

Brandon's not in the room when I wake up. He's not at a table when I come down, and Malcolm hasn't seen him. I get Helen and Silver and do my best not to worry. He's way higher level than I am and he knows the city. He's going to be fine.

Silver's reluctant to venture out again, saying one of us should be around when Brandon returns. Helen laughs that off. I'm not that insensitive about it, but I remind Silver of the things I'm telling myself to keep my worry under control. Ultimately, I tell her that we can't stop living because we're worried. We're all adults, and Brandon can take care of himself.

Placated is how I'm going to describe how she is after that, but I have to head back to the library. I still need to figure out what The Nox is referring to.

I have my hood up before we're out the door, then I take Adam to Woodland because those are the busiest roads I know of that take me to the library. While I feel eyes on me even as I mix with the crowd, I'm counting on Brandon being right when he said the people who'd try anything prefer acting where no one will see them. So my best protection is the crowd.

So, of course, when I hear the cry of distress over the bustle of the people around me, I'm nearly in the alley before the utter stupidity of what I'm about to do registers. It sounds like they are in pain, and it sounds so fucking real and even knowing I've fallen for that trick before, my willpower bar flashes and a quarter of it vanishes before I'm able to step away.

I don't feel good about it. Even telling myself it was almost certainly a trap doesn't help. Or that no one else bothered reacting to it. They might have grown callous to other people's pain here, but I haven't. I don't want to ever reach that point. Which means we need to get out of this city as soon as possible.

There are two other attempts at getting me to enter the alleys, and the second one doesn't even cost me willpower. At that point, it's obviously a ploy. I mean, I hope it is; I don't want to think that so many people get hurt in this city and that I'm not doing anything about it.

I make it to the library without being accosted or even robbed. My kidnappers' comments about someone being able to access my inventory was a reminder that thieves don't need to actually put their hands on me to steal from me. I've been keeping an eye on my inventory.

The guard's surprised as I approach and I can't tell if it's because I'm here, in which case I should be worried, or because I'm without Brandon. I chose to give him the benefit of the doubt, and immediately hate myself for being ready to equip my sword.

He hasn't done anything to warrant me being that suspicious, I tell myself. And I can't help adding the 'yet'.

"Hi," I start. Probably the lamest greeting of all time, but I'm distracted. "Look, I wanted to apologies for how Brandon treated you the other day. I really appreciate you letting me in."

He stares at me in surprise. When he speaks, it's hurriedly. "It's okay. He didn't say anything that—" he stopped and looks around me like he expect a monster to round the corner. "He isn't with you?" Or Brandon.

I shake my head and go for casually nonchalant and smile. "No, he doesn't need

anything from the library and figures I can handle myself.” The way his eyes lock on me, widen, and he then takes a step back before hurrying to open the door tells me it might not have been the way to respond. I try to apologize, but I have no idea what I can say. If me being as none threatening as I know how to be is causing that reaction, what will trying to put him at ease do?

I thank in and step in, wondering if the reaction is because of what he’s experienced in the city, or if it’s because of what Brandon told him on that first day. I decide that I probably don’t want to know either way and look for a table to sit at.

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I look at everything I’ve written on my makeshift map as I drink from my lukewarm water skin. I distractedly make a note to look for one that’s going to keep the content cold, as I try to find out what’s nagging at me.

I have twenty-three locations that contain ‘nox’ in their names; twenty-eight if I include those that are on the line of being inside or outside the search zone. I’ve matched three of the names to places already named on Aaron’s map, like the Knoxville in Tennessee, but on his map, it’s clearly lower than Nashville. Most of the names fall in areas with nothing on his map, at best there are dots with a letter above them, possibly the initial for the location’s name, or some sort of indexing system he put together with the list in the locked section of the journal. I’m inclined to think that’s what it is, because I can find A to Z, and then AA and moving up to AK. If that’s the case, we don’t have a choice, we’re going to Kansas City. But it also means the odds of Xander working it out before us remain low.

Then the odd one out registers.

FK. In the middle of the search zone, below Louisville.

And I have a name in the same general area; Fort Knox.

FK.

Honestly, I can’t even say it’s clever. It’s even so obvious I should have made the connection as soon as I had the name. Too tired from all the reading is the only excuse I can give myself. But not too tired not to call up a book on it.

I don’t know if there’s an easy way for Xander to know what books I look at, or what my queries were, but the system knows everything and it’s just a question of him formulating the right query.

I’m halfway through the two hours of picking books from my previous queries I’ve decided on when I slip the one about Kentucky. A quick flipping to the entry for Fort Knox and I’m reading. I spent about fifteen minutes with the other books, so I have this long to get as much information as I can.

So, Fort Knox was a military base that held part of the United states’s gold reserve. On US route 31W.

I whistle at that. Okay, so, the little I know about ruins, from what Brandon said, is that they come about in places that had something of interest. That Disney ruin, the Mall of America. If a gold reserve isn’t something of interest, I don’t know what is.

Hopefully Brandon’s going to be able to make use of that route thing to get us there. I find population numbers, numbers of servicemen, equipment and other things I can’t come up with reasons it might be useful, but still write down.

Then I close the book and move on to the next one. It’s difficult for me to keep

going. I want to run off and tell Brandon; see what he can make of the information. When I'm done, it's hard not to run out of the library. I'd be an idiot to think Xander doesn't have people watching me, on top of the bounty on my head. So I can't give away I have the information.

The guard jumps when I open the door, then stands well enough away that I look around for an attack. But I'm the reason he's nervous, it seems. If I had time, I'd reassure him, but I need to get back to the club.

Not running costs me willpower. That's something I never thought I'd have to deal with. Not a lot, but still. I've never been this excited in my life and I have to hold back. My need to tell Brandon even overrides my desire to respond to the cry of distress I hear.

When I don't see him in the club, I head for the bar. "Have you seen Brandon?" I ask Malcolm.

"Sorry, hun. He hasn't been by yet."

I curse. "Any idea where he might be? It's important."

Malcolm chuckles. "He's not in the habit of telling me what he's up to. He knows I'm going to keep him from doing the more stupid stuff. And that the stuff he really enjoys."

"Any idea how I can go about finding him, then?"

"I might be able to help with that," a deep voice says and the guy against the bar who'd just registered as large and dark-skinned in my hurry to talk with Malcolm turns to face me. First thing that registers is the fur. Short and dark brown. The face has a short muzzle that makes me think bear and the expression as he looks me over makes it clear how he expects me to pay.

And I don't tell him to fuck off outright.

Shit, would I? If it means getting Brandon so we can get out of here?

"Harry," Malcolm says, while I'm trying to work out how I feel, and how far I'm willing to go. "Leave Dennis alone. If you need that big rod of your polished, I'll be happy to lend you a hand."

The comment makes me look down, and the crotch is certainly filled enough that 'big' comment might not be an exaggeration.

"I think the kid is more than willing to—"

I look up at the abrupt stop and Harry is looking at the ceiling, a thin sword blade under his muzzle.

"Are you going to keep that brain of your out of his pants?" Malcolm asks with a clear threat in his voice. The nod is small, then the blade vanishes back in his inventory.

"You don't usually protect anyone like this," Harry says, rubbing his throat.

"What can I say? I happen to like Dennis. So, what are you going to ask for your services?"

The smile is back, but vanishes at Malcolm's disappointed sigh.

I can't believe how conflicted I am about this. I mean, I don't want to have sex with him. And yes, a large part is because of Josie. But if that's the only way I get to find Brandon? I'm a bit disappointed at myself that I'm willing to entertain the possibility.

"A night," Harry says.

"Harry," Malcolm warns, and the bear looks at him.

"A night of you in my bed, as rough as I like it. Since you like him so much, I figure

you might want to pay in his place.”

Malcolm laughs. “As rough as *you* like? Make is as rough as *I* like, and we have a deal.”

“Malcolm,” I start.

“Oh, shush, Dennis. We can discuss how you will pay me back later. But if Harry here is willing to strike this bargain, I am certainly interested in it.”

The bear looks uncertain and I almost tell him he doesn’t have to, then I remember he’s the one who initiated this and I figure he can get himself out of it without help.

“Alright,” Harry says. “A night in my bed, as rough as you like it, after Dennis no longer needs my services.” He offers his hand to the barman.

Malcolm takes it, then pulls hard enough Harry’s breath escapes him as he hits the counter. They are nose to muzzle and Malcolm smiles. “Honey, keep in mind that if I find out you put the moves on Dennis while you are helping him. As rough as I like, will become as rough as you deserve.”

The nod is vigorous, and then Malcolm kissed Harry’s nose.

“Then we have a deal. You two have fun now.” And he goes back to serving one of the explorer like nothing happened.

Harry looks at me like I’m some sort of creature he’s never seen before, and I can’t shake the feeling he actually regrets the deal now.