn't managed to find that old ground between them, simply because they were now different people. She didn't remember him and he remembered a woman who wasn't coming back.

"You going back to the house?" Letty leaned against the doorframe, switching up her gaze from the kid's fast retreating back to Dom.

Dom nodded. "Just needed to pick up some stuff for the Tuesday."

"Okay." She would be there on Tuesday. Much had been sacrificed to get her back and though Letty wasn't the same, she still fit into their family and always would. She moved on with her life while he still struggled with what was versus what could've been.

"But I'm heading back to the house to make a late breakfast. Mia worked basically all of yesterday, so she needs some good food to go with that sleep."

Letty toyed with her sunglasses. "I could eat. I worked up an appetite since I had to rescue you and all." She smirked slightly and dismissed a chuckle as a cough.

"Letty to the rescue. Somethings don't change." Others do. "I gotta lock up, but I'll meet you there in a minute. It's hero—heroine's choice for the spread."

"Sounds good, Dom. See you at home." Letty passed through the door smoothly, the only sign she'd been there was the ringing of the door chime.

Home was where he was going and in two days, the rest of his family would be there too. Despite how much the world had changed, he appreciated one thing that would hopefully remain the same.

Three

Chapter Summary

For Dom, the answer didn't have to be spoken; it was already in motion.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your patience! I hope that this story will be worth the wait.

All of it felt so normal. Like any other Sunday when there was the funny ratio of too few seats to too much food spread out over the table. The Car Gods' benevolence shined down on them from crystal blue skies with clouds so fluffy they looked sweet enough to taste. Or, maybe it was just actual hunger that had Dom's thoughts steering towards food, beer, and the belly deep warmth that only came from being genuinely satisfied.

Tej passed Dom's phone back. "Just looking at that kid makes me feel old." He sighed, shaking his head with a small grin tugging at his mouth while he inspected the selection on the grill for the tenets of good barbecue.

"Can't say I feel old." Dom might have undersold the claim. "There's no dust on my treads that I didn't put there on purpose, but this is one of those good reminders that time keeps moving. I can't believe it's been three years." Since they go free while many people got gone.

A day like this made three years seem like a blink in the eye. The people he cared about most in the world were in one place, with a few exceptions, hanging out and waiting to eat like no time had passed. The open exchange of scents from the kitchen with those from the grill allowed Dom to hear the soft edges of Mia's laughter as she charmed Han into a disposition a few levels above frozen. The same instinct that had Dom's gut locking up when he crossed the railroad tracks in front of the semi warned him that this might be the last time he'd see Han if he didn't pull him closer. An ocean existed between L.A. and Japan, but it was losing Giselle made Han lost.

By the garage, Letty exercised another of her secret talents which managed to keep Rome's mouth shut for the duration of her demonstration of the many secrets under her hood.

"Right. Right." To Tej's critical eye, and Dom's, the meat and everything else appeared to be fully done, meaning that that the buffer zone would soon be breached. "Nico's a cute kid," he used a free finger on his beer hand to point to the screen where little Nico had struck an intimidating pose for a four year old. "Even though, I didn't know your boy very well--Vince,

I mean--I gotta say that this kid is like his brown carbon copy. All he's missing from what Brian--" he paused for a half breath, a smoother transition that most had managed, "--said is the tank top and sleeve full of arm tats."

Dom could picture Brian replaying his greatest hits from his less than copacetic meeting of minds with Vince. "You're right: the kid looks just like him, right down to the *I might Hulk out if you take another picture* scowl. Those are strong genes." Strong enough to build a life and sacrifice on for their family. "And the tank thing? I think me and V were about ten when he realized we were allergic to sleeves." He chuckled, then took down a mouthful of beer. "So, the kid's got some time before Uncle Dom--" now that made him feel old, "hooks him up."

"I'll set a reminder on my calendar for that day. I wanna be there front and center for the whole thing, especially if it's like a knighting ceremony." Tej made the appropriate faces, just smiled and looked awed at how much kids grew. "How old is he now? Three? Kid's big enough to head to the NBA."

Dom laughed, "He's half-Brazilian, so I think the kid's got a shot."

Every time, Rosa sent him a picture or an update on Nico, Dom felt relieved. Each picture reminded him of the guilt he carried.

After setting his beer aside, Dom grabbed the wide platter from the old rickety wing of the big barrel grill. The arm hadn't been sturdy since he was a kid and had the misfortune of cutting the corner too fast to get an early taste after his Pop had made the offer without the penalty of saying grace afterwards. He thought of the incident as his first collision and as a result his front baby teeth met the corner of the wing and lost the fight.

Patiently, he collected the assortment of ribs and chicken that Tej artfully stacked on the plate. "The memories you've got from Brian's days on the houseboat--are they good?" Those days sounded like Brian was trying to play out some low budget high seas fantasy.

"Yeah, but don't remind me. We almost quit being buds when he dared Rome and me to try surfing." Tej's eyes stretched wide in incredulity. Just imagining the pair on the ocean gave Dom a good laugh. "Us, Dom? Me and Tank Head over there on surf boards. Snowman must've had water in his veins because he could swim like a fish."

There was a small reserve in Dom's memory dedicated to solo moments of Brian swimming: Brazil, Spain, London, and Dominican Republic. Brazil hadn't offered much time to enjoy the view, not when they were literally swimming into Braga's reach. Brian might have teased him about surfing then but Dom hadn't given him any ground. In the face of Dom's stubbornness, Brian had always grinned back, "One day, you'll ride the wave, Dom, and then you'll see just how awesome it is."

That *then you'll see* reverberated in his head in the quiet moments. Just like the lean figure he always expected to be at his left with each turn of his head. Thinking about Brian's words still put Dom inside a spinning loop of expectation.

The look Tej offered him asked silently *See what?* as he closed up the grill, so Dom answered with a shrug because the answer wasn't for him to give.

Tej began to follow him. "We're doing alright, if that's what you're thinking. I mean, *he's* doing as okay as he can be with a forehead like his and a best friend slash foster brother gone missing." Again, Tej shrugged and gave the heaping platter a look of approval. "All I can say is that if Rome's hanging out in Eastern Standard Time, then he's with me and he's doing...every Rome thing you can possibly imagine. Just with the sadness turned up in proportion to his volume being turned down."

The formation of their easy trust began as soon as Brian had made the call and enticed Tej to come to Brazil. Because Brian had faith in him, Dom's trust was an extension of that; so much so, that Dom could step back to give Tej dominion over the most sacred of male rituals.

When Dom asked, "Do you think we're ready?" The question so loaded that he wasn't sure how he wanted Tej to respond. Being ready wasn't restricted to the short string of minutes leading up to dinner, but everything else, including the invisible strings that Dom felt being pulled every day for the last three years.

The grill fork went down beside the closed hood, a protective arm in front of a long row of spices and looked like a modern art installation dedicated to the perseverance of flavor. Satisfied with his work, Tej turned back to Dom, "Once you taste that secret Georgia smoke with a little bit of that Miami sweet and spicy flavor, you won't have anymore problems. I used to weigh the odds for a living, so I'm basically giving you the odds of a sure thing."

Tej looked up at the house and then to the table; as if moving to the tune of a psychic wave, those distant points drew closer, making the old slapdash picnic table ready to be full again.

"Time to eat." Dom called out to the backyard and half the neighborhood. There weren't many of the old neighbors around, but he and Mia had made a mission of reconnecting to make sure that their parents' open door policy was reestablished.

Mia moved into the wide mouth of the kitchen window. "We'll be out quicker with a little help."

The Gran Torino's hood closed with a sturdy slam. "We're coming," Letty shouted back, already bodily maneuvering Rome into motion.

Dom and Tej headed to the table where Dom took the seat at the head of the table. When he'd been younger, Vince had sat at his right, then came Brian. Years passed in between the fragile truth of those easy Sundays and their tumultuous reunion. No matter how much time passed, Dom still expected Brian to be on his right. At times, it was a feeling that grew stronger as they got farther from the Event.

Just as Letty and Rome began to make their turnaround trip, a loud whirring from above shifted Dom's attention. Dom could identify cars by the purr of the engine or the shape of the taillights but planes, trains, and everything else weren't his specialty. But Dom could tell that the helicopter was vectored east and flying unusually low.

He turned away as the helicopter arced away from the copse of gleaming skyscrapers.

"We're ready," Mia called out as she brought the last platter to the table, a heaping bowl of rice and beans that had been one of their mother's favorites and current top seller at the market now that they'd gotten the recipe down to a science.

The group quickly filed into the seats around the table, with Mia taking the seat at the opposite end from Dom while Letty and Tej sorted themselves out to his right and left, leaving Han and Rome to the seats closest to Mia.

Letty snagged his beer for a stray sip while giving him a knowing smile. She returned the bottle to him then went back to her own. "It feels like home," she smiled, but her eyes drifted up and away from Dom as a pair of black helicopters darted overhead lying in the same eastbound direction.

Her memory was still shaky but Letty settled back in like she'd never left. Her fierce attitude and her ability to drive were constants like gravity and the welcomed rise and fall of the sun. "Good, just try to remember that this time." He started to reach out for her hand to start the prayer when he caught Rome sneaking a stray cherry tomato from the overflowing glass bowl full of summer salad.

"You forgot about the house rules while you were gone?" Dom needled Rome.

Rome chewed slow and unbothered with five pairs of eyes watching him. "You talkin' about me? Can't put all this food out here and not expect a man to eat." The edge in his voice after those first days in Rio had come back full stop when Rome and Dom had to do the one-on-one thing.

"Well, now I'm reminding you of how we do things since it's been a good minute since you've been here for a visit."

Tej thumped Rome on the shoulder. "I second that." Rome gave Tej a small scowl but Tej bucked his big eyes back at him and countered Rome's look with one of his own. They might not have spent much time together, but Dom knew him well enough to pick up that besides being smart, Tej also possessed the same mediator gene that buffered the others' sharp edges.

Mia took a softer approach with Rome. "The only thing we should be dogpiling on is the food, so I'm gonna ask for another prayer like the one you did when we first got home."

Shifting his eyes from Mia to Dom, Rom agreed, "Alright, I'll lay it down again." The previous tide of attitude scaled back as Rome reached out to take Mia's, then Tej's hands, and then cut his eyes toward Dom before bowing his head. "Bow your heads so we can do this." He cleared his throat. "Father, thanks for gathering us together for food and family. Thanks for bringing us home and thanks for watching out for the ones that haven't quite made it back yet. Most of all, thanks for giving us fast cars. Amen."

"Amen." Repeated Dom as the hands around the table dropped and started making towards the dishes on the tabletop that outnumbered them two to one.

Tej moved towards the chicken but stopped with a piece midway towards his plate as the air was disturbed by the louder flutter and whirl of additional propellers. “There goes another one.” His distraction caused him to lose his perfect piece to gravity that quickly turned his fork into an adjunct pointer.

Rome was halfway done with his second rib and his first run-through of licking the extra sauce from his fingers. “This is L.A. but c’mon—this is getting ridiculous.” He got a stray drop from the inside of his pointer finger, then offered, “Look at ‘em, there go two more. This has gotta be big like Shaq and Kobe reuniting—that is if Shaq hadn’t been taken.” Among the two percent of the world’s population taken, there were more than a few famous names among those of the missing.

“That’s flying pretty damn low,” said Letty as another trio flew directly overhead, close enough to rattle the dishes and rustle the leaves around the yard.

Rome didn’t miss a beat as he chewed, just ducked out of instinct. “Don’t they know we’ve got kids, birds, and people without any coverage on the top of their heads around here.”

“I doubt that they’re offering sightseeing tours. I think *that thing* may have something to do with that.” Han pointed to the eerie blue ball plummeting fast and bright to the east. “And that doesn’t look like any shooting star I’ve ever seen.”

Mia looked off into the distance. “No, this is a lot scarier. Dom--” She was already on her feet.

Finishing Mia’s thought, Dom added, “I think we need to go inside and find out what the hell is going on.”

Rome lifted the salad bowl with one hand and the casserole dish with the rice and beans in the other. “I know I can’t be the only one thinking that since we’ve said the grace while we wait for the news about E.T. landing on our doorstep or not, we can still get our grub on.”

For a long moment, there was silence as eyes pinged back and forth across the table until they all landed on Rome like the ball on the final slot on the roulette wheel. Letty lifted a finger in Rome’s direction to add her two cents to the debate, “So I’m not saying you’re right, just that among the things I do remember is the fact that this food is always delicious.”

Rome bobbed his head and made a *now you see* gesture and then headed towards the house. Quickly, they disassembled the spread on the picnic table and sorted the various plates and platters around every available space in the kitchen.

Dom hung out behind the couch as the television transitioned from dark silence to HD action. Mia flicked through the channels until she reached a twenty-four news station while the others opened up a diverse collection of phones to check out what the internet had to offer about the situation.

Han settled on the arm of the couch beside Mia and looked up from his phone. “Apparently, this thing appeared about an hour ago and has only gotten faster until it dropped down in the Mojave.”

The newscaster's voice interrupted their research. "A fog descended over the area upon landing; now it appears to be clearing. As our sources on the ground have confirmed the object seemed to slow down before impact." The reporter paused, listening to a feed in his ear, "Again, I'm being told that the object did not crash. Reports indicate that it decreased speed prior to making contact with the ground. Speculation has already started that the object is actually a space craft... That as you can see has not been confirmed but these aerial shots are demonstrating that the fog that cloaked the object's arrival is, once again, thinning."

The reporter continued on, though the picture faded in and out without streaks of static distorting the picture and sound. The reporter's voice stretched and rolled as the news scroll ran across the bottom of the screen and the picture wavered and pulled like electronic fabric across the four points of the screen. "—being told that the object is approximately the size of a football field. Experts are speculating the nature of the craft. Many confirming that, though it remains unseen, it is most likely a craft of some sort, as crash by an object this size would have triggered a seismic event. We are still waiting for confirmation--"

The image flickered once more, holding steady in a bizarrely moment in time, the sound cut out beneath the image until the only thing that remained was a long beep, followed by the familiar shrill of the Emergency Broadcast system announcement filling the screen. This time not as a test but the real thing. The hum was long enough to be heard from passing cars and houses with open windows watching the same thing.

Dom looked across the living room, taking in what each person was doing as they were sitting on the edge of a fresh emergency; Mia's hands were folded together with her eyes still on the screen, Letty had one of hers on Mia's thigh—a steady anchor for them both, while Han moved to the big recliner by the window, still too quiet as all of this unfolded and Tej sat on the other end of the couch with his fingers furiously dancing across the flat keys on his tablet.

Rome pulled up beside Dom, slowly shifting his gaze around the room. "You think this is it?" He asked, as the emergency message droned once more before fading into the CNN logo with a brief message of *Returning Shortly* running across the bottom of the screen.

Passed down from his abuela to his mother was a porcelain plate with the Serenity Prayer. For years, it had been just another piece of the past, the little bit of his mother left behind that reminded him of his childhood and the memories his Pop had tried to keep fresh. Now, it got him like a yellow light in the blackest of night; this sign that demanded his attention and forced him to be smart.

"I don't know what to think, but I feel that this important." Dom answered.

Back to the television, the reporter returned briefly to the screen. "We're getting first word that the visibility has improved around the landing site and on the scene witnesses indicate that there was a flash of light before the mist began to dissipate which you can now see here in our live footage--"

They stared at the screen, coming to the same conclusion as the reporter. "Are those..." Rome looked to Dom for confirmation.

Nodding back, Dom said, “Yeah, it’s people.” That certainty he felt in the Serenity Prayer—the same feeling that wouldn’t let him rest and made his mind recycle those final moments and the seconds in between where he should have filled the spaces with *could have* and *should have* was suddenly filled. Dom’s fingers drifted from the heavy cross around his neck to the smooth feel worn rosy beads in his pocket.

They didn’t finish dinner that night.

They didn’t sleep much that night either.

Sometime later, they remained watching when a title was given to the people inside the object: The Returned. Around midnight, the news shifted to the overall management of the situation. “Domestically, DSS has been tapped to coordinate the domestic efforts, including the identification, quarantine, and possible relocation of the Returned.”

No one left the living room that night nor did they leave in the early hours of the morning. The television droned on with hours of the same footage on loop of the explosion of the blue light and the slow mist revealing thousands of people in the middle of the Mojave.

Within a half hour of the sphere’s disappearance, the military had moved in to set up a quarantine zone around the arrival site and started the process of identifying these newly arrived people. They watched the President’s statement around ten pm, extra late by east coast standards, but this was a west coast event that was quickly shaking up the linear string that began and ended history.

Sometimes Dom wondered if his parents wanted more kids, because the house offered more space than required for just him and Mia. Now that same space that often felt cavernous these days made for perfect accommodations because no one was going anywhere. Definitely not to L.A.X. which would be welcoming an emergent stream of U.N. Delegates and international officials coming to see to their governments’, then their people’s, interests.

As soon as the reporter announced that there were *people* where the great sphere of light once was, Dom felt it. Felt certain like no other as he and Rome shared a look that was silent but translated to the same thought—*this is it*.

Despite the loop of coverage, the news was slow and it wasn’t until well after sunrise the next morning that many of the stations started broaching the subject that everyone was thinking of: the Missing.

They slept in weird configurations: half asleep and half awake, until it was nearly noon again and another official statement had been made.

Dom came to with Mia’s hand gently shaking his shoulder, offering him coffee with the other. “Thanks,” he said, accepting the coffee that was made Cuban strong.

“You’re welcome,” Mia settled in beside him in a way that they hadn’t done since they were kids. The gravity of what was happening made everyone, including those around the room, seek comfort in familiar things.

He relaxed into the soft caress of her hand over his scalp before she flicked his ear just to annoy him into full wakefulness. “Anything new?” Already tracking the new additions spliced into the loop of the arrival.

She dipped her chin at the screen silently. “Just one thing. A big damn thing actually.”

He read the scroll once, then twice and let the words sink in. He’d already known. Had always known that the Event hadn’t ended everything, not like everyone else wanted to believe. He dropped his elbows on his knees and stared at the announcement bar hovering above the scroll running below the government official’s podium, reading: *The Event: 2% gone, only 100k returned.*

Mia pointed to the low table in front of the television. “The phone calls will start soon.” Every phone in the house was scattered across the surface, all connected to an assortment of power cords so ancient that they must’ve been dug up from the garage.

“Phone calls about what?”

Letty shifted out of her sprawl over the couch's arm. “Phone calls to families, Dom. They’re saying that once they finish processing each of the Returnees they’ll start making phone calls to their families.”

Then Tej added from the spot between the couch’s left corner and the big plush chair where Han was still sacked out, “DSS will make the calls. They’ve been given point on this.” Of course, there’s almost an electric pulse of thought in the room as they wondered how close Hobbs would be to this situation.

“I got a feeling.” Rome said from Dom’s other side, standing close despite the shaky ground of mutual antagonism between them, eating a slice of buttery toast. Some situations, such as those that were earth-shattering required that the bullshit be set aside.

The news kept going on and on, same story with more speculation and fewer answers now that the scene was vacant of the newly returned 100k of people. So normal began to slip in once more; at three-thirty pm, they squeezed in around the wooden kitchen table that was certainly made to fit four comfortably but was being stretched thin by the inclusion of six healthy bodies.

They ate quietly, not sure what to say, not sure what to add, since they had all seen the same thing. There were eyes on him, Rome’s actually, still waiting for Dom to respond to his previous statement. For Dom, the answer didn’t have to be spoken; it was already in motion.

So they continued to eat the leftovers that seemed infinitely more delicious on this day after the world had changed. The sound of the television providing more than just background noise due to the absence of conversation in the room.

At three-forty, the phone rang.

**

At seven-fifteen, the knocking started.

Four

Chapter Summary

“I can’t say who’s looking out for your band of merry men—and women” Hobbs tacked on, smiling as Letty boomeranged a cocked brow in the direction of his attempt at humor. “—but maybe you can spread the wealth sometime.”

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long, long delay.

Hobbs in his living room drinking lemonade sounded like a scenario in *Clue* rather than real life. Perhaps, the start of a joke that had a payoff like a broken slot machine: big and worth the gamble; because here, Luke Hobbs sat in a comfortable large chair that was formerly a good time for two people, now seeming diminished by the breadth of his shoulders as he sat like the sun beneath the quiet awe of the room’s attention.

Hobbs gestured appreciatively at the chilled glass. “Don’t look so glum, Charlie Brown. You and the rest of the Peanut Gang should perk up a little.” Bringing down a group of wanted international terrorists cultivated a stockpile of goodwill the Hobbs intended to cash. “I know you’ve been following the news, because that’s what we’re all doing.” He started. “Everyone on the planet with a TV, internet, or a radio signal or piece of aluminum foil is waiting to hear what happens next. That’s why I’m here.”

Hobbs did his survey of the group, finally landing on Dom with a gaze that was equally as assessing as it was accusatory. “I figured I owed you a courtesy visit—mind you, I’m also a bit curious, too.”

Dom shifted bodily as if physically evading Hobbs’s verbal snare but Rome went right for it. “Isn’t everybody with a pulse right now feelin’ a little curious?” Rome snorted. “Curiosity doesn’t bring the *gov-ment* to the doorstep to make house calls.”

Elena replied with a placating grin. “No, it doesn’t but we’re here anyway.” Only a fool would mistake her soft tone for weakness. Dom knew that her baby blues were all steel at the core.

“Everyone has dumb luck every once in a while. Then there’s the lucky shot,” Hobbs smiled, grinning so broadly that the flash of his teeth was arresting against the canvas of his usual seriousness. “But then there’s the deck being rigged.” He lifted and dropped a big shoulder

like a barge cresting over a typhoon swell. “I can’t say who’s looking out for your band of merry men—and women” he tacked on, smiling as Letty boomeranged a cocked brow in the direction of his attempt at humor. “—but maybe you can spread the wealth sometime.”

Dom couldn’t resist baiting Hobbs. “Any particular reason why we should?” Neither friends nor enemies, as a measure of comfort Dom relied on old roles to keep everything straight.

Hobbs’s opening remarks were greeted by silence, the expectation of answers finally instilling a sense of patience in all present in the living room.

“So here we are—Elena and me—to give you the good news, intermediate news, and the news that’ll be up to you to make of it what you will. Just like the gospels only in plain English and no room for misinterpretation.”

Rome was propped up on the outer archway that divided the living room and dining room. Still and silent so far as the gravity of Hobbs’s visit kept his mouth in check and his ears open. Or, so it seemed until he asked, “Are you giving us a choice in the lineup or are just giving us a preview of coming attractions?”

Only an empty glass remained in Hobbs’s hand as he considered Rome’s question. “None of this is by the book. Notifications are way below my paygrade, but sometimes, exceptions have to be made, so we can freestyle it, Chief. Call the game however you like as long as we cover all the bases.”

The multiple sets of eyes shifted to Dom first waiting for his cue. Mia curling her palm over his hand snapped the cord holding him back. “My guess is that the good news *is* the reason you and Elena are slumming it making house calls.” Hobbs nodded. “I won’t steal your thunder by spoiling the surprise with the other two guesses.”

Dom didn’t want to water the hopeful seed starting to bloom in his gut as he tracked Hobbs’s incremental relaxation and Elena irrepressible smile that threatened to take over her face.

“He’s back.” Elena stated resolutely. “Brian’s among the returnees.” She finished with a bright relieved smile, happy to cut the tension that Hobbs had been milking.

Hobbs gave her a sidelong glance. Elena returned the look with a mild challenge of her own. “You can keep those guesses to yourself until you share them with O’Conner.” Eliminating the distraction of the glass by setting it aside gently.

Hobbs continued through the reverb of the shocked silence. “Knowing O’Conner, I guarantee he pulled the wild and crazy act on the otherwise and got FedEx’d back. You’ll have to ask him about the service at the middle of that desert cab stand.”

Elena rose from her seat, stopping short of the center of the room. Now she spoke, adding: “Officially, the returnees are free to go. Unofficially, they are being detained until the conclusion of a formal investigation into the Event and the Return or the completion of forty days.”

“Why forty days?” Letty asked, her brow scrunching skeptically. “Seems excessive to keep people separated from their families for so long.”

Mia broadly wiped her eyes, then sniffing in small bursts until piping up, “The original meaning of quarantine was a hold on ships docking in the European ports for forty days to prove that the crew hadn’t been exposed to diseases like Typhoid or the plague.” The tip of her nose was a rosy pink over her natural tan skin, the same pink now creeping up her cheeks to inject her eyes. Dom shuttered his eyes for stretches of seconds, clapping down hard, despite knowing that his features now resembled Mia’s for the first time since they were kids.

Hobbs rolled his massive shoulders as he agreed. “Right, Mia—Dr. Toretto. To recap: O’Conner’s back, you’ve got forty days to wait, and then prison rules for visitation. First come, first serve until the facility is at capacity. Access badges will be provided in a few weeks once the protocols are fully established.”

Dom squared up the pair in silence as he collected ends of a million thoughts into a question worth asking. “Have you seen him?” Dom watched Hobbs’s reaction for any tells—not even the vague eyebrow twitch that had first made its appearance when Hobbs asserted that they would work together again. So Dom hid the reflexive twitch of his lips with a cough into his fist. It was a bet he should’ve taken, in retrospect, because massive disappearances and end of the world scenarios aside, Hobbs being on the up and up with him presented a quagmire that he could understand.

“Not him. Other people, yes, and they look fine so far.” Hobbs gripped the arms of the chair as he leaned forward the wood whining as his big body pushed into the circle. “Consider this the courtesy call and have his walking papers ready because I’m not sure which member of the gang DSS will reach out to.”

Elena took a softer approach, offering sympathy as she stood at rest beside Hobbs. “As far as we can tell, the returnees appear to be unharmed. Just fewer in number than we would’ve hoped.”

Hobbs stood, “What we know could fit inside of a teacup. So questions?”

Eventually the eyes around the room shifted to Dom, who said, “Yeah, who wants to start the clock?”

**

Dom walked Hobbs and Elena out to the cacophonous sounds of a house going insane with joy. Rome’s voice carried loudest—“I knew it!” over the low purr of Letty’s “Even I knew Blondie wouldn’t quit” to Mia’s watery sighs of “oh my God”.

So Dom walked Elena and Hobbs out, just a show of civility, a perfect execution of the manners his mother and father drilled into him as soon as he knew his ass from his elbow, but the stroll down the walkway offered more than mere distance between the celebration in the house and the unshakeable hope that Hobbs tailing closely would give Dom something else. Maybe a message from Brian directly. A glimmer of hope. An answer that he could take to heart.

Those keen detective senses that Elena possessed stopped her short at the edge of the walk where she turned back to embrace Dom once, a long squeeze that still burned with the warm fingers of what-if, before letting him go. “This is...good news. I’m happy for you. Take care of yourself and him.” She said to Dom then nodded up at Hobbs who stood with the pick-up’s keys dangling between his meaty fingers.

They waited until Elena had rounded the nose of the truck and had planted herself a decent distance away to give them an illusion of privacy. Distant neighbors strolled the sidewalks, some pushing strollers, an occasional dog being walked, while a few hung around shooting the shit around the perimeter of low chain-link fences, a sporadic look being shot their way which Dom responded to with curt wave or a universal chin tilt.

“So?” Dom prompted.

“So you’re the luckiest sonuvabitch I’ve ever met. Luck like yours should be illegal.”

“But it’s not and that’s not what I what to talk about, Hobbs.”

A white van drove past with half-tinted windows that showed pristine white cloaking its front two passengers. All eyes on the street turned to watch the van as it passed. Its speed remaining steady without attempting to alter its course was a good sign. These days, most white vans carried a logo or some purposeful colorful imperfection to distance it from the cult of mute fuckers that seemed to get their rocks off on blocking streets, protesting at Remembrance Day, or standing in front of houses, staring into windows with a challenging resolve.

Hobbs snickered once. “Well, you don’t see that every day.” He motioned at the retreating van. “You’ve gotta share your secret to keeping the Guilty Remnant away.”

“If you’re asking in a non-official capacity, I can tell you the secret is showing ‘em what we call some good old fashion hood hostility. Even guys in La Eme lost people, so. But a hemi up the ass will get anyone moving, if stomps don’t speak loud enough.”

Dipping his chin, “Well-played,” he smiled.

Elena followed the van until it turned the corner, going left towards the central avenue. “I used to think that acting like that--” her words taking a hard inflection on the distasteful spectrum of what *that* implied “was wrong. But purposefully inflicting more pain on people who are already suffering is inhumane--vicious. So, they should get what they deserve.”

Hobbs stalled in turning back to look at Dom. The hard lines of his face leaving the point of the pseudo-secrecy veiled. “I have a math problem for you: two percent of seven and half billion go missing. Less than one hundred thousand return, including someone you know very well. What are the odds?”

Dom crossed his arms. “Too damn low to take the bet.” His fingers straying on their own accord to his cross.

“Your luck: whatever stardust that keeps you from stepping on cracks or breaking mirrors; maybe your mama dipped you in the River Styx or some shit. I don’t know. Don’t care for the details. All that needs to be said is that you should be grateful.” Hobbs finished.

Not that Dom felt like he needed to explain himself, he simply dropped a cool, “I am.” Dom extended a hand, the least of what was owed to Dom. “Thanks for the news.”

“I’m only the messenger, not the architect.” The cab of the gargantuan pick-up swayed as Hobbs rocked up into half of its doorway. “Forty days, Toretto, and if you wanna pay me back: just send up one of those Hail Mary prayers for the bald and beautiful. Spread the love next time. ”

After waiting for years, forty days was nothing. Dom grinned, “I’ll put in a good word.”

**

Excited described the buzz in the air; the electric hum of conversations that oscillated from the pressured and hyperactive to rumbling or stuttered and tearful. The latter was the result of years of questions and the persistent feeling of disconnection that came from living a life that felt unfinished.

The Processing Center’s waiting room reminded him of the purgatory that existed between the crowded cells in County: stuffed like a chile relleno with the unwashed, drunken, belligerent and teeth-chattering fearful masses, and the slow, lumbering of the bus, clanking with the steel moans of manacles and loss freedom, swaying like the low, heavy gut of a fatted beast on its way to an inevitable end.

Rows of seats lined the room’s perimeters and marched inward to make sections. They took up two rows, spreading out just enough to present themselves as a united faction. They looked like mirrors sitting across from each other. Despite the smiles that kept sliding into place, they had an air of rough--the intangible hard edge that flickered like a red light at a railroad crossing with an obvious warning to stay back.

And Dom was A-okay with that: Because this was his family, in their little corner of space, putting the pieces back together. So he was comfortable with the general look of amusement that wandered over his face after each sweep of the room.

On his left, Mia sat with her hands clasped around Dom’s left, a constant watery smile on her face while Letty sat on his right.

Three years, forty days, six hours, twenty-seven minutes and a wish-wash of seconds since footsteps in the sand and a promise of a later conversation.

The more the clock marched on, the more Returnee Detention Center felt like the DMV from hell. They arrived early, had tickets and were waiting for their turn to step up which seemed to put them purposefully at the end.

Rome had barely contained his urge to pace. “When I see that boy, Imma do three things: kick his ass, kick his ass--”

Then Letty supplied a sarcastic, “And kick his ass?”

Rome scoffed. “No, I’m gonna hug him until he turns red.” He paused. “Then I’ll kick his ass. Probably’ll hug it out again, and then--”

“You’ll kick his ass?” Han supplied for Rome.

“Right on the money as always, Seoul-Oh, right on.” Rome’s grin remained broad but just a touch watery at its edges. Distance did make the heart grow fonder and since their reunion, he and Brian hadn’t been more than a text message apart.

Dom looked to the high clock instead of trying to sift through slight tug in his chest that crawled into his throat as Rome rambled on. He’d never had much of a taste for jealousy.

Letty shifted restlessly beside him, causing her leather jacket to groan softly with the restlessness of her body. Somethings never changed. Dom glanced at the main door again, watching as a few more sets of visitors exited as an equal number stepped beyond the double doors.

“Feels like I was in a place like this. I know that I hated it.” Her eyes trained in the same direction. “This room just gives me a vibe...it feels familiar.”

“Here?”

“No, a place like this.”

“I was in prison for a few years.” Dom responded plainly. Letty’s memories tended to come and go like the current, with some waves bringing reedy experiences that stuck to the shores of her memory, while others just floated away into the dark oblivion of trillions of seconds gone by.

Dom added, “I think you hated Lompoc just as much as I did. You were always riled up--almost hissing mad by the time you got to the glass but you came. Like almost every Saturday, you were there.” He had been thankful that they hadn’t abandoned him to the humid coldness of Lompoc’s walls. Another reason why they couldn’t let Brian feel lost in this place. “I never said thank you back then, so ‘thank you’ now.”

“I may not remember us--the family that well but I’ve figured out that our thank yous are like a blank check: good for cash as long you’re willing to hold on to it.”

A fraction of relief eased into Dom’s gut as he looked over at Han, who looked for the first time in a long time like he was completely there with them in the moment, and not lost in his grief. See Dom was still optimistic. They found Letty. Brian came back. Giselle? There was no body on the airstrip.

It was very much like waiting for visitation in any other prison. The list of safe items to bring had been strictly abided by those in giant lobby. Bags stuffed with clothing in need of refolding, packaged food, and pictures were on the top of the list. A few stuffed animals made appearances on anxious laps.

Each family has been assigned a badge with a two letter-six digit code. It hadn't escaped Dom's notice that the badge Rome had been handed displayed a three on three combo that the guards had said "it's fine. sign here" and directed each of them to sign on the specified dotted line.

The counter kept up a steady consumption of group sets of forty at a time, always streaming through the red doors and exiting through a series of blue ones on the opposite end of the hall. The lobby thinned as the hours marched up from morning to evening until finally they were the only bodies remaining in the room that appeared more of an auditorium than an overstuffed lobby.

Rome rose "Anyone getting the feelin' that they're tryna save the best for last or am I just imagining it?"

"No, this looks like we're getting the beyond fashionably late VIP treatment."

"If Brian's not behaving, I'll join you on the ass kicking list. I'll graciously go third." Obviously behind Rome and Mia.

When the last trio of visitors shuffled through the wide blue doors, Rome stopped his circuitous pacing to watch like the rest of them as the doors swung shut. Dom, too, had shifted through various phases of contemplative posing and had settled for a tense crouch at the edge of his seat, his hands knotted above his heavy elbows anchored over his knees.

It was with a slow and inevitable crawl that the numbers on the visitor counter changed.

"Finally," Mia said, coming to her feet and their group number in hand. "There better be answers. Good ones." Each word falling in time with an exacting footfall.

"If there aren't, then we'll find them." Letty agreed from her six.

Dom squeezed her hand as he moved to catch up and finally pass through the beyond of the red doors.

Their anticipation only ratcheted once they encountered a supercharged screening and pat down process that made airport security look quaint. Dom stopped flinching at these checks within forty-eight hours of being locked down. The only sacrifice to the uneasy pat-down were their cell phones which get secured in a sterile, opaque lockbox whisked away by gloved hands.

They follow behind a pair of fatigue-outfitted bodies with broad shoulders. The one of the right held a clipboard close to the chest like a scabbard-less sword. The silence continued as they walked past a dark row of two-way mirror cubicles that numbered thirty in total. The fact that each stall was dark and their continued march felt like missing the right exit on a dark road.

Dom looked between the two emotionally desolate faces that were identically square-jawed and silent. "Are you going to tell us where we're going or should we guess?" His question went unanswered, though Mia squeezed his hand tighter in quiet warning.

Their silent escorts brought them before another set of silver doors that were electronically sealed. They walked through after the guards swiped a pair of lanyard suspended badges before identical black key pads which flashed a series of three colors before rolling aside with a soft swish.

From the back, Rome's voice carried impossibly loud through the tight hall lit by long tubes of white light. The security got thinner as they walked forward, transitioning to a more sedate and familiar uniforms of hospital scrubs.

"I can't be the only one who feels like someone else beat us to my previous promises."

"I would keep my voice down and the observations to a minimum." Han whispered back harshly.

The clipboard –wielding guard said firmly, "Your time starts now," then stepped aside to offer them up to their newest escort, who was petite and fierce in her mash-up of scrubs and military fatigues, standing in front of an equally white door as the halls with a black square window placed at head height.

She didn't formerly introduce herself, though the companionable grin was lightyears more reassuring than the cone of silence that they'd just passed through. "I'll take you inside now. We ask that you stay within the allotted space during your visit." The curling medical insignia was stamped behind her name on its patch on her left chest. "I'm here to answer any questions when you're ready." Which only left them with more questions.

Dom hadn't made a habit of visiting museums since he was a kid with scabby knees, but the allotted space reminded him of the velvet ropes that kept hands away from works of art. There was an 'L'-shaped pathway that gave way to clear glass and the stillness of the scene on the other side.

Dom knew dead bodies. This wasn't one. Wrapped up in the reassuring rhythmic waves and spikes across the monitors in a middle of a bed of white and too dark blue was Brian. If he ignored the wires and the tube between his lips, then Dom could focus on the steady rise and fall of chest, and sink into the feeling that everything would be okay.

For all the air that Dom suddenly seemed to have, everyone seemed to have lost their breath. "Okay, so—this is...good. Fine." Dom began then stopped. "We know where he is and how he is, so, okay." Which was the only thing anyone said for a while.

Dom hadn't moved from his spot that placed him directly below Brian's still feet. The counterpoint to Dom's quiet observation were the elliptical paths that Mia and Letty were making around the perimeter of the glass, like a lioness testing its prey's defenses, while Rome's body moved through arcs of paroxysmal grief.

Cataloguing Brian's features was an easy enterprise, made easier because they hadn't changed. A little bruised around the eyes, paler than his sun-kissed complexion, but still dog days of summer blond, yet still Brian.

So deep into his inspection, Dom caught the tail-end of Mia and Rome tag-teaming their as of yet undisclosed doctor-nurse-escort. “Why weren’t we told sooner? All of this cloak and dagger bullshit for this?”

“Ma’am, please calm down. We have procedures to follow during these unprecedented times.”

Rome stepped up at Mia’s shoulder. “Don’t Ma’am her. This isn’t a time for ma’am, sir, or anybody else. We want answers and expect them quick and in a hurry--”

Not to be intimidated by the verbal double punch, their escort stepped forward, lowering her chin and stared them down with the steely assurance that Uncle Sam trained her well enough to heal or lay someone out. “Extended quarantine measures end in twenty-four hours. Then effective immediately you may initiate visiting procedures. The extended quarantine was enacted for general protection and to guarantee the safety of the Returnees. Mr. O’Conner’s case is unique.”

“Why?” Mia questioned.

“His condition.”

“Which is?” Letty asked.

“We don’t know.” The military officer concluded. “But we are optimistic due to repeats lab series and imagining studies.” The officer’s expression shifted into an empathetic showing. “I would continue to remain hopeful as all evidence thus far keeps indicating that we should remain the same.”

They simmered down just marginally, falling into a state of uneasy calm that broke in fits and starts with the muffled beeps and bells beyond the glass. A question or two were vollied at the officer which she handled deftly, but without giving answers that were satisfying or conclusive in the face of the events that lead them here.

Once their time ran out, leading to them back through the reverse sequence of pat-downs, cell phone retrievals, and a rundown of the rules for future visits. Not the worst visitors’ day, Dom had ever had but a very different perspective from what he’d once been accustomed to.

Before they hit the series of doors that would spit them back into the lobby, Mia asked their escort one last question. “What’s his GCS?” Mia asked before stepping out of the door.

The medical officer’s open face folded into a tight lipped mask. “Three,” Finally, she said.

Mia exhaled a breathy, “Thanks,” and counted walking out.

“Out of...” Dom started to ask.

Mia sighed. “Fifteen.” The frown

Dom didn’t know medicine like Mia did, but simple rules of numbers and fractions made him a little hopeful. “So, you’re sayin’ there’s a 50-50 chance that he’ll be okay after everything?”

Mia grabbed his arm. “No, Dom.” She said haltingly, then pointed an impolite finger in the face of the guard. “It’s much less than that, Dom,” she paused, “I want to see Hobbs. Now.” Mia had the Toretto fury, but hers rarely exploded with the volcanic magnitude like Dom’s, yet those rare occasions when her temper flared, Dom wished he wore shades to shield his eyes from the supernova.

“We’ll have a talk with him. Bet on it. But he’s not our guy right now.” It felt weird to defend Hobbs and though the instinct surged to rail against him, Dom knew Hobbs wasn’t to blame for any of this. Just blame the red tape.

Nonetheless, Dom was still grateful, and optimistically patient. They had Brian back. The rest had to work itself out.

**

The strangeness of being the one with the visitor’s badge put the cherry on this crazy experience.

He hadn’t brought magazines, wouldn’t waste time looking at his phone, because it all seemed so unimportant.

He considered the cover of one of the glossy faces: Horoscope Post-Event Predictions. What’s your sign had never come up in conversation between them. Now, he knew that it should’ve.

A Leo, Dom was to his core. But Brian? Before Dom had vaguely known that the date was sometime in the spring. The Event made private information far less private, and all the more coveted if a loved one was on the missing end of it.

There was too much time to think, probably an unusual problem for most, but awful for him. The spaces of enemy questions taunted Dom for being too slow or too self-centered to ask. Now, he wanted to know everything about Brian: his highs, his lows, his fears, and the inbetween from five years gone after that first bump start.

Dom had a routine now when he came to see Brian: Every day, he waited with hemmed up patience for his number to be called and the brisk patdown that would pass no one’s standards in the Corrections world, and strode down the sterile hall, keeping count along the way—cameras, doors, guards passing—his mind still running the numbers for escape versus danger. Because a cage was a cage was a cage, no matter the intent.

The room was always the same when Dom entered: quiet and too neat for any semblance of living. Reading the monitors demonstrated Dom’s growing literacy in the basic beeps and slopes and falls of the electronic rhythm. Still steady and reassuring. Heart rate never rising above sixty-five.

“Still smooth and steady,” Dom remarked as he swung the solitary guest chair next to Brian’s bed. “Day Thirty-six, O’Conner, if you hit forty, then you earn a free t-shirt.”

They'd given him a semi-buzz cut to attach leads to the right side of his head. The roots coming in as soft wheat peach fuzz. But Brian slept on, silently, immobile and warm to the touch, reminding Dom of a car waiting in the sun with the keys in the ignition with no one behind the wheel. He shouldn't say no one, because Brian was definitely inside. Dom didn't need the mumbo-jumbo of the EEG and other reports to validate what Dom knew to be true: Brian had been sent back for a reason.

When Dom visited, he found that he had a wellspring of material to keep up a very one-sided conversation. "Everyone's still talking about that little light show you guys put on in coming back. But I know you like making a big entrance for your first impression. You've got some thinking this is the End of The World. Yeah, I know you probably broke up a few parties in your Boy in Blue period. Probably got mistaken for a stripper a few times, too." Dom laughed lowly. "Sorry, that was Vince's two cents. If he could rag on you, then that's how you knew he liked you." The sting of Vince's loss faded and healed over like an emotional callus.

Dom shuffled through the stack of magazines that were left as a reminder of Brian's stream of visitors. He picked up the newest one. "I think Letty left you a present—Surfer Magazine, uh? I know you can be crazy but that's too crazy for my blood. That's definitely for you and not for me," He imagined Brian's cocky rebuttal *scared of a little water, Dom* and the smartass grin that would follow.

"No, I'm not afraid of water." Just the shit inside it.

He skipped over the gossip rags that lamented or speculated about the return of celebrities that had disappeared. Not sure that Brian would get much out of it, Dom moved on. "I'll have to tell you about this crazy-ass cult that popped up after the Event. The best part is the beatdowns they got going into the wrong hoods spreading their bullshit."

"Let's start with the new drop of the Godzilla GT-R anniversary model." Then worked his way through all of Super Street, which got them through another hour of articles.

Dom heard the small rap at the door, indicating his thirty minute warning before visiting hours were over, which always settled over him like a stone sinking. So he doubled back to the worries of the outside world. "Business has picked up at the garage and the store. We're still getting some gawkers who've come around to ask questions, Mia usually sets them straight; if not, then we let Letty do the rest." He glossed over the fact that the shotty now had a permanent residence under the counter for those that didn't take a verbal fuck off lightly.

Looking at Brian reminded Dom of staring into the sun. Forcing himself to keep his eyes on a tear-inducing sight that hurt more the longer he stared at it. But Dom kept staring. Mia was too young to remember the slow descent of his mother to a painful end. Another reason Dom hated slowness—despised the protracted march to a dead-end without a reverse option. Unlike his mother's case, Dom would stake his life on Brian's hand being on the clutch.

Setting aside the magazines and leaning over into tripod of elbows on knees to cut the distance between them. "I'm all for taking the scenic route, but I think you're taking this a bit far, Bri, maybe don't wait until you're paroled from quarantine. No one would be mad at you for making an appearance sooner than later...Making the world stop by batting those pretty baby blues at them."

His fingers worried over the face of his cross, the gleam resting to a flat silver under close inspection, but it still carried the full weight of his faith.

“I still waiting to hear where you got that story about your dad from. Wishful thinking, maybe?” Dom shook his head, knowing that a low blow when defenseless was a pussy move. “Sorry.” He said into the empty audience of the room.

He was still tentative about touching, afraid that he would break the fragile peace and create a living nightmare of Brian fracturing to a million pieces. But this time, he reached out and curled his fingers over Brian’s, and closed his eyes as he fell into the steady flow of the monitors: beep, beep, beep until it was drowned by the distant growl of an engine.

Dom opened his eyes.

The golden sands absorbed the sun’s early afternoon light with a blinding intensity. A caravan of vehicles roved over the flats, spewing a short cloud of dust in their wake towards the small pueblo. There was an expectation that the lead car would drift right, which after a blink, it did, and then Dom threw his hand up to shield his eyes, seconds ahead of the glare gleaming off the roofs of the cars.

It was all just as blinding as...Dom paused, recognizing Braga’s hideout. Then watched it play out like the first time he saw it.

The memories stacked together as he remembered where he was and what would happen if he turned his head to the left. He knew when this was, too.

Dom looked down where his hands clasped the silver crucifix below his neck, closed his eyes as he mutely recited the prayer before desperate moments and lost causes.

Standing on this ledge, just ten minutes from storming down the mesa to bring a reckoning well-earned for every drop of blood scorched into the desert.

He opened his eyes and choked on his breath.

Unlike the last time, they don’t separate with a curt nod of understanding that this trip was one-way with a single intent: to ride it out or die trying. Dom grabbed Brian by the shoulders, his hug turned crushing until Brian’s arms roped over his back, clutching him just as tightly.

“This time, I’ve got you, Dom. I’ve been waiting, and you’ve been taking your sweet time.

Dom stepped back to keep Brian caged between him and the Subaru. He searched Brian’s face, finding him exactly the same as he’d been in space—a little older, road weary, and satisfied with where they were going.

Brian continued, offering that illuminating smile like a panacea to the last three years. “It’s okay, Dom, I promise. It’s all going to be okay.”

“Where the FUCK HAVE YOU BEEN?” Shouted Dom, his fingers digging deeper into Brian’s shoulders, furrowing deep to anchor from disappearing. “Tell me! Now!”

“Dom, I was here the whole time. Just not now but I was here and I came back. Shit, I mean, I tried to come back. I almost got us back.” Brian’s calm turned scorching, borderline frantic. “Did they come back?”

“I don’t understand. What are you talking about? Where were you? Why are you here?”

“Just tell me did the others come back. I need to know this. It’s important, Dom, I swear.”

“Yeah, thirty-six days ago nearly a stadium full of people appeared out in the desert. And you came back with them.” As soon as Dom finished, Brian sagged in relief against Dom, his hands finding purchase on Dom’s wrist.

But Dom doubled back to what Brian said. “You brought them back. What did you do, Brian?” Dom

“I tried to fix it.” His blue eyes pled with Dom with the ferocious desperation from years ago after that soul-searing betrayal. What Brian could’ve tried to fix didn’t require any forgiveness from Dom.

“You did, Bri. You came back.”

“You’ve gotta admit it, Dom: I had you.”

Dom leaned his forehead against Brian’s and breathed. “Yeah, you did. Still do, Bri,” almost quietly. “Make me understand what you’re talking about or why we’re here.” He almost pleaded.

Brian leaned into Dom’s embrace, placing a hand on Dom’s chest, the warmth weight burning settling deep inside Dom’s chest. “This place isn’t for you, Dom. I’ll get out. Trust me. I’m almost home.” Moving his hand to the gleaming cross, Brian caressed it with a finger before reversing away from Dom.

To stop Brian’s distance, Dom grabbed him by the shoulder, finding resistance when he tried to pull Brian back to him. Feeling his anger racket up in proportion to his relief, Dom struck upwards, clutching at the back of his Brian’s neck like a yoke. But Brian, stubborn as always, resisted.

“You can’t go, Bri.” Everything he’d wanted to say for three years, five years, and the quiet spaces inside cars. “Where are you going? Tell me and I’ll find you. I swear: I’ll find you!”

Brian grinning against his lips, “I know you’ll find me, Dom, but I think...that I might be stuck here.”

“Then we’ll get you out. You had every chance to turn on me and you never did. I won’t let you go again.”

“Instead of a ten second car, I want a ten second kiss when this is real again. You owe me that.”

That request Dom could honor and he did by surging toward Brian and taking his mouth. It was antithetical to their characters. Neither was shy nor cautious. It started as a slow press of lips, expanding in slow circles until Dom could catch the bitterness of Nos on Brian's tongue and the sweetness of his smile at the tail-end of the kiss.

Giving Brian his chain felt like the right choice, along with a second kiss that had been interrupted by five years and travel beyond. It went without saying that Brian would give it back when Brian was free.

The sun grew brighter. Flares of light sharpen and dull in oscillations of white to sepia until Brian started to white out, leaving Dom squinting at his disappearing form. Questions thundered through his brain like the tattoo of his heart when a final flash forced him to look away.

Dom saw his hand tangled with Brian's as a knock came from the door and measured voice called out, "Mr. Toretto, visiting hours are over." Dom took in the corners of the room, the pulse of the monitor slow and unchanged, and the heat of their hands radiating like a furnace in the cold of the room.

"Thanks." Dom replied.

A throbbing behind his eyes radiated to the back of his head. His eyes watered despite the limited lighting. Dom's attempt to fix the minimal disorder of the room was punctuated by waxing and waning throb low in his skull.

**

Ten minutes was all that Dom had lost when he'd napped. Decompressing what had happened gave Dom a greater appreciation for the effects of sleep deprivation and how it could pop-up when least expected rather than contemplate the possibility that his grasp on reality was slowing dripping away like the contents of a coolant leak.

Mia was home when he pulled into the drive. His mind was settled before he slammed the Charger's door to keep his mouth shut and not share what he'd dreamed. It wouldn't be fair to worry or upset her.

It was just them in the house now that they'd gotten settled with Brian's return.

"I'm back, Mia," Dom had taken to saying instead of the plain hey or hi when he returned.

"Good, dinner's in twenty. How's Brian?" She asked from the kitchen.

Very much a loaded question. "Good."

"Rome called for an update. Text him later, okay. Letty's going with me tomorrow, so I'll see for myself."

"Sure."

Upstairs, he went through the ritual of emptying his pockets before undoing the neat row of pockets on his work shirt. His eye was drawn to the mirror when he passed the mouth of the bathroom. His eyes instantly shooting to his neck. Absent from his neck was his cross.

Dom ripped his shirt from the hamper, patting it and shaking it upside down, then moving to his pants and then down to the floor to check the room's gutters. A simmering throb rolled through the back of his head as his frustration mounted.

While on his knees, Dom leaned against the wall as he walked through the dream. The kiss. His chain around Brian's neck. Brian's hand burning into his chest. He looked down at his white tee, sparing just a moment to just consider the possibility.

Dom launched up from the floor, thundering into the bathroom, slamming the door against the wall in his wake. He snatched his shirt overhead and looked at his reflection.

"Are you okay?" Mia yelled up the stairs.

But Dom didn't answer as his focus was drawn to his reflection. Eyes creeping upward to stare directly back at himself. The beat of his stare matched the tempo of the throb in his head.

Mia knocked on the wall beside the bathroom doorway, throwing out a worried, "Dom?"

"Mia."

She stepped into the doorway, her head cresting over his shoulder from the mirror's perspective. Her quick visual inspection immediately zeroing in on the mark on his chest. "Dom, your chest..."

"You see it?"

"Of course, I see it, Dom. What happened to your chest?" Mia inspected the mark. As Dom remained quiet, she asked again, "Why did you get this? You shouldn't be freaking out over a tattoo." The questions peppering him as she inspected the silver handprint on his chest a ghost of the series he'd volleyed at Brian. "Where did you get it?"

Dom's eyes darted from the three points: his chest, the mirror, and back to Mia who looked up at him with worried, dark eyes—questions visible on her face. But Dom went back to the mirror and placed his hand over the silver outline on his chest, centered to the right over his heart, and fit his hand over it and saw what he already knew: his hand didn't fit.

The throb in his head notched up like a slow turning switch, dimming only when his hand was placed over the mark.

"Dom, c'mon," Mia sighed, "Where did this come from?" Mia touched the handprint on his chest. "Dom, where did you get this?"

Brian.

If Mexico had been real, then Brian's rambling had been true. And it was Dom's responsibility to find him and get him unstuck. "You wouldn't believe me."

He had already confessed even if the confession sounded fake.

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