

Bulletproof Heart

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/14682786) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/14682786>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Original Work
Relationship:	Original Male Character/Original Male Character
Character:	Original Characters
Additional Tags:	Near Future , Alternate Universe - Dystopia , Psychic Abilities , Telepathy , Empathy , Spies & Secret Agents , Seduction , Explicit Sexual Content , BDSM , Consent Issues , Angst with a Happy Ending , Falling In Love , see beginning note for the consent issues explanation , Hurt/Comfort
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2018-05-16 Updated: 2018-07-16 Words: 22,925 Chapters: 3/10

Bulletproof Heart

by [boopboop](#), [luninosity](#)

Summary

Infiltrate the Organization, they'd said. Seduce the adorable super-powerful empath, they'd said. Be a Resistance hero.

Arthur was pretty sure that falling in love with said adorable empath hadn't been part of the plan.

Notes

The 'consent issues' tag is for...let's say under-negotiated kink and some tricky power dynamics.

Not non-consensual, not even really dubious consent - Devon enthusiastically says yes and could absolutely stop anything he didn't like at any point! But there's an imbalance that happens when you have one very inexperienced and affection-starved person, and one very experienced person who nevertheless **doesn't** have much experience with inexperienced and eager-to-please partners, and so while everything's consensual, there're definitely things that they don't talk about or negotiate that they really should, beforehand, and also Devon hasn't quite grasped the whole 'I shouldn't blindly just say yes to anything you want to do with me even if I don't quite know what that means' idea. They will talk about this later on! After they figure it out! Promise!

Title from My Chemical Romance, this time. It just seemed to fit. We're guessing about the chapter count. We'll find out along with you!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

the organization

The girl cried. They often did, of course, or at least they did in Arthur's experience, which admittedly only involved three acquisitions so far. He stared at the girl. She clung to the house's bannister, became an angry barnacle on the stairs, and glared right back.

"Um," he tried, "we need you to come with us."

"No." She said it again, not aloud but loud: *NO*.

The entire model home of middle-class suburban existence wobbled just a little. The parents—who had to've known, had to've been expecting a visit from the Organization—scowled at him. The mother—a Mrs Lee, he reminded himself—demanded, "Can't you let this go?"

"I'm sorry," Arthur said, and he was, oh god he was, they had no idea, "but we're supposed to take her."

Little Jennifer shouted, *NO!!!*

The six Organization agents at his back eyeballed each other and his leadership. They had tranquilizer guns, but the Commanders frowned on force unless absolutely necessary. Harder to cover up. More mess left behind.

In theory Arthur—and Devon, who was taking a hell of a long time to arrive from wherever he'd been that morning—was supposed to be making this easier. He was a telepath; eight-year-old Jennifer Lee was beginning to be a telepath; the Organization recruited telepaths and empaths and absorbed them into its ranks. Should be smooth. Natural. Compatible.

Arthur Wintower, who secretly worked for the Resistance, hated the whole idea of the Organization, and had agreed to this mission because it meant infiltration and exposure of powerful child-abducting evil, had never been good with children.

He cleared his throat. Tried to look less large and broad-shouldered and potentially menacing. Didn't work. Nothing he could do about his size, which Marisol'd once referred to as "herculean" and "godlike," before her lover and co-conspirator and second head of the Resistance had looked up from coffee and said mildly, "If you're going to start noticing men's godlike attributes, we're going to have a talk."

He *missed* Mari and Rosa, dammit.

And Devon, who was by nature better at this, *still* wasn't here.

He tried, "Please, um, honestly she'll be better off with us, with other telepaths? We know how to handle these things..."

The Lees did not appear convinced. He couldn't blame them. He wouldn't've been.

Some secret agent I am, he thought, I can't even sell the menace convincingly—

Listen, he said this time. The shape of the word bloomed out like concrete roses, heavy and grey. It filled up the room and kicked over the squashy brown sofa and loomed at the box-framed wildflowers above the fireplace mantel. *We're here because we know what's best for you and for her. Trust me.*

He even half meant it. He wanted to be the person they could trust. He wanted to rip off his own disguise and yell, *no, I'm sorry, I'm on your side, there's a massive group of very bad people who secretly DO control everything and they use telepaths and empaths to do it and I'm going to bring them down...*

Jennifer put hands over her ears and screamed. The muscle behind him tensed and rattled weaponry. Arthur spun around. "Don't you *dare*—"

The front door opened again. "Will you all behave," said an extremely annoyed familiar voice, "you're scaring her, and I have a headache already."

Arthur turned. So did everyone else. Like magic.

Devon Lane walked into the room. The room instantly brightened up and went about becoming a backdrop for him: ordinary chairs and floorboards and a rug leaning in to frame messy black hair and brown skin and average height. He was wearing skinny jeans and a casual navy-blue t-shirt and a black leather jacket and black boots, a sort of nineteen-fifties collision with present-day hipster-casual; he might've been a king or a youthful emperor. He was The Organization's pride and joy and not-so-secret weapon.

Arthur watched him and smothered a grin of delight. No admission of secrets. No fraternization. No teasing about the way Dev looked with pillow-creases on a cheek, hair standing up like improbable dandelion-fluff, yawning after a nap. Behaving. Right.

Devon glanced around, took in the situation, and went over and sat down next to Jennifer on the lowest stair-step. When he smiled, when he started talking softly, the universe bent that direction.

Arthur felt it. The generally human Organization minions, shifting weight and holstering tranquilizer guns, felt it. A sense of calm, of peace, of trust... a sense that of course this was the right thing to do, the best answer, no need to be scared... Devon himself was kind and the Organization was kind and they were here to help, they'd make the world better, and she could be a part of that, just come and see...

Devon held out a hand. She took it and uncurled from her tremulous ball. Her parents were smiling. Half the Organization hulks, despite psychic shields and intensive training, had ended up smiling soporily too.

And *that* was why Devon Lane was dangerous. Dangerous, and beautiful, and a weapon. The most powerful empath anyone'd ever heard of. Strong enough to shake the foundations of the earth, to command loyalty, to make men and women weep or swear everlasting devotion or laugh until they collapsed.

He also stole blankets in the night and got teary-eyed watching old Pixar movies. Arthur, with the memory of those cool grey-green eyes all brilliant and breathless beneath him in bed, ended up smiling for a different reason, half wistful, half abruptly entirely explicable aroused.

He shaped a thought, an image. Pushed it Dev's direction. Nothing out of the ordinary, nothing suspect if one of the minions had latent telepathic sensitivities and could pick it up. He'd not be surprised; the Organization liked doing things like that.

This particular image was only coffee, rich and dark and steaming invitingly. Might mean mental support for any tiredness; might be a suggestion for after, in the compound's commissary. Devon would probably need the support, with that headache. Arthur himself did, because this dazzling high-wire tightrope act kept fraying his nerves, giddy and wondrous and draining and fearsome.

Dev handed young Jennifer over to one of the agents, turned back to the parents, shook their hands. His smile was flawless.

And the Lees nodded and murmured words about this being the best, about being glad someone was here to help, about knowing their daughter would be taken care of. They would be left with the impression, strong as an instinctive emotion could be, that to speak of this would cause problems, perhaps even threaten the vital secrecy of this terrifically important role their daughter would play. They'd tell everyone she'd gone to a special boarding school as a cover story.

Arthur very, very carefully did not project any of his own thoughts. Telepathy under control. Doing his job.

Dev's hand brushed his on the way out. Might've been accidental, a bump in the doorway, framed by suburban sunshine. Those rainshadow eyes didn't meet his.

In the car, he ignored the driver—who ignored him right back, being a stoic professional, not here to make friends—and grumbled, “Where were you?” *You were supposed to meet us outside, what happened, is everything okay?*

“Sorry.” Devon ran a hand through his hair, left it even messier than before, somehow managed to turn this look into rock-star style. “I was meeting with the Commanders.” Neatly, precisely, he shaped specific words right back; Dev wasn't a telepath but had picked up a few techniques for clarity. *They felt I needed a reminder. About duties. About what happens to someone who fails.*

“Oh. That takes priority, of course. Never mind.” *Are YOU okay???*

Not great. I'll live. The image bobbed up and sharpened as Dev focused on it, sharing: one of the other empaths, not someone they knew well, had refused an order, a mission, a certain head of state to influence. Devon had sat beside him, while the Commanders watched, and had under orders quietly thoroughly poured sheer mind-destroying fear into his heart and soul. The man had screamed, and then sobbed, and then shattered, a blank shell.

The message had been clear. It was clear now, in the replay.

Arthur deliberately did not react. Did not think of another time, another place. His own parents. The way they'd once laughed while singing old once-popular tunes in the kitchen, and danced around the room with their young son, and kissed each other. The way they existed, if that was the term, now.

"I'm happy to serve the Organization however they require," Devon added dryly—a small amount of sarcasm was allowable, an outlet, and Dev's commitment went beyond doubt—and then sighed. "I wish they'd given me time to find coffee. Which you pointed out." His boot nudged Arthur's shoe lightly.

"We can stop and get you coffee," Arthur said. "You can have anything you want. You basically rescued us all."

"From the horrors of small children, yes, I saw the look on your face. For a telepath you're not very good at talking to kids, are you?"

"They're tiny alien creatures in miniature human bodies," Arthur explained, and instructed their driver to head for a nearby coffee-shop drive-through, because the Organization's superpower needed sugar and caffeine and, if he was any judge, about twelve dozen painkillers.

They got coffee because Arthur promised they would, and the drive-through limited the number of extra people in their space to one perky server, black rimmed eyes and purple lipstick oddly but welcomingly warm as she took their order. In the front, Harrison asked for Devon's white chocolate mocha first. His expression remained stony as he asked for a caramel latte for himself, then soured when he looked pointedly in the rear-view mirror at Arthur. Arthur ordered the same black coffee steadiness every time, but Harrison had never liked him. He'd pretend he'd forgotten.

It wasn't quite jealousy, not quite resentment, but it was tangled and heavy and pressed against the frayed edges of Devon's mind like a smothering weight. Devon leaned back against the leather seats of the car and closed his eyes. Guilt folded in, an extra layer to contend with, until Harrison managed to force the majority of his emotions behind a wall.

He should've been better at shielding himself. Even the normal, human members of the Organization were trained in some form of psychic defence. The furthest most of them ever got was the construction of that wall, but that was the bare minimum they needed in order to survive their work.

A telepath like Arthur never had a problem taking those walls down, and Devon could move through them as if they weren't even there, but it required effort they had to put into doing so. If someone was shielding and they didn't go looking, they could all just about work together in harmony.

The world moved at Devon's left. Arthur's shoulders took up more than half of the back seat and his arm, thick and heavy and warm, wrapped itself around Devon's shoulders, an extra, physical barrier between Devon and the world. *I got you*, Arthur's voice rolled through his mind, gentle and light as a breeze.

In the front seat, Harrison turned to hand them their coffee, his eyes contrite. "Sorry, boss."

Technically, Arthur was Harrison's boss. He led the team, not Devon. For security reasons, Devon wasn't allowed to be in charge of anything or anyone, not any more. Old habits were hard to break though, and Arthur, being made up of kindness and secrets, never minded the slip.

Devon summoned a smile, forged forgiveness from thin air, and let it soothe away Harrison's guilt.

His order tasted more like sweetness than coffee. Enough of a kick to jolt the exhausted parts of his brain back into focus, but it was more the sweetness he liked to savor. Once, when he'd been a lot younger, he'd been sent on a mission that left him near comatose for a week, his mind halfway between madness and the black void of death as entire families were massacred around him. When he woke up, one of the Commanders had sat him on their lap, and slowly fed him bite sized morsels of gilded chocolates. Dosed to the eyeballs on suppressants, the pleasure he'd felt had been his alone. He'd never been that cut off from the emotions of others since, but the sweetness of his favorite drink was the easiest way to replicate that simple moment without actually having to face the consequences of being alone in his head.

Besides him, Arthur shifted uncomfortably. His arm tightened around Devon's shoulders.

"Don't be nosy," Devon mumbled, no heat in his voice.

Arthur's chest rumbled beside his own. "Don't think so loud," was what he said, but the emotions that went with it were fierce and strong: protective.

Arthur, who was named so perfectly for knights battling dragons, for protection and safety. Who looked at him with eyes the color of oceans, deep and dark and ever changing. Arthur was brightness. Colors Dev had only seen in pictures, and in Arthur. Those eyes, and hair the color of fall. Russet and golden and easily ruffled beneath Dev's fingers. They weren't allowed to grow beards, but sometimes, on days when he had no contact with anyone but Devon, Arthur let shadows grow on his face, and that looked warm as well.

He'd probably grow one when he left. Devon could imagine it, almost as clear as he could imagine a place for himself at Arthur's side.

It was a pretty fantasy. A lovely dream.

He finished the coffee, and the world outside the car turned to night. The intercity tunnels were always lit up no matter the hour, but it was an underworld light and there'd be no escaping the knowledge that they were driving deeper and deeper underground.

All of Arthur was large. The hand that gently folded over his eyes was no different, covering his face from palm to fingers with grip left to spare. Those hands made everything they held look small.

“Sleep,” he said, a quiet song hummed against the fluttering exhaustion of Devon’s mind. “I’ll wake you before we get there.”

There. The glittering tower from which the Organization worked their machinations. The highest building in the world. Right at the top, with views above the clouds, Devon’s home.

He’d lived his life at both ends of the tower. He’d earned the privilege of cloud-strewn views and luxury through years of dedication and craft. When he got called in front of the Commanders, the trip down to the basement always served as a reminder of where he’d come from.

“Sleep, that’s an order,” Arthur said, chuckling at the rush of tired indignation Devon projected.

His hand stayed over Devon’s face, blocking out the world, and his voice continued to hum gently in Devon’s head, drawing focus away from the parts of him that ached and hurt and whimpered. If Arthur pressed down harder, it would be a struggle to breathe. It was not a scary thought. It was comforting. Securing.

Devon closed his eyes. He couldn’t sleep. Not now. Not yet. But this was close enough.

Technically Arthur, as a team leader, had quarters in the low extension behind the central tower. Technically he was supposed to stay there upon their return, writing up his mission report and being a good foot soldier.

He even managed to do exactly that for an hour or two. Cover. Infiltration. Keeping up the facade of loyal Organization obedience. He knew Devon knew about him, which meant the Commanders knew, but no one had chosen to do anything yet, so either they couldn’t prove he was a traitor or they were seeing what he’d attempt if left alone.

Or, suggested his brain, Devon hasn’t told them.

He mentally rolled eyes at his brain for that suggestion. Of course Devon had. No illusions there.

His fingers shivered with memory: Dev leaning into him, trusting him, falling asleep against him, accepting the caress.

Devon Lane was complex and contradictory and nothing Arthur’d ever expected. Infiltrate the Organization, Mari’d said. Bring back tangible evidence, proof we can use to expose them to the world. You might need to do something about the baby empath. Be his friend if he needs that, seduce him if that’s an option, he’s probably got a whole private harem but you can try.

Devon Lane did not have a private harem. Devon had in fact been a virgin in some very important and fairly central ways, though extraordinarily and astonishingly aware of the theoretical cornucopia of things people enjoyed while getting off. But he'd bitten his lip and offered up wide-eyed apology when Arthur'd rather desperately inquired, when they'd first fallen into bed.

These days Arthur knew that story--the Organization liked to reward their pet powerhouse, and when a younger Devon had expressed teenage interest in sex, had assigned him an agent for those purposes. They'd gotten just about as far as a skilled blowjob; Dev had started losing control of those empathic powers, which would've been bad enough, but what he'd picked up from the man between his thighs had been a swarm of lust and fear and greedy pride: *he's goddamn dangerous, isn't he, look at him, but he's so damn PRETTY too, bet he can use those skills for all KINDS of crazy shit in bed, and the other guys in the barracks are gonna be so fucking JEALOUS, wait until I tell them everything...*

Even at fifteen, Devon had thought for Arthur to hear, not quite looking up, studying the bedside table instead, I knew that wasn't--it didn't feel like what sex was supposed to be. I didn't really know more than that, but I thought--it was supposed to be--not that. I sent him away. I let him think he'd done his job and we were both feeling satisfied--I didn't--I didn't want him to get into trouble. Because I couldn't go through with it.

Arthur had, loudly and deliberately, telepathically voiced a string of profanity that would've made hardened Resistance fighters blush, and then yanked Dev into his arms for kissing. The bedside table had cheered.

In the present he knew that Devon would need him, now, tonight.

He closed his grey Organization-issue tablet, got up from his grey Organization-issue desk--at least he had his own private room; he was useful enough for that--and went out his grey Organization-issue door, as usual nearly missing his head on the door-frame.

The door stoically ignored this close encounter. The world, at least this part of it, had not been designed for people his size.

He took the connecting hallway over to the tower, and found the elevator, and went up to the top floor. He saw no one along the way; he'd never been quite sure whether that was coincidence or arrogance or the Commanders allowing this to happen. Fraternization and partnerships were discouraged. Divided loyalties. Desires. Emotions that could be manipulated. But Devon was special, and needed to be kept happy; Arthur himself was special, in the very specific sense of being an undercover Resistance spy.

Anyway, Dev's apartment had the nicer bed.

In the quiet of sky-level heights, carpet still determinedly grey but windows wider and summoning stars, he padded down the hallway and over to that familiar door. Devon had a whole floor to himself; he'd never had guards. When Arthur'd asked, early on, he'd only laughed.

The door opened even as his hand moved to knock. All the lights were on, and music danced in the background, ridiculous bubbly pop about teenage dreams and hands and kisses; seeing Dev's expression, Arthur had the impulse to take on every last one of the Commanders bare-handed. At the moment he might even win.

"How're you feeling?" He was already stepping inside, shoving the door closed, kicking off shoes and socks to match Devon's bare feet. The rugs were blue and expensive, and kept trying to snuggle his toes. The Organization held out carrots as well as sticks, and would readily purchase affection with plush luxuries or new books or stylish trendy leather jackets. *What can I do? What do you need?*

Devon took a step forward, right into his arms, right there on the spot, and Arthur wrapped him up in strength. *You're okay, you're okay, we're fine, I've got you. I'm here.* He found himself immeasurably grateful, then, for his own size and breadth: he could fit himself around Dev's slimness and become a shield.

The cheerful pop song kept playing, doing its best to be a good distraction. Devon tucked his face into Arthur's neck. Arthur remembered all over again that Dev was younger than he was, and not a Resistance fighter, and not prepared to dive into battle against evildoers with fists swinging.

And then he thought: that's not true, he broke apart someone's mind with fear today because the Commanders told him to, and if you feel protective it's because he wants you to, he can make you feel anything he wants and he doesn't need guards because he's a weapon...

He ran a hand over Devon's hair. Wayward strands of black popped up to cling to the touch. "Headache?"

"Better with you here," Dev said, muffled. "I want to not think about—about anything. I want to just...forget the world. Please."

"We can do that." He coaxed that chin up. "But only if you feel up to it, kid."

"Kid," Devon said, amused and tired and affectionate. He'd changed clothes—soft plaid pajama pants, a simple white t-shirt—and he looked even younger than his supposed twenty years, all enormous eyes and wayward hair and naked toes peeking out under fabric. "I can make *you* feel like getting on your knees and apologizing for that."

"And we both know you'd rather be the one down there." They did know that, and mutually enjoyed it. Extensively, spectacularly, so. "You want me to do that now?"

"Yes, please." Devon held his hand; Arthur took him through the sprawling living area to the bedroom, where cool crisp white sheets and dark solid wood and a scattering of old paperback romance novels framed Devon's smile. The lights were on in here too; he closed his eyes for a moment. His chest ached. Too many desires.

He said, both aloud and silently, impressing words with command, "Take off your clothes, and get on your knees." *Here. On the floor.*

Devon Lane, stunningly beautiful empath and Commanders' pet, knelt for him. Face tipped up, gazing trustingly at Arthur's rapid tossing-away of clothes. Waiting for Arthur to take him out of himself, or back into himself, the place where he was *only* simply himself, given over to gently conquering hands.

Anyone else—certainly everyone else here at the tower—would kill to be standing here. Access to this room, this place, this person, who could amplify everything over and over, climax after climax, wave upon wave, gathered up and multiplied and crashing like bodies together...

The edge of danger sent a rocket down his spine. Devon could kill him; the Organization could kill him. A Resistance member. A spy in enemy territory. Fucking the devastatingly lovely prize asset.

The prize asset with a startlingly sweet heart. Who had been crying, earlier; the tear-tracks when he'd come in had been proof of that.

He could trust Devon this much. Enough for this. Enough to have this. The need and the comfort were real.

That thrill came back, mingled with the clear poignant knowledge that he could care for Devon, that Dev wanted him to, believed that Arthur would take care of him.

He wanted that. He wanted all of that. He *did*.

He also wanted the Organization brought down and shattered and broken. He wanted to erase the memories he carried like weapons: the anger, the fear, the mindless faces of his parents in that Resistance hospital facility. He wanted to scream and rage and fix the whole damn world.

He took a breath, shoved those thoughts away. He'd thought that he could trust Devon, in this. He could help Devon with this. That was real.

If it was real, that meant complications. For the mission, for himself.

He did not like thinking about those complications, so he did not. He focused on what he could do, instead. Keeping up the seduction and the cover; caring for Devon. One and the same, at this moment in time.

Those pretty stone-and-moss eyes were watching him: devout, quiet, hopeful.

Arthur put a hand on Devon's head, and guided him down.

He wasn't gentle; they didn't need that. He fucked Devon's lovely mouth as hard as they both liked, cock shoving deep into his throat, making Dev moan and choke and struggle to take it. He demanded, *be good, open up, take it, the way you want to, the way you want me to use you, show me how good you are*, and Devon swayed in his hands, eyelashes fluttering, overcome by words and telepathic orders and the use of his body. And that was good; that meant the fall into delicious weightlessness, that space where Devon only knew the cock in his throat, the ache of arousal, the deep throb of obedience and response. Not thinking; not

scared or hurting from what'd been asked of him; not wondering what secrets Arthur might not be telling him.

Only this: the bedroom and their bodies, heat and shuddering arousal and naked skin, glowing in amber lampleam.

He moved a foot. Pressed it deliberately against Devon's cock, which stood up hot and leaking. Dev moaned again and rubbed himself against it. Arthur pushed harder, and said, *you love this, don't you, kid? Everything I do to you, you love the way I make you feel, knowing you're all mine and I can do anything I want with you, your mouth, THIS—*

Scarlet need and anguish snapped out into the night. It tasted like ginger and felt like roses, like pleading, like an inarticulate ball of yes and please and desperate craving: Devon was far enough gone to not notice or care about his own control slipping, so they were nearly there—

He jerked on that hair. Devon, betrayed and trembling, knelt open-mouthed before him.

Bed. Now.

Devon dove for the bed. Their heartbeats matched, pounding.

Arthur kept him on his back. Made liberal use of lube, vanilla-scented, and fingers, and then his cock, thick and so ready he could barely hold on, pushing in. Dev made small begging sounds, and the claws of *want* and *now* and *harder* raked down his back.

Harder. More. Slamming into him. One hand on Dev's cock, alternately kind and firm and cruel, without predictability. Devon was sobbing, unfocused, drifting; the scarlet shimmer had become unbearable euphoria, suffusing every touch and every thrust.

Now, he ordered, and pressed a thumbnail into that dripping slit, the sensitive tip; Devon cried out and came, helplessly tightening under him and around him. Arthur groaned, buried deep within him, and came as well, tugged by the coiling pull of that irresistible wave-crash climax.

Devon curled into his arms again after, and cried a little more, but that was natural; that felt like release, reprieve, cleansing of wounds. Arthur kissed his hair, and rubbed his back, and wondered how he'd gotten here, how they'd gotten here, how this had ever happened.

Devon had smiled at him, the first day he'd arrived. He'd never expected the Organization's favorite to smile like that. Radiant. Sunny. Astonishingly unguarded. A boy who'd pour an extra cup of coffee and bring it over to the new recruit, no evident ulterior motive or suspicion of any Resistance ties.

Not then, anyway. Not until the first night they'd spent together, the night Dev had asked about a certain scar and Arthur, half-asleep and sex-idiotic, had drowsily explained about dodging Organization acquisition at the tender age of ten. He'd stopped himself, horrified, before letting anything more slip; Devon had sat up and stared at him. Arthur'd been preparing himself for a fight, knowing it'd likely be futile and he'd go down screaming, and

Dev had said, “Oh, so you *are* one of them, I’ve never met anyone who got away before, what’s it like being outside?”

Unless that’d been a lie too, and Devon had known all along, and had gotten close to him for a reason.

He thought, I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know anything at all.

He stroked Devon’s hair. Dev woke up enough to make a contented kittenish sound at him. Arthur laughed, and held him.

Later, the two of them still tangled together, Devon said, “I hate it. Not this, I mean, not you. I like this. I mean...”

“I know.”

“I hate hurting people. It’s not—I know it’s not right. What I’m doing. When they ask me to. We shouldn’t have to do that. I hate that part.”

Arthur ran a hand over his hip: soothing, comforting, cradling him. Devon nestled into being held like a forlorn baby sparrow, broken-winged and needing safety and wanting him. Arthur’s heart ached with too many emotions. “I know. Me too. It’s not gonna be much longer. As soon as I’ve got something tangible to take back...”

“You can take me. I’ll come with you.”

Oh, that hurt; that cut like a scalpel to the bone. He wanted, oh how he wanted—and Devon Lane in the hands of the Resistance would be a prize. Interrogated, explored, mercilessly scrutinized, suspected of lingering loyalties. The moment quivered, painted in pale sheets and topaz lamplight, fragile and fleeting. They’d never have this again.

They didn’t have it now. He knew perfectly well that the Organization certainly knew about them, and Dev’s allegiances were...complicated. Given to himself, yes; that sweetness and surrender and open heart were all genuine. But Devon Lane had grown up a pet of the Organization. Had never known a life beyond this building, these walls, his instructions. Still smiled when recounting stories about kindnesses from agents and Commanders.

Arthur, for a brief furious second, wanted to tear down all those walls. To smash the constructs of expectations and spycraft and dishonesty, the Organization and the Resistance and the whole damn world, and to walk away into a stunning pink-and-cream sunset with Devon’s hand in his.

“I heard that last bit.” Dev tipped that head up to gaze at him; mischievous ink-pool hair whispered across Arthur’s bare shoulder. “You’re projecting. Also, I like sunsets. I think. I’ve only seen them in cities.”

“Fuck,” Arthur said, unsure whether he meant his own slip or the understanding that Devon Lane had never seen a shore, an ocean, a horizon of endless rolling blue and the celebration

of color as the sun sank into the embrace of the sea. “Sorry. Do you think anyone else heard?”

“No, I’d know. Nobody’s even around. A few agents having a movie night, some boredom, a lot of beer...” Dev paused, eyes distant and then extremely amused. “A few more doing... well, essentially what we were just doing. Oh, that one feels nice...”

“Still disturbing,” Arthur said, “even if I like you feeling nice,” and slid a hand along one slim thigh, up to Devon’s cock, which was half-hard again already, stirred by irresistible sensation both tangible and not. “Completely insatiable...do you need suppressants? How long’s it been?”

“They know about me. They knew when they signed on.” Dev wriggled against him; Arthur took a firmer grip on his shaft, very nearly enough to hurt, an admonishment, and Dev sighed and melted bonelessly into this dominance, pushing a tangle of silver-gold pleasure-pain confetti into their emotions. “Um...I can’t think when you’re doing that. Not yet, I think. Tomorrow. I took them this morning.”

I’m going to make sure you take them, Arthur promised, shaping words into incontrovertible stone. The image projected with that involved Devon on his knees, naked, hands behind his back, mouth obediently open. “I need you to take care of yourself. You know that.”

“I know.” Devon let Arthur push him to his back, and stretched arms willingly over his head at the silent command: *don’t move them*. His eyes were enormous, river-water and misty rocks and eloquent compliant onyx; his cock was stiff and dripping. Emotion, sensation, desires and passions and fears and yearnings and confusions and surrenders: those were all present in that gaze. “I wouldn’t lie to you.”

But you do, Arthur thought. You do, and I lie to you, and the whole fucking world lies. You work for the Organization. You know I work for the Resistance. You tell me you’ll run away with me, and you know and I know that you’re a spy too, you’re seducing me on their behalf, you want to know how to find Marisol and Rosa and all the rest, and you look up at me with those eyes and I worry that you’re not eating enough and I want to watch you walk barefoot in the sand...

He was a telepath, and a good one. He could hear thoughts; he could project them. He couldn’t outright compel anyone—that’d be a mythical skill set, or mythical for pretty much anyone not Devon—but he could make suggestions in a perfectly reasonable internal voice. He wasn’t powerless. He just needed time and evidence, something physical and undeniable, some proof he could take back to his friends and show to the world. The Organization being real. Being evil. Abducting children. Breaking families into pieces.

Thought and emotion weren’t the same. Emotion could be instinctive, unreasoning, unconquerable. And he himself was good but Devon Lane was better. Stronger than anyone he knew about. At risk of drowning in the cacophonous music of the world’s rampaging drives, which was why the suppressants; most telepaths and empaths needed them, Arthur himself needed them sometimes—the world occasionally shouted too loudly for comfort—but Devon wouldn’t be sane otherwise.

And Dev could knock him off his feet with terror or desire. He'd never see it coming.

Devon had *been* one of those abducted children. Taken from his home, his mother. Young enough that he didn't even know his birthday; he knew he was twenty years old now because he'd asked once, he'd said, long legs entwined with Arthur's on the sofa. He'd been curious about milestones like learning to drive; he did know how, along with basic combat and gymnastics training. Nobody'd bothered to tell him the specific day he'd been born.

Arthur got a grip on his own emotions, in the wake of that reflection. Ordered voicelessly, *stay put and be good, we're going to see exactly how insatiable you can be*, and reinforced that one with a sting of command, a whip-crack in thoughts and a pinch to the softness of Dev's inner thigh. Devon moaned, instantly spread his legs further, got lost in the physicality of sensation: grounded and anchored and *experiencing* everything. That glittery swirly delight erupted outward and encompassed them both, sparkling and catching fire.

Arthur bent and licked that straining flushed cock, a reward. Took the whole rigid length into his mouth, caressing and sucking, while his hand explored. A little bit of hurt, he'd learned, worked beautifully when paired with pleasure: Dev stopped thinking and being aware and maintaining control, and dissolved into pure intense *feeling*.

Right now that was what he needed. Right now neither of them had to think. Right now they could simply be this, could have this, tonight.

In silken lamplight and snowdrift cotton sheets, he left a kiss on Devon's hip, and scratched fingernails along delicate flesh, and Devon gasped his name and came apart under him, for him, with him, both of them shuddering with ecstasy.

Fresh out of his weekly medical, Devon took a seat in the small interview room and idly stared at a loose thread of his white pants while he waited for a Commander. His feet, still bare following the procedure, kicked back slowly against the metal chair legs, and his toes curled against the cold.

It was rare they kept him waiting, not these days, but almost fifteen minutes passed before the door behind him opened. The woman who walked in was tall, willowy, with shiny black hair and onyx eyes. One of Devon's favorites. She smiled at him and took the seat opposite. "Good morning, Devon."

It was easy to smile back. "Morning."

The Commanders didn't have names. If they did, they didn't share them, not even with him. They all answered to the same title, each as calm and soft spoken as the next. There was never any emotion to read in them, either non-existent or beyond even his ability to sense. In his head, Devon had named all of them. This one, with her cheeks the color of pink blossoms and small, delicate features, he called Mai.

"How are you feeling, this morning?" Mai asked. Her manicured fingers formed a steeple in front of her. It wasn't quite a perfect arch - double jointed fingers and wrists overextended

themselves and formed an angle too extreme for perfection. “Any lingering pain?”

Devon shook his head. “No,” he said. “I feel fine.” It wasn’t a lie. Falling asleep in Arthur’s arms was always a balm for aching senses.

Mai smiled. She looked pleased. The Commanders didn’t like hurting him. They disliked it almost as much as he disliked the hurt. “I’m glad to hear that. You’ve had your suppressants this morning?”

“Not yet, Commander.” Using her name wasn’t an option. “I’m supposed to see Doctor Richards when you dismiss me.”

Unsteeping her fingers, Mai reached across the table and rewarded him with a pat on the back of his hand. “Good boy,” she said, and Devon flushed at the praise.

The touch was removed as quickly as it was delivered. Mai leaned back in her chair, smile undimmed. “Tell me about your assignment yesterday.”

“We collected a Potential from her human family,” Devon reported. Mai wasn’t the usual Commander to interview him, but the process would be unaffected. He knew what was expected of him. “She’s been successfully delivered for processing.”

“I hear Arthur struggled with the parameters of the assignment.” Every agent was expected to debrief. Devon wasn’t surprised by the question, and he answered honestly.

“I think he’s scared of scaring them. The children, I mean.”

“That’s understandable. He’s an intimidating man. It’s fortunate he has you there to help.”

Devon’s smile wavered. “I’m less scary,” he said, wishing it were true.

“You were intimate with him last night,” Mai continued. Devon nodded. His apartment was monitored by both cameras and microphones. It wasn’t a concern for him, but he doubted Arthur knew they were being watched. He would be more careful with the things he said. He probably wouldn’t want to continue. That knowledge, more than any personal discomfort, was what kept him quiet.

“Yes,” Devon said, then, “you said that was allowed...” It came out more of a plea than a statement.

“Of course,” Mai said. “We want you to be happy.” Devon nodded again, his throat suddenly tight. He didn’t trust his voice not to waver if he responded. “Has he told you anything about the Resistance?”

Back on task, Devon found his focus. “No, not yet. But he... he wants me to go with him, when he leaves.”

“You’d be a considerable asset to them,” Mai agreed. “Do you want to go with him?”

There was no point lying. They'd heard his answer to that already. "I like him. He promised to take me to see the ocean." It wasn't quite an answer. Biting his lip, Devon hoped she didn't notice.

"And does that feel like a lie to you?" Mai asked. "Do you think that is what he plans on doing, once you both leave?"

Devon swallowed. "No," he said. Arthur wouldn't take him to see the ocean, or the forests. He wouldn't walk hand in hand down a busy street with Devon. He wouldn't smile and laugh at him across a table in a restaurant, roses between them and candlelight in the air. Whenever they talked about leaving, no matter how brief, how vague the conversation, it wasn't hope or excitement that flowed from Arthur in waves, it was guilt.

Mai's lovely face twisted in sympathy. "Don't let his lies cloud your judgement, Devon. You hold the power, remember that. Do not let him chain you."

"I hold the power," Devon repeated, thinking of last night. Of being pushed down onto his knees, of being conquered. Arthur fucked him like he owned him, and for a glorious moment, he did. But it would've stopped with a word from Devon. It would have been Arthur on his knees, gentle and contrite and desperate to make Devon happy.

"Yes," Mai said with an encouraging nod of her head. "The sooner you get him to open up to you, the sooner he reveals the location of his fellow traitors, the better it will be for everyone."

"I can't push him," Devon said, helplessly hurt at the implication of weakness, of a flaw in his usefulness. "He'd know."

"You're letting him read what he wants to read," Mai reminded him. "Nothing more, nothing less. You're doing wonderfully. We just want to help you reach your full potential. We want to help you help us all."

"How?" Devon breathed. He wished, for the first time in years, that there was something, anything, behind the Commander's calm blandness to read. He reached out, tentative and slow, and felt nothing.

If Mai felt the touch of his power, there was no change in her expression to give it away. Instead, she stood. Devon quickly followed her to his feet.

"I don't want you to take your suppressants today, Devon," Mai said, one arm extended, a guide towards the door. Devon hesitated. His last dose had been over twenty-four hours ago. She must've seen something in his expression, because a small hand came and rested lightly on his bare arm. "You can continue tomorrow as normal. I have complete faith that you can handle just one more day."

That became the deathblow to any resistance Devon might have formed. They had faith in him, and he would do anything to prove himself worthy of that. "Yes, Commander," he said, and followed her from the room.

the test

Chapter Summary

In which abilities and loyalties are tested.

Chapter Notes

We promise not to hurt Devon TOO much!

Um, warnings...kind of the standard one with this story, regarding consent issues that are...complicated? Devon genuinely wants and asks for the sex, and he thinks he knows what he's doing and he could stop it at any time, and that's all true, but he's also been pretty thoroughly conditioned as regards touch and kindness and rewards, and especially in this chapter, he's very much in need of comfort and still recovering, and it's not really even dubious consent, because he actively wants it and Arthur wants to comfort him, but it's also probably not 100% healthy, either?

This would be a day off, then, relatively speaking; Devon left the morning debriefing and found his clothing and his current favorite boots being held by an unsmiling agent, and did not have to walk back over to the medical wing after all, and therefore stopped for an instant outside the building, disconcerted, curious, at loose ends.

He tipped his face up. The sun offered thin rays, gossamer-light but trying hard, chased by clouds. He liked it, he decided. Himself and courageous sunshine and bare skin. The scent of grass, faint but trying too, and the idea of autumn, though he didn't really know what autumn ought to smell like. He'd read a few books that mentioned russet leaves, bonfires, pumpkin spice; he'd had pumpkin spice in coffee, but the scattered bushes that dotted the Organization compound never changed color.

He could feel without trying the low-level hum of presences in and around the tower. Most of them were good at walls. But he was a phantom, a ghost, a legend, and he could walk through walls. Particularly at the moment.

He kept his eyes closed. The sun pressed heat into his eyelids: tangible color.

Mai had said that they had faith in him. He could handle himself. He could handle the pressures, the growing heaving pulsing tapestry of anxiety and love and disgust and greed and fondness and fear. He could be good enough. They wanted him to be that good.

A cloud snuck in and interrupted his sunshine. No: not a cloud. An Arthur, who loomed with affection and trailed protective concern like blue and auburn streamers, knightly banners embroidered with intricate multifaceted emotions. “Hey.”

Dev opened both eyes. Blinked up at him: Arthur was framed by sun. “You really are a hero, aren’t you...”

“Am I?” Arthur put a hand on his shoulder, gave him inquisitive eyebrows. The sense of him became complicated: a hero in his own mind, in a way—Arthur wouldn’t’ve called himself such, but was fighting for what he thought was a good cause—and on a mission for the Resistance, someone who tried hard to care for other people, who was gently amused and mildly wondering about Dev’s own state of mind, post-debrief... “Like from one of your romance novels?”

“You’d make a good lord of the manor. Caring for your tenants. I like happy endings. Do you have anything you need to do?”

“No. Day off, apparently. Because of you?” Arthur didn’t quite take his hand when they started walking—might’ve been too blatant even for their allowable relationship—but managed to bump shoulders with him, companionable and reaffirming. “And I know you like happy endings. Romance. You’re a romantic. Kind of adorable.”

“I didn’t ask for the day off,” Devon said. Maybe he should have. Maybe Arthur would’ve liked it if he had. A day for the two of them, by request, because he wanted time together. He ought to’ve thought of that. “They decided. We’ll have something in a day or two, but not today. I just like seeing people be happy. In stories. There are enough bad emotions already. Where’re we going?”

“I thought you had a plan. I don’t.” Arthur’s grin turned cool brittle air and skeletal sunbeams into honey, sugar, cinnamon spice and tempting wicked heat. “At your disposal.”

“Oh. Um...” Daydreams and realities crashed into each other and stood dazed for a moment. Imaginary Regency-era ballrooms and sleek Organization tower walls. A compound he wasn’t allowed to leave without supervision versus Arthur’s wistful promises of oceans and sandy beaches and sunsets. The kind of lavish rose-petal date-night evenings he thought were probably unlikely, even without the lurking low-level susurrations at the back of his mind, the scurrying mouse-feet of other people’s wants and frustrations.

He wanted to be good. He wanted to be useful. He couldn’t think of a single thing that real people actually did when given a day off, or more accurately, he could, but he didn’t think any of that applied.

Maybe the sex part. Arthur liked having sex with him, taking care of him that way too, making him feel good; that felt good for Arthur too, he knew. His hero.

He could ask about that interesting sensation he’d picked up a few months ago in a city—he’d forgotten which one—in which they’d driven past a brothel. He’d felt very many things, very quickly; he’d liked a lot of them but couldn’t recognize particular items from fleeting impressions. Restraints, he was pretty sure he’d felt, and harsh ones, wrapped around

sensitive anatomy, coupled with a kind of sublime selfless joy in the denial and the suffering. He wasn't as good with specific names for objects and acts, but Arthur might know.

He wasn't entirely sure he felt up to sex. In one sense, he absolutely did—his body appreciated the idea, as ever—but he caught a louder beat of impatience and stress and *not done on time/hurry up/stupid/they'll be waiting* as an agent passed them with a tablet. The man had psychic walls up, and decent ones, even. Devon winced.

Arthur's eyebrows did that tugging-together worried reaction. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I just..." He waved a hand. The sun hid itself behind clouds. "What do you want to do? What would you...is there anything you would...want?" He didn't mention not being on suppressants. If this was a test of his growth and his ability, he'd cope with it on his own.

Too late, he realized that he should've suggested something treasonous. Something that might get Arthur to talk about means of communication with the Resistance. Not only about small private lonely desires.

"You want me to think of something?" Arthur considered this. "Okay. We can't go anywhere, not without permission, but I do have an idea. Something I've kind of been wanting to do for a while. For you."

"For me?" He waited, bemused, while Arthur made a call or two; Arthur was, after all, a field team leader, and so lower-level agents would jump to follow orders even when they involved seemingly spontaneous directives on days without missions. Arthur covered the phone and told him not to listen: it'd be a surprise. Devon, who had not had anyone ever arrange a surprise for him, other than doctors' visits or a summons to see the Commanders, did not try to hear details but did eavesdrop on Arthur's sudden rose-and-candy giddiness with...

Well. With surprise.

He thought, I do like this. I like this, with him.

"Okay." Arthur took his hand, unafraid of being in public this time, making a statement. Devon's fingers tingled. "Come on."

There was only one tree in the tower compound. Gardens, yes, with neatly trimmed hedges and fastidiously maintained flowerbeds, but nothing that grew without the ordered interference of control. The one tree, sat in a circle of grass, overlooked a thirty-foot wall of steel and concrete.

Hardly the most romantic spot for a picnic.

Supplies had been left as requested, substitutions made where necessary. A starchy blue blanket taken from the hospital wing in place of warm plaid fuzziness, and the plastic cups and utensils taken from the commissary looked nothing like the neatly packed picnic supplies from the books Devon liked to read while curled up on his couch.

Still, delight bloomed brightly on the edge of Arthur's consciousness. "A picnic!" Dev exclaimed, seeing only the gesture and not the shortcomings. "I've never been on a picnic," he said.

I know, Arthur thought, *and this is a poor substitute*. He squeezed Dev's hand instead, fingers tangled together, warm and comfortable. The sun had yet to journey far enough across the sky to steal away what little warmth and light they could enjoy, and under the friendly boughs, they set out their blanket, excitement mixed and shared and impossible to tell apart: Arthur was excited to share this with Devon; Devon was excited to experience it at all.

"Do you trust me?" Arthur asked, settled down with his back against a solid trunk, Dev pulled down to rest between his legs, back to chest, wrapped up in Arthur's arms.

Dev paused, hand outstretched curiously, fingers hovered above sealed treats. Surprises yet to be shared. "Of course!"

Arthur smacked his hand away lightly. "Be patient." The laughter that rumbled through his chest felt like too much champagne on an empty stomach: light and bubbly and headed straight for his head. "We're going on a picnic."

"We're *on* a picnic," Dev chuckled. "Or is the commissary just outsourcing?"

Arthur pulled fabric from his pocket, blue and bright and the softest he could find. Dev gasped when Arthur placed it over his eyes and carefully fastened the ends amongst unruly curls. Arousal hit him hard, a shockwave reverberating through Devon's body and into his own. His cock, painful and suddenly hard against the curve of Dev's ass. "Whoa," he said, hands wrapped tight around a slim waist as they rode out the waves, "easy!"

Dev gasped, words breathless. "Sorry, sorry!" He sounded it, contrite and on the edge of upset. Arthur kissed his neck, soothed away the worry.

"If I'd known you'd get this excited by a blindfold, I'd have put one on you weeks ago." He couldn't quite see the full beauty of Devon's face, not from this angle, but he could imagine how he looked. How he might look in the bedroom, bright colors sharp against a face lit with the fire-gold glow of sunset, rich and warm. On his knees, the dusky-pink curve of his mouth, open and wanting as he waited of patiently for Arthur's touch.

The vividness in his mind was as much Devon's doing as it was the work of his own imagination. The arousal was no longer stuck to his skin, cloying and hot, but it waited, a moment of calm in the middle of a monsoon, ready to drown him again at a moment's notice.

"Too much?" Arthur asked, feeling the way Devon had to fight for his own control, usually so carefully locked away. The blindfold served two purposes. It gave Arthur the control of their environment, of the scene he wanted to share. It forced Dev to fix his focus on Arthur's voice, to give himself over to that anchoring he likely still needed after yesterday.

Dev shook his head. "No, please..."

“Hmmm, I do like it when you say please. Such a good boy, aren’t you?” He pushed his fingers past the fullness of Dev’s lips before he could respond, and murmured his praises when that eager mouth started to suck. “So we’re on a picnic, your eyes are closed...”

“Blindfolded,” Dev mumbled around Arthur’s fingers.

Arthur pressed them in deeper, warning. “Hush. We’re on a picnic, just the two of us. Just like in one of your books.” Dev hummed in low satisfaction, shifting slightly as Arthur withdrew his fingers, chasing, left empty by their absence. “Just the two of us, out in the country. The sun warm on our faces.” Gently, he tipped Dev’s head backwards, until it rested on his shoulder. “The breeze in our hair.” The only thing that ruffled those curls were the soft puffs of Arthur’s own breaths, but Dev turned his face towards them and sank deeper into the arms holding him.

It would be easy, even with someone as strong as Dev, to put the images into his mind. Arthur wanted to, wanted to share the things he’d seen and strengthen the fantasies he knew Dev had. It would be asking for trouble. Not something he was supposed to be able to do. If he could put images of a country picnic in your mind, he could put other things in there as well. Things that hurt. If he put those cards on the table, there’d be no taking them back, and Dev...

Words needed to be enough. Maybe another day, maybe...

The grass was cut too short, the air was almost stale with city pollution, and the sun was only minutes away from hiding behind that imposing wall, but Devon leaned back into him trustingly and gave into the fantasy.

“There’s no one for miles,” Arthur whispered, and cringed when someone shouted across the grounds behind them. Devon flinched, tried to hide himself in Arthur’s chest. “Just us,” he whispered again. “Us, and the sunshine. And so much sweetness. I know how much you like that. Sweet things for a sweet boy.”

Treats were unearthed from their containers. Things he knew Dev would like but doubted he’d ever been allowed. Delights from a stolen culture and heritage hinted at in ochre skin. Devon had no idea where he came from, who his family were. Just a memory of sunshine and warmth and a journey so long and dark on the inter-city roads that he was still uncomfortable traveling on them to this day. You could travel the globe on those roads; the Organization could have taken him from anywhere, any corner.

The gathered feast cost him favors he shouldn’t have cashed for the comfort of the Organization’s prize asset, not when he might need them for more pressing, life and death things, but...but he liked making Dev smile. Dev was smiling now, he could feel it.

There was Iranian *baklava*, sweet and sticky, and glistening round Turkish *lokma*. Smooth and shiny Italian *bomboniere*, and Romanian *turtă dulce*. *Medjool* dates from the Red Sea and sweetly sugared squares of Turkish Delight, flavored with rose water and orange blossom.

Arthur thumbed open each tub carefully and let the scents wash over them both. Plucking one of the square confections from its box, Arthur raised it to Devon's lips. "Open," he ordered. Dev obeyed, taking the sweet into his mouth with perfect, unwavering trust. "Tell me," Arthur prompted, his cock throbbing as Devon moaned.

"Flowers," Dev said wondrously, voice fractured and raw. "Spring and rainwater and oh, you want to fuck me."

"Yeah, I do," Arthur chuckled, the urge to throw Dev down and shove his cock into that pretty, sugar sweet mouth suddenly became a solid, physical thing. He pushed it back, put a hand between Devon's legs, squeezed firmly. "Later," he promised. "Now behave."

Dev shuddered in his arms, his body trembling. "I'm sorry. I'm trying, I'm sorry." He liked teasing Dev, liked tormenting and even torturing him a little, his body taut and overcome with need, but this... this was just supposed to be fun, harmless and quiet. Never anything to cause that much distress, neither warranted or earned.

"No, hey, it's alright." He lifted Devon out from between his legs and settled him more securely on his lap, tucked into a protective arm and rocked gently. "You've not done anything wrong. Talk to me."

Too much. Too far. *Stupid, Arthur, so stupid.*

Arthur reached up and pulled away the blindfold, and his heart plummeted to his knees. "Dev...?"

Moss-and-stone had vanished behind obsidian, pupils blown huge. No adjustment to the sudden flood of light. Beneath rich brown warmth, something ashen and pale stirred under his skin. His body gave one tremulous shudder, and he flung himself off Arthur's lap, first to his knees and then, unsteadily, to his feet. Long legs wobbled: an unsteady gazelle trying to take its first fleeing steps from danger.

"Talk to me," Arthur hauled himself to his feet, panic giving speed to a body usually too big and clumsy.

Devon opened his mouth. "Hurts," he said, and it *did*. Hands raised to his head, Devon made one last broken sound, and the walls built so high against the brutal onslaught of six billion bundles of emotions cracked like the ice atop a frozen lake. Water started to spill through the gaps, and with it, a wave of pressure that almost knocked Arthur off his feet. He couldn't tell the emotions apart, couldn't see or feel one from another. They were just there, hammering down in hailstones of hurt.

"Devon," Arthur said. Alarmed. Something was wrong. Everything was wrong, and this... Devon wasn't controlling this. Devon wasn't *in control* at all. "Dev? Kid?"

Devon wavered, tried to find a balance on that broken ice. "I'm—"

The cracks grew, fissures widened, and then the ice gave way. Devon hit his knees, and *screamed*.

I'm here, he'd been going to answer. Here and fine, and don't call me kid—

But he wasn't fine. And he wasn't *here*. Abruptly, he *wasn't*.

Storms and eddies and whirlwinds roared into his mind. The last gasps of his last dose of suppressants failed and fell, overrun. He hit the ground hard, no coordination left to catch himself. The impact hurt, except it wasn't his hurt, not anymore, he wasn't himself, he was—

A woman moaning in ecstasy in a darkened bedroom. An agent irritated by a fly caught in a window, buzzing and scratching like a persistent itch. A child's happiness, simple and bright and lemon-yellow. The curious cool blank thread that wove through awareness and meant the Commanders, but that was nothing to grab onto, nothing to hold—

Even Arthur's fierce protectiveness crackled like a fire, and it burned, too much, he was dissolving in flame, and when he tried to move a hand he didn't know if he moved or someone else did, or maybe someone was holding him and pleading with him to come back —

Or maybe he was made of despair as black as ruin, not his, someone's, or satisfaction like a low smug purr of a dragon, or the clinking noises of greed and the deep stiletto-blades of envy—

Where was he, which one was he, was he even a person or only a shell for cacophony, as everyone else's emotions rose up and bore down, and he couldn't contain them, he couldn't hold them, too big and too much, they were flooding free—

He was screaming and drowning and clawing for air—but there was no air, and at least one of his selves was dying along with him, heart giving out in a hospital bed—

Unless that was him too—

A voice cut through the noise. It sounded real. It sounded golden and garnet and frightened for him but certain of itself. It held banners and could fight dragons. It told him what to do. It said, *Sleep*.

Yes, he thought, we can sleep, that sounds good, please, we'd like that—

And then he went away someplace soft and shadowy and kind, and the world went away too.

When he woke up he did so slowly. Floating to the surface. Unfocused. With a sense of having run for his life, fallen from a cliff's edge, grabbed a swinging offered rope. His throat ached. He inched eyes open with caution.

Bed. *His* bed. His bedroom. And Arthur occupying a large proprietary portion of bed beside him, radiating the horrified shock of a man who kept mentally reliving a collapse, a scream, a crumpling under tidal waves.

Arthur saw him wake up. Relief poured into the world like sunrise, drenching skin and bones and pillows with color. It was genuine, all genuine, and still a little scared for him, and a little guilty, and those were genuine too. “Hey. How’re you feeling?”

“Fuzzy.” He was. He could sense everything—Arthur, the agents moving around in the practice yard, someone getting a dressing-down for improperly storing a weapon—but oddly muffled. Some sort of blanket between too-tender nerve-endings and the shrieking universe. If it was a test he must’ve failed. Unless they’d wanted him to fail.

He didn’t know why they would’ve wanted that. He did know that he’d always previously been warned to be diligent about suppressants, to keep himself from being overwhelmed or overwhelming other people with inadvertent leakage, to stay on those recommended doses every day. But they’d told him not to...

His head hurt, but also in that fuzzy way, distant and smothered by painkiller-pink clouds. He had another concern: Arthur had been right next to him, and Arthur was a telepath but not an empath and not used to handling emotions, and other agents had certainly been present in the compound and the tower. He hated the idea of anyone innocent being caught in his blast radius; he did not quite understand why the Commanders had accepted that risk, when they all knew how strong he was. The question nagged at his mind, though he was drowsy and off-balance enough to set it aside for now.

More immediately, more concretely, he hated the idea of *Arthur* getting hurt with a strength that astonished even his cloudy self. If he had— “Did I hurt you? If I was projecting? Or anyone else?”

“No, I’m good. As far as anyone else—a few people in the infirmary, headaches, nothing major. Don’t worry about it, kid.” Arthur was holding his limp hand in both giant ones, on that side. That felt nice. He also felt exhausted, and wrung out, and heavy; he shut his eyes for a second. Arthur made a sound, squeezed his fingers. “Dev?”

“I’m here. I’m awake. Why *are* we here? Not the medical wing? Not that I’m complaining.”

“Doctor Richards did come by.” Arthur was not-so-surreptitiously checking his pulse, Dev noticed. “You’re on a pretty heavy dose of suppressants. And sedatives. He didn’t want you to wake up and get hit with everything again.”

“Which would be why the fuzzy.” Dev yawned. He wanted Arthur in bed properly, holding him; at least this was his home, and they’d let Arthur stay. They wouldn’t’ve if this had been the medical wing...no public affection...but this was special, this was him and this was them...

Arthur. Arthur was special. Arthur had—

“Seriously, though,” Arthur was saying, now touching his face, checking his eyes, “you still look fuzzy, like you said, and I know you’re sedated but I don’t like that—and you were—that was—” His emotions made a scratchy ball of snarled clashing yarn: *I don’t like this you’re hurt and you were screaming and I couldn’t fix it and what the hell HAPPENED—*

“You,” Devon said. “You’re better than you pretend to be. Aren’t you?”

Arthur said nothing, then, though his mouth twitched like it wanted to: admission, or regret of admission, or not exactly regret, because Devon was alive and sane and talking.

“You’re better than I am,” Devon said.

“I don’t think I am.” Arthur leaned over, let fingertips graze his temple; the gesture grew intimate and affectionate and poignant, coming from those broad hands. “If you were all present and accounted for, if you were actually fighting me, I think you’d win. Emotions’re harder to hold off. And you have better range. But I surprised you.”

“You took care of me.”

Arthur’s expression changed, at that. Opening and flowering and even a bit startled by happiness. “I did.”

Arthur only remembered how to breathe again when Devon opened his eyes. For those long, terrifying hours of helplessness, he’d been certain he’d held his breath. Hoping. Praying.

Tomorrow, when the world had put all of its parts back in place again, Arthur could dwell on his fear, on his *anger*. Tomorrow he could figure out how in the hell he’d get Dev out of the Organization before the bastards either killed him, or drove him mad. Today, he had a job to do.

Devon slept because Arthur told him to. He stayed asleep because Arthur told him to stay asleep. Now the suppressants and the sedatives could do the job for him, it was more than reluctance that made him hesitate in withdrawing the last of the walls he’d built around Devon’s screaming, unprotected mind.

“*You took care of me,*” was what Dev had said. Tomorrow, he’d understand just what that actually meant. Not just for him, but for the both of them. For the Organization. For the Resistance. Today, Devon had a vague understanding of what Arthur did for him: tomorrow, there would be questions without answers.

Arthur’s body was wrapped around Devon’s body, his mind wrapped around Devon’s mind. He’d hold him in every way he could, and ignore the ache of his own abused senses to shelter the delicate, fragile flutter of Dev’s consciousness.

“I did.” *I will, always. Forever. Please, let me.* In that one admission came the startling understanding of just how much he *wanted* to take care of Devon. There was the lingering closeness of Devon’s emotions colliding with his, of them drowning out every part of him for just a brief, terrifying second, but with that gone, with everything held at bay behind drugs, there was nothing to justify the way his heart skipped under the light of Devon’s sleepy smile.

If the Commanders walked into the room now and offered to hand him everything he needed to bring them down, Arthur would think twice before letting Devon out of his arms to take it.

That was, god, it was dangerous and frightening and in place of all the anxiety at what might go wrong, all he could think about was how good, how right, Devon felt in his arms.

“You should sleep,” he said, and tried to soothe Devon back under with a suggestion, not a command. He wasn’t surprised when Dev resisted. Or when he turned his face into Arthur’s chest and started to cry. The drugs. The exhaustion. Both combined with the fact that for too long, Devon’s mind was open to *everything*, reflecting and refracting and absorbing the emotions of... well, he didn’t know just how far Devon’s range stretched to. Certainly everyone in the tower. Perhaps everyone in the city as well. Hundreds of thousands of souls, each with their own hopes and dreams and aspirations, each feeling the world in their own way, and Devon, screaming and screaming and—

He pushed the thoughts away. Not now. Not here. He was needed.

Dev’s hair was still damp with fever sweat, his body, wrapped up in all the blankets Arthur could find, still chilled. Imparting warmth was something Arthur could do. Wanted to do. Fingers in those loose curls, his head tucked under Arthur’s chin.

“You’re so brave,” Arthur whispered. “So brave, and so strong.”

Dec wobbled: his lip, his body, his mind. “I failed...” he moaned, choked back a fresh wave of tears, and clung to Arthur: his life raft in a storm.

Arthur didn’t think about the meaning of those words. To do so would invite anger. *Rage*. To do so would threaten the tranquility he was trying so hard to maintain for Dev’s sake.

“You didn’t fail. You could never.” He kissed the top of damp curls, the salt off flushed cheeks, the swollen plushness of bitten lips. He kissed each inch of Devon’s face, until he could map beloved features with his lips as well as his eyes.

“Please,” Dev begged him. “Please, please, please...”

He could have been asking for a million things. Arthur knew he was only wanting one.

Arthur hesitated. Under normal circumstances, sex would be the furthest thing from his mind.

Under normal circumstances, Devon wouldn’t be lying in his arms, frayed at the seams.

Traumatized by the day’s events, drugged, *sedated*, Devon wasn’t in a place to ask for this. But he was, and giving it to him would be the quickest way to help him shore up the walls of his own control.

“Is that what you want?” Arthur framed his face with hands that were at once too large, and too clumsy.

“I want...” Tourmaline eyes fluttered open and met Arthur’s gaze with heartbreaking need. “I want it to go away.”

An impossible reality to ask for, but Arthur could give him the next best thing. Rolling them both over until Dev was pinned beneath him, Arthur took his time kissing him again,

unhurried and gentle. “I can make it quiet, for a little while,” he promised, ridding Devon of blankets and clothing. There was only the sanctity of Devon’s room to witness the perfection revealed beneath coy fabric, but even that felt like too much. Arthur needed to shelter that loveliness, to protect Dev’s body as surely as he was trying to protect his mind.

“Focus on me, just on me. Let everything else just wash over you.” He moved down between parted thighs, fingers dancing over the stirring length between them. Dev wasn’t hard yet, but Arthur took his cock—long and slender, like the rest of him—into his mouth, worshipful and adoring as it hardened and pulsed.

Just focus on me, he said the words again, this time directly to Devon’s mind, and continued to whisper, to soothe, as he opened Dev’s body with fingers, and then his cock. *So brave, so good, so lovely*. He said the words out loud and he whispered them into Dev’s mind, and he filled him full with his cock, until there was no room for anything else. Just Arthur. Deep and slow and certain, until they both came, until Arthur’s chest was sticky with Dev’s come.

He stayed there, his spent cock held snug in Devon’s body, filling him up even as he surrounded him with the weight and size of his body. They stayed that way, with Arthur still whispering those soft words of encouragement and adoration, until Arthur was hard again. When they were done again, Dev hung boneless and spent and whimpering in Arthur’s arms, sprawled this time on his lap, spread open and fucked senseless, the world around them was quiet.

“Good boy, so good, so very good,” Arthur praised, a hand running down Dev’s trembling back, holding him firm and fast and still so full. *I think*, his mind whispered, *that I might love you*. And Dev, his eyes closed and his mind quiet, finally slept.

Devon woke in Arthur’s arms, and knew that he was warm, and safe, and well defended. He lay without moving, head pillowed on a sturdy shoulder, listening to Arthur’s heartbeat for a while. Night had tiptoed in when they weren’t looking; it folded satin blankets around naked bodies and bedposts and clothing on the floor. He stretched out one leg, found Arthur’s ankle with his toes. Flesh and blood and power. Real. Touchable with a foot.

The vast ocean of living emotions had trickled back in to some extent, but remained for the moment only background, a horizon rather than an oncoming wave. He knew that reaching out for any of those beckoning prisms would hurt; he did not reach out. His head ached in a far-off way, not one he could explain well. A missing tooth, an amputated limb, a hollowness. He’d had so many personal galaxies in his head; now he did not. Even though they’d smothered him and drowned him and crushed him, they’d been real too.

He himself was...probably real. Almost certainly. He knew his name; he knew he was twenty years old; he knew he must’ve had parents, once. Those were all part of being a real person.

He did not know his birthday. He’d been told that his parents no longer wanted him, that they had begun to fear him, that everyone agreed he belonged with the Organization. He knew that he felt what everyone else felt, that it poured into him and filled him up.

Perhaps he'd never been real, he considered wearily, whimsically, curled into Arthur's heat in the dark. Perhaps he'd been designed by the Commanders. A perfect empath. A shell to hold their desires. He'd always believed their desires were correct; they'd said they saved people, guided the world, corrected flaws, and he'd had no reason to doubt this.

His hip, not under a blanket, was chilly; he did not want to lose the sensation, because it was his.

Arthur had held him when he'd been hurt. Such a simple thing. And yet not simple at all: no one'd ever been able to accurately measure his range or his power, and Arthur Wintower had put him to sleep with a word.

Arthur, who fought for the Resistance, who believed the kindly unobtrusive Organization was wrong and cruel and needed to be exposed, who challenged everything Devon had known growing up—

And who had left an impression, a butterfly's kiss, a startled wing-brush of emotion after making love to him, as Dev had tumbled into blissful blank quiet: an echo like a heartbeat, promised and true, wrapped around him.

He thought that Arthur might've said something as well, then. Something hastily concealed and barricaded away. Devon had never been a telepath. Emotions, not precise words. Absolutely not when sedatives and Arthur had combined to lull him into hushed and glowing sated peace.

He tucked his face a bit further into Arthur's chest. Arthur, who was awake, moved the arm around him: soothing, caressing, easing him back into drowsiness.

Arthur would stay awake, he thought. Would hold onto him: a guard on watch, a protector. Devon, who could under ordinary circumstances knock out any threat with psychically magnified pain or dread or paralyzing fear, rather liked feeling defended, and shielded, and cared for. And he liked the idea that maybe Arthur could contain him, if he himself were a threat, if the suppressants were someday no longer enough.

"Kid," Arthur rumbled gently, deep fondness and concern laced through the words like chocolate swirled in a cake, "stop thinking. Rest."

Even that sweet emotion billowed too close to flayed senses, but he welcomed the scrape of it. He was here and he felt these things. He had Arthur. He had his bed and paperback romances which always led to happy endings and flavored syrups for coffee in his kitchen. His body throbbed pleasantly; he and Arthur had that. Together.

He yawned, and fell asleep again.

When he woke in the morning—late morning, by the slant of the sun—Arthur was still awake, gazing at him. Devon smiled; Arthur kissed him. Dev wanted to ask *did you watch over me all night?*, but the question got lost somewhere in the heat of Arthur's lips, the faint scratch of unshaven stubble, the delicious explorations of big hands along sensitive skin, and the moans his own mouth made, then.

Arthur tucked him up in blankets after, oddly determined and wistful at once, as if knowing that blankets might not solve anything permanently but willing to try. The blankets squared fluffily up to the occasion; Dev emerged from the top one as it landed with enthusiasm on his head, and let Arthur scoop him up and take him out to the living room sofa. He was feeling a lot better, but he didn't mind being fussed over; real, he considered again. This self. With someone who cares.

Stories and romances, he thought. Arthur made sure he was comfortable and warm enough and not too warm, and went out to Dev's kitchen to explore cupboards. Stories and heroes and happy endings. Stories that got told and retold and written in a certain point of view. Stories that survived.

He did not understand why the Commanders had done what they had done, though he was beginning to have an idea. He did not like it.

The Resistance had sprung up about twenty years before as well, after the Organization had begun more actively acquiring Potentials for their own and society's good. The Organization had, from what Devon knew, been operating covertly for centuries before then, not yet as strong as they could be, not strong enough to help the world the way they wanted to. The Potentials could be trained; they could guide world leaders, correct wrong decisions, change minds with telepathy and empathy. They were their own best defense; no one who'd met an Organization psychic would ever speak of their existence. The Resistance seemed to take exception to these things.

Devon had been told that the Resistance was misguided. Full of backwards thinkers who couldn't see that the world needed a quietly firm hand upon the wheel, steering the ship. Formed by men and women who did not understand that taking children young would be best for them, giving them the guidance necessary to use their gifts. Obviously in his case that'd been true. His mother and father had given him up eagerly, the Commanders had said. The Organization had given him a home.

Arthur had come in as an infiltrator, volunteering to join up, an unregistered wild-talent telepath. He'd made it through the first levels of screening with no indication otherwise. Devon had looked at this broad-shouldered arrival, the way the Commanders asked him to for all new recruits, and had known in an instant.

They'd brought him in regardless. An opportunity. A tool.

They'd known Arthur wanted him. Though...

He bit his lip, rearranged a leg under blanket-guardians. Arthur was doing something with cocoa and whipped cream.

That first time, the first time he'd been on a mission with Arthur—routine, straightforward, three months ago—they'd been visiting a politician, reinforcing commands. Devon hadn't been the one to guide this particular man in the first place, many years ago; artificially created loyalty'd been slipping, and there'd been bodyguards. The team had been tense; Devon had smiled at all six security hulks, and let simple devout trust fill them all.

Arthur had put an arm around him after, companionable support and approval for a young man who'd done well on a mission. Arthur doubtless would've done so with any of his Resistance recruits as well: a genial compassionate commander, right there for his team.

Devon, who couldn't recall the last time someone'd hugged him, had inadvertently broadcast a tired yelp of surprise and pleasure and *yes nice please!* Arthur had put the other arm around him too, radiating an abrupt twirl of astonishment and *has no one ever, how could no one ever, why wouldn't they, he's so—*

And Devon had looked up, and their eyes had met.

Three months later Arthur was in his bed. Taking care of him. Stories, and stories, and his head hurt vaguely.

He thought that the Commanders had known he would fail, be overrun, be conquered. He'd thought it'd been a test of his ability to function without their drugs; he was sure it had been, to some extent.

The Commanders had wanted to see what Arthur would do. How much Arthur cared, and what he *could* do. They must've suspected something.

And now they knew. Arthur Wintower was a more powerful telepath than anyone else Devon knew. Good enough to handle *him*. Not that it'd been a fair situation. No ability to focus and fight back. No desire to.

Arthur *had* handled him. Had taken care of him, and also protected the world, by extension. While the Organization had been perfectly willing to sacrifice any agents in the vicinity to Devon's loss of control.

It would've happened. He had faith that the Commanders would've found a way to knock him out eventually, but there was no escaping that fact: he might've inadvertently driven a human insane, broadcasting and screaming every emotion on every wavelength into nearby minds. It could've happened.

They'd been fine with letting it happen. With hurting him to make it happen.

That was the piece he did not understand: if this was his home, his family, the leaders he trusted—if they were helping the world—

But this could've *hurt* people.

Devon had never liked hurting people. Felt wrong somehow. Inside his head, in the place where emotions lived. Snarled up and blue-black and confused.

Arthur kept secrets even from him. Arthur was a rebel and a traitor and shivered with guilt at times when making promises.

But Arthur had saved him. Had put together a picnic for him, an afternoon full of treats and delights that must've cost favors, strings pulled, for no other reason than trying to give him a smile.

And came over now with two steaming richly scented mugs, drifting with hazes of orange and cinnamon. “Cocoa? I wasn’t sure you should have coffee. Too much caffeine. Your extra drugs. What’re you thinking about?”

“Palimpsests,” Devon answered idly. The microphones were leaning in. “Echoes. Rewritings. Fairytales. Nothing much. I didn’t know I had cocoa.”

“You do,” Arthur said, in a tone that meant he’d put it there. “Feel up to breakfast?” Oceans watched him in those eyes: rippling waves, depths upon depths, blue and green and glinting with hidden treasures. “I can manage eggs, if you want that.”

“I don’t know. Not yet. Maybe after this.” He took a sip, let flavors suffuse his senses. Chocolate rippled like velvet over his tongue, laced with spice and oranges and holidays. He breathed in opulence and autumn and decadence. He freed his other hand from sympathetic blanket-tendrils. “Come here and hold me?”

“Would’ve anyway.” Arthur put arms around him, collected Devon into his lap, left a kiss somewhere on the top of his head. “Better? Still fuzzy? Needing anything?”

“No one’s asked for me—for us—have they?” He took another sip. Fortification.

“No, not yet. I’ve been told I’m not required anywhere else for the time being.” That sense of fierce defense got stronger: Arthur wanted nothing more than to be right here. “I’m guessing they want me keeping an eye on you.”

Innocuous for any listeners, but the double meaning lurked like sharks’ teeth under seas; Arthur must’ve been thinking along the same lines. He is a Resistance fighter, Dev reminded himself. He led people back there. He knows about tactics. Like a commander. Or a spy.

The opening waited, though. And he took a deep breath, said aloud, “Good, I like having you here,” and thought, in delicate precise words, *we need to talk*.

Arthur was a good enough operative to not react visibly, or at least to turn the reaction into something like a tighter squeeze of solid arms. His emotions burst into a clamoring sun-flare of *don’t don’t hurt yourself you can’t I can’t I saw you never again please don’t push* plus a comet of dismayed calculation containing a spy’s reaction to that *need to talk*.

It did hurt. But not badly. Not yet, not when Arthur felt so right, sunwarmed as tides and gilt-edged ribbons among colorful leaves. This time Devon shaped an image of a microphone, held it out, buttressed it with apology and admission. Leaning on his own skill set helped.

Arthur winced but took this in stride, no doubt having assumed as much. He didn’t know about the video feeds, but that was going to be more complicated to explain. *What’s wrong?*

They’ll know about you, Devon said. And then caught his breath: exertion raked over battered nerve-endings and senses. *Why they did it. What you’d do.*

Yes—

You have to get out. They'll decide you're finally a threat. Or they'll expect you to feel protective and want to rescue me. So I can—

So you can call them from our Resistance location. I know. Arthur did not ask whether or not Devon would, no doubt afraid of knowing. Devon, who up until the day before would've had an answer, was finding that at the moment he did not. His solid ground had snuck away, vanished under picnics and cocoa and Arthur's body moving atop his and newfound comprehensions.

Arthur told him, *I'm not leaving you.*

Devon nearly spilled cocoa with his abrupt sitting-up. *Please go, please, I can't—I can get you out if you go NOW, just don't do anything else and I'll say you left me a psychic suggestion while I was sleeping and—*

“Shh.” Arthur caught him, steadied him, moved cocoa to the table and out of peril, and said for the listeners, “I know the world's coming back, everything's loud, it just surprised you—here, relax, I've got you—” *I am NOT leaving you.* His anger crackled like a banner whipped by revolutionary wind: fury that the Commanders would do this, would consider the hurt worth it, would hurt Devon along with countless other innocents...

I don't know what to do, Devon said, though this emerged less as words and more as a plaintive unformed swell of anguish. His need for Arthur to be safe came out on top, over bewilderment and secondhand stormclouds and the headache.

Arthur sighed, leaned their heads together, rested his cheek in Dev's messy hair. *Neither do I. Not yet.* Honest, and it should've frightened him—if Arthur didn't know, then who would?—but became oddly comforting: maybe they were both venturing into uncharted lands. No maps, no marked trails for the future. Just them together. *But I know you need to rest. That's enough for today. I'll figure it out.*

But you—

Devon. When Arthur thought his name the universe bloomed: roses and ginger, dusky spice and sundown and light airy sheets and slick pounding bodies, honey and sugared treats and threads of guilt and hope and tiny newfound unlooked-for joy. *I know. And thank you for—* For the offer of help, the desperate care, the willingness to lie to the Organization for this: those silver threads shimmered gold and aware and drenched in awe. *Thank you. But not now. Not yet. There's no immediate danger yet, not for me, but you're in pain—*

Aloud, Arthur finished, “You just rest, focus on recovery, and let me take care of you.”

Devon sighed, let the last of the connection fall like water through lax fingers, and let the discussion go. He was more tired than he'd anticipated: not knocked off his feet, not flailing, but drained. Strained like a muscle, overworked.

They hadn't precisely come to a decision. Arthur was older and more experienced and more at risk, and certainly had sounded firm about not leaving him to be hurt. But Dev himself had been known to be both stubborn and persuasive. He could find a way to save Arthur. He

could ask the Commanders why they'd felt the danger to others had been necessary. He could refuse to hurt anyone else.

He could do those things. He was sure he could.

Tomorrow, he thought. After I'm myself. The legend. The Organization's super-person. I know I can. Right now I'm recovering. I'm safe and I'm being cared for and Arthur wants me to rest. I'm being good.

"So good," Arthur murmured, a mirror of his thoughts, and stroked his hair. Devon leaned into the jewel-like sleepy feeling of praise, and drank more cocoa when Arthur held it for him, and napped on and off while Arthur read to him, an improbable nineteenth-century story about matchmaking and ballgowns and wealthy young men in need of true love.

the mission

Chapter Summary

A mission, an interlude, a plan.

Arthur wanted to punch something. By preference, an Organization Commander. Otherwise a desk would do. His standard-issue tablet for writing reports. A wall.

He couldn't manage any of that, because he was waiting in Devon's apartment, so he paced around the living room and sulked. Dev's sofa watched him with compassion.

Devon wasn't here, because the Commanders had sent for him; Arthur had wanted to argue, had wanted to shout, to point out that Dev had two days ago been crumpled screaming on the ground--

They couldn't say no to the Commanders. Arthur at this moment had no idea where he stood, whether the leadership wanted him dead or wanted him to seduce and run away with Devon; he had an uneasy feeling that Dev himself might try to ask a question or two, and that would be stupid and stupidly brave and beautiful and wrong.

He knew Devon still trusted the Organization. Still believed in the overall rightness of the people who'd raised him. But had made a choice: not renouncing allegiance but shifting priorities. Confused by the casual willingness to use him; to use them both. Along with any bystanders caught in the crossfire.

I'll help you get out, Devon had said. Sincere, bruised and bandaged-up and shining with pain and good intentions. *I'll lie to them if you'll go and be safe.*

That *was* a choice. He hoped Devon was smart enough not to outright push the Commanders on the subject of supposedly necessary sacrifices. Dev had felt so distressed, asking who might've been hurt, broken, wounded by his loss of control, which hadn't been his fault at all.

He paced across the room again. Nearly knocked a book off the couch-arm. Devon would've laughed.

Time ticked by. Almost an hour.

He considered Devon's old-fashioned paperback romances or possibly the virtual game system for a while, and gave up on even the idea of being able to focus, and resolutely ignored the next minute flipping into the next.

Dev's apartment came with lots of toys and also skillfully restricted GlobalNet access. Arthur had discovered that ages ago, one of the first nights he'd spent in those arms. Most of the

compound also had restrictions, control of information and all that, but this was more extensive and more subtle: the Commanders very much wanted their pet to stay contained and happy. Devon likely hadn't even realized that his access was limited by design; he could look up historical trivia from a centuries-old novel or order just about any movie or toy or game he wanted, and he was easily distracted by new ideas and new books and new sensations and new sex toys and, lately, Arthur himself.

He went and got a glass of water from the kitchen.

Over an hour. No messages. No word.

And then, abruptly, there *was* word. Not from Devon. A flicker at the back of his thoughts. An inquiry like steel tulips and bronze-wire nagging. A reminder.

Arthur scowled at the clock and by extension the Resistance member currently in his head and also the whole damn world. He sat down on Devon's expensive couch, where they'd held each other and made love and drunk voluptuous hot chocolate and made love again, tenderly, gingerly, slowly. A blanket lingered in idle blue and green stripes across one couch-arm. *Go away. This isn't safe.*

I know, Leah said, *but Rosa told me to check in.*

Leah and her husband were the closest end of the Resistance information line that stretched back to the coast; Leah worked for the company that, rather prosaically, made Organization uniforms. She was a minor telepathic talent, but she could play relay, and did; she should've been instructed to mostly leave him alone. The Organization had more psychics than anyone, and they'd be listening for chatter. Arthur himself was good as far as range and good at shielding, but some risks weren't worth taking.

Tell Rosie to kindly fuck off, thanks, I know what I'm doing.

She says you're supposed to have something by now. Three months, and you were supposed to get in and get proof - something tangible, visible, documenting their existence--

I know!

--and their power, so people stop dismissing us as a conspiracy of crazy--

I KNOW!

Of course he's good in bed, Leah said, *but is Devon Lane's pretty mouth worth not doing your job?*

For a moment Arthur couldn't answer. White-hot anger. Pure and blinding. *Are you questioning my loyalty to--*

No, no, of course not, sorry. She might be; he wasn't an empath and couldn't read more than surface-level purposefully visible emotion. Words, facts, details: yes, he could excavate those, even over this distance. But not with the color, the flavor, the depth, that Devon could. Devon, who wasn't back yet--

Leah had kept talking. As ever with another telepath, this should've felt as easy and distinct as conversation, not complicated lurking pools of feeling and instinct. But he'd gotten used to Devon and the complications.

And he hadn't been listening. Guiltily, he tuned back in; she snapped, *the Organization stays in power because no one believes it's real. We need something incontrovertible. Video. Photographs. Something that can't be faked with a telepathic projection. And you're losing focus.*

They do random sweeps! I can't just bring a camera in--if I'm concealing a secret they'll pick up--I've only met a Commander once, and half the time I'm here at the compound, do you want snapshots of me eating toast--

Or fucking an all-powerful manipulative empath?

That's not fair. It was and wasn't. He had a job to do. He hadn't done it. The reminder burned like acid in his gut. The Resistance needed this. Kidnapped children needed this. His parents and justice--

He hadn't been the first person they'd sent. Not even the third. The attempts before him had all failed. Gruesomely.

Devon's apartment got more icy around him, despite being temperature-controlled.

He *was* the strongest they'd sent. The strongest telepath the Resistance had. Someone who might be able to fight back if discovered. Fighting wasn't exactly what he and Devon were doing.

The very first person they'd had inside had come to them, rather than the other way around. Arthur'd never gotten the chance to meet Charles Smith, but he knew that everyone had loved the old man, a soft-spoken grandfatherly figure who'd once been the Organization's prime recruiter. Charles had decided he couldn't bear this anymore, and had fed them the names of the next Potentials on the acquisition list, letting the Resistance get there first, right up until someone'd caught him and he'd died.

He said, remembering this loss, *I'll see what I can do to speed things along.*

Good. Leah vanished. No goodbye; he didn't deserve it, and every extra second gave the Organization psychics more time to find incongruent conversations.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. Exhaled.

A mission. His assignment. The right thing to do, dammit.

Devon's striped cozy blanket tumbled in accusation over the sofa beside him. Cocoa-mugs in the dishwasher. Rumpled sheets left like kisses across the expanse of bed.

He opened his hands, looked at them. Big and broad and strong. They held the memory of Devon's skin, naked and trusting. He could see those wide long-lashed grey-green eyes and that emotional heart, trying to keep him safe, even when that meant pain.

The Organization wanted him to give in to those protective instincts, to take Devon, to run; they believed Dev was wholly theirs. If Arthur didn't perform as expected, or if Devon failed--

He honestly didn't know what would happen. What fallout, what consequences.

He was still sitting on the couch twenty minutes later when Devon came in and kicked off boots with a small pensive exhale. Arthur spun around, hit his knee on the table, dove that direction to be support. "What did they say?" *Are you hurt, are you in pain, what did they want--??*

Devon tipped his face up for a kiss, and leaned into Arthur's hands as they gathered him close. "We have a mission. We're leaving tomorrow. Early." *Better. Mostly back to normal. Cleared by medical. And they were...kinder than I expected.* But this came with a ragged edge: Dev turning something over, pieces that didn't quite fit, a lack of satisfying answers, maybe.

"Mission?" The word sank uneasily into his chest and his conscience. Rocks and stones. "Here, sit down, I'll bring you coffee--" Should've had it ready. Prepared. Comfort.

"Yes," Devon said, flopping onto the couch, then sitting up to raise eyebrows at him: the Organization's twenty-year-old rock-star, weary and wry, "we're going to use me to talk to the British Prime Minister about diverting lots and lots of money into Organization funding for expansion, apparently."

Dev watched Arthur's face at this news. Arthur's expression shifted, gave nothing away, kept the mask of field commander and lover in place. Arthur said, aloud, "Is she here on some sort of state visit? Diplomatic negotiations?" His mind had already begun spinning, Devon could tell: thinking of team members, strengths and weaknesses, preparations, supplies, requisitioning the latest hyperjet for rapid travel, annoyance at the lack of notice, minor pride that he and his team could be ready in an hour if asked, rapid-fire speculation about what expansion plans might mean for the future of the world...

Of course the American president had been thoroughly under Organization control for years. Several presidents' worth of years, in fact. That'd make it easy to gain access to a prize guest or visiting head of state. But no, in fact; and Devon grinned, letting hints of firework enthusiasm crackle in the air. "No. We're going to London."

Arthur, midway to sitting down beside him, stopped. Then sat down and took Dev's hand, but more slowly. "We're going to London?" His emotions skittered and raced like raindrops on slick glass. Devon tried to catch a drop or two, to examine them more closely, but Arthur heard him looking and focused more sharply on one emotion in particular, letting the rest fade.

Devon said, "You're worried about me." He let his own emotions unfurl in reply: a sun-kissed pink rose, opening up petals of shy pleasure that someone cared, but also spiked with thorns; it could take care of itself.

“Two days ago,” Arthur said, “you were screaming. In my arms. And then drugged until you couldn’t feel anything. Of course I’m worried.” His fingers laced themselves through Dev’s, then slid away to encircle Dev’s wrist, then tapped rhythms over a wrist-bone, restless. *You know how much I’m worried. And I know you’ve got thorns. But this is big, kid.*

This time Dev made a face at him and pictured rose petals dissolving, tumbling, falling over recognizable London landmarks. Anything he could recall from books and films. Swooping pointy architecture. A bright red bus. A cup of tea. Everything laced with the sweet candy fizz of his own excitement, and also the dry licorice-whip of his own minor irritation: of course he knew it was something important. The Commanders wouldn’t’ve asked him to go personally otherwise. They did not like him being exposed to new places, new people, particularly not one of the last remaining Free States, where so many rebellious clamoring minds and hearts, unguided by the benevolent Organization influence, would batter against his walls. He could handle small-scale travel, places already well-controlled and comfortable; that was what he normally did.

The Commanders cared for him. They did not want him to be hurt.

At least, that was what they’d said. What they’d always said. This time it’d even been delivered with a touch to his arm. He must have done something well, to please them so.

He had thought, then, at that touch, the same thing he thought now: but you did hurt me. You did. I know it was for a reason. I’m sure you had a reason. I know that reason’s sitting right here holding my hand. If you’d only told me first, asked me first, I’d’ve still gotten hurt but I’d’ve understood. I would’ve said yes. But you didn’t ask before you hurt me.

He hadn’t been able to voice the question, faced with their evident pride in him and praise for his courage during the test, their plan to discover precisely how powerful a Resistance telepath Arthur Wintower was. He hadn’t been able to find words.

In the wake of this, he discovered more complicated emotions than he’d expected regarding London.

He said, “They said they needed me there in person. The Prime Minister has good defenses. And this is important. If I can sway her, we not only have greater room for expansion, but we can send a message.”

“That no one can resist for long,” Arthur said.

“Not even the best-defended.” He was eavesdropping; Arthur’d felt different, briefly, at the touch of the word. Resistance. A threat. Nothing concrete, though. Nothing Dev could follow and learn. “How much time does your team need? To be ready.”

“We can go as soon as you tell us.” Arthur glanced at his wrist communicator, lying where it’d been tossed at some point on a kitchen counter. “I’ll send out orders.” *Answer me honestly. Will you be alright? Traveling? In a crowded city?*

“I told you not to worry,” Devon pointed out. “And I’ve got suppressants to take. Stronger ones than usual, even, I had to go and pick them up on the way back.” *And I’ve got you. You*

can take care of me.

That complicated nest of emotion flared and muttered again, a snag of tree-branches in a river, a snarl of clashing motion. *I will*, Arthur said. *You know I will.*

On impulse, not quite certain why, Devon said, “Will it hurt them? The people. Over there, I mean. Us moving in. Of course we’ll be good for them, taking over, taking care of them, but - but that doesn’t mean it might not confuse them, or hurt them, so will it? While they adjust.” He’d echoed Arthur’s phrasing, about taking care of him, he realized too late.

Arthur did flinch, then. Not visibly. Internally.

Arthur did have shields, strong ones, and good training; he normally kept compartments tidily closed off, and Devon couldn’t probe much without being detected. Something about those words, though--about the phrasing, the question, the hurt and care and the way those got tangled up with love and despair--

Arthur’s heart opened up like a chasm, shocked and broken.

Devon caught glimpses of memory and pain like gilded threads plucked from a tapestry, suddenly under siege from merciless light. A woman who looked like Arthur, all auburn curls and graceful height, laughing in a kitchen, holding out a hand. A gruff happy voice that also sounded like Arthur, though older and deeper. Devon himself, unconscious and frighteningly white and limp in Arthur’s arms. Two slender fierce women bent shoulder-to-shoulder over a map, and the taste of the sea. A boy he did not recognize, perhaps a year or two younger than Devon was now, and a kiss, and what he knew--because Arthur knew, younger Arthur had known--had been a mission, and then a terrible empty lonely shockwave, a gap of screaming nothingness, and a belated attempt at a comforting hand on Arthur’s shoulder. The first woman again, still laughing, wearing a blue dress that twirled out like a bell when the tall gruff-voiced man swung her around a dance floor and smiled back at a child’s-height Arthur--and then the crumpling of their faces into something older and timeworn and utterly vacant, surrounded by hospital white, unresponsive to the sound of Arthur’s voice, the solid desperate plea of Arthur’s presence.

Arthur slammed walls back into place, hard enough to sting as they slapped Dev’s empathy in the face. Glared at him: furious, speechless, for once without a soldier’s ability to strategize, a spy’s ability to conceal.

“I’m sorry,” Devon said, and he was, he was, Arthur’s presence howled with grief that he’d caused. He was also curious. The guilt and the need to fix this won out. *I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to--*

You did. Arthur had never been this angry at him before; the anger sealed off the wound and became impenetrable steel. *You knew exactly what to say. How to say it. To make me think about--*

I didn’t mean--

Didn't you? Outwardly, for the video cameras, they'd not moved. Arthur's hand had remained around Dev's wrist. The grip had grown tighter. Enough for actual pain. Bones under pressure. *How much did you see? How much will you be telling your Commanders?*

The wrist hurt enough that Devon couldn't think; his first answer could only be made up of jagged bone-white shards. A muscle in Arthur's jaw jumped, but the pressure loosened a fraction.

I'm sorry, Devon whispered. *I swear I didn't mean to. Instinct. I don't know. Something to push.*

So you pushed.

Yes. No. I didn't plan that. I could feel something, and I didn't think about it. I won't tell anyone. Even as he made that last vow the thought burned like acid. He did have something to tell, not much but more than they'd had. The faces of those two slim swordblade women, and Arthur's loyalty to them. Resistance leaders, he thought. And the scent of salt in the air.

He could make the Commanders proud.

Arthur laughed. It was not a happy sound. *You'll tell them. Don't lie to me, kid.*

I won't, Devon breathed, futile and truthful. *I won't lie to you, and I won't tell them - not yet - I don't know. I don't - it's not much even if I did. And I won't tell them anything now.* At least he could promise that. *Not before London. Not before this mission. And I'll let you know before I do say anything.*

It was what he could offer, caught in the hurricane of demands and desires, blown and battered to bits on rocks and shoals. He hoped it'd be enough.

Arthur shifted weight. Released his captive wrist. Devon, not expecting this, wobbled at the loss of pressure, the flare of returning sensation, the pain.

Arthur swore briefly aloud too. Said, no doubt for the cameras, "Dammit, kid, tell me if I'm hurting you, I know you like it when I do but there's got to be a line, okay?" and got up and came back with towel-wrapped ice. "Let me see."

Devon, bewildered and hurting and unsure what this care might mean, let Arthur cradle his arm and determinedly did not cry. "I'm fine. I - I like it when you make me feel like I'm yours." *It's not that bad.* He held the feeling out like an apology: a bandage, a rueful flex and gesture. *It's just bruises.*

"I shouldn't've, though." Arthur didn't seem quite able to look at him. "I know I'm stronger than you. Physically, I mean, don't say you're a better psychic. I should know better."

The ice felt cold. The stiff awkward gentleness in Arthur's hands, tender despite lingering anger, felt nice.

Devon, given this kindness, inquired, *Can I ask you about some of it? You can say no.* "I like you being stronger than me. I know you are. It feels good." He did like that. Reassuring.

Secure.

You already know the answer.

Those were your parents, weren't they? He avoided the figures he'd guessed were the Resistance; he touched the shape of the others, intangibly. *They feel like you.*

Yes.

What happened?

You don't know?

No.

They're in a hospital, Arthur said flatly. Because of your Organization. Because they fought back when someone tried to take me. Psychic shattering. No one can reach them; I've tried.

I'm sorry.

Arthur's first response - *you SHOULD be, you work for them, you make excuses for them* - collided with a more self-aware and remorseful restraint, glancing at new bruises. *You weren't there.*

I know.

"You don't know anything," Arthur said out loud, and the sense of it sizzled with anguish like dying stars. "You think you do. But this, what we're doing..." *Sometimes I think that's true and you DON'T know anything. Sometimes I think you know everything and you're only toying with me. You did that too easily. Taking me apart. You could've done more. I'd've wanted to tell you. You'd've made me want to.*

I wouldn't! But even as he said it he felt the whip-crack of memories, his and Arthur's combined: convincing the Lee family to send little Jennifer to the Organization's waiting arms, bending their wants under the silk and stone weight of his own.

He went silent, confused, oddly ashamed.

"I always thought," Arthur murmured, acting for the surveillance but not more than half so, "you were dangerous, kid." *You are. You could tell someone--even someone as strong as I am--to do anything, pull a trigger or sign a treaty or step off a bridge, and it'd FEEL right to them, and they'd never question it.*

Devon swallowed, hard. That wanting to cry sensation was back. His wrist ached. Arthur believed he was dangerous, deadly, even monstrous. He did not know what to say, so he said, helplessly, "What can I do? For you. To make this better. Please."

He said it aloud. Human, as much as possible. Pulling back every strand, every glowing trace, every dancing silver thread that wove him into the world. Less frightening that way. Small and withdrawn and regretful.

That hurt in a different way--he could never be truly isolated, of course, not without serious injury to those abilities, though he could shut down his senses and build barricades and pretend--but he did not mind trying now. Penance: temporarily carving out a piece of his self.

The universe became muffled. Glimmering lights got smothered under artificial numbness. He did not like it; he did it nevertheless, and more so because he didn't.

Arthur started to speak; stopped. *What did you do?* The words brushed dimly against white slick walls, shields like muffling hospital wards, finding no purchase; Dev could hear the echo but had built layers well, at least for a few moments. Maintaining that level of insulation took effort, along with the disconcerting sense of almost-but-not-quite amputation; he'd be tired later.

"Devon," Arthur said. *What happened? Where are you? You don't feel right. Are you okay?*

Dev watched the ice melt in its bundle of kitchen towel. "Tell me something you want. Anything. I can try to get it, or to do it, or--find someone else to do it. If you want me to leave."

"It's *your* apartment," Arthur said. "Dev--"

"The plan is that I meet her at a party," Devon said. "The Prime Minister. Some sort of fancy evening gala. I've never even worn a tie before. But it won't matter, will it? Everyone'll believe that I belong there." Because I make them believe it, he thought. Because I can walk into a formal party wearing jeans and that half-transparent purple shirt Arthur says ought to be illegal on me, and no one'll bat an eye.

His favorite jeans and t-shirts and bright colors were probably stupid. Young. Casual. Part of being a kid. Not knowing anything.

The ice was melting through the towel. He moved it from the sofa to the table, which wasn't really any help. Same puddle, different place.

"They will believe you." Arthur's voice stayed very, very careful: not quite understanding, but knowing that quicksand lurked around the path, and holding out a rope. "We'll get formal evening wear anyway, it's easy enough to replicate and get tailored, and that way you'll blend in even if something slips. But you'll be fine. Is that what it is? Are you nervous?"

"No," Devon said. "Not really."

"Are we..." Arthur didn't seem to know where that sentence was going either; he shook his head and took Devon's arm again. "Come here."

"Where?" He let Arthur guide him into the bedroom, over to the bed with that plush mattress and unmade pale sheets, creamy satin backdrops for his coloring, for Arthur's: night and forests and autumn leaves sprinkled with ginger. Arthur did not strip him naked or put a big hand over his eyes or swat that hand against Dev's backside; Arthur only put both arms around him and lay down with him, holding him close, both of them fully dressed.

Devon tucked his face into Arthur's chest. Felt that breadth and that firmness surround him. Felt Arthur holding on as well, equally tight, face buried in Dev's hair.

Arthur clung to Devon like a bit of cork that'd found an anchor in a tempest. Tried to breathe. Tried to steady his own heartbeat. Devon said nothing, only nestled in even closer, as close as possible, as if trying to pour himself into Arthur's soul.

He already had, of course. Arthur could admit that to himself; he'd always been fairly self-aware. He knew. He knew how deeply he cared about Devon Lane.

Right now he felt too much. And none of that was Dev, who'd gone into some sort of hiding, present but not, muted and blank to psychic senses.

Devon had turned his world inside out. Had dredged up the faces of his parents, the way they'd been and the way they were now, the way they did not know him even when he visited the Resistance-run small hospital out near sand dunes and waving grass. Devon had taken a few words, a phrase-- *will someone get hurt?* --and run them like an arrow into one of Arthur's fault-lines: the visceral emotional need to protect, to rescue, to fight back against evil and to save someone.

He'd not been able to hold back the emotion. Which meant Dev had seen the people Arthur loved and needed to protect. Only glimpses, but that'd be enough for the Organization, with those insidious resources, to begin looking.

Hot guilt seared his soul. He breathed in, tasted the silky dark feathers of Dev's hair, felt the bed underneath them and the slim weight of the person he'd fallen in love with, pressed up against him.

He was better than this. He ought to be.

But he'd still been raw and shaken from Dev's collapse, not a loss but something that could've been. And that weak point had led to others. His memory of Mark, the first boy he'd ever kissed, older and already part of the Resistance, fierce and brave and shortly to be lost in what'd been a failed attempt to protect another child Potential. Mari and Rosa, planning, directing operations with steel resolve. His parents, yes. And Dev himself, that memory, that painful awful wondrous love that gnawed away at Arthur's chest.

How could he love Devon? How could he have come to care so much for someone so--

So *what*, he wondered. So beautiful, so excited about the world, so powerful, so loyal to the people who'd raised him?

He couldn't not love Devon for that.

And he'd hurt Dev, just now. He squeezed both eyes shut. Too large, too cruel, too angry. Not only the wrist, though that was bad enough; he and Devon both knew that as a spy and infiltrator he'd done worse to other people. And the bruises weren't that ugly, though he wished he'd not done it, and he wasn't sure whether Devon knew *that*.

He'd managed to do something else, though, something that *was* worse, and he didn't know exactly what or why or how to fix it. He didn't even know what Devon had done to himself in response, or how to fix that. He was afraid that it'd been something self-inflicted and harmful; he did not know how to reach out when his telepathy slid off slick shining walls.

Something about the moment when he'd pointed out how dangerous Dev could be. Or even a moment earlier, when he'd said, wounded and fighting back, *you don't know ANYTHING. About this, about us.*

They both did know Dev was dangerous. That wasn't a question. And it wasn't true that Devon didn't know anything. He hadn't meant it that way, not exactly. Devon was young and enthusiastic and openly emotional, but Devon also knew about loneliness and pain and divided loyalties. Dev had been the first one of them to make a choice, to offer to help Arthur get out, even if it meant his own punishment; that hadn't been a naive suggestion but rather a realistic awareness of the situation and possible harm.

Devon had tried to apologize. Had tried to navigate a compromise between desires and honesty and competing demands on his heart. When Arthur hadn't listened, he'd asked what he could do to help, backed off and given Arthur space, and nevertheless held out that slender bruised wrist for care and then followed Arthur trustingly into the bedroom.

Arthur drew in a breath, let it out. Breathed, as softly as he could, "I'm sorry," into Dev's hair.

Devon shook that head slightly, and Arthur's heart broke along multiple shatterpoints; but then Dev's lips said "For what?" into his collarbone, barely audible.

More fractures. Crystalline and poised to snap, on the brink of hope and fear: Dev at least would talk to him. He murmured into the curl of Dev's ear under silky waves, "I know you better than that. What I said. I was angry. I'm sorry."

Clumsy without telepathy, without Dev's radiant empathy meeting his on the other side, he waited. Added, after a second or two of silence, "I don't talk about any of that much. I didn't expect to feel...everything you got me to feel." That was almost a confession. Almost the words he shouldn't want to say. "And I hurt you, and I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Devon said. "It's not all you. It's a lot. In my head, right now. And you're not wrong. I know how much I don't know."

Arthur did not choke on a sob because he'd learned how not to. He'd not wept in years. "I didn't mean that."

"You did, but it's fine." Dev tipped that head up to glance at him, then back down. Those pretty grey eyes looked older. Scuff-marks on opals. Sea-pebbles kicked around and displaced from home. "I know you didn't mean it to be cruel."

Arthur, who had, at the time, at least a little, did not deserve this faith. He whispered, "You said it was a lot. In your head. Are you still recovering? Is that why--why this?" He kissed Dev's temple, lips lingering, an apology. "If you're not up to it we can say no to the mission."

“It’s not about that.” Devon actually found half a smile for him. “And we can’t say no. Or I can’t. It’s not...it’s only...here, I’ll let you back in. This’s hard anyway and I can’t do it for very long.”

Word became thought and deed; featureless awful white walls melted down to reveal complicated cool oceans of emotion, shimmering and horizonless, rising and falling like waves. Devon was tired; that felt like dull leaden air. Dev was mildly thirsty; that tasted like sandpaper and scratchy yarn. Devon wanted to be held, and that felt tiny and wistful as budding roses painted with dew.

I’m so sorry, Arthur told him, a banner printed clear and undeniable. Devon’s answer was an intangible wordless touch of memory, the weight of Arthur’s arm over his shoulders the first time they’d hugged, the quiet weary joy of gazing up at Arthur above him while Dev remained on his back with bound arms in the wake of an orgasmic peak: triumphant in the way that lay next-door to melancholy, the ebbing of wild glory, coming back to earth in secure protective hands.

Devon was an empath, not a telepath, and worked best in that realm; Arthur’d always been the opposite. They’d learned, though. Devon could put in the effort to shape words and clarity and sharper specifics; Arthur could listen to complex abstract layers and understand that for Devon it was all intertwined, sometimes multiple emotions at once, wants and worries and instincts and hopes.

He said, *I can get you water, if you’re thirsty?*

The image of a full glass and *want/yes/please* blurred into *no/not yet/stay here/don’t leave me/sorry/never meant to hurt you/promise/please believe me*, with a question mark on the end that stuck itself into Arthur’s gut like a spear.

I’m not leaving you, he whispered, and said it aloud for good measure. “I’m right here, kid, I’ve got you, I’m not going anywhere.”

Devon smiled a bit more, so Arthur leaned in. *Can I--*

The anticipation of the kiss bloomed in both their minds, along with Dev’s *yes, please*; still too quiet, but true as sunrise.

Arthur kissed him. Devon parted those lips and gave himself willingly over to being kissed, lovely and aching and wanting this, wanting him, Arthur could feel it, and felt it too.

At first Arthur only kissed him, just that, both of them still dressed and clinging to each other in the center of the bed; the morning yielded to afternoon around them, and Arthur’s mouth on Dev’s moved reverently, drawn-out and unhurried, exploring as if this were new.

Arthur’s tongue teased his mouth, discovered him, licked him up as if memorizing his taste. Devon trembled, falling from loneliness to hope to need; he wanted Arthur, and his head hurt a bit, and his wrist hurt a bit, and he wanted to belong right here in those strong arms and be

told that everything would be well, that Arthur wanted to be with him and take care of him and make him feel good.

He knew that, even if Arthur told him those things, some of it would be a lie. Arthur couldn't always take care of him. Arthur wouldn't rescue him. They wouldn't have a dream of a life, full of books and walks on the beach and the discovery of the texture of sand between toes.

He believed that Arthur *wanted* that. He did believe it; he knew emotion.

So for now, for right now: yes. He could believe it too.

Arthur said, between kisses, "Do you want--do you feel like doing this? Us." The guilt about that flickered windily as well: that *us* had been one of the things Arthur'd said Devon knew nothing about. What they did, in bed.

"I want you," Devon said, and thought, and felt for him to hear.

Arthur rolled them over enough so that Dev ended up on his back, Arthur's weight atop him, heavy and familiar. "Yeah?" *If you're sure.*

I'm sure. He wrapped a leg around one of Arthur's, rubbed a sock-clad foot over that calf. They were both more or less half-hard, growing more so, part of that leisurely slide into want. "Yes, please." He knew Arthur liked him being sweet and polite even while learning about decadence and kink; he liked the way Arthur's eyes got hotter and more intent when he said things like that. "*Please.*"

"So good." Arthur kissed him again, swift and full of relief. "Yeah, then. But first--okay, actually, first thing. You said you were thirsty. I'm getting you water. When I get back I want you naked and sitting on this bed. Got it?"

He hadn't actually said he was thirsty; Arthur must've overheard that. That didn't matter; the surveillance team assumed that, with Devon involved, there'd be non-verbal psychic exchanges. They trusted him to report those, to include anything he'd learned, and to not give anything of his own away.

He'd done most of that. He'd done *most* of that very well.

Yes, he answered. *Yes, Arthur.*

Good, Arthur told him. "Good. I'll be right back."

Momentarily alone--but not alone; Arthur's presence remained nearby, large and determined and bittersweet and full of affection--Devon hopped to both feet, flung off shirt, jeans, socks. One sock made it into the laundry chute to be carried off and handled elsewhere; one didn't, and lay there in pink-striped encouragement.

He turned back to the bed, gazed at a sheet-hill, debated his next move. Sitting down, Arthur'd said. On the side? In the center? Any particular pose?

The afternoon hummed, faintly chilly and eager. Devon, naked and trying to be good, felt his nipples harden, his skin shiver; he ran a hand over his own stomach, flat and and brown and smooth and he thought attractive, or at least Arthur seemed to like the way he looked.

He did not touch his cock, though he thought about it; the self-denial, when his erection stood fully upright and flushed, made him even harder. He would not touch; he would wait for Arthur to say so, because he wanted to belong to Arthur. He wanted Arthur's hand on his head, telling him he'd been good.

He sat very carefully on the side of the bed, hands in his lap but not caressing his cock. He ignored the dark purple and blue rising on one wrist. That'd been earlier, and Arthur regretted it; they'd both done things they wished they could take back. But this was now.

He let bare toes curl into the rug, lavish and cerulean and thick. He liked things that felt nice; he liked colors, here in his apartment, the rooms that'd been his home for so long.

Arthur came back in with water, tall and clear in a simple glass; Devon stopped playing with the rug and looked up hopefully.

Arthur laughed. "You do like being good for me, don't you? Well done." His emotions made a jumble of delight and want and dark seductive leather and deep-down relief. He was hard also, arousal pressing against loose off-duty pants; Devon licked lips at the temptation.

"We'll get to that," Arthur said, "stay put," and came over to stand in front of him. "Here."

The glass, still in Arthur's hand, touched his lips; Devon opened his mouth obediently.

Water slid across his tongue, clean and clear and delicious. He swallowed; Arthur didn't move the glass, so he drank more, swallowed more, kept drinking.

Somewhere around the third or fourth sip that hazy languid brilliance began to pool inside his head again, the way it did sometimes when they were in bed, when Arthur held him down and praised him and played with him until he came over and over in a blaze of white heat, or when Arthur stroked his hair while Devon knelt and took that big cock in his mouth. This glowing radiant drowsy feeling didn't happen every single time, but he liked it when it did, spreading molten honey through his body.

"Devon," Arthur said. *Kid? Still with me?*

Oh. A pause. Glass at his lips but lowered, tangible but not requiring that he drink more. Devon tried to catch breath and balance among waves of honey. He decided that he liked Arthur feeding him, or making him drink water: deciding what he got to have.

"Yeah," Arthur rumbled, amused, "I can tell." *I can feel it. Probably every person in the tower right now can feel it. Even through shields. And you look so--* The image was of Devon himself, dreamy-eyed and pliable, tucked between Arthur's legs and obviously aroused, cock firm and fat and wet-tipped to match his mouth.

Devon shivered. Wanted. Needed. Couldn't think. *Please...*

“Oh, Dev,” Arthur said, and put a hand on his head, stroking fingers through his hair. Devon made a sound because this felt *so good*, and the rigid hot core of want between his thighs twitched and throbbed.

“Want more?” Arthur held the glass for him again, one or two more sips. Devon was losing track; he felt soft and floaty and spun out into nothing or everything, some omnipresent dissolved form of existence in which there was only bliss. Bliss, and Arthur’s hands, and Arthur’s voice, and Arthur’s warmth, reassuring and true as hearth-fires, as signal beacons.

“I want you,” Arthur said this time, setting down the water, voice low and commanding. “Don’t ever think I don’t. I want all of you.” *Everything*.

Everything, Devon thought. He wished--

He wasn’t sure what he wished. For them not to be who they were, perhaps. Or not, because if they weren’t, they’d’ve never met. And he couldn’t wish for that.

Arthur’s thumb touched his lower lip, caught a stray drop of water like a forgotten teardrop, pressed it into his mouth. Devon shut both eyes and accepted the intrusion, the weight of Arthur’s hand, the occupying of his mouth. He let the rest of the world fade away.

Arthur pushed him back into the bed, and lost clothing in one swift motion, and knelt above him, and took him that way; perhaps a homage to the image from earlier, perhaps not, and perhaps it didn’t matter. Arthur did not tie him up or gag him or employ any of the toys that Devon had eagerly suggested ordering when first told about them; Arthur glanced at his wrist, and a raincloud shadow drifted over those blue eyes.

Arthur told him to put both hands above his head and not move them. Devon, feeling liquid and drowsy and incandescent, a candle-flame in the shape of a person, did so without protest. Arthur reached down to play with his nipples as he did, tugging and pinching hard enough to hurt, or enough that it should’ve hurt, except nothing did right now. Devon heard someone moan; it was himself.

Arthur did not bother with much prep - some, sufficient, but not so much that the first thrust did not make him gasp and cry out, huge blunt invasion entering his body. He trembled; he kept seeing Arthur through the haze of desire, empathy, telepathy, a sort of towering rapturous figure. Arthur shoved his legs up and back, hands gripping tight and nearly folding him in half, and fucked him hard and fast, some need that hovered unspoken between them, tangled up in faded anger and mutual wounds and regret and reaffirmation.

This felt real. They were real. They could feel each other.

Arthur made him come first, legs in the air, that hand back to torment Dev’s nipples; Devon sobbed blindly, lost in riotous white heat and ecstatic anguish, and surrendered, cock jerking and spilling untouched over his chest and stomach. Arthur fucked him through the peak and the oversensitivity after, prolonging his own release as far as possible. Devon, reduced to sheer incoherent sensation, could do nothing but take every pounding thrust, every brilliant starburst inside; he whimpered brokenly at the next movement, so deep and so huge and thick, hitting everywhere within him.

Arthur gasped his name, not aloud, a sudden lapidary eruption: *Devon*, like a gem or a prism or a rainbow, bursting with light, and plunged into him one more time, hardest of all. Devon's whole body shuddered helplessly, and he came apart too, one more release of self, no ability to resist.

He wasn't very awake after that, floating in the candlelight waves. He felt indistinct moments and sensations: Arthur bending to kiss him, lips oddly reverent, almost shy. Arthur easing his legs down, touching his wrist, saying something that sounded unhappy and apologetic. Arthur slipping out of him, slickness following. Arthur's hands and the swipe of towels and sips of more water, one of those hands cradling Dev's head. Arthur's hands and some sort of wrapping-up of his wrist, while that knight-errant voice said something about support and just for now and just in case.

Devon curled up into that autumn warmth when Arthur came back to lie down with him. Real, he thought again. This. Them.

"Oh, kid," Arthur said, hushed and low, and put arms around him. *Oh, Devon.*

"Mmm," Devon said, half awake, and stuck a leg through Arthur's. Arthur had more hair than he did. That was always nice, too. Interesting and scratchy and by now familiar. *Good?*

You know it was. You are. That answer spilled over into feeling, shared. "You should be resting."

"I am. You're a good pillow. Do you need to make any preparations?" *I like that. When you tell me so.*

Arthur shrugged, one-shouldered because he was supporting Dev's head. "Told you we could be ready in an hour. Not leaving until tomorrow morning. I'll give them a call after we're showered." *Devon?*

Hmm? "If you say so. Sir."

"Oh, we're going there? With the *sir*?" Arthur pinched his hip, not hard. "We can go there. Give me a few minutes. Rest first." *Can I tell you something?*

Of course. For the cameras to see, Devon only yawned, settling in. *Please. I'd like it if you did.*

I can't tell you everything. Obviously. But...this is from decades ago, and it won't be anything you haven't seen. It's just-- That other figure, that Resistance-fighter boy who'd tasted like younger Arthur's first kiss and had hair like aged gold, swam to the surface again. *His name was Mark. He was the first person I fell in love with. Or something like love. He was older than me and already a well-trained field agent even though he was only seventeen--*

A few details got hastily edited, there: time and place, giveaway information. Devon, understanding the weight of what was being offered, deliberately let those details go. He received a faint smile in turn, for that.

Anyway, Arthur finished, it was a little bit hero-worship--he was a good telepath, not as good as me but better than most of us, and he was the best shot out of us all and he was kind to everyone who showed up scared--

More editing, not quite fast enough to hide quick shadow-pantomimes of younger children, Potentials, their parents, refugees. Devon should've wanted to chase those images--they'd escaped Organization collection--but didn't do that either. Only left his head on Arthur's chest, and listened.

So it was part hero-worship and part a kid's crush, or something like that. I can't remember now. It's been too long and it wasn't more than that, not really. But he liked me back, out of everyone, and he kissed me-- Sand-dunes and moonlight and salt shimmered, for an instant. And I know you saw him in there. So I thought you should know. Who you saw. That his name was Mark. Arthur paused, purposefully tugging the mood lighter. Sunshine, not moonlight. I just wanted to tell you. Something that was me.

Thank you, Devon breathed. This did not feel adequate. It was all he had; he held out gratefulness and astonishment and wonder at the honor like a bouquet of wildflowers, ragged and heartfelt. Thank you. I won't tell anyone.

I know you won't.

Thank you for that too.

I told you because I wanted to tell you, Arthur said. I know you didn't ask me to. That's why, I think. So I could tell you something I chose to let you know.

Thank you, Devon whispered again, and pressed lips over Arthur's heart, meaning it.

"Oh, go to sleep," Arthur said aloud, ending that discussion, "you can nap for twenty minutes or so, and then I have to get up and make a call or two, okay?"

"Yes, sir," Devon agreed, and enjoyed the rumble of Arthur's amusement, and shut his eyes. He did not fall asleep, though. He thought about a boy named Mark, and Arthur choosing to share a story, and a mission. He thought about their mission, tomorrow, and the way Arthur effortlessly took command of everything, from formalwear to travel.

He did not entirely know how he felt, which for an empath was perplexing. But the world seemed to be shifting, lately, or maybe that was his heart.

He did have a mission. The Commanders trusted him. He wouldn't let them down.

He also did not want to let Arthur down. Arthur, who trusted him with those memories.

After London, he thought. I can make a decision then. I can think about choices then. Right now we have a clear goal. A purpose. Arthur and I *both* have this mission. Together. We can go and do that. What we're supposed to do.

He breathed out, and listened to Arthur's heartbeat, and let himself be comforted by the sound.

End Notes

Some songs on the playlist for this one:

My Chemical Romance, “Bulletproof Heart” and “The Only Hope For Me Is You”

Tegan & Sara, “Arrow” and “Red Belt”

Lit, “Miserable”

Better Than Ezra, “In The Blood”

The Buzzcocks, “Ever Fallen In Love (With Someone You Shouldn’t Fall In Love With)”

The Regrettes, “ ’Til Tomorrow”

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!