

## Heaven Help Us

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/231227) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/231227>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Explicit</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">Graphic Depictions Of Violence</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">My Chemical Romance</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Frank Iero/Gerard Way</a> , <a href="#">Ray Toro/Mikey Way</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Frank Iero</a> , <a href="#">Mikey Way</a> , <a href="#">Gerard Way</a> , <a href="#">Ray Toro</a> , <a href="#">Bob Bryar</a> , <a href="#">Brian Schechter</a> , <a href="#">Craig Aaronson</a> , <a href="#">Original Characters</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Alternate Universe - Religious</a> , <a href="#">Religious Themes &amp; References</a> , <a href="#">Christianity</a> , <a href="#">Catholic Character</a> , <a href="#">Torture</a> , <a href="#">Psychological Trauma</a> , <a href="#">Blood</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe - Career</a> , <a href="#">Pining</a> , <a href="#">Grief</a> , <a href="#">Resurrection</a> , <a href="#">Mind Control</a> , <a href="#">Possession</a> , <a href="#">Friendship</a> , <a href="#">True Love</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 3 of <a href="#">Unholiverse</a>
Stats:	Published: 2011-07-30 Words: 68,251 Chapters: 1/1

## Heaven Help Us

by [Bexless](#)

### Summary

“It would seem,” the Cardinal finished, “that Father Way’s body has disappeared.”

There was a silence. Eventually Bob said, “What the fuck?”

“Yes,” said the Cardinal. “Quite.”

### Notes

Third in a series, following I Have Been All Things Unholy and Staring Through the Demons. I have to thank everyone who listened to me go on about this without actually seeing it, particularly Omniguy, Olivia Circe and Sunsetmog. Strobelighted for an amazing and as-yet uncredited proofread of all three stories, and Fvckofagun for the final stamp of approval.

None of these stories, however, would have been written without Wax Jism and Shoemaster. Seriously, guys, the whining these two have had to endure. The whining. They are so patient and so enthusiastic and so awesome, and they have ideas I ought to have myself and let me use them, they put up with my technofailure and me getting my British all over everything and changing my mind every three minutes, and I just wish to publicly shower them with hearts because they deserve it. \*showers\*

Finally thank you to everyone who read the last two and let me know they were still looking forward to this one despite my unforgivable snail-speed, you're awesome.

Frank had never been on a plane before, and so far he hated it. His legs were cramping from being folded up for so long, the air tasted stale and recycled, and the pillow he was supposed to sleep on was smaller than any human head, he was pretty sure.

Even worse was the fact that nobody else seemed to have a problem sleeping at all; not Ray with his freakishly long legs, or Bob and his giant head. Even Mikey was slumped in the seat next to Frank with his eyes closed and his mouth open. The only person apart from Frank who was still awake was the annoying dude a few rows back who kept coughing every seven seconds. Well, and the pilot. Frank hoped, anyway.

Frank sighed and readjusted the stupid tiny pillow for the umpteenth time. It was so quiet on the plane, with everyone sleeping. Frank was totally alone with his thoughts, which was the absolute last place he wanted to be. Every time he let his inner guard down and tried to relax or breathe or tell himself to be patient or something, he would immediately flash back to Gerard lying in Mikey's arms, or the look on Brian's face when the Suits took the body away, or the way Frank had spoken to Gerard the night before –

Frank swallowed sharply and shook his head, warding off the memory. He rubbed his hands over his face, which didn't help because every time he closed his eyes he saw Gerard's face. He tipped his head back against the seat and stared at the ceiling instead, resigning himself to wakefulness.

"I slept with Toro."

Frank startled, turning to Mikey, who had cracked one eye open and rolled it slightly in Frank's direction, peering out at him from under the lid.

"What?" said Frank.

"Toro," Mikey repeated, opening the other eye and turning his head all the way towards Frank. "I slept with him."

Frank stared. "When?"

Mikey frowned slightly. "Like, yesterday? Maybe the day before. I don't remember."

Frank could relate. He actually felt like it was still the same day it had been when Gerard died.

"We kissed before," Mikey continued. "When you and Gee were fighting."

Frank winced. He couldn't think about that at all. He couldn't think about it or he would just throw himself out of the plane. Instead he looked across to where Ray was asleep in the aisle seat. He didn't really know what to say – none of his usual responses to one of Mikey's sex stories seemed appropriate. He hesitated, then asked, "Was it just because you're sad?"

"I don't know." Mikey lifted one shoulder. "I honestly can't tell."

"Shit." Frank sat back in his seat. He made himself think about the way Ray was, how he'd gone to work early every morning at the shop so Mikey could get his hair done, how worried he'd been when Mikey met Pete, the way his face looked when Mikey made him laugh. "Shit," he said

again, realization dawning. "Toro's into you. Of course he is. How the fuck did I miss that?"

Mikey shrugged the other shoulder. "Same way the other guys missed you and Gee, I guess."

Frank didn't know what to say to that. He looked down at his lap and rubbed his thumb over Gerard's rosary, wrapped around his wrist.

"We're supposed to be able to trust each other with our lives," Mikey said. Frank looked up, but Mikey was staring straight ahead, his jaw set. "And then we don't tell each other shit."

"But you knew," Frank said. "I didn't think – Mikey, you knew."

Mikey shook his head. "That's not the point."

Frank knew he was right, but he didn't know how to explain it. The things he'd kept to himself – the secret conversations, the nights he'd force himself to stay awake just so they could talk when nobody else was listening – he hadn't hidden them just because he knew Mikey would be pissed. It was because they were the only things of Gerard that Frank had all to himself, the only time Frank got something from Gerard that nobody else did.

He said honestly, "I thought Gerard would tell you."

"Yeah, well." Mikey pushed his fingers under his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "He didn't."

Frank was secretly glad. He looked out of the window so Mikey wouldn't see it in his face. He moved the rosary around his wrist.

Eventually Mikey said, "I don't think it is. Just because I'm sad, I mean."

Frank looked at him. He pressed his foot against Mikey's. When Mikey pressed back, Frank said, "Then you should tell him."

"I don't know." Mikey shifted in his seat, rolling his shoulders. "I can't even...I don't even really feel like a person," he admitted, shooting Frank a wary, sideways glance. "Do you know what I mean?"

"I know exactly," said Frank, wishing he didn't.

"Yeah." Mikey closed his eyes for a moment, then scooted down in his seat and put his head on Frank's shoulder. Frank turned towards him, resting his cheek on the top of Mikey's head.

It was still really quiet on the plane. Frank felt like his whisper was really loud when he asked Mikey the question he was afraid to hear the answer to, but couldn't keep to himself. "Mikey? Do you think he's alive?"

Mikey was quiet for a long time before he said, "I don't know."

It wasn't the answer Frank wanted, but it was the best he was going to get. He closed his eyes, and tried to sleep.

\*

The airport was loud and crazy and full of people yelling in Italian. Frank pretty much just grabbed on to the back of Brian's jacket and held on for dear life, until he found himself being herded towards a dude in sunglasses who was holding a sign that said, 'M. Way.'

"Uh," said Mikey when they got close enough. "That's me, I guess."

The dude – he wasn't a Suit, which Frank was kind of surprised by; somehow in Frank's head all Vatican employees looked like they'd jumped out of the Matrix - kind of looked Mikey up and down, then nodded and walked off quickly in the opposite direction.

"Come on," Brian urged, jogging Frank's elbow. "He's our ride."

Outside the airport was another dude in sunglasses, and two shiny black cars, the kind Frank had only ever ridden in for funerals. He wasn't that crazy about getting in, especially when he realized they wouldn't all fit into the same one.

"I thought we agreed to stay together no matter what," Bob hissed. Frank nodded hard.

"You want to sit on my lap, Bryar, be my guest," said Brian. "You ride with Ray and Mikey, okay? Frank's with me."

Bob looked unsure, but he nodded. Over his shoulder, Frank could see Ray's hand low down on Mikey's back, guiding him towards the car.

"I feel like I'm in a dream," Brian confided to Frank when they were pulling out of the airport.

"Don't tell me that, dude," Frank said. "You're supposed to be the one who knows what he's doing."

Brian kind of laughed. "Right," he said quietly. He heaved his bag onto his lap and started rifling through it, probably checking he had all their passports for the ninetieth time since they got off the plane. "Do you know if there's like, another border control at the Vatican? It's technically its own country, right?"

"I don't know," Frank shrugged. "I mean, it is, I think, but I don't know about passports and stuff."

"I guess we'll find out when we get there." Brian moved more shit around in his bag and frowned. "Shit, I forgot to buy an adapter. Now we can't charge our phones."

"So we'll buy one," Frank told him. "Brian, we're in Rome. It's not exactly a backwater."

Brian kind of hesitated, then deflated a little. He worried the strap of his bag in his hands. "I just wish I could do something," he said. "I feel like there's nothing I can do for you."

"Don't worry about me," Frank flapped his hand at Brian. "Worry about Mikey."

"I worry about all of you," said Brian. He sat back in his seat and looked out of the window.

The ride to Vatican City was completely uneventful, although Frank was absolutely incapable of stopping himself turning around every two seconds to make sure the other car was still behind them. He caught Brian doing it a bunch of times, too. When they finally arrived, they were met by a small, bespectacled man in neat robes who introduced himself as Cardinal Pierce's assistant. He led them down a maze of hallways, then opened a door which led to what could easily have been a suite in a nice hotel. Clearly there was no expense being spared at the Vatican, Frank thought.

"We hope you will find these rooms comfortable," the assistant said. "You must be tired from your journey. You will rest tonight. The Cardinal wishes to meet with you first thing after Mass tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow?" Brian shook his head. "The guy just dragged us halfway across the world with no explanation and he thinks we're going to wait until tomorrow? We want to see him now."

The assistant turned his cool, even gaze on Brian. "You are tired from your journey," he said firmly. "Food will be brought shortly. You will meet with the Cardinal in the morning."

He nodded, once, and closed the door on his way out.

"Well," said Bob to the door. "I guess that's that."

"I can't believe they're just going to leave us hanging overnight," Ray said after they'd eaten. He was sitting on the floor with his back against the wall, knees drawn up to his chest. "I mean seriously, unforeseen circumstances? What does that even mean?"

"What if he didn't really die and he's just sick or something?" said Mikey suddenly. "What if they realized he was still alive on the way here?"

"I don't understand why they wouldn't have taken us straight to him," Brian said gently. "If that were the case."

"What if-" Bob started, and then cut himself off. He hunched his shoulders and shook his head. "Never mind."

Mikey looked at him. "What?"

Bob hesitated, then said, "You don't want to hear it."

"Probably all the more reason for you to say it, dude," Frank said, getting ready to move closer to Mikey just in case.

Bob didn't look happy about it, but he took a deep breath and said, "What if it isn't really about Gerard? What if they just wanted to get us here because – because they know that we know more than we should. About like," Bob waved his hand around in a way that was obviously meant to indicate the entire inner workings of the Catholic Church. "What if it's a trap?"

"No," Frank said. "Gerard would have warned us."

"Okay," said Bob. "Yeah, no, he would've."

They lapsed into silence again. There was nothing to say except why and what if, and none of them had any answers. The chair Frank was sitting on was seriously uncomfortable, and he fidgeted ceaselessly until finally Brian said,

"Frankie, did you sleep at all on the plane?"

"No," Frank sighed. "I can't sleep sitting up."

"That's a damn lie," said Ray, smiling a little bit. "You could sleep standing on your head."

Frank made the effort to curl one corner of his mouth in response.

"Why don't you lie down?" Brian suggested. "Even if you can just doze a little."

"I'm fine," Frank protested.

Brian made his stern face. "You are not. You look like you're going to pass out. The last thing we

need is for you to get sick."

The thing was that Frank totally was tired, he was just afraid to be by himself in a room with nothing but his guilt for company. He let Brian usher him into the adjoining room, though, and curled up on one of the beds.

"We'll wake you if anything happens," Brian promised him, and then pulled the door closed.

It was warm in the room, but Frank tugged the covers up around his ears anyway, bundling himself up inside them. The food, which hadn't tasted like anything while he was eating it, was suddenly heavy and sullen inside his stomach, protesting every movement. The quiet and the dark seemed oppressive and accusatory, and Frank pulled one hand out from under the covers so he could unwind Gerard's rosary from around his wrist. He caught it between his fingers instead, holding the first bead between his thumb and forefinger. Each bead was carved with tiny roses, twisting around in a pattern like vines, and Frank held it close to his face so he could make it out in the darkness, and follow the path with his eyes.

Frank had never used it to actually pray a Rosary, but he liked counting the beads, testing them one by one to make sure they weren't loose or cracked or damaged at all. He had to concentrate in the darkness, too, and fight against his own drowsy eyes, so there was no room in his thoughts for anything else. He started off counting them individually, then in fives, then tens, then individually again, and at some point he must have dozed off despite himself because the next thing he knew he was sitting bolt upright in bed with his hands pressed over his chest, where he could feel his heart banging like it was trying to get out.

"Bad dream," he said to himself, taking a deep breath, and then another. "Just a bad dream."

He couldn't remember it, but he felt the familiar sickly unease lingering down his spine and in the back of his throat. He was glad he couldn't remember it. Lately Frank's dreams were something he tried to avoid.

Frank ran his hands over the bed, looking for the rosary. When he couldn't find it, he kicked the covers off and slipped out of bed, fumbling to switch on the lamp on the nightstand. The rosary was lying on the floor, and Frank knelt on the rug to pick it up carefully, making sure he hadn't broken it in his sleep.

The light from the lamp was fairly dim, but warm enough for Frank to look around the room. There was a low dresser running along one wall, and in the corner was a small table with a picture of the Virgin Mary hanging on the wall above it. It was Frank's favorite kind of icon, the kind where she looked sad but calm. He shuffled closer on his knees so he could see where the details were picked out in gold – the cross around her neck, the halo illuminating her plain, beautiful face. He found himself wondering if she knew what they were going through, if she cared. If she knew how sorry Frank was. If she would forgive him. If she knew where Gerard was, if he was safe, if he was with her. If she would give him back if Frank promised to be better.

He knelt there for a long time, just looking up at her. Then there was a click, and a slice of brighter light fell across the wall. Frank turned around to see Brian standing uncertainly in the doorway.

"I heard your voice," he said hesitantly, eyes skipping from Frank's hands up to the icon of Mary on the wall. "Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt."

"I wasn't," Frank started, feeling unaccountably guilty, like Brian had just caught him doing something he shouldn't have done. He looked down at his own hands, clutching the rosary, and up at Mary, and then back down at himself, on his knees on the floor. "Oh," he said. "I guess I was."

He met Brian's eyes and lifted his chin a little. Whatever, Frank hadn't done anything wrong. What was Brian going to do, give him shit for it?

Brian hesitated another second, then came into the room and closed the door behind him. He came over to stand next to Frank. "You mind some company?"

Frank shrugged, hitching his shoulder up. "Be my guest."

Brian knelt, crossing himself quickly. He folded his hands in his lap and closed his eyes, head bowed.

Frank watched him for a minute. It was weird. All the times they'd been to church over the last year, it had never occurred to him that anyone other than Gerard was actually doing any praying.

Brian cracked one eye open. "This isn't a spectator sport."

"Sorry," Frank said immediately, turning back to Mary and her unchanging expression. Maybe that was the appeal, he thought. You could say anything you wanted and never get looked at like you were crazy, or a terrible person, or both.

\*

In the morning, they didn't have to wait long. Someone brought more food, and then the assistant appeared.

"The Cardinal will see you now," he said when Bob opened the door. "You will follow me."

"What's all this 'you will' shit?" Bob whispered to Frank as they followed the assistant down endless winding hallways, each one indistinguishable from the last. "It's like we signed all our rights away at the door."

"Bob," Ray murmured, "Remember we talked about how not to be reassuring?"

They turned another corner and then the assistant came to a halt in front of a tall double door, dark wood with handles that looked like gold. He knocked twice, and after a minute there was a soft reply from inside. The assistant opened the door, said something in Italian that Frank didn't understand, and then stood back, sweeping his arm out to the side.

"After you," he said.

They all paused for a second, then Brian marched into the room, the rest of them trailing after him. They found themselves standing in a room unlike any Frank had ever been in before – the high ceiling, the deep red drapes that swept all the way to the floor, the wide, polished desk and the spindle-legged chairs with their plush upholstery – all of it screamed *vow of poverty, my ass*.

"Mr. Way," said a voice, and they turned to see a man in red robes standing by the bookcases that lined the other side of the room. "My name is Cardinal Pierce."

The Cardinal was tall, and fairly elderly, which Frank was expecting. He was American, though, which Frank was not. He had a narrow, kindly face, and white hair, and he didn't *look* like he was going to throw them in Vatican prison or anything. He came forward and stretched his hand out to Mikey. When Mikey took it, the Cardinal placed his other hand over the back of Mikey's.

"Thank you for coming," he said. "I know this is a very difficult time for you."

He released Mikey's hand and turned to Brian. "Mr. Schechter," he said, shaking Brian's hand, and then addressing the rest of them in turn. "Mr. Toro. Mr. Bryar. And you," he said finally, turning to Frank, "must be Mr. Iero."

Frank shook the Cardinal's hand when he offered it. "Must I?" he said warily.

The Cardinal smiled a little bit. "Father Way thought a lot of you. All of you," he said, letting go of Frank's hand and turning to include the other guys in his address. "I should very much have liked to meet you under different circumstances."

Frank should very much have liked to know how the fuck he knew what they all looked like, but he just nodded and took a step closer to Mikey.

"Please," said the Cardinal, moving around his desk. "Take a seat. That will be all, Antonio, *grazie*."

The assistant nodded, and closed the doors.

"I imagine," said the Cardinal once they were all seated, "that you are wondering why I asked you to come."

"You could say that," Brian said dryly.

"Is my brother alive?" Mikey burst out suddenly, leaning forwards in his chair. "Is that why we're here?"

The Cardinal's face fell a little, and he shook his head. "I'm afraid I have no such good news for you," he said sorrowfully. "And I'm sorry that I couldn't say more on the phone."

"You're not on the phone now," Frank said, losing patience. "Start talking."

"Frank," Ray said warningly, but the Cardinal waved his hand.

"Your friend is quite right," he said. "So let me tell you what happened. When my associates arrived at the scene of the events in Chicago-

"You mean Howard and those guys?" Mikey interrupted.

The Cardinal nodded. "Father Way's body was removed and transported immediately to the airport, where it was loaded onto a private plane that took off within minutes. On arrival in Rome, Father Way's body was brought straight here, where it was scheduled for immediate examination."

Frank really wished the Cardinal would stop referring to Gerard as a body, as 'it'. He hated the thought of it, Gerard cold and all alone, locked in a coffin, getting carted around like a piece of meat. It made it seem like – like he was really dead.

"At no point," the Cardinal was saying, "was the body attended by anyone other than Howard and his colleagues."

"If you've brought us here just to brag about your awesome dead-body transportation," Bob began, shutting up when Brian threw him a sharp glance.

"What I am trying to tell you," the Cardinal went on, "is that Father Way's body was never left alone. Not for one second between Chicago and the Vatican. However, when the capsule was opened up so the examination could begin, it was found to be empty."



Frank blinked and looked at Mikey, who was staring with giant eyes.

"It would seem," the Cardinal finished, "that Father Way's body has disappeared."

There was a silence. Eventually Bob said, "What the *fuck*?"

"Yes," said the Cardinal. "Quite."

Frank sat back in his chair, stunned. He turned to see the other guys doing the same, and they just stared helplessly at each other for a minute. For all the what-ifs they'd thrown at each other over the last twenty-four hours, this particular scenario had somehow never come up.

The Cardinal pressed a button on his phone, and a second later the door opened and a young woman entered, carrying a tray of what smelled like really awesome coffee.

"*Grazie*, Cesca," said the Cardinal, and the young woman nodded before slipping out of the room. The Cardinal rose up from his seat and pushed the plunger on the cafetière. "I know that your grief is still raw," he said quietly, not looking at any of them. "And it is not my wish to upset any of you further. But I hoped you might be able to help us solve this mystery."

"What can we do?" Mikey said immediately.

The Cardinal started pouring coffee into the cups on the tray. Ray leaned forward to help him pass them out. "You can tell me everything you know about Father Way's last days. The case in Chicago, the people involved. Anything he might have said to you, any events in his personal life, anything at all. We were able to piece together most of the information from a notebook Howard removed from Father Way's pocket at the scene, but obviously we're missing something."

"Wait a minute," said Ray, frowning. "You think *we* know what happened to Gerard's body? With all due respect, Sir, we're not the ones who're stingy with the information."

"That's as may be," the Cardinal allowed, setting a jug of cream and a bowl of sugar lumps out on his desk, like the world's weirdest tea party. "But I believe in this instance you may hold the key without realizing it. So will you help us?"

"Of course," Brian answered for all of them. "Anything we can do to help the Father, we will."

The Cardinal settled back in his chair. "Thank you," he said, stirring some sugar into his coffee. He brought it up to his face and sipped, delicately. "In your own time."

Frank was starting to panic a little bit. He wanted to help, he did, but were they really going to tell the Cardinal everything? The events in Gerard's personal life leading up to his death were pretty much *Frank*, and while Frank might not be on board with the Vatican's whole Team Homophobia thing, he also wasn't about to go posthumously outing Gerard to his boss.

He tried to telegraph that to Mikey with his eyebrows. Mikey turned to Brian, who dropped his eyelids at Frank a little bit, like, *let me do the talking*. Frank sat back in his chair and tried to stay calm.

Brian started with the end of their last job, the one with the runes and the exploding sacred flame thing. That was when they'd had the assignment to go to Chicago, so he told the Cardinal about how their van had died on the way, and how they'd met Pete and he'd offered them a ride.

"I see," the Cardinal nodded. "And Father Way knew immediately that Mr. Wentz was involved in the case somehow?"

"No," Ray put in. "Actually, that was Mikey."

The Cardinal turned his eyes on Mikey and looked at him for a long moment. "I see."

Mikey shifted a little in his chair, not meeting anyone's eyes.

Brian went on, relaying the tale of Danny and Mark, of Pete's exhaustion, how they'd found the ball thing – a sphera, the Cardinal said it was called - with the symbols on it. He somehow managed to leave a bunch of stuff out without ever really lying, although when it came to the night before Gerard's death, he admitted, "You should – you should probably know that Frank and the Father were fighting."

The Cardinal raised an eyebrow at Frank. "Might I ask the cause of your disagreement?"

Frank glanced at Mikey, who shrugged. Frank said, "Let's just say I have a few problems with company policy."

"Anyway," Brian said quickly. He went on with the story, all the way up to Gerard switching places with Frank at the last minute.

"He hit you?" The Cardinal looked surprised for the first time all morning. "That seems a little out of character for Father Way."

"You're telling me," said Frank. His cheekbone was still a little tender, actually, but there wasn't a bruise or anything. If Frank had been expecting the punch, it probably wouldn't have even knocked him off his feet. He pressed his fingers under his eye, remembering. He didn't mind that it hurt.

"And then Howard and those guys showed up," Brian went on. "And it seemed like a lot of those people with the ball things, uh, spheras, got away – but then Howard did something so the fans wouldn't remember it."

Mikey frowned. "I don't remember any of this."

"You were kind of out of it," Ray told him. He covered Mikey's hand with his own.

'Out of it' was kind of an understatement. Mikey hadn't even seemed like he knew he was still breathing until the next day. Frank wasn't exactly clear on what had happened right after Gerard died either, but he remembered that the Suits were there for a long time, that it didn't seem to go nearly as smoothly as it usually did when they were around. Mostly he just remembered it was chaos.

"Wait a minute," said Bob, leaning forward. "Some of those people with the spheras got away, but not all of them. Your guys bring people here, right? People who do bad stuff? They must know something about Gerard's body, why don't you interrogate them?"

"We have," the Cardinal said, nodding. "But so far they are disturbingly silent on the matter, and as we do not condone violence or torture, there is only so much we can do."

"But you must be able to make them talk," Mikey protested.

The Cardinal spread his hands. "Usually we don't have to. A particular personality trait of the kind of individual we deal with is immense pride, huge arrogance. Usually they can't wait to tell us what they did, and how they did it. It is extremely rare that this many people are working together, and it would seem they have taken a vow of silence on the matter."

"Give me five minutes in a room with one of them," Bob said grimly, "and there'll be no damn vow."

"Seriously," said Frank. Just the thought of coming face to face with one of those motherfuckers made Frank's hands ball into fists.

"That won't be necessary," said the Cardinal. "The best way for you to help us is with information."

"But that's all we have," Ray said anxiously. "Brian just told you everything we know."

The Cardinal looked at them all in turn, silently. Frank fidgeted in his seat when it was his turn – it was like the dude could see right into his brain, seriously. Eventually the Cardinal said, "All right. I have another meeting this afternoon, but I would be very pleased if you would dine with me this evening. Antonio will come to your rooms."

It obviously wasn't a request, so there was no point in trying to decline.

"I know I don't need to impress upon you how important it is that you speak to nobody but me about these events," the Cardinal said as they stood up to leave. "This is an extremely delicate matter."

"My brother's dead," Mikey told him. "You don't need to tell me anything except where the hell his body is."

The Cardinal nodded. On cue, Antonio appeared, ready to escort them back to their rooms.

"Oh, and gentlemen," the Cardinal called after them. "I would recommend you stay within Vatican City limits while this investigation is ongoing. For your own safety, you understand."

"I understand exactly nothing," Frank said under his breath to Mikey as they followed Antonio back through the winding hallway maze. "Except that this is creepy as hell."

Mikey didn't reply, though, and as soon as they got back to their quarters he went straight into the other room and closed the door behind him.

"I think he was still hoping they were just going to say Gee was still alive," Frank said, starting towards the door. Then he stopped and turned around, slowly, and looked at Ray. "Hey, Toro, why don't you see if he's okay?"

Ray blinked in surprise. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah." Frank made himself step back, even though the urge to run in there was really strong. "Just come get me if he asks?"

"Of course." Ray rubbed his hands nervously against his jeans, threw kind of a shifty glance at Bob and Brian, then went inside, closing the door gently behind him.

Bob looked at Frank. "What was that about?"

It wasn't for Frank to tell, though, so he just shrugged and went to look out of the window. Watching the people around outside made him realize how restless he was feeling. When it became clear that Ray had the Mikey situation under control, Frank said, "He only said we had to stay in Vatican City, right? Not the rooms."

"I don't think we're prisoners, Frankie," Brian said absently. He was digging in his bag again. "Go for a walk if you want to."

They might not be prisoners, but Frank still trusted the Vatican exactly not at all, and he wasn't afraid to admit he didn't want to go wandering around by himself. He jerked his chin at Bob. "You wanna come with?"

Bob nodded. "Fuck yeah. Schechter?"

Brian waved them off. "I'm looking for something. Take your phones."

When they made it outside, Bob slung his arm around Frank's shoulders. "How're you doing?" he wanted to know. "Really?"

"Shitty," Frank said honestly. Bob squeezed the back of his neck. "He's still dead."

"Yeah." Bob rubbed his shoulders a little before letting go. "Shitty's right."

Frank thought, not for the first time, that Bob was the best person in the world to have around when you really didn't want to talk about it. He let you know that he gave a shit, but he didn't get all in your face about it.

There were super-long lines of noisy tourists waiting to get inside the Sistine Chapel and places like that, but that was okay, because Frank didn't feel like looking at a bunch of religious art anyway. He was content – or as content as he could be – to walk around with Bob and wonder about the time Gerard had spent in the Vatican, whether he'd walked down that alley or sat on those steps.

He didn't know what the fuck he was supposed to think about Gerard's body going missing. Maybe it wasn't true, maybe the Cardinal was just messing with them – but he really didn't seem like a jerk, and besides what could he possibly have to gain? The only explanation Frank could come up with was that the Suits had done something with Gerard's body before they arrived in Rome, but he wasn't quite ready to start throwing around accusations of an inside job.

In a strange way he would never admit to anyone else, he was kind of glad he had something to think about apart from what an asshole he'd been and how he could never tell Gerard he was sorry. Frank wasn't big on guilt, usually, but this was eating him alive, as if the regret was a physical symptom, a virus taking over his nervous system. And there were other feelings underneath the remorse, too, like how furious he was at Gerard for doing such a stupid fucking thing, and the painful sympathy he felt for Mikey, and then there was the constant, ragged ache of missing Gerard. Frank would take confusion over that combo any day of the week.

Somehow they found themselves in a kind of covered walkway, away from all the crowds. Bob wandered off to look at the inscriptions in one of the columns, and Frank stayed where he was, leaning against a pillar and watching a guy in a green jumpsuit prune some hedges a few yards away.

He looked like kind of a hippie for a Vatican gardener, Frank thought idly. He had long gray hair held back in a ponytail, and Frank was pretty sure he could even see the splash of tattoos on his forearms, peeking out from the guy's sleeves. He looked familiar somehow – he reminded Frank of some of the dudes his Dad hung out with, maybe, or it could have been someone who used to come into the shop. Or maybe he just looked like one of those decrepit dudes Frank would sometimes see at shows, and think he wanted to be exactly like that when he was old.

Frank leaned forward a little, squinting in the sunlight. The dude really did look familiar, and when he turned towards Frank to pick up a different tool, Frank's whole stomach bottomed out and he had to grab on to the pillar so he could stay upright.

The guy in the green jumpsuit was Luke.

"No," Frank muttered under his breath, squeezing his eyes shut and shaking his head. He was dreaming, or it was a trick of the light, he was just sleep deprived, it couldn't be, it *couldn't* be – but when he opened his eyes, Luke was still there. "No, no, no, no, nononono-"

"Frank?" Bob was there, suddenly, touching Frank's face. "What is it, are you okay?"

Frank couldn't even speak, he couldn't move, all he could do was stare at Luke and feel the tidal wave of fear crash through him, making his ears ring and his mouth fill with sourness. Bob followed the line of his eyes, though, and Frank could tell when he got it, because he immediately stepped in front of Frank, turning Frank around with his hands firmly on Frank's shoulders.

"He hasn't seen you," he said calmly. "He doesn't know we're here. We're just going to walk away quietly, and you're going to stay in front of me the whole time, okay?"

Frank nodded dumbly and Bob urged him forwards a few paces. Frank's legs wouldn't work at first and he stumbled, but Bob held him steady. Frank made himself put one foot in front of the other, and it was all going to plan until he suddenly wasn't afraid anymore, he was just fucking mad as hell.

"Hey!" he yelled, wrenching himself free of Bob's grip and heading quickly back towards Luke. Bob grabbed for him, and he was strong, but Frank was fast, and he dodged and picked up the pace to a run. "Hey! Hey, you!"

Luke looked up as Frank approached, frowning slightly, and cried out when Frank slammed into him, sending him sprawling down onto the floor.

"Get up!" Frank yelled, reaching down and yanking Luke to his feet when he just lay there staring. "What the fuck are you doing here, asshole? You do a little gardening for them when you're not busy bleeding innocent people to death, is that it?"

"Take it easy, Frank," Bob warned when he caught up. "Don't get too close."

"Answer me!" Frank yelled, ignoring Bob and grabbing Luke so he could shake him, hard.

"Answer me, you fuck, do you work for them? Is this some kind of a game? Give me some fucking answers!"

"I don't know you!" Luke cried in a high, frightened voice. "Please, I don't know you!"

"Don't know me?" Frank had had e-fucking-nough of this bullshit already, and he punched Luke in the jaw as hard as he could, gleeful when Luke doubled over, cradling his face in both hands. "Do you know me now, motherfucker?"

Luke shook his head hard, backing away and holding one hand out to ward Frank off. "Please, I don't. I'm sorry."

Frank shoved Luke back against the hedges and held him there with one hand, using the other to yank up his sleeves. "Maybe this can jog your memory," he hissed, shoving his wrists in Luke's face. He reached up and pushed his hair away from his forehead. "Or how about this? You don't remember that? You don't remember me lying on your table bleeding while you tried to choke my

friend to death?"

"Please!" Luke was cowering now, his hands held up in front of his face. "I don't know what you're talking about, I promise you I don't."

"Frank," said Bob, grabbing Frank's arm when he pulled it back to throw another punch. "I think he's telling the truth."

"What?" Frank shook Bob off and stared at him. "Bob, this is the guy! You don't remember his face?"

Bob scowled. "Like I could forget it? I'm saying, he obviously has no clue who you are."

"I don't," Luke insisted, turning to Bob. "Please, I don't, please don't let him hit me again."

"I should let him do a lot worse than that," Bob snapped, but he pulled Frank back a little way and spoke into his ear. "We don't want him running off and telling someone you just laid into him. The last thing we need is the Swiss Guard on our ass."

"I won't tell anyone!" Luke promised in his trembling, reedy voice. He was a lot smaller than Frank remembered, actually. And he looked pretty old. "I won't, just please, whatever I've done to you, I'm sorry, but I *don't remember*."

Frank glared at him. "If this is a trick," he warned, "I am going to rip your face off with my hands."

"*Frank*," Bob repeated, turning Frank forcibly around to look at him. "We'll bring it up with the Cardinal, okay? I'm on your side, but this isn't the way."

Frank was so angry he felt like he was going to throw up. He wasn't aware of them walking back to their rooms at all, only really coming back to himself when Bob told them what had happened and Frank heard Ray say,

"*What?*"

"Oh my God." Mikey scrambled up off the couch and ran over to Frank, lifting his hands up and inspecting his wrists anxiously. "Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine," Frank told him, forcing himself to unclench his jaw and meet Mikey's eyes. "I'm okay. He didn't do anything."

"Frank pretty much flattened Luke's face out for him, though," Bob said, sounding half proud and half annoyed. "You should have seen him, I thought he was going to kill the guy."

"Thank God you were there to stop him," Brian said, nudging Mikey aside so he could check Frank over for himself. "'Crazy American Beats Vatican Gardener to Death' isn't a headline we need."

"What would you have done?" Frank challenged him, scowling when Brian moved his hair aside to check his forehead.

Brian frowned, then patted Frank's hair down and stepped back. "I don't know. Probably fed him his rake."

"This is fucked up," Ray said furiously. "What the fuck is he even doing here?"

"Evidently the Vatican's rehabilitation program includes topiary," said Bob.

"What if he followed you?" Mikey said fretfully. "What if he comes up here?"

Frank touched Mikey's hand, shaking his head. "Much as I hate to admit it, dude, I really think he didn't remember me. I just don't know why."

"We still have a few hours before we see the Cardinal again," Brian moved over to the table, where he'd spread out what looked like the entire contents of all their bags. "Okay, we know the Father wrote a lot of stuff down in his unicorn notebook-

"It's *my* unicorn notebook," Mikey reminded them all.

"Which the Cardinal has," Ray put in.

Brian nodded. "Right. But I think we know most of what's in there anyway. I wasn't sure what to bring with us – I mean, I didn't exactly have long to pack, and the Father has a lot of shit, but I thought maybe we could go through what I have and see if there's anything we missed."

"I wish I had been able to bring my kit with me," Ray said glumly as he sat down at the table. "I feel useless."

"Yeah, well, good luck trying to get that shit through customs." Bob locked the door to their room and, after a moment's hesitation, set a chair under the doorknob. "Just in case," he mumbled, when Frank gave him a look.

"Okay," said Brian when they were all settled. "Here's list of things we don't know: number one, what the second symbol on the sphera means. Number two, who the people behind the whole soul-sucking thing are, what they want, whether or not they have Danny and Mark, and if they have anything to do with the Father's body going missing. Three, what the fuck Luke is doing here, why he doesn't remember you, and finally, whether or not the entire Vatican is evil and planning to kill us."

"I think," said Frank, "It might be quicker to make a list of things we *do* know."

Ray and Mikey exchanged a glance, then Ray said, "Mikey has something to tell us."

Mikey kind of nodded, and he opened his mouth, but then closed it again and looked down, wringing his hands.

"It's okay," Ray murmured to him. "Everyone's going to listen."

Mikey hesitated another second, threw Frank a weirdly apologetic glance, then blurted out, "I think Gerard isn't dead. That's why I was upset after we saw the Cardinal. And I know," he hurried on before any of them had time to respond, "I know you're going to say that I just don't want him to be. And it's true, I don't. But...but I feel like if he was really dead, that I would know. Like I would really feel it. And I don't, I haven't felt it since we got here. I feel like he's hiding, or something."

Brian leaned forward, looking seriously at Mikey. "Why would he hide from us?"

"I don't know," Mikey said uncomfortably, hugging himself. "Maybe he doesn't know we're here."

"Do you think the Cardinal's hiding him?" Bob wanted to know.

"No." Mikey shook his head. "I mean, he definitely wasn't telling us everything, but I don't think he was lying to us, either."

Bob sat back in his seat, frowning. Frank watched Mikey look around the table, and the way his shoulders turned in when none of them said anything. "I told you they'd think it was stupid," he muttered to Ray.

"I don't," Frank said. Mikey turned hopeful eyes on him. "I mean, I don't want him to be dead either, right, but the thing is, you knew about Pete before any of us. You knew what was happening to him had something to do with the shows. You knew to tell Gerard when – you know, at the beginning, when it was me in trouble."

"Well." Mikey took his glasses off. He polished them on the hem of his shirt, then put them back on. "I guess."

"I'm saying it's good enough for me," Frank said firmly. "And I don't know about the rest of you, but I find the working theory 'Gerard's not dead' way more motivating than – than the other one."

"Me too," Bob said, raising his hand like he was in class.

Brian kind of rolled his eyes. "Look," he huffed, "Me three, obviously. I just don't want you to get your hopes up for nothing."

"It's not nothing," Mikey insisted. "Brian, it isn't."

"It's not stupid, either," Ray told him. "People wake up in morgues and then wander off all the time."

Bob raised an eyebrow. "All the time?"

Ray flushed. "Well, on the Discovery Channel. And it's not like there isn't a precedent for this within the Church."

"Right," Bob said slowly. "But the other dude it happened to was *Jesus*. Gerard's a nice dude and all, but I don't think he can walk on water or kill trees with his mind."

"Guys," Brian said impatiently. "Come on, we need to focus. Let's assume that Gerard was drained of his life force to the point where it seemed like he was dead, okay? No pulse, he wasn't breathing. It could be like Ray says, that he woke up in a coffin, freaked out, and maybe he's holed up somewhere because...I don't know, he has amnesia or something. That doesn't explain how he managed to escape when the coffin was never unattended, and it also doesn't explain how none of the Cardinal's guys have been able to find him. They must know every inch of this place."

"Apparently they don't know there's a bloodthirsty maniac trimming the verge," Frank pointed out.

"You know what sucks the most," Mikey said suddenly. "Is that if Gerard were here he'd figure this all out in like thirty seconds. He'd be all, oh, well, back in the third century this exact thing happened to a pig farmer in Eastern Europe, let me just look up the manuscript some monks illuminated to commemorate the occasion, and then he'd find it, and he'd know what to do."

Frank couldn't help smiling, just because that was exactly what Gerard would do, and now Mikey thought he was alive and that meant there was a chance they might get to see him do it again, see him pacing around with his hands in his hair, making it all stand up crazily on end, or hunched over his books, muttering to himself and getting ink all over his hands. Whatever Brian said, it was way too late – Frank's hopes were up and they were going to stay that way until someone could prove Mikey wrong.

He looked up to see Mikey's mouth curled up at the corners, too.



"It's so frustrating," Brian was saying, leafing through a notebook that was filled with Gerard's barely-legible scrawl. "They must have more reference books here than we could even dream of, but we have no way of getting at them."

Ray nodded. "And we probably wouldn't even know where to start if we could."

A little while later, Mikey caught Frank's hand and tugged him into the other room. "I would have told you first," he said apologetically when he'd pushed the door shut. "I thought you would follow me in here."

"It's okay," Frank squeezed Mikey's hand. "I think Ray wanted to, so."

Mikey rolled his eyes. "I don't need you to fix me up with Toro, dude."

"I'm not," Frank protested. His hand was aching a little from punching Luke – he looked down at it and flexed it.

"Sometimes," said Mikey, grabbing it and using it to pull Frank to sit down on the bed, "I wish that your first instinct wasn't always to punch things that are pissing you off."

"He deserved it."

Mikey rubbed the pads of his thumbs between Frank's sore knuckles. "But he could have hurt you. You might not have come back."

"But I did," Frank reminded him. Mikey just shook his head. Frank said, "Do you really think he's alive?"

Mikey didn't say anything, but he looked up so Frank could see his face, and that was all the answer Frank needed.

\*

Frank didn't want to wait for dinner, he wanted to go and confront the Cardinal right away, but Brian said no.

"I want to get to the bottom of this just as much as you," he said when Frank got mad at him. "But the Cardinal is our only hope of getting any answers, and if Mikey's right about Gerard I'd say we're really going to need his help. Yelling at him isn't going to endear us to him."

He wouldn't budge, either, and Frank was climbing the walls by the time Antonio came to collect them again. He jittered all the way to the Cardinal's rooms, and sat there seething while dinner was served and they waited for the Cardinal to make an appearance, and by the time the Cardinal had greeted them and taken his seat he couldn't take it anymore.

"So," he said casually. "You wanna tell me why the dude who tried to kill me is working here?"

The expression on the Cardinal's face was pure surprise, and Frank wasn't prepared for that. He just kept his gaze steady, though, and when the Cardinal asked him to repeat himself he said, "Luke. Old guy, long hair. Gave me stigmata. Any of this ringing a bell? Because I just ran into him clipping your fucking bushes outside and I'd really like to know why he doesn't seem to have any memory of trying to *murder me*."

The Cardinal had gone pale, and he passed a hand over his mouth, sitting back in his chair. "I'm very sorry," he said sincerely. "You should never have - he should not have been somewhere you

might come across him. That was a grievous error on our part. I apologize."

Bob frowned. "An error? Why is he here at all?"

The Cardinal looked confused. "Father Way didn't explain the rehabilitation process to you?"

"No," Frank gritted. "He said he couldn't."

"I see." The Cardinal was quiet for a second. Frank squirmed in his seat, trying hard not to just scream at the dude until he told them what the fuck was happening. Finally the Cardinal went on, "I see I underestimated his discretion."

Mikey cleared his throat. "Please," he said quietly. "Tell me what's going on."

The Cardinal gave him a sad look, then leaned forward and set his arms on the table. "The individuals who come to us through people like Father Way and yourselves cannot be dealt with by traditional methods. In most cases, the police would be powerless even if they could get past their disbelief."

"Which is why you send those guys," Brian put in. "The Suits."

The Cardinal smiled a little bit. "That's not what we call them, but yes. They escort the perpetrators here, and we decide what's to be done with them."

"Like making them part of your ground staff?" Frank said incredulously.

"The vast majority of the people who come to us this way are psychologically disturbed," the Cardinal went on, holding up a hand to ask Frank to wait. "Sometimes severely. In these cases, we arrange psychiatric help for them. Sometimes there is only so much we can do, but best case scenario, with treatment and support they can be released, start living real lives again. Others, although this is more rare, are legitimately under the thrall of...outside influences."

Ray frowned. "Like what?"

"Demon possession," the Cardinal clarified. "In these cases, we seek approval for an exorcism, and again, with support, most of these individuals can be released."

"Most," Brian frowned. "So which category does Luke fall under?"

The Cardinal leaned back, steepling his fingers under his chin. "Sometimes an individual does not feel ready to face the outside world for a long time, if ever. Sometimes they are concerned that they might re-offend, for example. I am sure," he said archly, his eyes flicking over to Frank, "that you would not wish for Luke to harm anyone else."

"Of course," Frank said hotly. "But why isn't he locked the fuck up?"

"This is the city of God," the Cardinal said. "Not a prison. It is enough that we circumvent the outside world's methods of keeping order. We cannot offer people like Luke a legal trial, a jury of his peers, a chance for parole. To be locked up forever with no hope of release is a terrible punishment, and not one that the Church is willing to mete out."

"So you put him on the payroll instead?" Frank didn't understand any of it. "And why doesn't he remember me?"

"You did something," Ray said suddenly, looking at the Cardinal. "Like Howard and his guys did

to the kids at the show. You did something so Luke wouldn't remember."

The Cardinal hesitated, then got up from the table and went to stand in front of the window, facing away from them. His hands were clasped behind his back. He said, "We are sometimes forced to take extreme measures when large numbers of the public are involved, to keep them safe. Confusion, nothing more. But we do not take away people's memories."

Bob shook his head. "So what, you brainwashed him?"

"No," the Cardinal sighed. "Luke's mind was damaged during his exorcism. It is an extremely dangerous rite, for the possessed individual and the priests involved, and it takes enormous mental and emotional strength to come through it unscathed, strength which Luke unfortunately did not have, in the end. Whether he truly does not remember, or he simply forces himself not to, I cannot say. But what is beyond doubt is that his past actions harmed nobody more than himself, in the end."

He turned around to face them. "Luke lives here with us, now. He lives a quiet life, he harms nobody. He is not the same person he was when he tried to hurt you. You saw that for yourself."

"So what you're saying is that he gets to live here in a nice quiet job and never even has to remember what he did," Frank said slowly, "and I have to spend the rest of my life having nightmares every time I go to sleep. Not to mention being all scarred up to shit."

The other guys were all tense, on the edge of their seats. Cardinal didn't say anything.

"I have to live with that," Frank pushed him, clenching his fists, "and he doesn't even have to *remember*? Is that what you're telling me?"

"We can't force him to confront the memory of his sins," the Cardinal said, spreading his hands. "If he cannot remember, then he cannot repent, therefore he cannot truly be forgiven, and that is punishment enough in itself. Frank, you must understand - allowing him to stay here with us is the best way to keep you safe."

"You haven't done shit to keep me safe!" Frank yelled, losing his temper. "Not me, not any of us! Not Gerard! You couldn't even keep his *body* safe, don't talk to me like you know what's best!"

The Cardinal threw Brian a look, but Brian just kind of shrugged in Frank's direction. "No disrespect, Your Eminence, but he's got a point."

"You know what, fuck this," Frank said, shoving out of his chair, which squeaked loudly against the floor. "I have had it up to here with your fucking Church and all your bullshit. Why don't you let me know when you're ready to give us some fucking answers, all right?"

He slammed out of the room, ignoring the calls of his name, and hurried blindly through the hallways, down flights of stairs, until he found a fucking door, thank God, and just took off running. He had no idea where he was going and he didn't care, he just needed to move, to get the fuck away from that place. He relished the burn in his lungs and the ache that sprang up almost immediately in his side and his legs, and pushed through it, the pain only spurring him on. He knew the others had followed him; he could hear them close behind, and he turned corners and doubled back whenever he could, trying to lose them, trying to get *away*, he didn't want to think or talk or anything anymore, he just wanted to be left the fuck alone.

He rounded a corner, skidding slightly on the cobbles below his feet, and immediately collided with someone on the other side. Before he had time to snarl an apology, the person grabbed him

roughly by the collar and Frank saw, to his horror, that it was one of the hooded figures who'd been involved with the attack on Pete.

"What the fuck?" Frank said, and then went crashing down onto the floor when a fist collided with his face.

"Frank!" Brian yelled, skidding around the corner, and then, "*Motherfuckers*," and then the hooded figures were fucking everywhere, laying into Frank and the others like they were possessed or something.

"What do you *want*?" Ray demanded, dodging before he got a foot to the face.

"Where is he?" the guy holding Mikey demanded, his voice strangely distorted through the hood that still covered his face. "*Where is he?*"

"Where's who?" Frank tried to ask, and got a punch in the stomach for his trouble. He doubled over, wheezing, then launched himself forwards, putting all his weight behind it and jamming his shoulder into the guy's midriff as hard as he could. The guy went over backwards and Frank followed him, scrambling on top. He grabbed for the hood, intent on pulling it off and exposing the guy's face, but the guy fought him, struggling violently, trying to roll them over.

"Frank, you good?" Bob shouted, and Frank glanced over to see him doing the same thing, struggling to avoid the guy's hands where they were grasping at Bob's throat. Ray and Brian were still on their feet, but Frank couldn't see -

"Mikey!" he yelled, hurling himself off the guy on the ground and racing over to where Mikey was on his knees, his face bloody, his hands held protectively over his head. The guy standing over him had his fist raised and Frank threw himself up and grabbed it, yanking his arm down behind his back until he heard the *crack* and the guy howled, his knees giving out under the pain.

The guy Frank had been fighting before caught up with him, only to be pulled back at the last minute by Ray, who threw him against the wall, knocking the guy's head back hard. "What do you want?" Ray demanded, his hands opening and closing in fists by his side. "Who are you looking for?"

"The resurrected," the guy said, trying and failing to get past Ray. "Where is the resurrected?"

"We don't know what the fuck you're talking about," Brian shouted, and then there was a huge, rumbling sound like thunder, and a flash of light so bright Frank had to let go of his guy to clap his hands over his eyes.

When he peeked out through his fingers, the hooded men were on the ground, dead or unconscious or something, Frank didn't care, and in the middle of the alley was a man in black, with his back to them. His hands were outstretched in front of him, Frank could see his fingers spread. He was standing straight, but he wobbled slightly when he turned around to face them.

It was Gerard.

Nobody moved, Frank didn't even breathe, or blink, he didn't know if he *could*, he didn't know what to do, he only knew it was Gerard.

Gerard blinked slowly. He took two tiny, faltering steps forward, his hands slowly coming down by his side.

"Mikey?" he said, and then he collapsed, his body giving way just like it had when he died, only

this time Bob was there to catch him.

"Quickly," he said, scooping Gerard up. "Let's get him back to the Vatican before these assholes wake up again."

He started moving, only to stop when Mikey said, "Bob!" shrilly, wringing his hands in front of him. "Bob, is he...is he?"

"He's alive, Mikey," Bob confirmed, and Mikey staggered in place, rubbing his hands over his face.

Ray went to him, steadied him and got him moving. "Come on, we don't have much time."

"Should we try to find a cab?" Brian wondered. "We can't just walk back into the Vatican with him, can we?"

"That won't be necessary," said a voice, and Frank looked up to see Howard and the rest of the Suits standing there, sunglasses in place despite the darkness. Howard didn't look remotely surprised to see Gerard, but maybe that was part of his training. "There are cars waiting."

"What about these guys?" Frank said, indicating the hooded men who were starting to stir. "The Hood guys?"

One of the other Suits, the little one with the ponytail, smiled grimly. "Don't worry," he said, taking out a pair of black leather gloves. He tugged them on and flexed his knuckles. "They'll be taken care of."

Howard started to usher them away, but before they left Frank darted down and picked up Mikey's glasses where they were lying on the floor. The arms were wobbly and one of the lenses was covered in blood, but Frank put them in his pocket for safekeeping.

"Okay," he said, and followed Howard to the car.

\*

"I kind of thought that he'd be naked," Mikey said.

Frank looked over. Mikey was chewing his thumbnail, eyes fixed on the Vatican doctor who was moving quietly around the bed.

"You know," Mikey went on. "Like Angel. Or the Cylons?"

Frank nodded, slowly. "Or the Terminator."

Mikey laughed, suddenly, then stopped, then started again, giggling helplessly. He leaned heavily against Frank's side and wheezed, "The Terminator isn't dead, you dumb shit, it's time travel."

Frank didn't know why it was funny, but it was, it was the funniest fucking thing he'd ever heard in his life and he laughed too, trying to keep it down and avoid the suspicious glances from the doctor. He turned his face into Mikey's shoulder to muffle the sound - he could feel Mikey shaking with laughter, both of them struggling for composure and breath.

"The Terminator," Mikey hacked out, and Frank lost it completely, clinging to Mikey and laughing until he felt weak all over. "Frank," Mikey giggled, "Frank, he's alive."

"I *know*," Frank sniggered, flattening his hands over his stomach in an effort to calm down.

"Guys," Brian hissed. "Keep it together, for fuck's sake."

He was using his sternest voice, but it only made Frank laugh harder.

"He seems to be unharmed," the doctor said, and Frank managed to calm down enough to listen to him. "If he doesn't regain consciousness in the next twelve hours we'll run some more tests."

"For what?" Brian wanted to know.

"The best thing you can do for him now is let him rest," the doctor went on, avoiding the question. He indicated the two nuns who were assisting. "The sisters will take good care of him."

"Not going to happen," Mikey said immediately.

The doctor frowned. "It would really be best if-

"He said he's staying," Frank interrupted, meeting the doctor's eyes. "And so are the rest of us."

"It's all right, Vincent," said the Cardinal, appearing suddenly in the doorway. "Let them stay."

"But," the doctor protested, only to be silenced by a wave of the Cardinal's hand.

"They are Father Way's closest companions. It can only do him good to have them here when he wakes."

Ray looked up. "So you think he will? Wake up?"

"I certainly hope so. I think everyone here has questions they would like answered."

Personally Frank didn't care if Gerard couldn't answer a single one, as long as he woke up. He bit his tongue, though. He just didn't trust the Cardinal at all - he *seemed* like he was on their side, sort of, but after everything that happened with Luke, Frank just wasn't sure.

He did convince the nurses that they should stay just outside the room instead of in, though, which Frank was grateful for. As soon as the door closed behind them Mikey was up and on the bed with Gerard, touching him anxiously; his hand, his face. "Should we try to wake him?"

"I don't think so," said Ray. "I mean, sleep is the way the body heals itself, right?"

"But the doctor said his body's fine," Mikey protested, laying his hands on Gerard's shoulders. "If it was me I'd want him to wake me up."

Brian shook his head. "If he didn't wake up from getting transported back here and put into bed and prodded by the doctors and you two," he indicated Frank, "doing your best impressions of hyenas, then he probably isn't ready."

Mikey didn't look convinced, but he settled back a little, propping himself on one elbow to watch Gerard's face. "I'm glad I didn't call my Mom," he said.

Frank knew Brian and Ray were right, that it was best to leave Gerard to sleep, but it was excruciating waiting for him to wake up. He was *right there*, looking exactly the same as before except maybe he was a little paler than usual. It was his face and his hands and more than anything Frank wanted him to wake up so they could hear his voice.

At the same time, though, he was scared of what might happen. They didn't know where Gerard had been, what had happened to him, if he was going to be the same person as he was before he

died. Plus somewhere really deep down Frank was worried Gerard might still be mad at him. God knew Frank was mad at Gerard, he was fucking *furios*, the fury that comes after the initial stomach-flipping high of intense relief. He didn't trust himself not to punch Gerard in the face, or kiss him, or both, and neither was anything other than a terrible idea. He wrapped his fingers firmly around the arms of his chair and promised himself he'd stay in it until he knew he could keep it together.

Time seemed to stretch out while they waited - there was nothing to say, so they didn't speak, just sat and watched Gerard sleep. He was so still and silent, and he looked smaller than Frank remembered, although that was probably just the giant bed, the vast expanse of white sheets. Frank's Mom always said everybody looks smaller on white sheets, and she should know, she'd racked up enough hours sitting by hospital beds with Frank. He was thinking about how much hospital food sucked when Gerard made a noise, a cough or something, and Mikey sat up, leaning over him.

"Gerard?" he said, stroking Gerard's hair gently away from his face. "Gerard, can you hear me?"

Nobody moved for an endless second, and then Gerard stirred, opening his eyes and blinking up at Mikey.

"Mikey?" he said, clearing his throat when his voice came out all scratchy. "Are you - where's Pete?"

"What?" Mikey shook his head.

Gerard started trying to sit up and Mikey helped him, pulling him upright. "Did it work? Is Pete okay?"

Mikey just shook his head again, then made a strangled noise and threw himself at Gerard, wrapping his arms around him and rocking him back and forth. "Thank God," he said, muffled in Gerard's shoulder. "You're okay, you're okay, you're okay."

Over Mikey's shoulder, Gerard looked completely baffled. He hugged Mikey back, and said, "I'm fine, Mikey. I'm sorry if I scared you."

"Scared me?" Mikey held Gerard out at arms length and shook him a little. "You were dead, you giant asshole!"

"What?" Gerard kind of smiled, like he thought Mikey was playing a trick, then the smile faded as he looked around the room, took in his surroundings and the rest of them staring at him.

"What...are we at the *Vatican*?"

Frank's ears started ringing as Mikey explained what had happened to Gerard - he could see Gerard's face, see the confusion and the disbelief written there, see Mikey shaking his head and laying his hands on Gerard's arms, insisting, but he couldn't hear what was being said. All he could do was stare, even when Gerard pushed the covers back and, with Mikey's help, got out of the bed to stand on his own two feet.

"This is really weird," he said, looking around the room. "This is...this is really weird."

Suddenly Bob pushed away from the corner he'd been standing in and grabbed Gerard up in a hug, almost pulling him off his feet. Gerard disappeared from view behind Bob's shoulder, but Frank saw his hand pat Bob's back tentatively when Bob said, muffled, "Don't do that. Don't do that, okay?"

"Okay," Gerard promised, clearly bewildered. Bob let him go after a minute, and Gerard got hugged by Ray and Brian as well, getting more and more flustered. His hands were jittering around all over the place and his cheeks were flushed by the time Brian let him go. There was a moment's silence, and Gerard looked over to Frank. His eyes widened, like he hadn't expected Frank to be there, and he took a couple of steps forward. "Frank?"

Frank was still sitting in his chair. His hands were still wrapped tightly around the arms; the skin over his knuckles, when he looked at it, had gone white and he could feel the grooves in the wood digging painfully into his palms, but he couldn't make himself let go yet.

Gerard shifted uncertainly from foot to foot. "I'm glad you're okay," he offered timidly.

Frank made a noise that he couldn't have classified if you'd paid him, halfway between a laugh and a bark, and stood up involuntarily. His hands were shaking now he'd let go of the chair and he clenched them into fists, hiding them from view. "You stupid motherfucker," he heard himself say, in a voice that shook and seemed far, far away. "You *asshole*. I told you I had it covered!"

"But I couldn't let anything happen to you," Gerard said anxiously, taking another step towards Frank and then stopping, his hands hanging limply by his sides. "Frankie."

"Don't you think I felt the same?" Frank demanded. His face felt hot and he knew he was shaking all over - he wished the others would leave, or look away, or something. He felt stripped open and exposed, there was too much feeling inside him and he didn't know what to do with it all. He was being pulled in a thousand directions, like his body wasn't under his control and he had to stay still because he didn't know what it was going to do next.

He felt something on the back of his hand - he looked down and it was Gerard's fingers, resting lightly there. He looked up again and saw Gerard's face, closer this time, his forehead furrowed and his mouth turned down at the corners in a worried, pursed-up frown. "You're still angry with me," he said, and then Frank didn't know what happened but the next thing he knew he had wrapped Gerard up in his arms and was hugging him so tight it probably hurt.

Gerard didn't seem to mind, though, he hugged back and let Frank cling to him, let him bury his face against Gerard's throat. It hurt not to kiss him, it physically *hurt*, but Frank wasn't going to ask for that anymore, he'd made a promise, so he just rocked Gerard back and forth a little bit and squeezed him tighter. "I'm sorry," he said, quietly so only Gerard would hear. "I wanted to tell you that I was sorry."

"Me too," Gerard said. He touched the back of Frank's neck. "I'm just glad that you're all right."

*I'm not*, Frank thought, but he didn't say that, he just took deep breaths and lifted his head a little. When he opened his eyes, all he saw was the wall - the other guys were behind him, he realized, so he pressed his cheek against Gerard's and hid a secret kiss in his hair, back behind his ear where nobody would ever find it.

"We should tell the doctor you're awake," Brian said when Frank finally managed to let go. "I'll ask the sisters to call him."

The doctor ordered all of them outside except Mikey, while he was examining Gerard. When he went away muttering and let them back in, Frank immediately told Gerard about running into Luke.

"And the Cardinal said you *knew*," he remembered suddenly. "Is that true?"



Gerard looked intensely uncomfortable. He fidgeted with his collar and his sleeves before admitting, "I knew."

"And you didn't tell us?" Frank raised his voice, he couldn't help it, he was so *mad*. "Gerard, what the *fuck*?"

"I can't tell you everything, Frank!" Gerard raised his voice in return. "You know that! And what good would it have done for you to know? It's not like I ever thought you were going to come over here, is it?"

"Tell them what the Cardinal said," Mikey interrupted suddenly, his voice tight with anger. Frank looked at him and noticed that he was so pale he was almost gray. "Tell them what he said when they were out of the room."

Frank frowned. "What did he say?"

Gerard shook his head. "Mikey, this isn't the time. Let me talk to him and then--"

"What did he *say*?" Frank demanded.

Gerard hesitated, then sighed and rubbed his face with both hands. "He said that you guys have to go home," he said tiredly. "He said I can't work with you anymore."

Frank had been expecting that since day one, he'd always known it would happen, but that didn't stop it feeling like a kick to the guts. He said, "Oh, well, of course," and then turned around and slammed his fist against the wall as hard as he could. "Fuck this place, seriously."

"Seconded," Bob agreed.

Ray leaned forward, looking troubled. "What are you going to do?"

"What do you think he's going to do, Ray?" Mikey snapped. "He has to do what they tell him."

"Why?" Frank burst out, spinning around to look at Gerard again. "Why can't we just leave, all of us together? What are they going to do, arrest you?"

"They could dismiss me," Gerard said quietly.

Frank bit his tongue as hard as he could so he wouldn't say, "Good." He threw himself back into his chair and folded his arms, waiting for Gerard to tell them to get out.

"But I think you're right."

Frank's head snapped up to see the others gaping at Gerard. "Excuse me?"

"After everything that went down, I don't feel right just sending you guys away. What if those guys in the hoods come after you again?" Gerard shook his head, his jaw set firmly. "I'm not going to just abandon you, that's not right."

Brian stood up and jittered a little in place, ready to do something practical. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't want to stay here without you," Gerard said slowly. "Maybe if we can get out of here just long enough to figure out what's going on, and then I can talk to the Cardinal again and make him see that he's being unreasonable."

Ray frowned. "How can we figure out what's going on if we're not *here*?" he said. "Gee, this is crazy. We need to talk to the Cardinal *now*."

"He's not going to tell us shit!" Frank argued.

"But how will we even get out?" Ray waved his hands. "They must have guards and shit."

"He's not under arrest," Brian said.

Ray rolled his eyes. "I know that, but do you think they're just going to let him walk out of here when he just *recently returned from the dead*?"

"I know a way out," Gerard said. "It's not exactly scenic, but it'll work."

Bob scowled. "See, we have to fucking jailbreak. I said we were prisoners. I said."

Ray sighed. "We're not *prisoners*, Bob, don't be such a drama queen-"

The bickering continued - Frank tuned them out and focused his attention on Mikey, who was sitting close to Gerard, looking carefully at his face. "Do you think this is the right thing to do?" he said quietly, holding Gerard's hand. "You wouldn't rather stay and talk to them?"

"I'm sure," said Gerard.

Mikey's forehead creased. "It just - it just doesn't seem like you."

Frank held his breath. They were *so close* and if Mikey talked Gerard into changing his mind now...

"You'd know," Gerard said, covering Mikey's hand with both of his own. "You'd know if it wasn't me."

Mikey's face cleared and he sat back a little. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I would."

"But I don't - shit, I don't have my fucking passport," Gerard said, agitated.

"Uh," said Brian, raising his hand. "I do."

Everyone stared at him.

"What?" Brian said, shifting uncomfortably. "I just thought - just in case, you know?"

Gerard smiled and shook his head. "I love you."

"Yeah, well." Brian cleared his throat and said gruffly, "Let's see if you still love me after I try to explain why there's no record of the passport in question being used to get you into the country in the first place."

\*

Nobody tried to stop them on their way to the airport. Frank kept expecting it; that a Suit would pop out and demand to ask where they were going, or an alarm would sound when they stepped over Vatican City limits, or that the Swiss Guard would suddenly appear in the rearview on the cab ride to the airport. None of that happened, though - what did happen was that Brian tried to spin the airport guys an elaborate lie about a missing computer record, and they pretty obviously did not believe a fucking word of it, and they took Gerard off to a room somewhere and wouldn't let them

go with him.

"This is fucking insane," Brian said, pacing up the same six-foot area he'd been patrolling ever since they took Gerard away. "This is *crazy*. They're probably on the phone to the Cardinal right now. He's going to show up any second."

"Shut up," Frank hissed at him. "Don't even say it."

Next to him, Mikey was jiggling his knee nervously up and down. "He's right, though. We should have stayed."

"For what? For the Cardinal to throw us out and never let us see Gerard again? Fuck that."

"He didn't say we couldn't see him," Mikey pointed out. "He said we couldn't *work* with him."

"Yeah, well." Frank drummed his hands against his knees. "All I know is, there's no way we're leaving him there alone. God knows what they could do to him, Mikey, what if he ends up like Luke?"

Mikey made a face. "Why would he? They don't need to exorcise him."

Frank shook his head. "We're not leaving without him. If they take him back then we'll just have to find out a way to get back in, okay, it's all of us or none of us."

"I'd say we're about to find out which," said Brian.

Frank looked up to see Gerard coming towards them. He was pale, but he wasn't flanked by any security guys, and when he reached them he waved his hand - that had a boarding pass in it.

"You're kidding," Brian gaped. "I didn't think it would actually *work*."

"Yeah..." Gerard looked over his shoulder, frowning. "I don't really know how it happened, to be honest."

"Who cares?" said Frank, shouldering his bag. "Let's just get on the fucking plane before they change their minds."

They were even sitting together, in two sets of three seats either side of the aisle.

"Pete's having our things shipped to Craig's place," Brian informed them, after he returned from a furtive trip to use his cell in the bathroom. "And Craig's sending cars to pick us up at the airport."

"Life is so much easier when you know rich people," Bob observed.

Ray waited for Brian to sit down and belt himself in, then said, "You know you're not supposed to use your cell on flights."

Bob rolled his eyes, then covered them with a sleep mask he'd found somewhere. "That's just because they can't figure out how to charge you when you're not technically in anyone's network area."

"It's because it might crash the plane," Ray argued.

"It's a *plane*, Toro," Bob said, pulling his blue airline blanket up to his chin. "It flies. In the air. With people inside. If it can't withstand someone using a cellphone, then frankly I think we have bigger things to worry about than a slap on the wrist from the stewardess."

Frank snorted a laugh and sat back in his seat. He had the aisle seat, for once, which never happened, but Mikey had decided he wanted the window. Gerard was between them and his elbow kept poking Frank in the arm whenever he scratched his neck, which was a lot.

"Dude," said Frank. "You okay?"

Gerard made a face. "Yeah. Just an itch." He dropped his hands and rubbed them anxiously against his knees. "This is a really bad idea."

Mikey looked at him. "What is?"

"This," Gerard waved a hand around. "Running away."

"But you wanted to."

"I know." Gerard scratched his neck again. "I don't know what I was thinking. I'm going to call the Cardinal as soon as we land."

"You can use my cell if you want," Brian offered from across the aisle. "Bathroom's free."

Gerard scrunched his nose up. "I don't think priests are supposed to break airline rules."

"*You see*," Ray hissed at Bob, who just swatted at him like he was a bug.

"I'll just tell him my head's all messed up after what happened," Gerard went on, digging his fingers right down inside his collar and making a face. "He's a good man, he'll understand - dammit!"

Gerard ripped his collar off and yanked the top few buttons on his shirt open, spreading his palm against the skin on his neck. "What the fuck, I feel like I'm on fire."

Frank and Mikey both leaned in to look. The skin around Gerard's neck and collarbones was angry and red, raw where he'd been scratching at it. Frank winced and Mikey made a sympathetic hissing noise.

"It's really red," he said. "Try to stop scratching."

"It itches," Gerard complained, rolling his head around and hitching his shoulders up. "Like poison ivy, or something."

Ray rummaged in his bag (stowed safely underneath the seat in front of him, of course) and leaned over the aisle to pass Frank a small tub. "Try this."

Frank turned it over in his hands before passing it to Gerard. "You have a magic potion for everything?"

Ray snorted. "It's vitamin E cream, dude."

Gerard opened it and scooped some out with his fingers, rubbing it onto the skin. "Ow," he said, frowning. "Wait - hold this." He shoved the open tub at Frank, then lifted his hands and fiddled at the back of his neck for a moment, finally undoing the gold chain he wore around his neck. He kissed the cross on the end quickly, then wrapped it up and put it in his top pocket. "Okay," he said, and took the lotion back, rubbing some more in. "Thanks, Ray. That's actually better."

"Guess you're allergic to Vatican fabric softener," Mikey said.

Gerard smiled lopsidedly. He buttoned his shirt all the way back up to the top. "I guess."

He looked really strange, Frank thought, in the stiff black shirt but no collar. Frank dug in his pocket and reluctantly offered him the rosary. "Do you want this back?"

Gerard's eyes lit up when he saw it, and he did put his hand out, but then stopped and instead folded Frank's own fingers in so he was holding the rosary tight in his palm. "I gave it to you," he said.

Frank nodded and put it away again. His face felt hot and his throat was dry all of a sudden. He looked at the floor.

They couldn't really talk on the plane, any of them. It wasn't a night flight and most people were awake and would definitely notice if they started talking about hooded dudes with magic balls and whether or not the Vatican wanted them dead. Mostly they all just sat there catching each other's eyes awkwardly until they landed, and then there was the airport to deal with more anxiety over whether or not Gerard would be able to sweet-talk the US Immigration Officials as easily as the ones in Rome.

"Easier, apparently," Bob observed when Gerard came towards them after seriously only five minutes.

"How are you doing it?" Ray wanted to know, shaking his head. "My uncle was once turned away because they thought he 'looked shifty', and you're making them all fall in love with you and handwave a non-existing outgoing trip?"

"I don't know," Gerard said, looking equally mystified. "Maybe I just have an honest face."

Craig hadn't sent cars to pick them up, he'd sent a giant fucking van with hilarious blacked-out windows, which was awesome as far as Frank was concerned because it meant they all got to stay together, and when they pulled into the driveway (which might as well have been a parking lot; Frank wondered for the billionth time exactly how rich Craig was) Craig came to meet them, waving his gangly arms and smiling his creepy big smile.

"Quickly, quickly, inside," he urged them. "My guys will get your bags, come on."

"We can't thank you enough for this," Brian said as Craig showed them into the house.

"We really appreciate it," Gerard agreed, reaching out to shake Craig's hand.

Craig brought his other hand up to cover Gerard's and pumped both his arms up and down energetically. "No problem, really, anything I can do to help! I'm just glad you're okay! Brian said you died?"

"Uh," said Gerard, looking around shiftily. Craig just kept beaming at him expectantly until Gerard said, "I guess."

"Awesome!" said Craig, then when Gerard's eyes bugged out, he hurriedly clarified, "Not that you died. But I mean, that you came back. What was that even like?"

"We're really grateful to you, Craig," Brian cut in smoothly, "and I'm sure the Father will be more than happy to answer all your questions later, but if you don't mind, it was a long flight and he's been through a lot. You understand."

"Oh!" Craig dropped Gerard's hand and laughed a little, shaking his head. "Of course, of course. Here, let me show you to your rooms."

Their 'rooms' actually turned out to be their floor, as in, an entire floor of Craig's house.

"I thought you'd be more comfortable if you could all stay close together," Craig said, opening the door to yet another huge bedroom. "Oh, and I wanted you to have your privacy, so I gave the staff some paid leave. You can stay as long as you need to."

"Jesus *Christ*," Ray said quietly. "The size of this place!"

"I don't remember it being this big when we were here before," Bob frowned.

"Well, you only really saw the upper portion, that time," Craig said casually. "It's really far too big for me, this place, but it has such great views, I just fell in love. Plus I always wanted an orchard, and I have my own creek, too, set right into the grounds."

Frank raised an eyebrow. "You have a football field too?"

"No," Craig said sadly. Then he perked up. "But I do have some caves, if you're into spelunking."

Once they'd dumped their bags and showered, they reconvened in Mikey and Gerard's room to properly fill Gerard in on everything that had happened. He was dismayed to hear that his unicorn notebook (*Mikey's unicorn notebook*, said Frank's brain in Mikey's voice) was still in Rome with the Cardinal, but Brian found him a plain one and he used that to make notes, nodding and frowning as they took turns making sure he was up to speed.

"And what about Danny and Mark?" he wanted to know, peering at them over the top of the notebook. "Where are they now?"

Mikey and Frank exchanged an uncomfortable glance. "We don't know," Mikey said. "I barely thought about it."

"Me neither," Frank said, honestly.

Gerard frowned deeply. "Guys, something really terrible could have happened to them. Didn't any of you think it was a priority to try to find them?"

"You were dead," Brian said quietly. "We weren't really thinking at all."

Gerard looked a little abashed. "Well, we need to find them. I guess we have to assume the Hoods are some sort of cult? Did the Cardinal give you any more information about what the symbol on the sphaera might be?"

Frank shook his head. "I bet he knows, though."

"I'd say you can count on it," Gerard said, with kind of a faraway look in his eyes. Then he said briskly, "Okay, well, if they managed to track you to Rome we know they're organized, efficient and therefore a lot more dangerous than the usual wackos we deal with."

"We also know there's like, a million of them," Bob said.

"So you think they could have tracked us here?" Frank asked, fighting the urge to look out of the window.

"I wouldn't bet against it," Gerard said thoughtfully. He scanned his notes once more, then nodded. "So I guess that brings us up to date, unless there's anything else you need to tell me?"

There was a silence. Frank broke it by saying, "Gerard - is there anything you need to tell *us*?"

"What?" Gerard looked at him sharply. "Like what?"

"Like what happened to you while you were gone? Where you went? Why you came back?"

Gerard went quiet. He folded his notebook shut and laid his pencil down on top of it. He scratched his nose and said, "I don't know. I don't remember."

"There must be something," Ray pressed, but Gerard shook his head.

"I don't even remember being in the alley with you guys. Just waking up at the Vatican, that's all. Everything before that is just a blank."

Frank didn't know what to say to that. He watched Mikey rub Gerard's arm.

"Do you want to call the Cardinal now?" Ray said then.

Gerard hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah, I'll - he'll be worried. Do you guys have my cell?"

"Shit." Bob shook his head. "It's with the stuff Pete's sending over."

"I don't know the number," Gerard said, twisting his hands, agitated.

"It's okay," Mikey soothed him. "I'm sure our stuff will be here soon. You should try to get some rest right now."

"We all should," Brian said firmly, in his *that's final* voice.

Frank thought he would crash out the minute his head hit the pillow, but instead he found himself staring at the ceiling for a while. He rolled over and saw that Ray was still awake too, in the other twin bed. "Hey."

"Hey." Ray wiggled two fingers in a little wave. "This is all crazy, right?"

"Seriously." Frank blinked heavily.

"I know Gerard doesn't want to be cut off from us," Ray said thoughtfully. "I don't want that either. But don't you think it's strange that he just decided to walk away like that?"

"I guess," Frank allowed. "But to be honest with you, dude, I don't give a shit as long as he's with us and not with them."

*You mean as long as he's with you,* said a voice in Frank's head. Frank ignored it.

"It just seems strange to me," Ray was saying, propping himself up on an elbow. "I mean, I know he isn't going to win any priestly awards for rule-following, but this is kind of a big deal, isn't it? Running away?"

"It's not like he isn't going to go back," Frank said uncomfortably, feeling for some reason like Ray was accusing him of something. "It's just until we can be sure we're all safe."

Ray watched him thoughtfully for a minute, then nodded and lay down on his back, lacing his fingers over his chest. "I guess you're right. He's just hard to understand sometimes. They both are."

Frank raised an eyebrow. "Both?"

"Ways."

"Uh huh." Frank smirked, and Ray looked over and rolled his eyes, raising his middle finger in

Frank's direction. Frank laughed. "Is this where you ask me if Mikey's said anything to me about you?"

"What are we, in middle school?" Ray scoffed. He rearranged the blankets over himself, then cut his eyes at Frank. "Well has he?"

Frank laughed and pressed his face into the pillow. "Dude, you know I couldn't tell you even if he had."

"I'm not sure that I do know that," Ray said, frowning at the ceiling. "He's obviously told you what happened, so you must have talked about it. Aren't you and I friends too?"

"Oh, dude, of course we are!" Frank said in dismay, struggling to sit up. "Toro, it's not that, it's just that if he has something to say to you then I think, you know, *he* should say it to you."

Ray sighed. "I guess."

"And anyway, if we're talking about not telling people shit, okay, how long have you liked him and not said anything?"

Ray shrugged. "A while," he said, in a way that made it sound like it was a lot longer than that. "But he's Mikey, you know? Plus he has someone new every five minutes."

Frank thought about that. It had been true back when they worked at the shop, he supposed. "Not really. Not anymore."

"Yeah, well, that's part of the problem, isn't it?" Ray moved his hands restlessly over the covers. "I don't want it just to be because I'm here. Just because of our situation."

"I know," Frank said, guiltily remembering Mikey saying basically that exact thing on the plane. It took Mikey a while to come to conclusions sometimes, though, it wouldn't be fair for Frank to go telling Ray what he'd said when Mikey wasn't sure how he felt himself yet.

"Whatever," Ray sighed. "How much of a shit am I, anyway, talking to you of all people about this?"

Frank blinked. "Me of all people?"

"You know." Ray waved his hand. "The whole 'I Don't Know How To Love Him' deal."

"The - you - !" Frank looked around for something to throw at Ray, but then gave up and flopped down onto the pillow again, groaning. He could hear Ray cracking up and he flipped him off without looking at him. "Fuck you, dude, we're both pathetic, okay?"

Ray just laughed some more. "Agreed."

Frank punched the pillow until he could see Ray around it. "It might be out of my hands soon anyway," he said lightly, trying to hide the way that even the thought of Gerard leaving them made his chest ache. "If the Vatican have their way."

"Maybe," Ray started, then looked down at his hands for a minute. "Maybe it would be easier," he said hesitantly. "That way. For you."

Frank picked the rosary up from the nightstand and wrapped it around his wrist, pressing his fingers against the beads until it hurt. "I'm not interested in easy."



"Yeah," Ray sighed. "That sounds about right."

\*

When Frank woke up, groggy and aching a little, Ray was still sleeping like the dead across the room. Ray was a quiet sleeper - he didn't toss and turn like Frank, or snore like Bob or Brian - but occasionally he muttered to himself. Mostly nonsense, but Frank listened carefully and picked out the words 'raspberry' and 'server', which made him smile as he swung his legs out of bed and tiptoed to the bathroom, closing the door quietly behind him.

He pissed and brushed his teeth and then stood there for a while, just breathing and thinking about how Gerard was alive, and back with them, and just in the other room. He still couldn't quite believe it, and the urge to double-check was irresistible, so he padded back out of the bathroom, pulled his jeans on, and made his way down the hall to Gerard and Mikey's room.

Their door was just the tiniest bit ajar. Frank caught himself before he touched it, and pressed his eye to the gap instead. Mikey was sitting up against the headboard, with Gerard's head in his lap.

"You didn't call Mom and Dad?" Gerard was saying incredulously.

"I told you, I didn't feel like you were really dead," Mikey said patiently, stroking Gerard's hair away from his face. "And anyway, thank God I didn't, okay? How would I have explained you coming back?"

Gerard made a noise, almost a laugh or a sigh. Then he said, "Was it a feeling like you had about Pete?"

Mikey frowned a little bit. "At first I just thought it was wishful thinking. But then...well, it got stronger. And - yeah, I think it was. Like Pete."

Gerard was quiet for a while. He closed his eyes. He looped his arm around Mikey's waist.

Frank felt so wrong, standing there spying on them from the hallway like a creep, but he couldn't make himself move away. It was like he was starving for the sight of Gerard, greedy to just be near him, even if Gerard didn't know he was there. And for Mikey, too, for Mikey like this, calm and whole. Frank cast a nervous glance up and down the hallway, and stayed where he was.

"How are you feeling?" Mikey wanted to know. He touched the side of Gerard's neck. "That rash or whatever seems to have gone down."

"Yeah," Gerard said, then shifted around a little. "I don't know, I feel so weird. Like...disconnected, or something. Unplugged."

"You'll feel better after you speak to the Cardinal," Mikey said confidently. "And you have to take it easy on yourself, okay? You've been through...well, we don't even know what. Give yourself a break."

Gerard smiled a little. He reached up and curled his fingers around Mikey's wrist for a second.

"And Gerard," Mikey hesitated, making a face at the opposite wall, before going on, "Do me a favor?"

"Anything," said Gerard.

"Frank."

Frank froze, holding his breath and feeling his heart beat wildly in panic.

"He was out of his mind," Mikey said quietly. "When you were gone. Just - just try to be careful with him, okay?"

Gerard was silent for a long time, during which Frank had to struggle not to throw up or clap his hands over his ears or fall through the door in his desperation to hear what his answer might be. Eventually he said, "I do - I always try, Mikey."

Mikey made a face that was impossible to read, and his voice was equally shuttered. "I know you do."

Gerard rolled over, pressing his face against Mikey's belly. Mikey hugged him close and made a soft sound, and Frank's whole body ached with how bad he wanted to be the one comforting Gerard, how much he would have given to be in that room with them. But then there was a sound on the stairs, and Frank just had time to throw himself a respectable distance away from the door when Craig appeared at the end of the hall, doing some over-exaggerated tiptoe walk that made him look like a spider.

"I don't want to disturb you," he whisper-shouted to Frank. "But your stuff just arrived, and I thought you might be hungry?"

Frank's stomach immediately growled its agreement and he laughed to cover the fact he was flustered as hell. "I'll wake them up," he whispered back, and Craig beamed and tiptoe-walked back to the stairs again.

*What a weirdo*, Frank thought, not unaffectionately, and raised his hand to knock on Gerard and Mikey's door.

\*

Ray was so happy to have all his kit with him again, it was hilarious. He kept pulling out jars and instruments and making happy noises, waving things in the air when he was particularly pleased to see them.

"I hope Pete didn't open any of these," he said, indicating the jars with the red 'DO NOT OPEN UNLESS YOU ARE RAY TORO' labels on them. "But he can always call me if any part of him starts falling off, I guess."

Gerard looked up from where he was making out with his books. "Did anyone find my cell yet?"

"Here," Bob tossed it to him.

"You can use the landline," Craig said, but Gerard was already on the way out of the room, with his cell pressed to his ear.

Mikey watched him go, looking troubled. "I hope the Cardinal isn't too mad."

Frank took another enormous bite of his sandwich. "Isn't it against his religion?" he said with his mouth full, then took advantage of Mikey's distraction to sneak a couple of his chips. "I'm sure it's fine, dude."

"How is it fine?" Mikey wanted to know. He pushed his glasses up on his nose. "After everything that went down, he just ran away? What if they fire him?"

Frank swallowed his mouthful and picked up his soda. "Am I supposed to think that would suck?"

"Don't be such an asshole," Mikey said, moving pointedly away from Frank.

"I'm not!" Frank protested, but then Gerard came back into the room, looking like a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

"I only got to speak to him for a few seconds," he said before they could ask, "But I think everything's okay. He said he'll call me back and we can talk about it more."

"What did you even tell him?" Ray asked.

Gerard shrugged. "The truth. I freaked out. He told me not to blame myself, and-" his eyes flickered to Frank for a second, "To reassure you all that he only has our best interests at heart."

Frank snorted. "If you say so."

"I do say so," Gerard replied sharply. "Our best shot at figuring this out is with his help, Frank."

Frank disagreed with that so hard he almost laughed, but he bit it back and concentrated on eating.

"I just don't even know where to start," Brian said now, looking glumly at the giant 'To Do' list he'd written. "How the hell do you find missing kids who may or may not be mixed up in a cult when you can't involve the police?"

"Private investigator?" Ray suggested.

Bob gave him a look. "We *are* private investigators."

"Yeah, but we suck at it," Frank said truthfully. "Does anyone even know their last name?"

"Allia," Gerard and Brian said at the same time, like, way to make Frank feel like a shit.

"Um," said Craig then, wiping his hands on a dishtowel. "I might be able to help."

Brian looked unconvinced. "Craig, we're so grateful for everything you've done for us, but this is really-"

"I was going to help them anyway," Craig cut him off. "Remember? I'm invested now. Look, if I can't turn anything up, there's no harm done, is there? Let me try, come on. I can help you."

"You're already helping," Brian said, and looked at Gerard, who was smiling a little.

"We always find ourselves people who want to help," he said. "It's almost like we were meant to meet you."

"You think so?" Craig said eagerly. "Like fate?"

Gerard laughed. "Why not?"

*Because there's no such thing,* Frank thought bitterly, but he kept it to himself.

Craig went off to see what he could do about the kids, and the rest of them settled down to a 'find the symbol' research session that proved ultimately fruitless.

"It's just not *anywhere*," Gerard said, slamming his book closed in frustration. "Why the *fuck* didn't

we stay at the Vatican? The Cardinal could have figured this shit out in five minutes."

"Don't underestimate yourself," Mikey said.

Gerard shook his head. "I just wish I could remember. I mean, we have to assume I wasn't dead, right? People don't just come back from the dead."

"But you weren't breathing," Brian frowned. "Father, you had no pulse. They put you in a fucking body bag."

Gerard waved his hand. "People seem dead and then aren't all the time."

"On the Discovery Channel!" Ray said eagerly. "See, that's what I said."

Bob leaned forward. "So the real question is, where did you go when they lost your body, how did you find us in the street, and what the fuck did you do that sent the Hoods to the floor?"

"And why can't I *remember* any of it?" Gerard sighed and dropped his head into his hands. "This crap is so much easier to deal with when it's happening to someone else."

"You're telling me," said Frank.

Gerard looked up and studied Frank's face for a minute. "How did it not drive you crazy?" he said. "When it was you?"

Frank didn't know what to say. The truth was it did drive him crazy. It still did. He was starting to feel like it always would. "I don't know," he said eventually, not looking at anyone. "The show must go on, I guess."

Everyone was quiet for a minute. Then Brian said, "Look, why don't we take this back to basics."

Gerard frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Remember when it was Frank, and we had our first research session?" Everyone nodded. "Well, let's do that. Father, you'll make a list of things to look out for. We'll write them up when we find them, keep the categories separate, and maybe a pattern will start to emerge."

"I think that's a great idea," Ray said, "But can we call a time out first? I need some air or something."

"Me too," said Gerard and Mikey in unison, which made them both laugh.

"Maybe we can go for a walk in the grounds," Ray suggested.

Frank could have gone with them, but he was finding it difficult to be around Gerard, if he was totally honest. He just felt like there should be *more*, like something should have changed after everything that happened, but Gerard seemed much the same as he ever had, if a little more temperamental. Before, he'd felt like they were closer than they'd ever been - and he should have been expecting something to give, because it was driving them both out of their minds, but he would take it over this weirdness.

He headed upstairs to call his Mom and tell her as much as he could without freaking her out, then sat on the end of his bed for a while, holding the rosary in his hands. He counted the beads three times over, then three times over again, letting his mind clear and focus on nothing but the steady movement of the beads through his fingers, the soft click-clack they made. The repetition and the

peace it brought him made him sleepy, but he wasn't in the mood for another bad dream. Instead he went to his bag and got out the book he'd been reading, before everything went to shit.

It was one of Gerard's, but it was slightly less boring than some of the others because there was a whole bunch of stuff on Mary, who Frank actually gave half a shit about. The chapter he was reading was about a little girl who claimed to have seen Mary a bunch of times in Belgium, which was a place Frank wasn't convinced actually existed, but whatever.

He sighed and lay back, rolling onto his side so he could curl up and keep counting the rosary beads while he read. It would be much easier, he thought, if Mary or someone would just get off their ass and come to Earth and tell them they were on the right track. According to the book, Mary was all over the fucking place until not-so-recently, so why couldn't she come and help them out now? It was like someone had decided that the human race couldn't have the internet and miracles at the same time, and it was bullshit, because Frank would give the fucking internet back very happily if it meant knowing it wasn't all for nothing, that they weren't all just fools.

"I'm just saying," he told the picture of Mary in the book. "We could use you, you know?"

She didn't say anything. Of course she didn't, she wasn't even a she, *it* was a fucking drawing. Frank sighed disgustedly at himself and looked down at his hands. He wound the rosary around his left hand, crossing the beads over his tattoos there, the seraph's face, the circle between his forefinger and thumb. His eyes kept wandering back to the picture in the book, drawn to her like a magnet.

"Believe in me and I shall believe in you," he read aloud, which was what Mary had said to the little girl, according to the book. He draped the rosary around his neck, tucked it under his shirt and rubbed his hands over his face. "Easier said than done, sister."

He kept reading until he was hit by a deep craving for a cigarette. Craig hadn't said they couldn't smoke in the house, but if Frank was an asshole, well, he was an asshole with manners, so he slipped downstairs and found Bob and Brian had evidently had the same idea because they were sitting around on the deck.

"The others not back yet?" Frank tapped a smoke out of his pack and lit up, closing his eyes to properly appreciate the burn in his lungs at the first, sweet inhale.

"No," Brian frowned a little.

"Toro's probably making them harvest something," Bob said in a voice that spoke of a lot of experiences he'd rather forget.

Frank laughed, and then a noise caught in his ears and he looked out over the grounds of Craig's house, squinting. "Did you guys hear that?"

Brian shook his head. "It's just the wind, Frankie."

"It's totally still out here, there was - there!" Frank moved to the edge of the deck and shaded his eyes with his hand, pointing to where he could see three tiny figures moving out of the trees at the bottom of Craig's giant garden. "You don't see that?"

Bob and Brian got up to join him, then, and after a few seconds the figures became clearer - it was Ray, Frank realized with a sick lurch of his stomach, it was Ray, and Mikey and Gerard were *carrying him*.

"Shit," Bob said, and all three of them jumped off the deck and started running.

"What the fuck happened?" Brian yelled as they got closer, close enough to see that Mikey and Gerard were lurching along with Ray's arms hooked around their shoulders, that Ray could barely stand, that Mikey and Ray were soaking wet and *bleeding*, for fuck's sake. "Did you fall in the creek?"

Ray shook his head, tried to say something and started coughing, deep wet hacking sounds that made Frank wince in sympathy. Bob reached them first and moved Mikey out of the way; took most of Ray's weight on himself. Mikey stumbled over to Frank, who caught him, and Brian went to help Gerard on Ray's other side.

"What happened?" Frank asked, getting Mikey's arm around his neck. "Why are you *bleeding*?"

"Rocks," Mikey muttered.

"What rocks?" Brian spluttered, but Gerard said,

"Let's just get them inside, Brian!" and so they hurried as fast as they could back up to the house, getting Mikey and Ray down on the couch while Bob called for Craig.

"Now somebody start talking," Brian demanded, when Craig and Bob came back with towels and a first aid kit. "What the fuck, you go for one walk without me and this happens?"

"We went down to the creek," Mikey started, clutching at the towel Frank draped over his shoulders. "We wanted to see where it came from, like, if we could find the source? And it seemed like it was coming from underground, like, this cave thing."

Bob was kneeling in front of Ray, looking at his hands. "Toro, what the fuck did you do, wrestle a razorblade?"

Frank looked over and his stomach turned when he saw Ray's hands, all cut to shit and bleeding like crazy from the palms.

"I told you, there were rocks," Mikey said tearfully. Frank rubbed his arms, trying to warm him up. "He was trying to find me."

Craig whispered anxiously to Brian, "I was *joking* about the spelunking."

Frank looked at Gerard. "Can you make any more sense than these two?"

"I don't know what happened," Gerard said helplessly. "One minute they were just exploring the mouth of the cave, and the next Ray was in the water calling for Mikey, and then I guess the current pulled him further into the cave, or something, and he couldn't get out."

"You can't swim!" Bob said furiously. "What the fuck were you thinking, getting in the water?"

"I couldn't see Mikey!" Ray said shrilly, his voice rough with coughing. "I couldn't see him anywhere, I thought he'd been sucked under and I had to find him!"

"But I was right there on the rocks!" Mikey insisted, shaking with cold or remembered fear. "I was right there yelling your name and it was like you couldn't see me at all!"

"I *couldn't* see you!" Ray said, waving his wounded hands around. "I thought you'd drowned!"

"Well, you pretty much did!" Mikey shouted. Frank held him tighter, rubbing his back. "You almost died!"

"I had to *find you*," Ray shouted back, and then Mikey scrambled out of Frank's arms and over to Ray, curling his arms around Ray's shoulders and pressing his face into his wet hair. "I had to find you," Ray repeated. He turned his face into Mikey's shoulder and awkwardly braced his arms around Mikey's waist, hands held out stiffly at the ends.

Frank looked at Gerard, who was wringing his hands. Gerard said in a small voice, "Mikey pulled him out of the cave and he wasn't breathing. We had to give him CPR."

"You guys sure love your near-death experiences," Craig said in a hushed tone.

"Why didn't you call for help?" Brian asked Gerard.

"You were too far away to hear," Gerard said, distressed. "And I couldn't leave them."

"But why couldn't Ray see Mikey?" Frank wondered. "What the fuck is going on?"

"I don't know," Gerard shook his head miserably.

"We need to get these guys out of their wet clothes, they'll catch fucking pneumonia or something, with our luck," Brian said decisively.

Mikey didn't want to leave Ray alone once they got upstairs: Gerard seemed confused when Mikey didn't want him to stay with them, and Frank had a little shock of thinking *he doesn't know*.

"Come on, Gee, you can tell us what happened again so we can start figuring it out," he said, and ushered Gerard out of the room, closing the door behind him just in time to see Mikey climbing into Ray's lap. Evidently he was starting to figure out how he felt about Ray, at least.

"They're," Gerard started, and then he got this look on his face as everything obviously clicked into place. "Oh," he said, his eyes going wide. "Oh. When did that happen?"

"I think it's still pretty new," Frank said, leading Gerard down the hall with a hand on his back. "I'm not sure if Bob and Brian know, either."

"Oh," Gerard said again, and shivered; he must be cold, Frank realized, because his shirt was damp from carrying Ray, although the rest of him was still dry. He must not have been in the water like Mikey and Ray.

They couldn't go back to Mikey and Gerard's room, so Frank steered him towards his and Ray's room instead. He wanted to change his own shirt, too, because there was blood on it. Gross.

"I think this will fit you," he said, fishing a plain black T-shirt out of his bag. "I'm just going to wash up."

He went into the bathroom and peeled out of his shirt, then lathered his hands up and washed the bloody smears off his neck and hands. He was fucking sick of blood not staying inside people's bodies where it belonged. Plus it always gave him flashbacks to being covered in his own, which was totally awesome.

He towed himself off roughly and went back out in the bedroom, where Gerard was sitting on the end of the bed. He was suddenly very aware of the scars on his back, and of not wanting Gerard to see them because he would want to touch them and talk about them and Frank would go insane, so he crab-walked to his bag instead, bending down to dig out another shirt.

When he looked up again, Gerard was watching him intently.

"What," said Frank.

Gerard raked his eyes down Frank's body, then slowly back up again. Frank could practically feel it, and he shifted uncertainly, feeling his face heat up, fucking hell.

"You look good," Gerard said eventually, in a low, even voice.

"Uh," said Frank, frozen with his shirt balled up in his hand. His fingers flexed in the fabric; he couldn't seem to make himself move. "Thanks."

Gerard watched him a little longer, then got up off the bed and came over, standing too close to Frank, not touching but so close Frank could feel the heat of him, feel his breath on Frank's cheek.

"Thanks for the shirt," Gerard said in the same voice, making Frank's stomach tie itself up and his mouth go dry. "It feels nice. Wearing your clothes."

"You're welcome," Frank mumbled, suddenly unable to look up and meet Gerard's eyes. It was like he had a weight on the back of his neck, keeping his head down, and he saw Gerard raise his hand and trace his fingers vaguely around the shape of the rosary, which Frank was wearing around his neck.

"You know," Gerard murmured, moving his fingers over Frank's collarbone; not touching, but so close Frank's skin prickled with imagined sensation. "Tattoos are a form of defiance against your creator. This body is yours, and you'll do whatever the fuck you want with it. It's pure rebellion."

Frank opened his mouth to say something, but his throat was closed; he coughed, twice, to clear it, and Gerard kind of blinked and stepped back, shoving his hand into his pocket.

"Sorry," he mumbled, practically crimson. "I don't know - sorry."

"It's okay," Frank said, trying not to look too disappointed. He yanked his shirt on over his head. "Let's find the other guys and try to figure out what happened, okay?"

It was a while later when Mikey made his way to join them, looking suspiciously ruffled. Frank tried not to feel too jealous.

"Um," said Mikey, hovering in the doorway. "Frankie, I need to talk to you."

Frank got out of his chair and crossed quickly over to him, letting Mikey pull him away from the door and around the corner a little. "What is it?" he said quietly. "How's Toro?"

A little smile tugged at the corner of Mikey's mouth.

"Oh *really*," said Frank.

"Shut up," said Mikey, obviously struggling to control the smile.

Frank grinned at him. "Not just because you were sad, then, huh."

"Shut up," Mikey said again, then kind of frowned. "I mean, things are still all weird. I don't know what it means yet."

"I think it's great," Frank said honestly. "Toro's awesome."

"Yeah," Mikey said, totally losing the battle with the smile for a second, then sobered up quickly and whispered, "But this is about Gerard."



"What?" Frank said, feeling unaccountably guilty even though Mikey had obviously been busy while Gerard was psychically feeling Frank up or whatever it was he'd been doing up in Frank's room. "What's the matter?"

Mikey looked nervously towards the doorway, pulled Frank a few feet further away, and whispered, "He didn't try to help when Ray was drowning."

Frank stared at him. "What? Don't be crazy."

"I'm not!" Mikey said. "He just stood there, he didn't call for help or anything."

"But he said we were too far away to hear him-"

Mikey cut him off. "He didn't even *try*."

Frank rolled his eyes. "What are you saying, Mikey, he should have thrown himself into the water too? They couldn't see you, remember, he was probably looking for you!"

"He *wasn't*. He just stood there and *watched*."

"So maybe he was frozen stiff with fear!" Frank said, forgetting to whisper. "Maybe he was so scared of losing you he didn't know what to do! Maybe he just came back from the *dead* and you ought to give him a fucking break!"

"I'm telling you it was like he wanted us to die!" Mikey insisted.

"Mikey?" Gerard was in the doorway. "What - are you talking about *me*?"

They both turned to look at him - Gerard looked like he'd been punched, like he was going to throw up.

"I'm sorry," Mikey said quietly. "But I was calling and calling for you and you didn't do anything."

"I couldn't hear you!" Gerard said incredulously. "I couldn't see you, neither of us could!"

Mikey knotted his fingers, his shoulders hunched. "You could hear Toro, though, and you didn't try to help him."

"I couldn't get to him, Mikey, the current had sucked him under that ledge, you know that!" Gerard's entire face was white, with little spots of color burning high on his cheeks. "How could you even think that I would ever want anything to happen to you," he said, voice breaking. "How could you even *think* that?"

Mikey held out a whole three seconds before going over to him and hugging him close. "I'm sorry," he said, his arms around Gerard's shoulders. "I'm sorry, I was just so scared."

"Me too," Gerard said, a little angrily. "Fuck, Mikey, what is the matter with you that you would think that?"

"I'm sorry," Mikey said again, pulling back to look at Gerard's face. "Please, I didn't mean it. Just forget it, okay? I was being crazy."

Gerard still looked deeply hurt, but he nodded, hands on Mikey's shoulders. "Okay then. How's Ray?"

"Okay," Mikey said, letting go of Gerard. He took his glasses off and polished them on the hem of

his shirt. "His hands are all fucked up, though."

"We're trying to figure shit out," Frank said, even though he was mad with Mikey for saying those things about Gerard. "You should come help."

"There isn't shit about invisibility in any of these," Bob declared, tossing his book onto the pile.

"I know," Gerard agreed. "It doesn't really come up in Catholicism, to be honest. Unless you're talking about God himself. And even then it's not clear. Ye shall see me, no ye shan't, is He here, is He not here," Gerard pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes squeezed shut. "Sometimes I really think it would be easier if just *one* person had been writing things down back in the day, you know?"

"Are we sure this is even a mystical thing?" Brian said skeptically. "I mean, I know previous experience suggests it must be, but it was a freaking cave. All those ridges, plus it was dark, right? And sound echoes weirdly. I'm just saying, the mind plays tricks."

Mikey scowled. "So now you're saying you don't believe us?"

"Of course not," Brian held his hands up placatingly. "All I'm saying is, maybe we chalk this one up to 'who the fuck knows' for now, and concentrate on the things there's actually some precedent for."

"Like the resurrection," Bob said, pointing at Gerard.

Gerard winced. "I really wish you wouldn't call it that."

"But that's what those guys called it," Frank said suddenly, snapping his fingers as he remembered. "The Hoods. They were looking for the resurrected, that's the word they used."

Gerard frowned. "Like they knew I was going to come back? But how?"

Frank spread his hands. "You're the brainbox, dude, I don't fucking know. But that's definitely what they said."

"But they weren't trying to hurt me in the first place," Gerard mused. "They were after Pete."

Mikey gave him a look. "Pete's Jesus now?"

Gerard looked startled, then laughed, rubbing his forehead. "Wow. That's an image."

Frank grinned too, just because the idea of Pete in a toga with a beard was hilarious. Although Gerard said Jesus didn't wear a toga. Whatever, that's what it looked like in all the pictures.

"Resurrection isn't actually confined to Jesus, though," Gerard said, settling back in his chair. "Like, He brought a bunch of people back to life himself while he was alive."

Brian sat forward. "And what was the reason then?"

Gerard shrugged. "Different things. Compassion. To reward faith. Because He could. The most famous case is probably Lazarus--"

"I know this one!" Frank snapped his fingers again. "Like, his sisters send to Jesus to tell him Lazarus is sick, right, only he doesn't get there in time, so the dude dies, and then Martha's all mad, and Jesus is like, chill, he's gonna rise, and she's all, yeah, on *Judgment Day*, and he's like, nu-uh and brings the dude back, right?"

Everyone stared at him. Frank shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Right?" he repeated, looking at Gerard. "Isn't that what happened?"

Gerard got a tiny smile on his face. "I've never heard it told like that before," he said slowly. "But yes."

Frank made a victory fist in the air. "See, I can read a book, motherfucker."

Mikey rolled his eyes.

"So you're saying resurrection wasn't such a big deal back then," Brian said a little impatiently.

Gerard scrunched his mouth up. "I don't think it was commonplace, or anything. It was obviously remarkable enough for the apostles to record it. But you have to remember this all happened before Christ's own resurrection, so technically nobody's soul was going to Heaven anyway."

Mikey chewed his lip. "And it's never happened since?"

"Oh no, it has," Gerard said, getting that edge to his voice that meant he was warming to his subject. "There are over four hundred reported cases of Saints performing resurrection miracles. Like, Saint Peter raised a woman named Dorcas, for example. She was a seamstress who made clothes for the poor, and the whole village was mourning her when she died. Saint Peter came and prayed over her, and said, 'Tabitha, arise,' and she did. Converted a shitload of people, I can tell you. Nothing like a miracle for a recruitment drive."

"Wait," Frank shook his head. "Tabitha? I thought you said her name was Dorcas."

Gerard tilted his head. "They're different versions of the same name. It means 'gazelle'."

"What about this guy?" said Bob, who had evidently decided to give his book another shot. He frowned and said something that sounded like, "You dyke us."

"Eutychus," Gerard corrected. Then his forehead creased and he held his hands out. "Can I see that?"

Bob handed the book over and Gerard read the open pages quickly, frowning deeper. "Maybe this is more what we're looking for," he said doubtfully, passing the book over to Mikey and Frank. "Eutychus was a boy who wanted to hear Saint Paul speak, only the address was really long, right? So he fell asleep, which would have been fine, except he was sitting in a third-floor window and he fell to his death."

"Ouch," said Frank, wincing. He wasn't crazy about heights.

"Well, except Paul said he wasn't dead, and carried him back upstairs. He had a meal with the men there, and when he left, Eutychus was alive." Gerard scratched his head. "It's not really clear that he ever was actually dead, though. Maybe he just seemed dead and Paul knew that he wasn't."

Mikey looked skeptical. "You didn't have a concussion, Gerard."

"Well, I wasn't dead either, Mikey, because check it out," Gerard snapped, raising his arms to the side.

Mikey scowled. "All these people were, why not you?"

Gerard clicked his tongue irritably. "Because the last time I checked, no Saints or Sons of God

swung by to plug me back into life support."

"Do we even believe in resurrection?" Frank said hurriedly, before they could start fighting for real. "I mean, officially? Except for Jesus, I mean."

"Of course," Gerard nodded. "Both the Apostle's and the Nicene Creed state that we believe in and expect the resurrection of the dead and everlasting life."

"But I thought that was metaphorical," Bob said. "Just our souls going to Heaven."

"It's not-"

"Really clear," Frank finished for him. "Surprise!"

Mikey cracked up. Gerard gave them both an exasperated look, and went on, "Originally, the resurrection of the dead, I mean, the big one, Judgment Day, was a Judeo-Christian belief, whereas the idea of souls going right to Heaven was a pagan thing. But now we've adopted that for ourselves."

"Jesus Christ," Frank rolled his eyes. "Is there anything we didn't steal from someplace else?"

"And there's evidence to suggest that Jesus believed in a physical resurrection, of the just and the unjust," Gerard went on determinedly. "But He also said that we would be as angels, not as humans, in Heaven. And that according to what God said to Moses, He is the God of the living, not of the dead. But then after Jesus died he took all the righteous souls of dead people to Heaven with him. So...I don't know."

"I really hate it when you don't know," Brian moaned. Frank really agreed.

"I said that if you were here you could figure this out in three seconds," Mikey complained. "And now you are and you can't at all."

"Sorry," Gerard said, guiltily. He snuck a little shifty look at Mikey and nudged his thigh with his hand. Mikey looked grumpy, but he touched Gerard's thumb with his own, and Gerard's face relaxed.

"Um," said Bob. "I have a question."

Gerard made a 'go ahead' gesture with his hands.

"You're not gonna like it," Bob warned. "But I'm just - this resurrection stuff. Bringing people back from the dead. Isn't that the same as what the Hoods were doing, the necromancy? I thought you were all against that and shit."

"I am," Gerard grimaced. "It's not really the same. Necromancy is usually to do with a spirit rather than a physical body. And besides, the Saints were basically the hands of God on Earth. Ordinary people aren't meant to try to do things that are best left up to God."

Frank frowned. "But you are. Right? I mean, wasn't that one of your vows? To do his work or whatever?"

Gerard looked surprised, like he'd never thought about it like that. "I guess," he said reluctantly. "But I still wouldn't attempt something like that unless God specifically told me to. Like, unequivocally. In writing."

"Besides," Mikey said. "The Hoods were killing other people to make it happen."

"I'm just saying they're closely related," Bob said, and then he raised his eyebrows at Gerard. "Hey, are you even still a priest?"

"What?" Gerard gaped at him. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, if your soul goes to Heaven when you die, I mean..." Bob waved his hand. "Do you need to get ordained again? How does it work?"

Gerard started to say something indignant, but then stopped and thought about it. "I don't think there's any official guidance on it," he said ruefully, "but a priest can never be ordained twice."

Brian frowned. "Why not?"

"When you take a sacrament, whether it's baptism, confirmation, or Holy Orders, you get this thing called the sacramental character," Gerard explained. "It's indelible, kind of like a tattoo, but on your soul. It can't ever be removed."

"What if you left the Church?" said Frank, trying to keep his voice light, like the answer didn't really matter. "What if you weren't a priest anymore?"

Gerard hesitated, then said, "Well, either you get defrocked, which is like getting fired. Or on rare occasions they'll agree to laicize you, which is kind of a 'no hard feelings' deal. But even if you were dismissed, you - you're not a cleric anymore, you lose your position within the Church, but your ordination is still valid."

"Because of the mark?" Gerard nodded. Frank sucked in a breath and said, "So like, would you still be all...holy, or whatever?"

Gerard flinched a little. "I'm not - if you're asking if I could still perform Rites, then technically the answer is yes. I could consecrate the Eucharist, for example, and it wouldn't be....it would be illicit, but not invalid."

Brian raised his eyebrows. "So you could still do all the priest stuff, you just wouldn't be in the employ of the Church?"

Gerard's eyes flickered to Frank. "It's more complicated than that."

"Right," said Frank. Of course it was. He looked away, towards the wall because he didn't know what expression was on his face, or how to hide it.

Bob was undeterred. "So after you died," he began.

"I didn't die," Gerard interrupted him.

"Okay," said Bob. "Except you did."

"No I didn't!"

"Yes you *did*."

"Stop saying that!"

"Why?"

"Because it's terrifying!" Gerard said, snapping his pencil in agitation. There was an awkward silence, Gerard looking like he was about to burst into tears, Bob scowling in the way that meant he was sorry.

Ray appeared in the doorway, looking sleepy. His shirt was all askew. It was probably a bitch to get dressed when your hands were all fucked up. "What's going on?"

"Bob's being a douche," Frank told him.

"Okay," Ray said easily, coming into the room. He sat down next to Mikey and promptly sneezed three times in a row.

"Ugh," said Mikey. "You should be wearing a sweater or a blanket or something, you could still get really sick."

"I'm fine," Ray insisted, although it came out more like 'T'b fide.'

Frank looked at his bandaged hands and wondered how they'd even managed to have sex. And it wasn't like he could even just ask, like he usually would. Ray wasn't some random, and Frank didn't know if he wanted to see Mikey's impression of his orgasm face. Frank had to see him every day.

"The thing is," Ray said after they filled him in, "That they weren't trying to raise *Pete*. Right?"

"No," Gerard said, chewing on his pencil. "They were using him to collect all that energy that was focused on him."

"And then when you took his place, you got in the way of that," said Frank. "Do you think it was the sacramental tattoo thing that fucked it up?"

"I don't know. The energy they wanted wasn't focused on me, anyway."

"And until we find the meaning of that symbol, we won't know why they wanted it in the first place," Brian sighed. "Man, I miss working in a hair salon."

Frank excused himself, then, to go out on the deck and have that smoke he'd been robbed of by Ray throwing himself down a well after Mikey or whatever the fuck had happened. It was coming up to sunset, and as much as Frank basically hated nature and would be happy to see only concrete for the rest of his life, it was a fucking nice view across the grounds, Craig hadn't been lying about that.

He felt...not angry, more resigned. Frank was so frustrated with himself, it was like no matter how much evidence the universe shoved in his face that it was never, ever going to happen between him and Gerard, he just couldn't let it go. He just felt like he *should* be with Gerard, not in the stupid you-complete-me way, but in the way where he just couldn't see the bad in it. Frank wanted to be with him literally every second of every day, and he had never felt that way, ever, about anyone, and certainly not someone who disagreed with him about basically everything, and was completely unavailable to boot. Frank was beginning to feel like it would never change; not the situation, or the way he felt about Gerard, and that was a fucking depressing thought.

Maybe Ray was right. Maybe it would be better if he couldn't see Gerard at all. He thought about Mikey and Ray and his guts clenched. He was happy for them, if it worked out, but the jealousy and the *it's not fair it's not fair* was a seriously bitter pill.

"Hey," said a voice behind him, soft. Gerard. Frank didn't turn around. Gerard came up next to him

after a minute, leaned on the railing with him. "Can I bum a smoke?"

Frank handed the pack over wordlessly. Gerard shook one out, lit up, and then moaned in pleasure because he was a fucking sadist asshole. "Do you wish I hadn't gotten in your way?" he said, exhaling out the side of his mouth. He rolled the cigarette between his fingers, studying it. "Do you still wish I'd let you take Pete's place?"

"No," Frank said immediately, thinking about the way it had been when Gerard was gone. "No way. I could never put you guys through that. Not now I know what it's like."

Gerard nodded, taking another deep drag on his cigarette. "So you understand, now," he said quietly, turning around to brace his elbows back against the rail, his shoulder against Frank's. "Why I couldn't let it happen."

Frank squinted at him, sideways. The low sun was casting orange light over everything, and it caught the shadows of Gerard's face in stark relief. He looked beautiful. He always looked beautiful to Frank. "Yeah," he said, almost a whisper. He turned away and concentrated on his cigarette. His stomach ached.

"Do you still want to bail?" Gerard asked.

Frank said honestly, "I don't know."

They smoked in silence. Frank reached the end of his cigarette and dropped it, making sure it was ground out under his heel before moving back towards the house.

"What if I did?" Gerard said, stopping Frank in his tracks. "What if I did want to leave?"

Frank squeezed his eyes shut, blinking hard, twice. "Don't say that shit to me," he said, his voice coming out hard and angry. "Don't say that if you don't mean it."

There was the creaking sound of Gerard's weight against the rail, then four footsteps to bring him up against Frank's back. Hands on his elbows to turn him around, and Gerard's finger under his chin, tilting his head up so Gerard could look into his eyes.

"Gerard," Frank bit out, his fingers clenched into tight fists with the effort of not touching. Gerard's other hand covered one of his gently, unfurling Frank's aching fingers to tangle with his own. His face was so close, Frank's heart was banging like crazy in his chest, and of course Mikey chose that moment to come wandering out onto the deck.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he said, taking in the scene, then he got the weirdest expression on his face, like he'd seen a ghost, like a bomb had gone off inside his head, and said, "Oh shit, they're here!"

"Who's here?" Frank demanded.

Mikey's eyes kept getting wider and he stumbled backwards a few paces towards the house. "The Hoods - they, they found us, Gerard, I can feel it."

They ran back into the house and Mikey yelled for Craig, who turned the TV on and flipped it to the channel for his security cameras. "Oh dear," he said, as the fuzzy black-and-white images confirmed Mikey's fears.

"What do we do?" Bob was on his feet already.

"Get me my kit," Ray ordered. "There's something I can do, a barrier, but - shit, my fucking hands. Mikey, you'll have to follow my directions, ok?"

"Me?" Mikey shook his head. "I can't."

"You *can*," Ray insisted. "You don't have a choice."

"What about the Father?" Brian said. "They're looking for him."

"I'm not leaving you guys!" Gerard protested.

"They're *here*, Gerard, you have to hide!" Mikey insisted.

"I didn't hear anything," Frank said stupidly, like that could make it not true.

"Follow me," said Craig to Gerard, and took off running for the stairs.

Gerard followed, and he was still holding Frank's hand so Frank got dragged along with him, down hallways and through doors until they reached a room that must have been Craig's private study.

"The panic room would really be better for this," Craig said, pressing a series of numbers into a keypad on the wall, hidden behind a framed photograph of Craig and a giant dog. "But it's on the other side of the house, and if they're already in the grounds, there isn't time. I knew I had it installed in the wrong place."

A panel on the wall shifted and rotated, revealing another keypad. Craig typed in some more numbers and leaned in to look closely at it - Jesus, Frank realized, it had a fucking retinal scanner.

"You're like Batman," he said wonderingly, and Craig gave him a huge smile before another panel in the wall rotated out of place and revealed a heavy, narrow door behind it. Craig typed in a final series of numbers and it slid back, revealing a space that was maybe six feet tall, two feet wide and three feet deep.

Frank stared. "Dude, why do you have a person-shaped safe, anyway?"

"It's for my golf clubs," Craig said, all matter of fact. "I had some problems with the help, you know how it can be."

"Totally," said Frank. Rich people were *crazy*. Also like Batman. "But there aren't any golf clubs in there."

"No, I always forget to put them away. I think they're downstairs somewhere. But I doubt those guys outside are after my nine-iron," Craig said reasonably. He gestured at the safe. "Okay, get in."

"Oh no," said Gerard, taking a step back and shaking his head. "No, you can't lock me in there by myself."

"Gerard, they'll find you!" Frank said desperately, trying to herd Gerard towards the safe. "There isn't time for this!"

"Not by myself!" Gerard insisted.

Frank grabbed his hand and yanked, hard. "Fine, I'll come in with you, just hurry!"

It was a seriously tight fit, and Frank was a little worried about the lack of oxygen supply, but Craig said, "I won't leave you in here any longer than I have to," reassuringly, and closed the door.



Frank cringed as he heard the various layers sliding and locking into place outside the door. It was completely pitch black inside and he couldn't see anything, just feel the cold steel against his back, Gerard pressed against his front, his rapid, panicked breathing in Frank's ears.

"Hey," said Frank, going for soothing. "Hey, I'm the one who's claustrophobic."

"I'm afraid of the dark," Gerard said tightly. Frank could feel his heart thumping wildly in his chest.

"I'm claustrophobic," Frank said again, because he was only really remembering it now, and it was kind of a good thing that it was so dark, really, because if he could *see* that they were in a room the size of a remote control he actually would lose his last few shreds of sanity.

Gerard wriggled a little and made an unhappy noise. "Can you - the rosary is digging right into my ribcage."

"Sorry," Frank said, wriggling himself until he managed to get a finger hooked under it and work it around over his shoulder to hang down his back, instead.

"Thanks."

"No problem."

"Do you hear anything?" Gerard said, loud and panicky. "I don't hear anything."

Frank shushed him, partly to try and listen, partly because he didn't want them to be given away if the Hoods found Craig's study, but mostly, if he was honest, because he was afraid Gerard would use up all the oxygen.

"I can't stay here in silence," Gerard whispered miserably. "Frankie, I can't, it's too dark, please talk to me, please."

"All right," Frank turned his head to press his cheek against Gerard's. "It's all right, I'm here, just stay calm."

Gerard heaved a shuddery sigh that Frank felt all the way down to his knees. "I don't understand why they're after me. Why is this happening?"

"I don't know," Frank murmured as soothingly as he could. He fumbled his fingers around and found Gerard's hand, trapped down by their sides. "Ray won't let them get to us, okay? You just have to hang on a little longer. I'm right here, you're not alone."

Gerard clung tightly to his hand. "I feel like I'm losing my mind, Frank. Half the time I don't even know what I'm doing."

"What do you mean?"

"My head, it's - " Gerard broke off, sighing heavily. He dropped his head slightly, resting his forehead against Frank's shoulder. "Sometimes I feel like you're the only one who has any faith in me."

"Stop it," Frank said, rubbing his thumb firmly over Gerard's knuckles. "You're just letting the dark and the stress drive you crazy. Just breathe, okay?"

*But not too deeply*, he thought guiltily.

"The others don't trust me anymore," Gerard said anxiously, but then lapsed into silence, breathing shakily in and out, his chest pressing against Frank's on each inhale.

"That's not true," Frank murmured, rotating his hand so he could clasp his fingers around Gerard's thumb.

Gerard shook his head, heavy on Frank's shoulder. "I can see it when they look at me."

"Shh," Frank said, pressing his cheek against Gerard's hair. "I trust you, okay? I trust you."

They were both quiet, then, pressed against each other in the dark. Frank's brain had started misinterpreting the situation almost as soon as the door closed, and he concentrated on listening out for sounds rather than what it felt like to be all wrapped up in Gerard like that. The rosary was kind of digging into his shoulder blade and he thought maybe his palms were sweating, one hand tangled with Gerard's and the other pressed awkwardly down by his side, flat against the metal of the safe.

He could feel Gerard's shoe between his own, the buckle on Gerard's belt pressing against his belly, Gerard's breath, hot on his throat every time Gerard breathed out, and after a couple of minutes he felt Gerard's fingers twitch in his grip.

"Sorry," he muttered instinctively, although he didn't know what for.

Gerard made a small sound and slid one fingertip across Frank's palm, from the web of his thumb to the base of his little finger. "I just need to know you're there."

Frank shivered and stretched his fingers out again, opening his palm up, silently encouraging. He was such a fucking sucker for Gerard, he couldn't help himself even though he could see the crash waiting for him on the other side. Gerard stroked two fingertips across his palm this time, then down to the tip of his little finger, which Frank crooked to catch his fingers and keep him there. Frank was barely breathing now, his eyes tight shut despite the dark, his whole focus narrowed down to the touch of Gerard's fingers against his.

He felt Gerard press the pad of his thumb into the center of Frank's palm; press his ragged nails between Frank's knuckles, trace gently over the inside of Frank's wrist. Every touch was magnified a thousand percent by the dark and the danger and the closeness; when Gerard opened his own palm and pressed it flush against Frank's, Frank barely bit back a gasp, he couldn't help it, he felt it all the way down to his toes. Gerard swallowed audibly and laced his fingers through Frank's, squeezing and then not letting go, so that they were holding hands in the dark.

Frank was going crazy inside; he couldn't stop hearing Gerard's words in his head, what he'd said outside about maybe leaving the priesthood, the way he'd looked at Frank afterwards. *Don't*, he told himself, stamping down furiously on that train of thought. Gerard was just scared and confused and needed someone to hold onto, and if that was what Frank could be for him, well, the pathetic truth was that Frank would take whatever he could get.

He turned his face, slightly, just to try and get some precious air into his lungs, but Gerard followed, the point of his nose tucked against Frank's ear, the faint scratch of stubble against Frank's cheek.

"Frankie," he whispered, and Frank felt Gerard's lips moving against his skin.

"I'm here," he whispered back, and then there was the sound of something shifting, it was the panels in the walls, and Frank was man enough to admit he clutched at Gerard a little, readying

himself to jump out and start beating somebody's face in if necessary.

The door clunked loudly, then swung open, letting light and fresh air into the small space, and Craig beamed at them, reaching in to wrap long hands around their shoulders and pull them out into the study before they had time to do more than blink awkwardly at each other and hurriedly disentangle their hands.

"Ray is so amazing!" he said, already bounding back towards the doorway. "You have to come see this!"

"We used the same spell that I did at the show," Ray explained when they got downstairs. Outside the windows, Frank could see the same wall of cold, blue flame, casting a weird, sickly light on everything inside. "Luckily I still had some vials made up. But it'll only hold for so long."

"It's on fire!" Craig said wonderingly, his nose practically pressing against the glass. "But nothing's burning up!"

"What's Plan B?" said Frank.

Ray pointed to a baggie containing what looked like moss. "Mikey, take pinches of that and place them in a circle around the symbol, ok?"

Frank craned over Mikey's shoulder to see that he'd used colored sand to make a picture of the symbol they all had tattooed on themselves. Mikey followed Ray's directions, making a circle around it. "What next?"

"Next we sprinkle with Holy Water," Ray jerked his chin towards a bottle standing off to the side. Mikey grabbed it and uncapped it. "And Gerard, if you want to do the honors?"

Gerard was staring out of the window, seemingly not listening.

"Gee," said Bob. "Latin time, you're up."

"Hmm?" Gerard said vaguely, then blinked, shaking himself. "Oh! Right."

Mikey handed him a book, already open at the right page.

"Mikey, I want you to light the circle right at the second Gerard closes the book, okay?" Ray said, checking over the sand and the moss one last time. "It's just a couple lines, so be ready."

"Okay," Mikey said doubtfully. "But what if I messed it up?"

"You didn't," said Frank and Ray at the same time. Ray gave Frank a small smile.

Gerard cleared his throat. "Ready?" Mikey nodded, the lighter in his hand, eyes trained on Gerard. "Okay."

"I love this part!" Craig whispered loudly to Brian.

"*Verbis consensus recisus est,*" Gerard said, frowning deeply as he read. "*Rumex somes celestius. Abeo crines.*"

He locked eyes with Mikey and shut the book with a snap. Mikey touched the lighter to the first little pinch of moss, and it crackled and spat for a second before the whole thing caught fire at once, shooting almost up to the ceiling in a violent blaze, sending Mikey reeling backwards and the rest of them flinching behind their hands.

The fire roared for a couple of seconds, then blew itself out as quickly as it started, leaving a deep, black rendering of the circled symbol scorched heavily into Craig's carpet.

"Mikey!" Frank scrambled over to his side of the circle, pulling Mikey upright again. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Mikey said, blinking. "Wow. I almost lost my eyebrows. See, this is why Toro does the spells."

"You did awesome," Ray said, beaming at him.

"Did it work?" Bob said, looking out of the window, where the wall of blue flame was starting to flicker and peter out. "Do I need to go get my axe?"

"We'll find out soon enough," Ray said. "I mean, it works in *theory*."

"Axe it is," Bob said, getting up to go and find it.

There was a flash, then, and Frank looked up to see Craig standing over the symbol, taking pictures of it with his camera.

"Uh," said Brian.

"Oh," Craig looked up guiltily. "Should I not? It's just it's so cool. Nothing like this ever happens to me."

"It's fine," said Ray. "Just maybe don't show them around at dinner parties."

"Okay," said Craig, sounding a little disappointed. He resumed taking pictures.

"I'm just glad he's not mad about his carpet," Mikey whispered to Frank. Frank stifled a giggle.

"Hey!" said Craig. "This is the same symbol you guys have tattooed, right?"

Ray nodded. "In theory," he said, rolling his eyes in the direction Bob had gone, "it means that we should be able to pass in and out of the barrier if we need to, but anyone without it won't be able to pass through."

"But I don't have a tattoo," said Craig, sounding more jealous than concerned.

"Neither does the Father," said Brian. "Don't worry, we have a press-on version. We'll get you set up."

"Not that I'm planning on going anywhere, of course." Craig took one more picture, skirting carefully around the edge of the burned carpet.

Frank turned to Mikey. "Prophetic visions and now you can do magic too?"

Mikey pushed his glasses up his nose. "I just did what Ray told me to."

"So I guess anyone can do this stuff," Gerard said suddenly. He was looking out of the window again. "Just need to follow the recipe. Zero skill required."

Ray looked startled, then hurt. "There's a little more to it than that," he said quietly.

Mikey was scowling. "Gerard, what the fuck?"

"What?" said Gerard, then turned away from the window, his eyes wide. "Ray, I - I didn't mean it like that."

"Okay," Ray mumbled.

"I didn't!" Gerard insisted, moving over to grab Ray's arm. "You're the whole, like, recipe book, here. I just meant if something happened to you," he gestured at Ray's hands, "then it's useful to know Mikey can step in."

Ray relaxed, mollified. "That's true."

"And it's not like there's any big skill set for reading some words out from a book," Gerard went on anxiously. "You're way more impressive than I am."

"Gerard," Ray said, his forehead creasing gently. "It's fine. Forget it."

Mikey gave Frank a look that meant *outside*. Frank tried to pretend he didn't see it, because he didn't want to hear Mikey's stupid 'Gerard is crazy' theory again, but Mikey gave him the look again, and then just gave up and pinched Frank's side so hard it actually really hurt, and Frank had to cover up his yelp of pain with a cough.

"Let's get you a glass of water," Mikey said immediately, and yanked Frank's arm until he followed him out of the room.

"Mikey, don't start," Frank said as soon as they were out of earshot.

"Don't start?" Mikey said incredulously. "Did you hear him just now?"

Frank rolled his eyes. "You're just all sensitive because you and Toro are a thing now."

"You're one to talk," Mikey snapped. "I saw you guys outside, I'm not blind. And we're not a *thing*."

"That's not how it looks to me," Frank argued. "And you didn't even tell Gerard about it! He's freaking out thinking you don't trust him anymore!"

"Are you telling me you don't think he's acting weird at all?"

"I think he's been through enough without you accusing him of drowning Toro, and Bob going on and on about how he's the walking dead."

Mikey made a strangled noise of frustration. "But he *did* die."

"We don't know what happened to him!" Frank slammed his fist sideways into the wall to get some of the anger out. "Jesus, Mikey, he's your brother! You wanna start acting like it?"

Mikey snapped his mouth shut and stared at Frank in shock, breathing heavily, his jaw set tight.

Frank winced, the feeling of being a jerk starting to push in at the edges of his anger. "I didn't mean that," he said, trying to keep his voice calm. "Mikey, I just think he needs you to be on his side right now."

"I am always," Mikey said in a low, deadly voice, "on his side."

"I know," Frank said, holding his hands up to show he was sorry.

Mikey went on, "You've known him for a year, Frank. A *year*."

"I *know*," Frank repeated. His guts were tying themselves in knots and his chest was tight, and he wanted to make things right but he couldn't forget the panicked pace of Gerard's breathing, the feeling of him holding so tight to Frank's hand. "Look. If I notice anything strange, I promise I will tell you about it. But you have to cut him some slack, okay? We need to trust each other right now."

"But you don't trust me," Mikey said quietly. "You don't trust me to know when there's something wrong with him. At the Vatican you said if I had a bad feeling, that was good enough for you."

"That was-"

"Something you wanted to hear?"

Frank bit his tongue and counted to ten. Okay, to three. "Look, let's just wait and see if Ray's spell works, and then we'll know if we have time to figure this out, or if we need to get moving again. This is all kind of redundant if there's going to be a hundred crazy assholes banging down the door in ten minutes."

"Guys," Brian called then from the living room. "Something's happening."

The wall of flame had died down completely by now, and although the sun had set, the security lights outside the house let them see far enough that they could make out people moving in the dim, a line of hooded figures forming around fifty feet away from the house. They weren't bouncing off an invisible wall or anything, but they also didn't seem to be making any effort to come closer.

"Does that mean it worked?" Frank said aloud.

Ray lifted one shoulder. "Either that or they're just trying to creep us to death."

"They're either really patient or really unimaginative," Gerard said, touching the windowpane with his fingertips. "They just wait."

"But we still don't know what for, right?" said Bob, who wasn't looking out of the window. He was sitting in a chair with his axe across his knees, frowning at it. "God dammit, I knew I should never have left this with Pete Wentz."

Brian looked over. "What's wrong?"

"I told him not to use it to cut anything up with it and he totally has," Bob complained, pointing to a mark that apparently only he could see. "I can tell."

"If you say so." Brian patted his shoulder.

"It's all scratched up now," Bob said sadly. "I polished it, like, right before we left, too."

"Bob, man," said Frank, looking away from the creep congregation outside. "It's an *axe*. Doesn't it want to be used to cut shit up?"

Bob scowled. "Not stupid shit in Pete Wentz's backyard."

"I bet I have stuff you could use to polish it in the garage," Craig offered. "There's an access door from the utility, off the kitchen. Just don't sharpen it on my cars."

"Cars?" Bob perked up instantly. "Cars plural?"

Of course Craig had cars plural, Frank thought. He probably had a private jet and a winged unicorn stabled in there too.

"I can show you," Craig said, moving away from the window. "If you want."

"Can I come?" said Gerard. Everyone stared at him. He frowned. "What? I can like cars!"

"Be my guest." Craig sounded genuinely excited at the prospect of having something to show Gerard instead of the other way around. He turned to the rest of them. "Guys?"

"Go," Brian waved his hand. "We'll keep watch here."

Mikey watched Gerard go, then went to look out of the window. "They're so creepy," he complained. "Just standing there."

Brian hummed his agreement. "What I can't understand is how nobody else has noticed them. I guess Craig doesn't exactly have neighbors."

"Guess not," said Frank.

They stood in silence watching for a while. Frank thought about his Mom, how she always spent a huge portion of their phone calls recounting exactly what her neighbors had been up to since they last spoke. No way anyone in her street could be surrounded by dudes in hoods and have nobody notice. Frank's Mom would be on that shit like Serpico.

He turned to tell Mikey about it, but before he could get any words out, an incredibly loud, shrill, wailing bell-type noise started blaring through the house.

"What the fuck is that?!" Frank shouted over the noise.

"Fire alarm," Brian shouted back. "Either that or Craig has one hell of a doorbell."

"What do we do?" Ray said, as Mikey helped him to his feet. "We can't exactly evacuate the premises."

"I have an idea." Brian ran to the TV - it was still set to the security channel, and Brian fiddled with the remote until he made the screen switch to a different camera, this one in a bedroom. He kept flipping, the screen showing image after image of stuff that wasn't on fire, and then, "There!" he pointed at the screen, which was showing smoke and static. "Where is that?"

"Oh, shit," Frank said, his heart sinking. "Shit, Brian, it's the fucking garage!"

They all took off running, Brian in the lead. When they rounded the corner to the kitchen, Frank's socked feet slipped on the tiled floor and he skidded into the counter, slamming his hip painfully against the edge. He had to stop to clutch it and wheeze for a second, and when he made it to the utility he found Gerard and Brian pulling on the door that must have led to the garage, Mikey and Ray hovering anxiously at their shoulders.

"It's locked," Mikey said as soon as he saw Frank. "Who the fuck has a garage door that locks from the inside?"

"But there's a keyhole on this side," Ray said, pointing. "We should check the kitchen for keys."

There was a small glass panel in the door - Brian got up on his toes to look through it. "Bob!" he

yelled, hammering on it with his fist. "Bob, are you hurt? Can you hear me?"

"What the fuck happened?" Frank asked Gerard.

"I don't know!" Gerard dug his heels in, putting all his weight on the door handle. "We were looking at his cars," he said, voice strained with effort. "Craig has a motorcycle I thought Mikey would think was cool, so I was coming to get him, and then the door just closed behind me."

"And locked itself?" Brian hammered on the glass some more. "Why the fuck didn't you come get us?"

"I was trying to open the fucking door!" Gerard said, his hands slipping off the handle. He staggered into Frank. "I didn't know there was going to be a fucking fire!"

"How did the fire even start?" Brian demanded, and then his voice changed. "Bob! Bob, are you okay? Where's Craig?"

Frank got on his toes too, so he could see Bob's face through the glass, pale and silent. His mouth was moving, but the glass was too thick. He looked frantic, and was pointing behind him every three words.

"The door doesn't open from this side!" Brian yelled, miming turning a key in a lock, then making a throat-cutting gesture. He pointed towards the lock. "Bob, you have to open it from your side!"

Bob obviously didn't understand - he shook his head and then they could see him coughing, both hands held in front of his mouth. He pulled his shirt up to cover his mouth and nose and disappeared again, going back towards the smoke and flames because he was *crazy*.

"Bob!" Frank yelled. "What the fuck is he doing? Why doesn't he unlock the door?"

"Why doesn't he use his stupid axe to break it down?" Brian shouted, going back to yanking desperately at the door handle. Gerard had backed off and was standing a few feet away, looking terrified.

Ray and Mikey came hurrying back in. "These were all the keys we could find," Mikey said, kneeling on the floor and spilling a million keys out of his hands. "One of them must work."

Frank knelt down next to him and grabbed the first bunch, fitting the keys one at a time into the lock. Brian hammered on the glass again, yelling for Bob, then let out a yell of frustration. "We have to break this fucking glass! I can fit through this gap."

"What?" Frank gaped at him. "Brian, you can't go in there, what the fuck are you thinking?"

"Frank, *please!* They're going to fucking die unless we can get this god damn door open!"

"Golf clubs!" Gerard said suddenly. "Craig said his golf clubs are around somewhere!"

Brian took off running, and raced back in like ten seconds later, holding a golf club. He braced himself, lifted the golf club back behind his shoulder and swung hard, slamming it into the glass panel, which cracked but didn't break.

"Jesus!" Frank rolled out of the way, pulling Mikey with him.

Brian slammed the heavy end of the golf club into the glass again, and again, until finally it shattered, sending splinters of glass to the floor and letting a gust of smoke and heat out into the



utility.

"Okay," said Brian, yanking off his hoodie. He wrapped it around his arm and used it to clear the rest of the shards of glass that hadn't fallen out of the door, then tossed it aside. He beckoned to Frank. "Give me a boost, come on."

Frank didn't like it, but he laced his fingers together, making a step for Brian's foot, and heaved him up towards the panel. Brian's head and shoulders went through fairly easily, then he seemed to get stuck and Frank had to push hard on his legs to get him the rest of the way through.

"Fuck!" they heard him say as he fell through to the other side.

"Are you okay?" Frank called through the gap. At his feet, Mikey was still going through the keys, one by one. "Can you see them?"

"I'm fine," Brian answered. The door rattled and he shouted, "There's a bolt on this side, but it's already open. It must still be locked."

"Schechter?" Frank heard Bob call faintly, his voice rough with coughing. "Is that you?"

"I broke the glass to get in," Brian said, turning away from the door, looking through the smoke. "Are you okay?"

"You stupid son of a bitch," Bob shouted back, louder this time. "You trying to get yourself killed?"

"You're in a fire!" Brian yelled. "What the hell was I supposed to do?"

"Not get yourself locked in here too!" Bob replied. "And nice job providing a source of oxygen for the fire, asshole!"

Brian waved his hands in frustration. "Can you be incredibly annoying after we get out of here? Where are you? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, but I think Craig's really hurt. And we're kind of trapped."

"Kind of?"

"After I saw you guys on the other side of the door I came back here to get him," Bob shouted. "But then this thing - I don't know what it is, this on fire thing fell down in front of us, or something, I don't know."

"Shit," Brian cursed, turning back to the door. "We have to get this fucking door open, you guys, it's fucking hot in here."

"Working on it!" Mikey threw a key aside and tried another one instead.

"Where's Bob's axe?" Frank said.

"Where's your axe?" Brian yelled, turning to look behind him. "Why didn't you use it to break the door down?"

"I don't know why I didn't think of that!" Bob yelled. "You'd think I must have been separated from it by a fucking fire, or something!"

Gerard was on his knees now too, helping Mikey go through the keys. "Try this one," he said,

holding it up.

Mikey fumbled it into the lock and turned - it went *click, click*, and Frank heard the bolt slot out of position.

"Yes!" he said, moving out of the way, and they pulled the door open, coughing and covering their faces when the thick, acrid smoke billowed out into the room.

"Bob!" Brian shouted. "Bob, the door's open, come on! Where are you? Do you need help?"

"Don't you fucking dare try and come back here," Bob yelled, and a moment later he came staggering through the smoke, Craig slumped over his shoulders, his arms hanging down limply. Bob stumbled through the door and fell almost immediately to his knees, laying Craig out on the floor and looking up at Brian through streaming eyes. "There's a hose just inside the door."

Brian grabbed it and handed one end to Frank; Frank ran to the utility sink and screwed it on tight, slamming the faucet up as high as it would go.

"Come on, come on," Brian growled impatiently while the water made its way through the hose, and then he braced himself and pointed into the garage, coughing and blinking through the smoke as he put out the fire.

"How did it start?" Gerard was on the floor kneeling over Craig, opening his collar and checking him over for burns.

"I don't know." Bob was sprawled a little awkwardly on the ground, sipping at a glass of water Mikey had brought him. "You went to get Mikey, and then the door closed, and then...then everything was on fire. Is he all right?"

"He's breathing," Gerard confirmed, and then Craig started coughing, and jerking his hands around. Gerard helped him sit up and Mikey went for another glass of water.

"Okay," Craig croaked when he could speak again. "Maybe that was a little *too* exciting."

Gerard laughed a little, helping him sit up further. "Are you okay?"

Craig coughed some more, nodding. "Fine. I think I tripped in the smoke and hit my head. Not very heroic."

"Hey," said Ray. "You have a working fire alarm and security cameras. That makes you a hero in my book."

Craig laughed, then looked worried. "Oh dear. My alarm system is set up to alert the fire department - I better call them."

"Uh, while you're at it?" said Mikey, who was peering at Bob's leg. "I think Bob needs an ambulance."

"What?" Brian shut the water off and came to kneel down by Bob. "Why does Bob need an ambulance?"

"Bob doesn't need an ambulance," Bob scowled. "Bob needs you to stop overreacting."

"Frank needs Bob to stop talking about himself in the third person," said Frank. Bob gave him the finger.

Gerard shuffled over to look. "Bob, was your leg on fire?"

"No," Bob said firmly. "My *jeans* were on fire."

"Your leg is in your jeans, asshole!" Brian grabbed the jeans in question and, ignoring Bob's protests, rolled the leg up over Bob's knee. The skin underneath was red and shiny, blistered in the center of what was a pretty big burn. "Fucking Christ, Bryar!"

"It's fine," Bob said irritably, leaning over to poke around the edges of the burn. "I've had worse."

Gerard shook his head. "This has got to be second-degree."

Bob rolled his eyes. "Then maybe one of you could get me some water to pour over it instead of competing to see who can be the biggest pain in my ass?"

"Oh!" said Gerard, scrambling to get up.

Craig was on the phone, spinning a lie about a cooking disaster. He hung up and shook his head. "Well, they bought it. I don't know how I'm supposed to explain it when I try to claim on my insurance, though."

"Oh, God," said Bob then, sounding genuinely distressed for the first time. "Craig, your *cars*."

"It's all right," Craig said bravely, although he didn't sound all right. "They're just cars." His palm pilot thingy beeped, and he looked down at it. "Apparently the garage is on fire," he said, pressing a button. "I really need to get this thing reprogrammed."

"It's a good thing you have such a good security system, though," Frank said. "Otherwise we might not have found you in time."

"It is a good thing," Mikey echoed. "Seeing as Gerard didn't think to let us know you were burning to death."

"What?" Gerard looked up from where he was dripping water over Bob's leg and the floor.

"It's really awesome," Mikey went on fake-casually. "How you knew exactly which key would open the door."

The color drained from Gerard's face and he stood up, slowly. "Are you accusing me of something?"

Mikey shrugged. "Does it sound like I am?"

"Mikey," Frank warned him. "Don't."

"He wasn't trying to open the door," Mikey said, meeting Frank's eyes. "Not when we first ran in."

"Yes he was!" Frank got to his feet too, already feeling his hands curling into fists at his side.

"He was just standing there," Mikey went on. "Watching."

Gerard looked like his heart was breaking. Frank crossed the room to stand next to him. "Mikey, drop it. I saw him with my own eyes."

"You were a few seconds behind us, Frankie," Ray said quietly. He looked worried, but he didn't flinch when Frank turned on him. "I'm sorry, but it's true."

"Oh, big surprise that you side with him," Frank said.

Bob frowned. "What? Why?"

"Frank, you don't have to do this," Gerard said in a small voice. He sounded so scared, it made Frank even madder.

"Yeah, I do." Frank raised an eyebrow at Mikey. "They're just agreeing with each other because they're sleeping together."

"Jesus Christ," Brian dropped his head into his hands. "How do you all find the time for this shit?"

Mikey was staring at Frank like he didn't know who he was. "I told you that in confidence."

"But you didn't tell me," Gerard put in. "You didn't see fit to tell me you were having sex with Ray, and then you're accusing *me* of having something to hide?"

"I'm not *having sex with Ray!*" Mikey imitated Gerard's tone. "It's not like that!"

Ray looked at him. "What is it like?"

Mikey stared at him. "It's - look, this is all beside the point, okay, he's just trying to distract us!"

"I guess I should have told you," Frank said to Ray. "Mikey's not a huge fan of the Relationship Talk. Why do you think he never sticks with anybody for more than a night?"

"Thanks, Frank, I got it from here," Ray said sharply.

Frank sneered. "That's not what you said when you were begging me to tell me if he'd mentioned you."

Ray flushed. "I didn't beg you, you little shit, I *asked*. And you made it perfectly clear that you wouldn't tell me, by the way, so I don't think you should be throwing stones when it comes to uneven loyalties!"

"We don't have time for this now!" Mikey said shrilly, turning back to Gerard. "I want to know why the fuck you didn't try to help Bob and Craig!"

"Who do you think I *am*, Mikey?" Gerard was practically begging now, his hands held out.

"You tell me! You're acting like a different person! Have you even prayed since you came back?"

Gerard reared back like he'd been slapped. "I - what?"

Mikey had wrapped his arms around himself, shifting agitatedly from foot to foot. "You said it yourself, Gee. People come back wrong."

Gerard made a choked sobbing sound and practically ran out of the room.

"Nice job, asshole," Frank said, moving to follow him.

"Frankie *wait*." Mikey ran across the room and grabbed before he could leave, holding onto Frank's elbows and looking into his eyes. "I know something's wrong. I know it like I knew Pete was in trouble, like I knew the Hoods were outside. Come on, you know me, probably better than anyone. Why the fuck would I be saying any of this if it wasn't true?"

Frank didn't have an answer for that. Mikey had never lied to him, as far as he knew, not about anything important. It felt so wrong to be on the opposite side of this from Mikey that Frank thought he might throw up, but he just knew Mikey was wrong about this, he *knew*, he couldn't explain it. When he looked at Mikey he could feel himself softening, but then the image of Gerard's horrified, miserable face filled his mind and he pulled away. "You're wrong."

"Frank," Ray said quietly. "Don't you think it's at least a little possible that you're allowing your feelings to cloud your judgment?"

"Glass houses," said Frank, and went after Gerard.

\*

He wasn't in the room he was sharing with Mikey; but Frank found him in his and Ray's room, sitting on the floor between the bed and the wall, with his knees pulled up to his shoulders. He peeped over the bed when Frank opened the door like he was afraid of who it might be - but he relaxed minutely when he saw it was Frank.

"Hey," said Frank, skirting around the bed to squeeze into the gap with Gerard. "Hey, it's okay. Don't listen to Mikey, he's out of his mind."

"But it's not just Mikey." Gerard wrapped his arms around his knees and rocked back and forth a little. "They all think I'm crazy."

"What? That's not true."

"It is," Gerard insisted. "Ray."

"Ray's just saying what Mikey wants to hear," Frank said firmly, and then regretted it, because why would Mikey want to hear that his brother was trying to kill people? "I mean, he's probably just trying to be supportive," he amended, risking a hand on top of Gerard's.

Gerard dropped his head down onto his arms. His shoulders hitched, and then he folded forwards, suddenly, out of his tight little tangle and into Frank's space. "I hate this."

Frank brought his arms up, wrapping them around Gerard's shoulders and squeezing him tight. "I know. I know you do. But we're gonna figure it out and it's gonna be okay."

"Not if they're all against me."

"They're not against you," Frank said automatically, although he remembered what it had felt like when the guys had been skeptical about Frank's own ordeal. Like being at sea, but not in a boat, just alone in the dark with a giant fucking tidal wave heading straight for you, and the ship with the lifejackets in was heading in the opposite direction. "They love you. They're just worried. And acting like dicks."

"Maybe they're right," Gerard said in a dull tone. "Maybe I am going crazy. Maybe I'm doing these things and I just don't remember."

"No."

"You should just let the Hoods take me," Gerard's voice wobbled and he curled in tighter to Frank's chest. "If I hurt you, Frank, I would never forgive myself, ever."

"No fucking way." Frank got his hands around Gerard's face and forced him to look up. "Listen to

me. You are not crazy," he said, stroking his thumbs over Gerard's cheekbones. "Unless you think for one second that any of us would just throw you to the wolves like that."

Gerard looked unconvinced. He brought his hands up to curl around Frank's wrists.

"I am not going to let anything happen to you," Frank promised him softly. "Not ever. Understand?"

Gerard bit his lip. "What if..." he trailed off, looking down.

"What?"

Gerard took a deep breath and reluctantly met Frank's eyes again. "What if I did something bad?"

Frank's stomach clenched. "Bad how?"

Gerard's eyes darted around, and Frank could barely hear him when he admitted, "I lied to you."

"About what?"

"About the Cardinal." Gerard took Frank's hands and held them tightly, as if he was afraid Frank might try to pull away. "I didn't call him."

"What?" Frank held on to his hands, but didn't try to keep the shock out of his voice. "But you said-

"

"I know what I said!" Gerard clung and pulled Frank closer. "But I was too scared, Frankie, you know they're going to make me leave you. They'll probably say we can't even be friends."

"Do you really think they'd do that?"

"I know they would," Gerard said hopelessly. "They're so powerful, Frank, and they're so - they're the most manipulative sons of bitches on this Earth, you know? I'm so scared, Frankie, I know they're going to come after me, they always do."

"I won't let them get to you," Frank said fiercely, bringing Gerard back into his arms.

"They'll tell you things," Gerard whispered, his hands sliding up Frank's chest until he could wrap his arms around Frank's neck. "They'll try to take me away from you."

Frank shook his head and held Gerard tighter. "Nobody is going to take you away from me. Nobody."

Gerard pressed his cheek against Frank's. "They'll poison you against me."

"I won't listen."

"No matter what they say?"

"No matter what." Frank shifted and rested his forehead against Gerard's. "You're the only thing that matters to me," he admitted with his eyes closed.

Gerard sighed, his fingers moving in Frank's hair. "I don't know what I would do without you."

"You'll never have to find out." Frank opened his eyes and cupped Gerard's cheek in his hand.

Gerard pressed into the touch, his face a perfect picture of misery. "I wish I'd left when I first met you, Frankie. I wish that I'd been brave enough. And now it's too late."

"It's not, it's not," Frank said, and kissed him. He couldn't not; Gerard was frightened and lonely and needing him, and Frank had to make him understand that it was never too late, not when it came to this. Gerard kissed him back eagerly; it made Frank ache to think about him going so long without this, starved of affection and closeness by the fucking Church for years and years.

"What if they find me?" Gerard gasped against Frank's mouth, moving further into his lap. "What if they come after us here?"

"So we'll leave," said Frank, and Gerard rewarded him with another kiss. They wound together easily, pressing close, and Gerard's hands were sliding under Frank's shirt when they were interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Don't," said Gerard when Frank pulled away, gasping.

Frank leaned in and kissed him again quickly. "You know they'll just break the door down if we don't answer," he said, reluctantly easing Gerard away from him so he could get up. "You stay here, okay? I won't let anyone in if you don't want me to."

Gerard hesitated, looking unsure. Frank touched his face gently and he nodded and climbed up to sit on the bed, watching the door anxiously.

Frank straightened his clothes on his way to the door, and made sure to pat his hair down over his forehead before opening it cautiously. Mikey was standing outside, his hands twisted in the hem of his shirt. Frank folded his arms. "Come to accuse your brother of attempted murder again?"

Mikey rolled his eyes. "Frank, let me in."

Frank blocked him when he tried to push past. "No way. Not unless I know you're not going to upset him again."

"You can't stop me from seeing him," Mikey said furiously.

Frank pushed him back a step. "Watch me."

Mikey's shoulders sagged and he sighed, rubbing his eyes under his glasses. "Christ, Frank. I just want..." He dropped his hands and stared at the ceiling for a minute. "I just want to tell him I'm sorry."

Frank eyed him suspiciously. "Wait here," he said, and shut the door.

"It's Mikey," he told Gerard, moving back to the bed. "Do you want to see him?"

Gerard bit his lip, reaching for Frank as he cast nervous glances towards the door. "What does he want?"

"Just to apologize." Frank stroked Gerard's hair off his face. "Should I let him in?"

"Do you think I should?" Gerard looked up at him, his face open and trusting.

"I do," Frank said honestly. "He's your brother."

"Okay." Gerard slid off the bed and stood up.

Frank went to the door and let Mikey in; Mikey crossed straight to Gerard, throwing Frank an irritated glance. "You're staying?"

"You bet your ass I am," Frank confirmed, shutting the door. Gerard looked like he was ready to bolt, so Frank went over and stood next to him, laying a hand low on his back.

"Fine," Mikey scowled. He turned his attention to Gerard, a completely new expression on his face. "Gee, I'm sorry."

Gerard pressed a little closer to Frank. "Mikey?" he said uncertainly.

"I don't know what's happening," Mikey said, rocking on his feet and then pacing a little, back and forth. "It's like I get hysterical or something, and I can't control it and I attack you and then I feel terrible about it afterwards."

He stopped pacing and came over to Gerard, hands held out. "I know you would never hurt anyone, not ever. I know that."

"Especially not one of you guys," Gerard said, moving away from Frank and towards Mikey, a little. "Especially not you."

"I know," Mikey said sincerely. "I think maybe it's those guys outside, they're - they're doing something, and it's driving me crazy, I don't know. I'm just sorry I said that shit to you."

"It's okay," said Gerard, and held out his arms.

Mikey went gladly; Frank relaxed, and touched Gerard's shoulder. "I'm gonna give you guys a minute," he murmured. Gerard caught his gaze and nodded, extending his arm out from Mikey's waist to squeeze Frank's hand as he left.

He didn't feel like going downstairs, and besides, he wanted to be nearby in case Gerard needed him. Frank went to his and Mikey's room instead; sat down on Gerard's bed, just enjoying being in his space. He brought a hand to his own chest and touched the rosary through his shirt as he looked down at the things on Gerard's nightstand: his Bible, the gold cross he usually wore under his shirt. His phone - the screen was blank and Frank frowned at it, trying to remember the last time he saw Gerard using it. Not since their things arrived from Pete, he was pretty sure. The battery was probably out of juice again, Gerard was always forgetting to charge it. Frank pried the drawer open and found the charger, then carried it and the phone over to the opposite wall and plugged them in.

The phone rang almost the second Frank turned it on, the screen displaying 'Private Number'. Frank pressed the green button and raised the phone cautiously to his ear. "Hello?"

"Gerard, oh, praise be to God," said a familiar voice. "Is that you?"

"No," said Frank. "Who is this?"

There was a long pause. "Mr. Iero." Another pause. "This is Cardinal Pierce."

Of fucking course it was. Frank's thumb was already on the red button when the Cardinal said hurriedly, "Please don't hang up. Is Father Way with you? Is he all right?"

"I ain't telling you shit," Frank said sullenly, his thumb still over the button, just in case.

"I'm not asking you to disclose his location," the Cardinal said. He sounded exhausted. Good. "I just want to know if he's still alive."



"He's fine," Frank allowed, after weighing up the pros and cons of giving that away. Maybe if the Cardinal knew Gerard was okay he would leave them the fuck alone. "He's fine. No thanks to you."

"I can assure you I have nothing but Father Way's best interests at heart."

"Right," Frank snorted. "Sure."

"Is that why you decided to leave? Did Father Way believe he was in danger?"

"We decided to leave because you told him he wasn't allowed to see us anymore," Frank spat. "Apparently there's no limit to the control you want to have over him."

"Yes, yes, you've made your problems with the Church perfectly clear," the Cardinal said impatiently. "But I'm afraid I don't have time to discuss that with you now. You must allow me to speak to Father Way."

"Why, so you can convince him to come back to you and get fucking disappeared or something? Not fucking likely." Frank craned his neck around the doorway to make sure he wasn't being overheard. "You've done enough damage to him already."

"Frank, *please*. You can't possibly understand what's at stake here."

"So explain." Frank scowled at nothing. "I'm listening."

The Cardinal sighed heavily, but went on. "Has Father Way been behaving strangely at all? Has he done or said anything which you consider out of character?"

Frank almost said no automatically, but curiosity got the better of him. He hedged, "Why do you ask?"

"I have reason to believe his life may be in danger," the Cardinal said gravely. "And the lives of you and your friends, and very possibly countless others. It is imperative that you return him to my care, Frank, please-"

"No fucking way!" Frank snapped, losing the tenuous grip he'd been maintaining on his temper. "You must be out of your god damn mind if you think I'm giving him up to you assholes. You come within a hundred feet of him and I will fuck you up, do you hear me?"

"Frank, please listen to me, I understand that you're suspicious."

"You don't understand shit!" Frank hissed as loud as he dared. "Understand this, okay? I will not let anything happen to him, do you hear me? I will not let you lay a fucking *finger* on him. I will do whatever I have to do to keep him safe."

"Then you must tell me where you are!" the Cardinal pleaded. "You don't know what you're up against. I should have told you right away: the second symbol on the sphaera, the one which Father Way was unable to decipher. It is the mark of Xaphan, and-"

"Who the fuck is Xaphan?" said Frank, but then he heard footsteps so he hung up immediately, holding the button down to switch off the phone. He slipped it into his back pocket and swept the charger out of view just as Mikey came into the room. "Hey."

"Hey." Mikey said awkwardly. "Um, Gee went downstairs. I think Brian's calling for us."

Frank nodded, and went to move past Mikey but was stopped with a hand on his arm. "What is it?"

Mikey peered at him unhappily. "Are we - are we cool?"

Frank almost said yes just out of instinct, because it was Mikey, of course they were cool, what the fuck. But then he remembered they were fighting, and his stomach protested the recollection with an anxious roll. "I don't know," he said, jamming his hands in his pockets. "Are we?"

"I made up with Gerard," Mikey offered.

Frank nodded. He hated arguing with Mikey so much, it made him feel horrible inside. It was easier to think without Gerard there radiating hurt and confusion: Frank remembered why he'd been so mad, but it still seemed strange that he hadn't even wanted to let Mikey in the *door*, for fuck's sake. "Do you really think it's the Hoods making you act this way?"

"I don't know." Mikey adjusted his glasses and was quiet for a long time, looking over to the window. "I guess. I don't know why else it would be."

"Well, we're gonna figure it out," Frank said firmly.

Mikey nodded. He kept giving Frank nervous little glances from under his hair.

Frank took a deep breath, then let it out, willing the weird residual anger to go with it. "I'm sorry for what I said about you and Toro. Are you guys okay?"

Mikey shrugged, his spindly shoulders going up and down one at a time. "I don't know," he said slowly. "Are - I mean, things seem good between you and Gerard."

Frank bristled, but Mikey didn't seem like he was accusing, just asking. Frank's instincts were screaming at him to keep it a secret, that if he told Mikey they'd kissed it would all be ruined. He gritted out, "He seemed less upset when I left him with you, yeah."

Mikey gave him a look Frank couldn't parse exactly. "Well," he said, in a small, disappointed voice. "Should we go downstairs? Or did you need to finish your call?"

"What call?" Frank said lightly, making his eyes big and round.

"I thought I heard you talking."

Frank thought about telling Mikey what the Cardinal had said, the lies he'd spun. He thought it might make it feel less like he and Mikey were standing on opposite sides of some rapidly-widening divide, but he knew it would also just rile Mikey up again, lend credence to his craziness. "Wrong number," he said, and led the way downstairs.

Ray, Brian and Craig were clustered around the TV, which was still set to the security channel. Gerard was sitting on the couch with Bob, whose leg was propped up on a large, padded footstool. Gerard gave Frank a tiny smile when he saw him, but then looked away.

"Hey," said Brian when he saw Mikey and Frank. "Danny and Mark are here."

"What?" Frank went over to the TV. All he could see were endless creeps in hoods. "How can you tell?"

"They took their hoods down for a few seconds," Craig pointed to two figures who were standing near the entrance gates to the grounds. "So that you guys could recognize them."

"Seriously?" Frank looked at Craig, impressed. "Did you set that up? How did you even find them?"

Craig tried to play it cool, but he was totally beaming on the inside. "A magician never reveals his secrets."

"So we need to go out there and get them right?" Bob started to get up off the couch.

"Sit," Brian snapped. Amazingly, Bob obeyed. "You're going nowhere, Bryar. Frank and I will go."

Bob scowled. "Go and get your asses kicked."

"Hey, Brian and Frank can handle themselves," Ray said. "But guys, there are a lot of them out there. I doubt they're going to stand idly by."

Craig snapped his fingers. "You can take the van. The one I sent to pick you up from the airport."

Mikey perched on the arm of the couch, next to Gerard. "I thought your cars were destroyed?"

"Yeah, me too, but it turns out it wasn't really that big of a fire." Craig frowned and made a picture-frame shape with his hands. "Just...really inconveniently shaped."

"And spontaneous," Bob added. "We still don't know what the shit started it."

"Maybe I should come with you," Gerard suggested.

"No," Frank said firmly. "You're staying here where nobody can get to you."

"But--"

"You can't pass through the barrier anyway, Gee," Mikey said thoughtfully. He looked at Ray. "Should we make up some ink? I guess Frank will need to paint our symbol on the kids, right?"

Brian tapped his pen against his teeth. "I didn't think of that. Okay, you and Ray get on that, and...hmm." Brian looked speculatively at Craig. "How do you feel about driving the van for us?"

"Really? Me?" Craig practically bounced. "Totally!"

Bob looked like his eyes were going to fall out of his head. "Craig can come and I can't?"

"Craig doesn't have a leg that looks like it lost a fight with a deep fryer."

"He's a civilian!"

"He's gonna be driving, Bob, not taking command of a platoon."

Bob made a disgusted sound and threw himself back against the couch pillows. "This is going to end in blood and death, I hope you know."

"Hey," Frank protested. "I can take whatever evil mojo they can throw at me, remember?"

"I know, Superstrength," Bob waved him off. "But last time I checked, Schechter couldn't."

"I'll be fine," Brian said, clearly irritated. "Maybe I don't have magic or holiness or superpowers or *axes* coming out of my ass, but I can still hold my own. Or have I been sitting the fights out for the last year and I just don't remember it?"

"Besides," Mikey piped up supportively. "Everyone knows Gerard's the one who's useless in a fight."

Gerard's head snapped up and he said defensively, "I don't believe in violence."

Mikey patted his head. "And I love you for it."

"Okay," said Brian. "Craig, do you have any plans of the grounds?"

Craig went to find some, and he, Brian and Frank rolled them out over Craig's kitchen table.

"The path from the garage to the gates is pretty convoluted," Craig said apologetically. "But we can cut across the lawn and get there quicker."

Brian hummed, tracing the path with his forefinger. "Maybe on the way back. But I think on the way there, following the path will keep us out of sight for longer."

Frank nodded his agreement. "So what's the plan? We roll up, open the doors, pull the kids in, and drive like hell?"

"It's a little more complicated than that," Brian said. Of course it was. It was always more complicated than that. "I know you have a steady hand and all, but I think even you would be pushed to paint two perfect circles at eighty miles an hour. We'll have to stay put until you've got the symbol on them."

"Brian, this is crazy!" Bob said from his seat at the other end of the table. "You really think you can fight them off for that long? By yourself?"

Brian shrugged. "Don't really see that I have a choice."

Bob slammed his fist on the table. "Let me come with you, you stubborn son of a bitch!"

"You're hurt!" Brian shouted, making Frank jump. "And so is Ray! And if you think I'm risking Mikey's life when the Father is barely holding it together as it is, then you are sorely fucking mistaken!"

"It's my leg that's hurt! There's nothing wrong with my fists!"

"So what are you gonna do, sit in the passenger seat and punch anyone who comes near enough?"

"Guys," Frank started, but then there was a crash from the living room, and the sound of Mikey shouting. Frank ran back to find Mikey on his knees, holding Gerard, who was curled up in a ball on the floor, clutching his head. Frank rushed over to him. "What happened?"

"I don't know," Mikey shook his head. "He was saying the words over the ink and it just happened."

"Frankie," Gerard moaned, rolling towards him. "It hurts."

"It's all right." Frank shushed him, looking up at Ray. "Is the ink ready?"

"We said Amen," Ray said anxiously, "So yeah, it should be."

"Brian!" Frank hollered, grabbing the vials of ink and the brush Ray handed to him. "We gotta go *now*."

"Be careful," Mikey urged him as he stood up. "Just get the kids and come back, don't try to do anything crazy."

"Yeah." Frank hesitated, then crouched down again to pass his hand over Gerard's hair. "Take care of him, okay?"

"I will," Mikey promised.

\*

In the garage, Frank stared in disbelief at the scorch marks on the floor, forming an almost-perfect square. "You weren't kidding about the shape."

Craig started up the van. "I know, right?"

Brian and Frank climbed in, and Craig pressed a button on his keys that made the garage door start to swing open. "Are you sure this is going to work?" he said, holding up the hand Frank had painted a symbol on. "I'm not going to burn up on re-entry, right?"

"Let's hope not," Brian said grimly.

"How are you going to know which ones are Danny and Mark?" Frank asked Brian. "Aren't they pretty much all gonna make a rush for the van?"

"I'm hoping they'll take their hoods down when they see us." Brian squinted out of the window. "Okay, Craig, take it slow. And don't turn on your lights."

The van moved at a crawl through the grounds; Frank felt like every tree and bush was about to come running at them. There was a strange sound in the air, a deep, reverberating humming, and as they moved closer to the gates he could make out a rhythm.

"They're chanting," he realized aloud. "Great. Because chanting makes everything less creepy and gross."

Craig brought the van to a halt, idling there for a moment. "We ready?"

The Hoods were lining the gates, indistinguishable from each other. Brian's profile was highlighted in the moonlight as he stared through the windshield, swallowing nervously. "As we'll ever be, I guess."

"Hold on tight," Craig warned, and put his foot down.

They were heading for the gates at top speed - Frank could see the Hoods freaking out, milling around excitedly as the van headed straight for them. "Will the van break the gates open?" he yelled to Craig over the screech of tires.

"One way to find out!" Craig yelled back, and then the gates came rushing up ahead of them before Frank even had a chance to find a grip, and he and Brian got thrown forwards on impact, slamming into each other and the back of Craig's seat.

"Ow," Frank muttered, but Brian was already getting up, reaching for the handle to the side door and throwing it open. "Danny! Mark!"

It was pretty much chaos, some of the Hoods had been thrown to the ground by the impact, others were already headed straight for them. Frank braced himself, ready to start fighting, but then the

two figures closest to the van threw their hoods back as they ran, revealing two very young, very dirty, very scared faces.

"Get in, get in!" Frank yelled, reaching out to grab Danny's robe as Brian did the same with Mark. The kids scrambled into the van and Brian yanked the door shut just as two more Hoods reached them. Frank heard them slam into it as it closed, and then they started hammering on it from the outside.

"You came," Mark said, his eyes huge in the dark. "I didn't think you would really come."

"Gratitude later," said Frank unscrewing the inkpot and yanking the brush out of his sock. "Trust now. I'm going to paint on you and I need you to just go with it, okay? I promise it won't turn you into a frog, and it's not a creepy sex thing either."

"Um," said Mark, and then the van rocked alarmingly and he grabbed for Danny's hand. "Okay!"

Frank had barely touched the brush to Mark's skin when the van rocked again. "Brian, this isn't going to work!"

"I'm on it!" Brian threw the door open again and jumped out, grabbing the nearest Hood and slamming his fist squarely into the dude's stomach.

"They're going to get in!" Danny cried, scrambling backwards into the furthest corner of the van. "Mark!"

"Don't move!" Frank warned Mark. He quickly filled in the third diamond and re-dipped the brush, dragging it in as smooth a line as he could manage, to close the circle. "Okay, Danny, get over here."

"Make it quick, Frank!" Craig said, jittering in his seat, hands pounding the wheel.

"Brian?" Frank called, yanking Danny's sleeve up so he could get to work.

"I'm okay!" Brian didn't *sound* okay: when Frank risked a look he had one Hood's arm hooked tight around his neck and was fending another one off with his feet. No part of him was touching the ground - it was fucking impressive.

"Shit, shit, shit," Frank chanted under his breath, working as quick as he could. The van rocked again and Frank lifted the brush just in time to stop the design being ruined. "Do you need my help?"

"I got it," Mark said, climbing over Frank's feet.

"Mark, no!" Craig shouted, but it was too late, Mark launched himself at the guy choking Brian and started pounding the shit out of him, in a frenzy; when Frank finished Danny's symbol and looked up, he was pretty sure Mark was even using his teeth.

"Get in, get in!" Frank yelled, leaning out of the van to grab at Mark and pull him back to safety. Brian writhed and kicked until he was free too, launching himself into the van and slamming the door shut just as Craig hit the gas and they went screeching back towards the house.

"Won't they follow us?" Mark leaned over the passenger seat, trying to look in the rearview mirror.

"Hence the painting," Frank said, leaning forward to inspect Brian's lip, which was split and bleeding. "They won't be able to get in, don't worry."

Brian batted him away, pulling his T-shirt up and pressing it against his lip to soak up the blood. "Guess you'll have to add your gates to that insurance claim, Craig."

"Guess so," Craig said. "But that's okay. This is so exciting, isn't it?"

Frank leaned back against the side of the van and closed his eyes. "Not the word I would use, my man."

When they got back to the house, they took the kids straight to the living room. Gerard was sitting on the couch - he looked pale and pinched around the eyes, but his face split into a huge smile when he saw Danny and Mark.

"You're okay!" he exclaimed, getting up and doing a weird abortive back-and-forth shuffle that was, knowing Gerard, him going to hug them, then thinking better of it.

Danny, it seemed, had no such reservations. He broke from his brother and threw himself at Gerard, hugging him tight around the waist. "They told us you died," he said, muffled. "I thought we killed you."

"No," Gerard said gently, squeezing Danny's shoulders. He looked over to Mark, who was hovering anxiously in the doorway. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"I'm sorry I didn't trust you," Mark blurted, his eyes twitching between the window and Gerard. "They were - they were different than we thought."

"You're safe now," said Gerard. "Nothing is going to hurt you here, I promise."

Mark's shifty gaze settled on Mikey. "Sorry I threatened to shoot you," he mumbled.

Mikey moved one shoulder slightly. "'S'cool."

While Craig fussed over the kids, getting them drinks and snacks and out of their creepy hooded robes, they tried to answer Gerard's questions.

"There doesn't seem to be a - what was the word you used?" Danny wrinkled his nose.

"Hierarchy," Gerard repeated.

"Right. One of them. They're sort of - you ever seen Dawn of the Dead?"

Mikey held a finger up. "Original or remake?"

"Same difference," Danny shrugged. Frank bit his tongue so he wouldn't get into it with the kid. This wasn't the time. "I just meant how the zombies just all go towards the mall, but they don't like, discuss it or anything. There aren't head zombies telling them what to do."

"We don't know exactly what they want from you," Mark said apologetically. "They aren't exactly blabbermouths."

Brian frowned. "They didn't tell you anything?"

Mark looked uncomfortable. "They don't really talk at all. Not since you - not since what happened at the Fall Out Boy show. They just chant a lot. It's so creepy."

"It is," Frank confirmed. "They were doing it outside. It's gross."

"And before we ran away from you, well, we weren't really like, part of them or whatever. But between then and the show they would sometimes talk about raising something, but I don't know what."

*I do*, said a voice in Frank's mind. Frank shut it down.

"The Cardinal said they weren't talking to him either," Bob reminded them. "At the Vatican."

Danny shifted in his chair. "We think they weren't expecting you to take Pete's place, though. Like, that got in the way. And they keep chanting about releasing the resurrected."

Mikey looked sharply at Gerard. "Releasing you?"

"Maybe they're confused," Danny offered.

Gerard stood up abruptly. "So I should go talk to them. Make them understand I'm not what they're looking for."

"Are you crazy?" Frank grabbed his arm. "No way!"

"But it's what they want," Gerard said in an odd, blank voice. "They'll leave the rest of you alone."

"Right, because they won't have any use for us after they cut off your head and stick it on a pole or some shit."

"We brought this," Mark said then, looking nervously between Frank and Gerard. He motioned to Danny, who produced his backpack from inside the tangle of robes. Out of it he pulled a bundle of T-shirts, which he unwrapped to produce a round object about the size of a bowling ball, with a symbol etched into each side.

"A sphaera," Ray breathed. "Nice work, guys."

"Thanks," Mark muttered. Danny flushed with pleasure at the praise. Mark pointed to the second mark, the one they hadn't been able to find in any of Gerard's books. "They draw this everywhere, like in the ground and things. Then they chant around it. I thought it might help."

Gerard held his hands out. "Can I see that?"

Mark handed it over and Gerard held it carefully, turning it over and over in his hands. He gazed at it for a long time, swaying slightly in place, and when he looked up he had the strangest expression, so unfamiliar on Gerard's face that for a minute it didn't even look like him. "Get them out of here," he said, which didn't make any sense, but before Frank could ask what he was talking about he turned and hurled the sphaera at the wall, where it smashed and let out a flash of sick, yellow light as it burst into a thousand pieces.

"Gerard!" Mikey shouted; Gerard had doubled over, staggering, moaning like he was in terrible pain. Frank's throat filled with acid and his insides froze, horror filling him all the way out to his fingertips. He was so scared, suddenly, so scared he felt like screaming, but instead he turned to Craig and grabbed his arm.

"Where did you say that panic room was?"

Craig was staring at Gerard; Frank shook him and repeated the question, and he stammered, "Other - other side of the house."



"Take the kids," Frank told him, running forward to grab them and pull them away from Gerard. "Take them, get out of here, Craig, now, you have to go!"

Craig hesitated another second, but when Gerard arched backwards and *screamed* clawing at his own face, Craig grabbed the kids' hands and took off running. Frank pulled the door closed after him; when he turned around Gerard was on the floor, thrashing around so violently that he threw off even Bob's attempts to hold him still. In the end there was nothing they could do but watch, horrified and rooted to the spot, as the sobs and whimpers slowly trailed off and the twitching and convulsing tapered out into stillness.

Nobody spoke. Nobody moved. Gerard got back to his feet, silently, his back to them all.

Mikey put his hand out, hovering an inch or so above Gerard's shoulder. "Gerard?" he said timidly. "Are you okay?"

Gerard rolled his shoulders a couple times, then turned around slowly. He was smiling. "All better," he said in a sing-song voice, and then lashed out, catching Mikey across the face with the back of his hand so hard there was a *crack* and Mikey flew backwards, landing with a painful-sounding *bang* and sliding across the floor until he came to rest in a stunned, crumpled heap against the wall.

"Man," said Gerard, cracking his neck to the side. "That felt good."

He headed straight towards the closed doors. Brian stepped in front of him but Gerard just grabbed his shirt and tossed him out of the way like a rag doll, before throwing the doors open and striding out of the room.

Frank put his hands over his stomach and just tried to breathe, willing himself not to throw up. He looked over to Mikey, who was still curled up by the wall, cradling his jaw in one hand.

"Frankie," he said in a small voice. "That's not Gerard."

"I know," said Frank, and he did know it, for the first time. It was a brand new thought, one he honestly had not entertained until that moment. There were clouds of bitterness and humiliation gathering in his mind, snide voices whispering about how big a fool Frank was to have fallen for it, to have thought for one moment, for one *second* that Gerard really - but there wasn't time for that now. He would just have to reschedule the self-pity parade. "I know," he said again, and this time his voice only shook a little. "What are we going to do?"

\*

"What is he doing?"

They were sitting on Craig's couch, using the security channel to watch Gerard moving through the house. He would stop periodically and run his hands over windowpanes, around doorframes, sometimes over random patches of wall.

"He's looking for a way out," Mikey answered Brian's question. "A weak spot in Ray's spell."

"He won't find one," Ray said confidently. He was holding Mikey's hand.

Bob sighed loudly. "I guess we're not going with my ass-kicking plan, then."

"He's still in there, Bob," Mikey said quietly.

"How do you know?"

Mikey shrugged. "I know."

Brian was kneeling by the coffee table, shifting piles of books around. "So I'm guessing we're dealing with some kind of possession, right? Of course we don't know what he's possessed *by*, that would be too easy."

"Xaphan," said Frank.

Brian looked at him. "Excuse me?"

"The symbol on the sphera," Frank said. "It's the mark of Xaphan. That's who the Hoods were trying to raise."

Brian grabbed a book and leafed through it, muttering, "Xaphan, Xaphan," under his breath. "Xaphan! Fallen angel, rebelled with Satan, demon of the second rank, yadda yadda..." the excitement faded out of his voice. "Had the genius idea to set fire to Heaven, and is now responsible for putting the 'fire' in 'fire and brimstone'. Awesome."

"Huh," said Bob. "Guess the garage fire wasn't so inexplicable after all."

Brian closed the book and looked at Frank. "How the fuck did you know that?"

It was a long time before Frank could answer. He'd never felt so stupid, so ashamed, his whole life. Remembering the way he'd behaved was like recalling an episode of TV or a story somebody had told him about a total and utter fucking jackass - but at the very least, he owed it to them to be honest with them now. "The Cardinal told me," he said, unable to raise his voice above a mutter or tear his eyes away from his knees. "I answered Gerard's phone and spoke to him."

"But I thought Gerard-

"He never called the Vatican like he said he did," Frank went on dully. "And he told me that they would take him away if I listened to them. So I didn't."

The couch dipped and shifted, and Mikey's hand came into view, creeping over Frank's lap to find Frank's own hand and hold onto it.

"Mikey," Frank started, forcing his tongue to form the words. "I'm-

"Don't apologize to me," Mikey said fiercely, bringing his knees up onto the couch. He tucked himself in tight against Frank's side. "Don't you fucking dare."

"When did this happen?" Brian wanted to know.

Frank's eyes burned and his vision was blurred. He couldn't seem to let go of Mikey's hand. "Right before the kids showed up on the cameras."

"So we probably couldn't have done anything between then and now anyway," Ray said gently. "Don't beat yourself up, Frank, this isn't your fault."

*Yeah it is*, Frank thought miserably, but he kept it to himself. Instead he pulled Gerard's phone out of his pocket and tossed it onto the coffee table. "It was a private number. I don't know if you can call the one Gerard has stored and they can tell us how to reach the Cardinal."

Brian took the phone and turned it on. He gave Frank a sideways glance and stood up. "Maybe I

should take this outside."

Bob cleared his throat as Brian left. "So let me get this straight. This Xaphan dude can make fires happen with his brain, okay, I get that. But what's with him pulling this lobotomy shit on Frank?"

"It wasn't just Frank," Ray put in. "I thought Mikey was invisible. And that throwing myself into the water was a good idea when I can't fucking swim."

Mikey adjusted his glasses. "Gerard says that all demons - the evil ones, anyway - have three things in common. They hate God, they hate us, and they can control our minds. Or they can try, anyway."

"Okay, well, that seems like an unfair advantage," Bob scowled.

Frank forced himself to sit up and hold his head straight on his shoulders. "I can't believe I fell for it."

"You didn't *fall for it*," Mikey insisted.

"No, *you* didn't fall for it," Frank argued. "You tried to tell me and I wouldn't listen."

Mikey pressed his mouth into a flat line. "Why do you think I came to you? I knew you wouldn't. I didn't want you to. I wanted someone to tell me it wasn't true."

"This explains so much, though," Ray mused. "Why we all went along with the 'run away from the Vatican' plan. How Gerard managed to get past the airport officials."

"That thing with his neck," Mikey said. Frank looked at him. "Possessed people can't bear the touch of the crucifix. I saw him test it on Pete."

Brian came back in looking grimmer than ever. "Okay, I have bad news, worse news, and marginally less terrible news."

"Just start at the beginning," said Bob.

Brian nodded. "Okay. So, apparently bunches of crazy people forming a cult and trying to raise a demon is less uncommon than you might think, which is awesome, in a 'nightmares for the rest of my life' sort of way. But it does mean that the Cardinal was able to answer some of our questions." Brian paused, rubbing his hands together slowly. "Demons can't just appear on Earth in their physical form. So what the Hoods were trying to do was raise its spirit, I guess, into Pete's body, and then they would perform a ritual to free Xaphan from the confines of the human form, and that's pretty much when the world would be in for a serious charbroiling."

"Only Gerard switched with Pete," Ray said. "So that derailed their plans somehow?"

Brian nodded. "Demons hate us, right? Wearing a human form of any kind isn't exactly a fun time for them. But I'm guessing a human priest is pretty much a nightmare scenario."

Frank frowned. "Because of the sacramental character, right?"

"Divine grace," Brian confirmed. "Not a demon's first choice for a roommate. So it seems like that was how the Father was able to fight off, or suppress the possession for as long as he did, but then the kids showed up with the sphera..."

"And it was like a wake-up call for Xaphan," Mikey finished. "So what now?"

"Uh," Ray raised his hand. "I don't want to point out the obvious, but speaking of unwanted roommates - aren't we kind of trapped in a house with a demon who can set things on fire just by willing it?"

Brian made a strange face, then dug in his pocket. He took something out and flipped it to Bob, who caught it and looked at it curiously.

"My lighter," he said, looking up at Brian. "Where-"

"In the garage," Brian said quietly.

"But," Bob started, then went quiet, looking down at the lighter in his hands. "Oh."

"I think he's relying on using our own minds against us because he can't use his physical powers while he's in human form," Brian went on. "That's why the Hoods want to free him."

Frank didn't want to ask, he didn't; he already knew what the answer would be, but he found himself forming the words anyway, "How would they do that?"

Brian hesitated for just a second before he said, "They would take the Father's life."

There was a silence. Frank thought Mikey wasn't even breathing.

Brian said, "They can't get in. He can't get out. As long as we can keep ourselves from giving in mentally, I think we should be okay. The Cardinal's on his way, we just have to hold out until he gets here."

Frank's head snapped up. "What's he going to do?"

"Exorcise him," Brian said calmly. "Cast the demon back down to Hell."

"Oh," said Gerard from the doorway, making them all jump. "I don't think so."

Frank stood up and pulled Mikey with him, moving closer to the other guys on instinct.

Gerard raised an eyebrow. "All that technology at your fingertips and you're still too busy listening to yourselves talk to see me coming," he smirked as he moved further into the room. "Humans. You never change."

"You're human too right now," Ray said boldly. "You can't hurt us."

Gerard smiled dangerously. "Can't I?"

"You come any closer and I'll break your arms," Bob warned, moving in front of Ray.

"But they're not my arms," Gerard said innocently. "They belong to your precious *Father*."

"He'll forgive me," Bob said, clenching his jaw as Gerard came closer. "It's this thing he does."

Gerard just smiled at him, unfazed. "How's your leg, Bob? Does it smell right to you?"

Bob sputtered, and Gerard crouched down, inspecting Bob's shin closely. He shook his head. "I really think you ought to lie down," he said sorrowfully, and then his hand flashed out and he scraped his fingers over Bob's burned shin, sharply, and hooked his other hand around Bob's ankle and pulled, sending Bob toppling over backwards where his head connected hard with the edge of the coffee table. Bob curled up, both hands coming to cover the back of his head, and Gerard stood

up, still smiling, Frank just wished he would stop *smiling*. "Oh yeah," he drawled, resting his foot on Bob's hip. "You're a badass."

Then he pulled his foot back and kicked Bob in the stomach, hard.

"Don't!" Frank shouted before he could stop himself - Gerard whipped round to face him and smiled even wider, if that was possible. Frank bit his tongue and shrank back against the wall, but it was too late.

"Frankie." Gerard came straight over to him, getting right up in his space, hands on his arms and leaning in to murmur, "You're my favorite."

"Don't," Frank said again, but Gerard had him pinned now, their bodies pressed together from shoulders to knees. Gerard inhaled deeply, his face pressed into Frank's hair.

"All that longing," he breathed, bracketing Frank's face in his hands. "All that rage. And so very, very...obliging." Frank jerked his head away and Gerard yanked it back, pushing his thumb hard against Frank's lower lip as a slow, sly grin spread over his face. He quirked an eyebrow and leaned in so close his lips moved against Frank's skin when he whispered, "I didn't have to lift a finger."

Mikey came out of nowhere and launched himself at Gerard, trying to pull him away from Frank. "Don't touch him!"

"Mikey, no!" Ray shouted, but it was too late, Gerard turned around and brought his knee up squarely into Mikey's stomach, then slammed his elbow down hard on the back of Mikey's neck when he doubled over. Mikey fell to the floor and Frank saw red; he threw himself at Gerard, intent on putting a stop to it, but Gerard turned around and slipped his hands into Frank's, holding them gently as he looked into Frank's face.

"You would never hurt me, Frankie," he whispered, and Frank wouldn't, he would never hurt Gerard, he didn't know what he was thinking. "You would never hurt me."

Bob appeared over Gerard's shoulder. "I would," he said, and yanked Gerard's hands out of Frank's grip, bending both his arms up behind his back so that Gerard twisted and cried out.

"No!" Frank shouted; he tried to get to them but Brian was behind him, holding him back.

"That hurt," Bob said to Gerard, and shoved him face-first into the wall, his hands still pinned behind his back. "Now I'm pissed."

"That's right, Robert, let it out," Gerard sneered, only laughing when Bob pulled him back and then slammed him against the wall again. "They just point you in the right direction and let you go, is that it? Like a dog. A big, dumb dog."

"Don't listen to him, Bob," said Brian, his hands like steel traps around Frank's arms.

Gerard craned his neck to look over his shoulder at Bob. "His master's voice."

"Shut up!" said Bob. Ray was there, suddenly, with something cradled in his arms - rope, Frank realized, and Bob used it to bind Gerard's hands together before dragging him roughly over to a chair and throwing him down in it. "You think you're something special, asswipe? Seems to me you're just another bad guy in love with the sound of his own voice."

Gerard shook his hair out of his face. There was blood at the corner of his mouth. "Am I hurting

your feelings?" he said breathily, blinking up at Bob. "It's nothing worse than they say behind your back, believe me."

"Anything they have to say to me, they say to my face," Bob said, kneeling so he could tie Gerard's legs securely to the chair. Gerard snarled and struggled, and Bob stood up once he was satisfied. "Dick," he added as an afterthought, and set about tying Gerard's chest and waist.

"You good?" said Brian in Frank's ear. "You're not going to run over there and untie him?"

"I'm fucking *fine*," Frank insisted, shaking Brian off.

Ray was kneeling next to Mikey. "Maybe I should do something. A binding spell, just to be sure."

Gerard scoffed. "Yeah, Ray, why don't you run and get your box of magic tricks? Maybe if you keep trying you'll come up with something that can keep Mikey's interest for more than five minutes."

Ray flushed, but held his head up. "That's not why Mikey likes me."

"No," Gerard agreed. "Mikey likes you because you're a warm place on a cold night, isn't that right, Mikeyway?"

"Don't call me that," said Mikey.

"You think you would have stood a chance with him back home?" Gerard went on, ignoring Mikey and looking straight at Ray. "You think he ever would have looked at you *twice*? Look at him, Ray, he's beautiful. He can have anyone he wants. He's just fucking you because you're there."

"Shut your mouth!" Mikey shouted.

"Don't be embarrassed, Mikey," Gerard soothed. "Hey, I know how it is, all right? As a guy who's been in what you might call a maximum-security establishment for the past, oh, eternity, I know how it goes. Eventually even the dullest, ugliest motherfucker in there starts to look like a good time."

"It's okay, Mikey," Ray said, his jaw set. "I'm not listening."

"Yes you are," Gerard shot back. "And nice job taking advantage of the guy when he's just lost his brother, by the way. Who needs rohypnol when you have grief?"

Mikey covered his ears.

"But then I guess I can't blame you, Ray. Mikey is a very pretty package." Gerard went on. "It's just a shame there's nothing inside."

"Don't," Mikey whispered.

"It's fascinating, really. All humans are ultimately empty, useless vessels of flesh, but to come across one who depends so entirely on another to give him even the slightest sense of self-worth is really impressive. I'm amazed you even have your own name. No will of your own, no path, no destiny. Hitching a ride on the coat-tails of your brother's calling just to kid yourself that you aren't the most pointless waste of life to ever walk this forsaken planet. Do you ever dream you're him, Mikey? When you look in the mirror do you sometimes see his face?"

"Stop it," said Mikey, rocking back and forth. "Stop it, please."

"Did your parents even notice you were there after he was Called? Did they care that you just faded away, drinking and fucking and trying desperately to ease the pain of knowing you're a total waste of space, just waiting for your brother to come back and give your life some meaning, Mikey, really, you give new meaning to the phrase 'superfluous to requirements', don't you? Even your best friend turned his back on you the second your brother showed up, didn't he? How many seconds exactly did it take him to realize he'd been hanging out with the shallow end of the gene pool, anyway?"

"That's not true!" Frank yelled; he wanted to get to Gerard and make him shut up, the minute he took a step forwards Brian was there, holding him back again. "Schechter, let me go!"

"Yeah, Schechter, let him go!" Gerard mocked. "Let's see if he can stand me touching him for more than half a second before he loses his mind to me again."

Frank growled in frustration, struggling in Brian's grip. "You son of a bitch."

"Son of God," Gerard corrected him, his face going pinched and sharp and deadly. "Favored creation before you came along, insects crawling all over this planet, infecting it with your selfishness, your stink. Did you really think that he would turn his back on the Almighty for you, Frank? Seriously? Are you that arrogant? Or just that deluded? Do you think for one second that you have anything to offer a man who knows what it is to love the face of God?"

"I think," Frank snarled, "that you're the guy tied up in a chair. And I'm the one still standing."

"You can't even take credit for that," Gerard scoffed. "If you're not on the floor it's only because your friends are holding you up."

"Yeah," said Ray. "Friends'll do that. Just another one of those pathetic human things, I guess."

Gerard stared at him for a second, then his face twisted violently and his head snapped back on his neck; the noise that came out of his mouth was inhuman, like children screaming and metal twisting and hate and pain tearing each other apart. But the ropes held despite his struggles, and Frank felt grimly triumphant.

"How's it working out for you sharing a body with a priest?" he said. "Does it hurt? I hope it hurts. I hope he's kicking your ass in there."

Gerard's head snapped around at an unnatural angle and his eyes fixed heavily on Frank's. "I am beyond pain," he growled, his voice rolling gutturally from one syllable to the next. "I was cast out of Heaven, human, you know nothing of *pain*. I will visit such suffering on this Earth that pain will be a beautiful dream you once had. Your children's skin will blacken and their eyes will roast in their skulls and they will still be screaming even as the flames lick their way up their tiny throats and out of their charred, ruined mouths, and they will still be screaming, screaming for their God to save them and *He will not come*."

"Blah, blah," said Bob. "Is anyone else really bored of this guy?"

\*

They huddled just outside the doors, where they could still hear Gerard ranting and raving to himself.

"It's almost better this way," Mikey said, cleaning his glasses on the hem of his shirt. "It's harder when it seems like it might be Gerard."

"When will the Cardinal get here?" Bob asked Brian.

"Maybe a day, I don't know."

Ray made a querulous noise. "So what are we supposed to do, just wait?"

"I guess."

Frank shook his head. "What if he doesn't last that long?"

Bob frowned. "What do you mean?"

"When I would channel, and have things going through me like that, it always made me feel like shit," Frank explained. "And Gerard thought Pete wasn't even going to survive, remember? I'm thinking a guy who went up against God has to be a shitload of mystical whatever. What if Gerard's body gives out?"

Brian sighed and rubbed his forehead. "You're right, I didn't think of that. I guess we need a back-up plan. Okay, you guys hit the books and I'll stay with the Father."

"Are you crazy?" Bob raised his voice. "We're not leaving you alone with him!"

"Someone has to stay with him, Bob, and he obviously doesn't have shit to say to me," Brian said decisively. "The rest of you take the books to the kitchen - and someone should go check on Craig and the kids. Tell them to stay put until one of us gives the all clear."

"I'm on it," said Mikey, and went off in the direction Craig had gone earlier.

"There's some rope left," Bob told Brian after they collected the books. "Feel free to use it to shut his mouth."

Brian smiled grimly. "I'll keep that in mind."

\*

In the kitchen, Frank and Ray settled at the table with the books. Frank made it a whole half a page before he blurted out, "Toro, I feel like such a shit."

"Nobody's saying you aren't a shit," Ray said, fumbling his book open. "We're just saying on this occasion you have an excuse."

"But I was an asshole."

Ray cocked an eyebrow. "And that's such a departure for you?"

"Ray!" Frank thumped the table in frustration. "Why won't anybody let me apologize?"

"Because it's not your fault! Do you want me to apologize for almost drowning?"

Frank threw himself back in his chair. "Ugh. I just feel like I should have known something was wrong. Like I should - I should have fought it, or something. I mean how did I let that happen? I couldn't even get hypnotized when I wanted to quit smoking, remember? The chick said I was too skeptical."

"Were you in love with your hypnotherapist?"



Frank's cheeks flushed hot and he looked away. "No."

"Was she possessed by a mind-controlling demon?"

"No."

"Well, then." Ray lifted his shoulders. "Nobody's going to beat you up for this, Frankie. If you want that you'll have to get it from someone else."

Frank scowled. "You're so annoying."

"Yes," said Ray, going back to his book. "Forgiveness is a real pain in the ass." Then he sneezed explosively, coughed a bunch of times and groaned, clutching his chest.

"Dude," said Frank. "You sound like me."

Ray waved him off.

Bob came out of the garage, frowning. "You would think I would remember starting a weird, square fire," he said, sitting down. "But I just don't."

"It's the mind control," Ray reminded him. "It's not you."

"Mmm," Bob said. He rubbed his temples. He was sweating a little, and really pale.

"Dude," said Frank. "Are you all right?"

Bob waved him off. "I'm just a little dizzy."

Frank exchanged a glance with Ray. They both knew that 'a little dizzy' was Bob-speak for 'incredible pain and about to pass out'. It wouldn't do any good to talk to him about it, though, so Frank got up and found him a glass of water and some painkillers, placing them silently by Bob's elbow before reclaiming his seat.

Bob waited until Frank had pretended to start reading again before downing the pills and draining the water.

"You need antibiotics," Frank tried, but Bob just scowled and hunched down behind a book.

"Craig and the kids are staying put for now," Mikey said when he returned. "He can watch what's going on, he has a feed of the security system in there."

"Of course he does," said Ray.

Mikey half-smiled and sat down. "He's not letting the kids watch, though. It would just upset them."

Bob looked up. "And being locked in a room with a strange man isn't upsetting?"

"You didn't see it," said Mikey, dragging a book towards him. "It's bigger than my apartment was back home. They're playing Mario Kart."

Ray turned a page with his fingertips. "I was thinking maybe there's something I can do," he said, resting both elbows on the table. "To suppress the demon so we can talk to Gerard."

Mikey's head snapped up and his face was so hopeful Frank had to look away. "Really?"

"I've never done it before," Ray said carefully. "But I think so. I need to read up."

Frank looked at Mikey. "He was sneezing and coughing before you came back."

"Frank!" Ray scowled. "I retract that forgiveness."

"You told me you were feeling better," Mikey said accusingly, reaching out to press his hand against Ray's forehead like somebody's Mom. Then he took it back and said sheepishly, "Okay, I have no idea what that's supposed to do. But you need to take care of yourself, Ray, come on."

"I'm *fine*."

"Okay," Frank amended. "Now you sound like Bob."

Ray rolled his eyes, but Mikey stared hard at him and Frank could see the minute Ray caved. He could also see that Ray didn't hate Mikey worrying about him as much as he made out. "Fine," he said. "I'll make some tea."

"I'll help," Mikey said approvingly.

They worked in silence for a while, partly, Frank suspected, because they were all feeling the heavy weight of impending doom on their shoulders and their tongues, but also in case Brian called out for them. Frank was reading a book that he suspected wasn't even entirely in English, but he turned the page and came across a drawing of an angel in armor, standing tall and proud and fierce, with a spear in his hand that he was holding to the throat of a dragon, this huge fucking dragon that he had pinned under his foot like it was nothing.

*Michael defeats the dragon*, the caption read. Frank was about to push it over to Mikey when a line of text at the bottom of the page caught his eye. "Uh."

Ray looked up. "Uh? What uh?"

"Uh Archangel Michael uh," Frank said, re-reading the words on the page twice just to be sure he had it right. He looked up at Mikey. "That's you, right? Field Commander of God's Army? He's your Saint?"

Mikey moved his shoulder slightly. "I'm not sure if he technically actually is a Saint, but yeah. Why?"

"There are many legends surrounding the Archangel Michael," Frank read aloud. "'Due to his duties, which include collecting and weighing the souls of the dead, it is a common belief that his face can only be seen by the dead or dying.'"

Mikey wrinkled his nose. "But you can see me."

"I always could," Frank pointed out. He looked at Ray. "But you couldn't."

Ray's eyes went big and round. He looked at Mikey over the top of his cup of vile-smelling tea. "I saw you," he said in a troubled voice. "I saw you from underneath the water, after I couldn't hold on anymore."

"Gerard said they had to give you CPR," Frank went on. "Maybe you technically were dead, or dying, and that's when you could see Mikey again."

Frank put the book down and started digging through the pile for another one - he knew this, he

*knew* this, he hadn't forced himself to read Gerard's mind-numbingly boring books for nothing. "Aha!" he said triumphantly, when he found what he was looking for. "Remember that night in my apartment, and Gerard said your Saint had that magic floating cloak, or whatever?"

"But he didn't drown," Ray said.

"But he could have," Frank insisted. "He didn't because God didn't allow it."

"Okay," said Bob, "But that doesn't explain why I turned pyro. I don't remember any mention of Saint Robert doing that."

Frank chewed his lip. "But there are like a hundred Saint Roberts. We wouldn't know even if there was."

"Uh," said Mikey, raising his hand. He was looking in the book Frank had cast aside. "'Saint Robert of Newminster often visited his friend, the hermit Saint Godric,'" he read. "'The night Robert died, Godric described seeing his soul ascending to Heaven in a ball of fire.'"

Bob looked at him flatly. "Awesome," he said, then jerked a thumb in Frank's direction. "And we already know what happened to Death By Papercuts over here."

"Good thing Brian doesn't have a Saint," Ray said earnestly.

"Yeah, just that Blessed guy, right?" Bob took the book from Mikey. "Here it is. Brian Lacey: English, secretly friends with a priest, betrayed by his own brother, and he was..." Bob trailed off, then dropped the book on the table and ran for the door.

Frank lunged over the table and grabbed the book. "Martyred," he finished, looking up at Mikey and Ray. "Brian Lacey was hanged."

They heard Bob shout Brian's name before they even had time to move.

When they reached the living room, Frank didn't know where to look. Brian's red, still face, his closed eyelids, his hands, hanging limp and swollen by his sides. The empty chair Gerard had been tied to. The ropes on the floor.

"Cut him down!" Bob shouted, wrapping his arms around Brian's legs and lifting him, supporting his weight. "We have to cut him down!"

It was like being in a dream; Frank moved on auto-pilot, climbing onto Ray's shoulders, taking the knife Mikey handed him, hacking and slicing at the rope that made a noose around Brian's neck. Bob was shouting - Frank cut as fast and as deep as he could, and finally Brian's body was loose and Bob was tumbling him to the floor, laying him out and scrabbling at his throat, pulling the noose over his head and throwing it away.

Frank fell on his knees next to them. He felt Brian's wrist. "No pulse," he heard himself say.

"He's not breathing," Bob said, his ear over Brian's mouth. He turned and - for a second Frank thought he was kissing him, but his hand was on Brian's chin, the other pinching his nose shut. Brian's chest lifted; Bob was blowing breath into his lungs.

"Out of the way!" he shoved Frank and laced his hands together, one on top of the other, pumping the heels hard into Brian's chest, once, twice, three times, four, five. Another breath. *One. Two. Three. Four. Five.*

"Breathe, god dammit!"

*One. Two. Three. Four. Five.*

"Breathe!"

*One. Two. Three. Four. Five.*

"Bob," said Frank.

"No," said Bob. He covered Brian's mouth with his own again.

*One. Two. Three. Four. Five.*

*One. Two. Three. Four. Five.*

*One. Two. Three. Four. Five.*

"Bob," said Frank again.

"*No*," Bob told him, smacking Frank's hands away when he reached for him. "Breathe, asshole!" he yelled, and brought his fist down into Brian's chest, hard, making Brian's body jerk and settle back into stillness on the floor. "Brian!" he shouted, and punched him again, and again, and Frank thought he heard a *snap*, something breaking in Brian's chest.

"Stop it," Mikey begged him, kneeling next to Frank and reaching out to block Bob's arm. "Bob, stop."

"Don't tell me to stop!" Bob yelled. "Don't tell me to stop when he's - *Brian*, don't you fucking do this to me, you don't get to fucking leave us, come on, breathe, *breathe*," he roared, and slapped Brian across the face so hard his head rocked violently against the floor. Bob brought his fist down on Brian's chest one more time and Brian convulsed, opening his mouth and sucking in a huge, hoarse, painful-sounding lungful of air, choking it back out, coughing and shaking and struggling for breath while Bob held him up, close to his chest, one hand spread over Brian's torso.

"Easy, easy," he said. Brian's hands flailed around; Mikey caught one and Ray the other. Frank sat back on his heels and just stared - his hands hurt and when he looked down he found that he was gripping Brian's legs so hard his fingers were driving into them. "That's it," Bob was saying. "Just breathe, you can do it, you're okay."

Brian fumbled his hand out of Mikey's grip - he caught Mikey's chin clumsily before scrabbling at Frank's shoulder. "What is it?" said Frank, catching his hand. "Brian?"

Brian couldn't speak yet, but Frank was watching his face and he saw his mouth form the words, "I didn't."

"I know you didn't," said Frank, holding on tight. "I know you didn't, I know that."

"He didn't what?" Bob demanded, still holding Brian close.

For a minute Frank couldn't answer because he wasn't there, he was back in his bathroom, sprawled out on the floor, and Brian was holding him in his arms until the ambulance came. "He didn't try to kill himself," he managed eventually, leaning into Mikey, pressing Brian's hand between his own. "It was Gerard."

\*

"I can't see him anywhere," said Frank, standing in front of the TV. "He's completely disappeared."

"He must be somewhere," said Bob.

Frank clicked through the security cameras one more time. "I don't see him."

He reset the screen to show the areas nearest the living room and went to sit down. Brian was lying on the couch, propped up against pillows they'd liberated from around the room. He was pale and he winced every time he moved, his eyes were bloodshot and there was an ugly, purple ring around his throat that Frank didn't want to look at, but he was alive. Bob was sitting at the other end, with his leg propped up on the footstool. He was sweating bullets, and his leg looked like he lost a fight with a meat grinder.

Ray was in the big armchair, and Mikey was sitting next to him, replacing the bandages on his hands.

"Jesus," said Frank, and sat on the coffee table. He dropped his head into his hands. "We are not in the best shape we have ever been, guys."

"We just have to make it until the Cardinal calls us," Mikey said quietly, ripping a piece of tape.

Frank shook his head. "Bob needs a doctor now. And who's to say Gerard won't come back and Jedi mind-trick us all into killing each other, anyway?"

"Gerard isn't what's keeping us trapped in here, Frankie," Brian croaked. "It's those creeps outside."

Frank yanked the rosary out from under his shirt and wound it around his fist. He ground the beads against his knee through his jeans. "Ugh."

"I have my kit here," Ray said. "But to work that suppression thing I mentioned I need one of the books we left in the kitchen, the one with the purple rose on the cover."

"I'll get it," Frank said immediately, standing up.

"Are you crazy?" Mikey shook his head. "Frank, if he finds you-"

"If he finds me I won't listen to a word he says," Frank cut Mikey off. Yeah, the thought of that thing out there wearing Gerard's face and touching Frank with his hands made Frank want to throw up - but he would take a million years of that over Gerard speaking to Mikey the way he had before. "These guys are all hurt. They need you to stay and take care of them."

The phone rang, then, making them all jump. Brian reached for it, but Frank went over and plucked it out of his hand.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Iero," said the Cardinal. "Are you all right?"

"Define 'all right'," said Frank, looking around at his friends.

"Are you-"

"When do you get here?" Frank cut him off, because he still didn't want to talk to the guy, even though now it was less because Frank didn't trust him, and much more that Frank had realized that when it came to Gerard, he couldn't trust himself.

"Tomorrow morning," the Cardinal said quietly, after a pause. "In around ten hours from now, I should say."

Brian gestured impatiently for the phone. Frank tossed it over to him and looked at Ray. "They'll be here tomorrow."

"How long do we have?" Mikey wanted to know.

"Ten hours."

Mikey met Frank's eyes and Frank knew they were thinking the same thing. "Get the book," he said, and Frank nodded and headed for the door.

Mikey followed him to make sure it was barred shut from the inside, and Frank crept along the hallway to the kitchen. He felt like there were eyes in the walls, like the air was touching him with spindly, sweaty fingertips, and his heart was banging in his throat as he made his way. There was total silence in the house, and Frank's breathing was loud in his ears as he reached the kitchen and found the book Ray wanted on the table. He grabbed it, turned around, and -

"Don't scream," said Gerard, holding his hands out, palms-forward.

"Don't touch me," Frank snapped, stepping backwards. He clutched the book tight to his chest so Gerard wouldn't be able to see that his hands were shaking. "And I wasn't going to *scream*, what the fuck."

"All right," Gerard lowered his hands but didn't step back, hovering just a foot or so out of Frank's personal space. "I want you to listen to me, Frank."

"Why?" Frank scowled. "So you can spew a bunch more shit about me and my friends? No thanks."

"No!" said Gerard, stepping to block the way when Frank tried to move. "I just think we can help each other."

Frank stared at him. "Did you forget that you're an evil demon from Hell? I'm really not looking to scratch your back, dude. And thanks for making one of my best friends hang himself, by the way. That was awesome."

Gerard laughed a little, not the sharp sneer from before, but a genuine laugh, which made Frank want to throw up because it sounded like Gerard, and that was so wrong, and it made Frank's stomach clench painfully with missing him.

"You're so angry," Gerard said quietly, tilting his head to the side. "I won't lie to you, Frank, I find that...well. Let's just say you hold a special fascination for me."

Frank opened his mouth to respond, but before he could get any words out Gerard was there, pressing him up against the wall again, his hands settling on Frank's waist as he looked into Frank's eyes. "Those people out there," he said softly, "They're just sheep. No mind of their own. Like your friends."

"No," said Frank.

"When this priest of yours asked them to drop their lives and follow him, did any of them give it a second thought?" Gerard went on, his voice rising and falling rhythmically. "Did any of them question it, even for a second?" Gerard brushed his lips against Frank's forehead. "But you did,

didn't you, Frankie? You weren't ashamed to show you had a mind of your own."

Frank opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"You question things," Gerard whispered against Frank's hair. "You want to know why. You gave up everything to be loyal to this priest and his cause, but you didn't want to sign over your soul. All you asked for was a little *respect*, Frank, a little independence, and what did you get? Abandoned. Forsaken. A broken heart." Gerard tipped Frank's chin up and Frank was startled to see that Gerard's eyes had filled with tears. "I know all about loneliness, Frank. I know all about longing. I know all about that. I know what it's like to be punished just because you won't do what you're told."

Frank shivered under his hands, pressing closer despite himself. "What do you want from me?"

"I want out," Gerard said simply. Before Frank could respond he went on, "And if you help me? I'll give him to you."

Frank bit his lip. He didn't want to believe it, but he could feel that it was the truth, he could feel it running up his spine and into his mind. "I don't want him like this," he tried, but it sounded weak even to his own ears.

"Liar," Gerard breathed against his ear. "I think you want him any way you can get him, Frankie. I think you're aching with it. I think you're really, really hurting for him, sweetheart, and here's the secret: he feels the same."

Frank shuddered and tipped his head back, encouraging the first slide of Gerard's lips on his throat.

"He thinks about it all the time," Gerard went on, sliding his hands up over Frank's chest and down to his belly. "He lies awake at night burning for you, Frankie, he stares at the ceiling and prays for the strength to keep his hands off you for just one more day. The thought of you with someone else makes him sick, did you know that? Someone else touching your skin, tasting your mouth, feeling you hot and desperate against them. He wants to be the one in your bed, Frankie, he wants you to hold him down and spread him open and taste every dirty, shameful inch of him, and I can *give you that*." Gerard pulled back to look into Frank's eyes, and slid his thigh between Frank's, pressing up and smiling when it made Frank gasp and clutch at him, his eyelids fluttering as his head fell back against the wall. "I can give you everything you want, and all you have to do is set me free."

Frank looked uncertainly down at the book still in his arms, pressed tight between them. Then he looked up at Gerard's face, and the decision was easy to make. "I can get you out," he whispered. "But I have to go back to the living room first."

"To the others?" Gerard said sharply, his hands tightening almost painfully on Frank's waist. "Why?"

Frank showed Gerard the tattoo on his hand. "You won't be able to leave without this. I need the special ink Ray makes, and it's back there."

Gerard searched his eyes; Frank just looked back, enjoying being so close to him, enjoying being held. "I would never hurt you, Gerard," he whispered honestly. "All I want to do is keep you safe."

Gerard hesitated a second longer, then nodded, turning Frank out of the warm circle of his embrace. "I'll be waiting here."

"I'll be right back," Frank promised him, and headed back to the living room.

\*

When he returned, Gerard appeared from the shadows in the corner. "You came back."

"I promised." Frank held up the vial of ink. "I don't know if this might sting," he said, frowning. "It has Holy Water in it."

Gerard smirked. "I can take it."

Frank nodded and unscrewed the cap, dipping the brush in. The first touch against Gerard's skin made him hiss and pull away - as Frank kept working, the skin on Gerard's neck began to blacken and crack, but Gerard stayed still and silent after the first moment, until Frank was done.

"Okay," Frank said, putting the ink aside. "We can take the van. I still have the keys."

"Let's go," Gerard said, but Frank stopped him with a hand on his arm. "What is it?"

"Just..." Frank shrugged shyly. "I don't know. Thank you."

Gerard smiled and pulled Frank close again. "Believe me, Frank, it's my pleasure."

Frank turned his face to Gerard's and kissed him, deeply, sighing when Gerard pulled him up against his body and held him there, tight, one of Frank's legs slipping in between Gerard's.

"You were right," Frank whispered in his ear when the kiss broke, settling his hands firmly on Gerard's shoulders.

Gerard nuzzled the side of his face. "About what?"

"I don't do what I'm told," said Frank, and with a flick of his wrist he shook the rosary out of his sleeve and jammed the crucifix as hard as he could into the broken skin on Gerard's neck. Gerard howled and staggered, hands coming up to clutch at his neck; Frank shoved on his shoulders, sending him to the ground, and followed him down. "You think I'd sell him out for *sex*?" he hissed, throwing his leg over Gerard's hips and pinning him to the ground. "You stupid motherfucker, you don't know the first fucking *thing* about me."

He screwed the crucifix into Gerard's neck again, slapping Gerard's hands away hard when he screamed and clawed at his throat. "Mikey, now!"

Mikey came running in, Ray hot on his heels. They skidded to their knees next to Gerard and Mikey shoved a book into Frank's free hand. "Read."

Frank recited the words on the page, but he wasn't really seeing them. Mikey was following Ray's frantic instructions as he used his arms and knees to help Frank keep Gerard pinned to the floor. It was awful; Gerard was writhing and wailing, he was cursing them and saying terrible things about them, about their mothers, about himself. He convulsed so violently his head cracked a tile on the kitchen floor and he spat blood, shuddering, jerking like every word Frank spoke was a bullet, like every move Mikey made was acid in his face. Frank kept the crucifix driving into Gerard's neck even when he smelled burning flesh.

Gerard ripped his arm free and his hand clamped tight around Frank's throat; Frank choked and kept reading, looking at the book instead of at Gerard's face, at his eyes, which were black with rage and betrayal. Gerard convulsed once more, his fingers spasming around Frank's throat before he twisted and vomited a stream of blood and blackness onto the floor, and then he slumped there, retching and heaving, all the tension leaving his body at once.



Frank dropped the book and took the crucifix back at once. He climbed off Gerard and collapsed onto the floor, instead, while on the other side Mikey gathered Gerard up into his arms, unmindful of the mess on the floor. Gerard sounded - well, he sounded like a man who'd just been through something that really fucking hurt, breathing out hoarse, shaky sobs against Mikey's chest. Mikey shushed him; he'd lost his glasses, Frank couldn't see them anywhere, but he saw the side of Gerard's ash-pale, tear-stained face when he struggled to ask Mikey,

"Is it gone?"

Mikey shook his head, and Gerard hid his face again. Mikey rocked him back and forth. Frank looked at him, at Ray, at the wreckage of the kitchen.

They were all silent. There was nothing to say.

\*

"I don't even know how to begin," Gerard said, huddled in the big armchair with Mikey. "To say I'm sorry."

"So don't," Ray told him. "Forget it."

Gerard kind of smiled. "Just like that?"

Bob nodded. "Just like that. It wasn't you, man. We all know that."

Gerard shook his head and looked away, his mouth turned down at the corners. He said, "But I remember it. I remember it like it was me."

"It wasn't," Mikey said softly.

Gerard sighed. "Are the kids safe?"

"They're with Craig." Mikey put his arm around Gerard's shoulders and rubbed his arm.

Gerard looked at him. "I don't want them to see me like this."

"They won't. Craig's taking care of them."

Gerard nodded. It was so quiet in the room. Frank was sitting on the floor. He hugged his knees to his chest. "What's going to happen tomorrow? When the Cardinal gets here?"

"We'll have to leave the house," Brian said, wincing as he tried to shift positions. "There's a church not far from here, I guess the Cardinal arranged with the local priest for it to be empty."

Gerard nodded. "That's good."

"No," Frank tried again. "But I mean with the exorcism. What will he do?"

Gerard took a deep breath, raising his eyebrows. "I've never done one. Not a real one. From what I hear the film is actually not entirely inaccurate."

Frank looked up. "The priests *die* in the film."

"Exorcisms are actually very rarely sanctioned by the Church. Partly because most cases of demon possession turn out to be something else - dystonia, schizophrenia, hysteria. Partly because nobody is more skeptical about demons than the Vatican, believe me," Gerard kind of rolled his eyes. "And

partly because, well, they're dangerous. People die, and then the Church gets held responsible. Priests have been convicted of homicide for their involvement."

Gerard paused, took another breath and went on, "So it might be better if you aren't there."

"And there's another thing you can forget," said Ray.

"It's too dangerous," Gerard insisted. "The very basic aim of exorcism is to make it so uncomfortable for the demon to inhabit the human body that it would rather go back to Hell. But it is totally possible for it to jump to someone else instead, and I can't take that risk."

"We're not leaving you," said Brian. "That's final."

"You said people die," Bob spoke up. "I thought if - if something happened to you, then won't the demon get free?"

"Either that, or my death will prevent it totally," Gerard said blankly. "I wonder if my soul will go to Hell?"

"You're not going to die," Frank snapped. Gerard blinked at him, and Frank thumped the table in frustration. "There must be something else we can do, Gee, we can go through the books again, can't we?"

Gerard shook his head. "There's nothing else."

"So our options are you get exorcised, it works, and the Vatican bans you from seeing us," Frank said, his throat hot and tight like the skin around his eyes, "Get exorcised, it works, and you lose your mind like Luke. Or you get exorcised, it doesn't work and you *die*? There must be another way!"

"Frankie," Gerard said gently. "There isn't. I'm sorry. The only thing we can do now is wait."

Frank gritted his teeth so he wouldn't start yelling. Mikey brought his other hand up to Gerard's face, rubbing at the dried blood that was still splattered over his cheek. "Do you want anything?"

Gerard thought about it, then said, "A bath." Mikey laughed, just once, like he was surprised into it, and Gerard managed half a wobbly smile in response. "What, is that weird?"

"Only because it's you," Mikey teased him. Gerard made a noise that might have started out as a laugh, and Mikey pulled him up, out of the chair. "Come on, I'll help you."

Frank watched them leave. He looked at Bob and Brian, who were both wearing twin clenched-jaw expressions of denying how shitty they felt, and at Ray, who was hunched over his kit, using his fingertips to shuffle things around.

"There has to be something else we can do," he said again.

Nobody replied.

\*

Frank liked the window seat in his room. It reminded him of his old apartment, of sitting there with Mikey, especially when it rained. It was raining now, hard, lashing against the window pane. Frank was curled up in the corner holding his rosary in his hands; counting the beads, one, two, three, five, ten. He'd lost count of the repetitions when there was a knock on his door. He didn't feel like

speaking to any of the guys, didn't want to listen to them telling him how they were doing the right thing or that it was going to be okay, so he ignored it.

Then he heard Gerard's voice, low. "Frankie?"

Frank went to the door immediately, pulling it open to find Gerard on the other side. He was wearing a white T-shirt and blue-striped pajama bottoms. The mark on his neck where Frank had hurt him stood out vividly, black and red with ugly purple veins spidering out like arms. His hair was damp and he was swaying a little.

Frank gaped at him. "Are you drunk?"

Gerard laughed, kind of, pushing his hands through his hair so it lay smoothly against his head. "Not exactly," he said, looking around him like he didn't really know where he was. He smoothed his T-shirt down with both hands. "Can I come in?"

What was Frank going to say, no? He stood back and let Gerard pass, closing the door behind him. Gerard moved slowly around the room, his hands moving like he didn't know what to do with them. He turned around and looked at Frank for a while, a little blurrily, then abruptly asked him, "Why don't you believe in God?"

Frank blinked. "What?"

"God," Gerard repeated, sitting down on the end of Frank's bed. His eyes were a little red. "Why don't you believe in Him?"

Frank considered the past year. "I'm not sure I'm in a position to say I don't anymore."

"But you didn't," Gerard insisted. "You never have since I met you, you - look, kids are predisposed to believe in God, and you were raised in a Catholic family, so I, I just want to know why."

"Because..." Frank had never really thought about why. He just didn't. "It's not like I used to and then I had some grand epiphany, or anything. I just...I just don't."

"But *why*?"

"Because!" Frank threw his hands up, frustrated. "Because where is he, man? Where is he?"

Gerard seemed to accept that, or something - he went quiet, looking down at his hands, twisting in his lap. His shoulders were hunched and his voice was small when he said, "I think you're right."

Frank stared at him. "What?"

"He wasn't there," Gerard went on in the same small, dull voice. "When I - when I died. There was nothing. He wasn't there."

"But you didn't die," Frank stalled, his heart skipping in his chest. He was scared of the thought. "You said you didn't."

Gerard shrugged. "I did. And He wasn't there."

"Gee," Frank went over and sat next to him, risking an arm around him. It seemed like the right move; Gerard pressed in close and Frank rubbed his shoulder. "Come on, you don't believe that."

"He wasn't *there*," Gerard snapped, agitated and tearful. "And I just - what's the point of any of this,

Frankie? I give up any chance I ever had of a normal life, I put the people I love through Hell, I get - I get fucking possessed by a fucking whatever the fuck it is that's inside me, I don't even have control over my own body anymore, and for what?" Gerard got up suddenly and paced around, his voice shaking and getting louder with every word. "I've spent the last decade under the impression that whatever I went through was okay because God was there, and I was doing His work, and He loved me, and He would take care of me if anything really terrible ever happened, and guess what, motherfucker, it *did* happen and *you weren't there!*"

Gerard was shouting now; he lashed out at the dresser in Frank's room suddenly, sweeping everything off the top and sending it crashing to the floor. Frank sat stunned on the bed, watching him. "Fuck!" Gerard yelled, then dropped suddenly into the window seat, head in his hands. "How do you stand it, Frank? It's so fucking *lonely*."

Frank stayed where he was for a second, feeling his heart banging in his chest. Gerard made a soft, miserable noise, and Frank snapped out of it, rushing over to him and dropping to his knees so he could lift Gerard's face and see his eyes.

"I feel like such a fool," Gerard confessed. He drew in a deep, shaky breath and touched Frank's face, gently. "All the time I've wasted, you know? And when I think - when I think I about the things that I could've-"

Gerard broke off, closing his eyes and touching his forehead to Frank's. Frank didn't know what to do - all his instincts were telling him to wrap his arms around Gerard and hold him close, never let him go, get them both out of there and on the road to fucking Mexico or something. He couldn't think with Gerard so close; he cupped Gerard's face in his hands and eased him back a little, just a few inches, just enough to look at him properly.

"Listen to me," he said, hoping that whatever was about to come out of his mouth would make sense. "You're not a fool. You're the smartest person I've ever met."

Gerard shook his head unhappily. "I'm an idiot."

"*No*," Frank said firmly. "Gerard, you're always saying that we don't have to understand everything God does, right? Maybe - maybe you just don't remember. Maybe he made it so you wouldn't remember."

Gerard frowned. "Why wouldn't He want me to remember Him?"

"Think about it, okay? You died. That means you went to one of two places, right? That's how it works?"

"I guess," Gerard said doubtfully.

"So if you went to Hell - which you didn't," Frank insisted when Gerard's face dropped even further, "then the memory of that would fuck you up forever, right? Like the worst trauma anyone can think of. Or let's say - let's say you went to Heaven. Let's say you went to Heaven and you saw God's face and it was everything you wanted it to be - how could you come back from that? How could you ever be happy here ever again? Gerard, you couldn't. You'd spend the rest of your life miserable, just waiting until you could get back there, and God wouldn't want that for you, okay? God doesn't want that for you."

Gerard gazed at him, his face desperately hopeful.

Frank took a deep breath and went on, "I don't think we can be on this plane of, of existence, or

whatever, and have memories of something like that. It'd fuck you up. And anyway, you weren't even really dead, right? This is like, something that never happens, and what, you're going to come back to Earth and tell everyone all God's secrets? That's not how it's supposed to work, right?" Gerard was watching him curiously now, his breathing steadying out. Frank pressed on with, "So - so I don't think he wasn't there. He didn't abandon you. You just can't remember."

Gerard bit his lip. He raised his hands and wrapped them around Frank's wrists. "Do you really think so?"

"Yes," Frank said firmly, and was amazed to find that it wasn't a lie. "Gerard, this isn't you. This is that thing inside you. It's trying to take you away from God like it tried to take you away from us, and you can't let it, okay? You have to - you have to have faith, Gee, don't tell me we followed you this far just for you to say it was all for nothing, all right?"

Gerard laughed, a little, and Frank joined in because it was so fucking bizarre, to be on the other side of this conversation. Gerard turned his face into Frank's palm. He said, "I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. I'm fucking terrified."

"I know," Frank said, and then he thought *fuck it* and kneeled up, pulling Gerard into a tight hug. "Me too."

Gerard held onto him; his hands moved over Frank's back, in his hair. He pressed his face into the crook of Frank's neck and sighed. Frank was so aware of him, of everywhere they touched, of the fact that he was kneeling, pressed up between Gerard's open thighs. Gerard's breath against his neck; he shivered, he couldn't help it. He rocked Gerard a little, trying to make it comfort, to remind himself that's what it was. "Is there anything I can do? To make it better?"

Gerard sighed again, pressing closer for a minute before pulling back to look at Frank's face. "You could," he started, then stopped, his cheeks coloring deeply. Frank squeezed his shoulders, made a soft sound to let him know it was all right. Gerard hesitated, then said very quietly, "You could say the Rosary for me."

Frank swallowed, unaccountably thrown off-balance by the request. He put his hand in his pocket and touched the rosary there, nervous.

"I can't pray," Gerard said, hushed and miserable. "It hurts."

Frank nodded jerkily, pulling the rosary beads out of his pocket. Gerard's eyes followed them hungrily as Frank brought them up to his chest. "Okay."

Frank crossed himself, and began. He stumbled over the first few words; he was only a couple of lines in when Gerard started wincing. Frank stopped, dismayed. "I'm hurting you."

"No," Gerard begged, sliding off the window seat to kneel opposite Frank on the floor. "Please, keep going."

Gerard was obviously in serious discomfort by the time Frank finished out the Apostles' Creed, but he wouldn't let Frank stop. In fact, he shuffled closer during the Our Father, frowning deeply, his eyes never leaving Frank's face.

"Amen," Frank said, moving his fingers to the next bead, the small one. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus."

Gerard moved closer still; his breath on Frank's cheek, his eyes now fixed on Frank's mouth.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God," Frank went on with difficulty, his stomach clenching painfully with confusion and want when Gerard lifted his hands and set his fingertips against Frank's lips. "Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

"For the increase of faith," Gerard murmured, still touching Frank's mouth. His face was pale and he was sweating, obviously in pain, but his eyes were calmer than they'd been for days. "Again, Frankie," he urged. "For hope, this time."

Frank said the Hail Mary again, and once more. "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit," he whispered, Gerard's lips only inches from his own. "As it was in the beginning, is now, and shall ever be, world without end. Amen."

Gerard stroked over Frank's mouth, pressed in closer. He was looking at Frank like he wanted to eat him whole, like he wanted to crawl inside the words coming from Frank's lips. "Frankie," he said, his voice wrecked. "Those things that I said to you, before -"

"It wasn't you," Frank interrupted, feeling his face flush at the memory of Gerard whispering those things into his ear. "I know that."

"But it was," Gerard said desperately. "It was, Frank, you don't understand, it can read my mind. It knows what I'm thinking, it knows - it knows everything I want. You could have -"

"Gee, you don't get it." Frank closed his eyes. He shook his head. "What I want from you, it's not like that. The way that I feel, and the - the sex thing, you think they're separate."

Gerard touched his face so gently Frank barely felt it. When he opened his eyes, Gerard said, "And they're not?"

Frank shook his head. He couldn't speak.

"When I'm with you," Gerard said so, so quietly. "It hurts. Less."

Frank battled the urge to lean forward and press their mouths together - it was too much like it had been before. He drew back a little.

"Frank," Gerard grabbed at him, pulling him back again, eyes searching Frank's face. "Frank, no, it's me. It is."

Frank couldn't move; he was sick with wanting it, but so scared of it being wrong, of it not being Gerard, of it being something that he might regret, that might make things *worse*. He just sat there staring helplessly at Gerard's face, until eventually Gerard pulled back, stumbling awkwardly to his feet.

"I'm sorry," he said, heading for the door. "I shouldn't have come."

Frank was gripped by fear, suddenly, thought, *what the fuck am I doing* and scrambled up, running across the room and reaching for Gerard's hand. He pulled him back before Gerard could open the door, wrapping his arms around him and leaning up to fit their mouths together.

Gerard sighed brokenly into Frank's mouth, cupping his hands around Frank's face and kissing him back fiercely, letting Frank guide him back towards the bed. The relief of kissing him, of holding Gerard in his arms was making Frank dizzy and he stumbled when they reached the bed, shoving Gerard down harder than he meant to and landing on top of him.

To be pressed against Gerard like that made Frank's head spin; together they struggled until they

were properly on the bed, and then they were kissing again, deep, shivery, bruising kisses; not like the first sweet kiss they had shared on Frank's bed, not like the angry, bitter kisses in Pete's kitchen, and not like any of the ones since, the kisses that hadn't ever really come from Gerard. It felt different, it felt so different, to have Gerard present and willing, desperate, with the way he held Frank so tight, the noises he made every time Frank touched him.

Frank was no better; he couldn't keep his hands still, couldn't keep quiet, couldn't calm himself down. He didn't know how to be less desperate, how to take it any slower, how to make Gerard understand that there had been times Frank needed to touch him so badly that it felt like he was bleeding. This wasn't how he wanted it to be; he wanted to be careful, to feel it properly, he wanted to keep Gerard there forever, safe between Frank and the mattress where nothing could ever hurt him, but there wasn't time, he'd got his hands on Gerard now and he couldn't help himself.

He got his weight onto one elbow and pulled away from Gerard as much as he could bear, just enough to push Gerard's T-shirt up. He spread his hands on the pale, warm skin underneath and bent down to put his mouth there. At the first touch of his lips Gerard made a panicked noise and curled up, kind of, his hands hard on Frank's back - not like he was trying to get away, more like he didn't know what to do with how it felt.

Frank could relate. He made a meaningless noise, meant to be soothing, and surged back up to kiss Gerard, who clutched at him harder and kissed him back like he was trying to leave a bruise. The feel of him made easy work of what was left of Frank's self-control and he pushed and kicked until both of their pants were pushed down a little, enough so they were skin to skin and the first hot, perfect slide of Gerard against him made all the breath rush out of Frank's lungs. He dropped his head, pressed kisses around the ruined skin on Gerard's neck and panted there heavily, his eyes screwed up against the too-fast wave of pleasure rocking through him, urging him to push his hips against Gerard's harder, faster, and it was no time at all until Gerard's shocked breath turned into him bucking up and spitting out a stream of increasingly frantic, anxious curses into the air.

"It's okay," Frank forced out, and Gerard cried out, his head falling back on his shoulders and he shook against Frank, coming hot and slick between them, his fingers tight on Frank's shoulders, holding on. It made the slide of Frank's cock that much sweeter, and soon he was following Gerard over the edge, clinging to him and shaking with it, already feeling the bitterness of regret seeping in around the edges, even before his heart started to slow down.

For a long moment he just lay there on top of Gerard, feeling Gerard's chest falling and rising with his restless, uneven breath, then pushed himself up onto his hands and forced himself to look into Gerard's face. Gerard wouldn't look at him, or couldn't, his eyes fixed somewhere across the room. Frank tried to bite down on the way it felt like a physical blow, and instead rolled off him and went straight to the bathroom to clean up, making sure to keep his eyes off Gerard when he came back out.

It was, he thought, probably the worst, most awkward, least satisfying sex he had ever had in his life. He didn't even know how to process the fact that it had even happened, that it had happened like this, that it would never happen again and Frank had wasted his one shot to show Gerard how he really felt about him.

He sat on the edge of the bed while Gerard was in the bathroom. The covers were bunched up where they'd been rolling around. Frank tried to smooth them out with the palm of his hand. He touched the pillow. He could still feel Gerard's skin against his own.

He looked up and Gerard was standing there watching him. He didn't meet Frank's eyes exactly, but his gaze hovered around his face.

They were silent for a long time. Eventually Gerard said, "I don't know what's going to happen. After tomorrow."

"I get it," Frank said quickly, because he couldn't hear Gerard say this, he really couldn't. He swallowed thickly. "No promises."

A pained expression flitted across Gerard's face, but he let it go. He wiped his hands against his pants, glancing compulsively at the door.

Frank said, "You could stay." When Gerard's expression didn't change, he added, "It's just tonight, right?" working as hard as he could to keep any note of desperation out of his voice.

Gerard hesitated, then nodded and came to sit next to Frank on the bed.

After a minute Frank put his arm around Gerard's waist. Gerard took Frank's other hand between his own and held it in his lap, looking down at it and stroking Frank's fingers, from knuckle to nail, one at a time.

Frank closed his eyes, so he couldn't see the numbers clicking over on the digital clock by the bed.

Impossibly, they fell asleep, because Frank woke a few hours later to find Gerard still in his arms, still sleeping, still there. He didn't know what had woken him until there was another soft knock on the door, and Frank looked up to see Mikey move quietly into the room. His face gave nothing away as he took in the scene, and Frank lifted his chin slightly, ready to refuse to apologize. Mikey didn't look angry, though, just sad. Frank had a sudden hot flash of guilt that he'd kept Gerard to himself all night, but Mikey just said softly, "We gave you as long as we could."

Frank didn't trust himself to speak; he just nodded. Mikey looked at Gerard for a long moment, then moved towards the door again.

"Mikey," Frank started then, but he didn't know what else to say, how to even begin, how to say *thank you*. Mikey seemed to get it, though, because he nodded, once, and closed the door behind him when he left.

Frank looked at the ceiling. He took a deep breath. He looked down at Gerard's sleeping face, pressed a kiss against his temple that lingered for a while. He let himself pretend for exactly one more minute, then murmured, "Gerard. It's time to wake up."

\*

"It shouldn't take us long to reach the church, but you can bet those creeps outside will be on our tail." Brian peered out of the kitchen window. "Ray's leaving Craig some instructions on how to break the barrier spell, but only if he's sure they're all gone."

"You need to tie me up," Gerard came back from the living room carrying the rope Bob had used to tie him before. "In case I go crazy and try to get out of the van or something."

Bob nodded. "Okay."

"You should probably gag me, too," Gerard added.

Bob looked less thrilled about that, but he said, "I'll find something we can use."

Frank wrapped another piece of tape around the broken arm of Mikey's glasses and wiggled them a little, testing. "I think that should hold," he said, and handed them over.



Mikey put them on. The arms were wonky and the taped part resting on his nose made him look like a kid in a cartoon, but he nodded. "Thanks."

"Frank's going to drive," Brian went on, "And - " he stopped, giving Frank and Mikey a worried look.

"What?" said Mikey.

"It's just - it's just this is a lot of pressure on you two," Brian said carefully. "With the rest of us all busted up like this. I wouldn't have planned it this way."

Mikey raised one eyebrow. "You would have planned this at all?"

Brian sighed. "Okay, maybe not."

"It is the way it is, Brian, there's nothing we can do about it now." Frank stood up as Ray came back into the room. "Are we ready?"

Ray nodded. "As we'll ever be, I guess."

Mikey hunched his shoulders. "We have to go," he said. He picked up Ray's kit bag. "The Cardinal's waiting."

In the van, Frank forced himself to keep his eyes away from the rearview, where Bob was asking Gerard to kneel, so Bob could tie his hands behind his back, and then his wrists to his ankles. Frank knew it was for the best, that it would stop Gerard from hurting himself, if nothing else, but that didn't mean Frank wasn't two seconds away from scratching Bob's eyes out. He started the van up and looked around for the button Craig had used to open the garage door.

"Wait," said Mikey. "The spell. How is Gerard going to get out of the house? Doesn't he need a symbol painted on?"

"I burned it into his flesh last night, Mikey," Frank said, getting the van rolling. "If that's not good enough then I don't know what the fuck is."

Frank didn't bother with the path Craig had taken before, instead deciding just to drive in a straight line towards the gates. In the rearview he could see Bob tying a piece of cloth in a knot at the back of Gerard's head, holding himself awkwardly so as not to put pressure on his wounded leg. He could see Brian, pale and sweating and trying to brace himself against the side of the van so the movement of the wheels didn't cause him too much pain, and he could see Ray staring down at his useless hands, frustration and hopeless rage written in the line of his shoulders and the set of his jaw. Mikey was in the passenger seat, looking like he had a date with the end of the world, and Frank just was not in the fucking mood to be polite to the assholes who had hurt them all so badly. He could see them now, milling around outside the gates.

"They might not move," Mikey said. He looked at Frank out the corner of his eye. Frank heard the *you might hit them* as clear as if Mikey had spoken it aloud, and it didn't sound like a warning, either.

"Good," he said, and put his fucking foot down.

The gates weren't closed this time so there wasn't the same impact; the human survival instinct was apparently still alive inside the Hoods because most of them got out of the way; the ones who didn't, though, tried to grab on and one of them clung to Mikey's door for almost half a block before Mikey managed to swing it open and send the guy flying to the sidewalk.

"They're following us!" he yelled when he pulled his head back into the van. "Frank, keep going!"

"Not planning on stopping, dude!" Frank wrenched the wheel to the left when Brian told him to, mentally apologizing to all the people in the other lane he almost killed. "Did we lose them yet? How fast are they fucking running, anyway?"

Mikey leaned out of the window again. "I can't see them anymore," he reported. "But I can still feel them. They're going to know where we are."

"Then let's hope the Cardinal works fast," said Frank, then shouted, "Everybody hold on!" as he ran a red light and turned sharply to the right.

"Jesus, Frank!" Ray slammed into the back of Frank's seat. "You're going to kill us all before we even get there!"

There was a noise, then, a horrible, garbled, howling noise, and Frank didn't even have to look to know it was Gerard.

"Scratch that!" said Ray. "Keep your fucking foot down, all right?"

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Frank chanted, swerving out sharply to overtake the car in front. "Brian, how close are we?"

"Should be the next left," Brian wheezed - Frank didn't want to know why he was wheezing all of a sudden, but he could guess it had to do with the muffled thumps and shouts he could hear. "Next left, Frankie, hurry!"

Frank took the corner as fast as he could without toppling the van over on its side, and the church came into view, tall and imposing and oh, *fuck*, Frank had never been so glad to see the Suits in his life, running out of the church doors to meet them as Frank brought the van screeching to a halt.

"Inside, inside!" Howard shouted as Mikey and Frank jumped out of the van. "Where is he, in the back?"

Frank nodded. "Our friends are hurt!" he said, struggling when the little Suit with the ponytail tried to pull him away from the van. "You have to be careful!"

"They'll be worse than hurt if we don't get you all inside, believe me," said one of the other Suits as they pulled the doors to the van open. Bob and Ray climbed out first, then together with the Suits they pulled out Gerard, who was thrashing around and snarling and his face was - Frank pulled Mikey to him quickly, turning him away.

"Don't look," he said, holding Mikey firm when he struggled. "Don't look, Mikeyway."

"Get him to the Cardinal!" Howard ordered the other Suits, and finally Brian came out of the van, climbing out painfully and leaning heavily against the side, panting. Howard said, "Is anybody dying right this second?"

Brian shook his head, clutching his side and leaning over to spit blood out onto the ground. "Not for at least an hour."

"Come on," Howard ran back towards the church and they followed him, stumbling inside so Howard could close the tall, heavy doors, shutting the light out, shutting them in. Frank immediately turned to see the Suits up at the other end of the Church, holding Gerard down on a large, heavy table, struggling to force Gerard's limbs straight.

"What are they doing?" Mikey cried, trying to pull out of Frank's grip. "Tying him down won't work, we tried that and he got free of the ropes."

Howard said, "He won't get free of these," and ran to join the others.

The Cardinal was standing at the end of the table, a large crucifix in his hand which he was holding high in the air over Gerard's head. "Save your servant," he said in a clear, confident voice. "Who trusts in you, my God. Let him find in you, Lord, a fortified tower, in the face of the enemy. Let the enemy have no power over him, and the son of iniquity be powerless to harm him. Lord, send him aid from your holy place, and watch over him from Sion. Lord, heed my prayer, and let my cry be heard by you."

The Suits joined in the second part of every phrase, so that when the Cardinal said, "The Lord be with you," they replied, "And also with you."

Gerard bucked and hissed and writhed when the Cardinal touched him with the crucifix, when he sprinkled Holy Water on him, when he laid his hand on the top of Gerard's head and prayed. Of all the things Frank had seen since this whole thing started, this was the worst, because there wasn't anything he could *do* about it. He had to stand there and watch and wait and try to trust some asshole he didn't even know to save Gerard, and the people who really loved him couldn't do anything but stand there and watch.

"I command you, unclean spirit!" the Cardinal called, and then there was hammering on the doors; Ray ran to them and crouched to put his eye to the crack.

"It's the Hoods!" he shouted. "They're here!"

"The doors look pretty solid, I don't think they can get in without some serious work," Bob said, frowning, and then they all jumped when Gerard let out a bloodthirsty scream and the next thing Frank knew, the *fucking walls were on fire*, huge, roaring columns of flame that reached from the floor to the high, arched ceiling of the church.

"He's trying to drive us outside!" Howard yelled, and the Cardinal nodded, but didn't stop talking, his hand still clamped on Gerard's head as he prayed.

"I command you to obey me," he raised his voice above the noise of the flames, "I who am a minister of God despite my unworthiness; nor shall you be emboldened to harm in any way this creature of God."

Gerard was screaming at him, but Frank couldn't understand him - it didn't seem like it was English, anyway. Gerard had stopped moving, now - his hands hung limply off the sides of the table, and the black mark on his throat had spread down both arms, clawing away at his flesh like it was laying its own arms over Gerard's. The Cardinal roared and bellowed; he sprinkled Holy Water; Gerard's skin split and smoked and he spat curses back into the Cardinal's face, but he wasn't moving, he had stopped moving, he wasn't moving at all.

"He's not going to make it," Mikey said suddenly, his hand clamped tight around Frank's wrist.

"How do you know?" snapped one of the Suits.

"He knows," said Ray. Bob and Brian both nodded.

"If he doesn't make it," Howard said grimly, "then we are staring into the face of Armageddon. This demon cannot be set free."

Mikey turned to look at Frank. "He's not going to make it," he said again, hollow and oddly calm.

Frank held his eyes. He turned his wrist in Mikey's grip and squeezed his hand. He waited.

Mikey nodded. Frank said, "Okay."

They ran towards Gerard together; dodging the grasping hands of their friends and the Suits. Mikey grabbed the startled Cardinal by the robes and threw him to the ground; Frank climbed up onto the table and unwound the rosary from his wrist. He slammed the crucifix as hard as he could against Gerard's forehead, steeling himself against the noise Gerard made. The Suits were right - the bonds held, and as hard as Gerard thrashed he couldn't throw Frank off.

There were hands on his shoulders, on his waist, on his arms; Frank was beyond their strength, though, he knew that now, he knew that this was what he had to do. Gerard's skin was disintegrating under his hands, around the rosary, in all the places where anything Holy touched him, but he wouldn't give it up, he fought and fought and Frank heard Mikey shout and looked up just in time to see him catching something Ray had thrown to him, a bottle. *Holy water*, he realized, and looked down at Gerard with a grin. "Oh man, you're gonna hate this."

*Make it as uncomfortable for the demon as you possible can*, that's what Gerard had said, and Frank forced his mouth open at the same time Mikey wrenched the cap off the bottle, and emptied it over Gerard's face. Frank jammed the crucifix into his open mouth and held it there, choking him with it, riding out the convulsions and staring directly into Gerard's eyes.

"Come on, come on," Frank growled. "There's nothing in there for you, asshole, come *on*."

He could feel it the instant it started to work. It might have been a year ago but Frank would never forget the way it felt, and the first sharp, sick split of the skin on his forehead was as familiar to him as his own name. "Yeah, yeah, that's it," he coaxed, as he felt the blood sliding down his face, his shoulders - he looked down at his hands, clamped together over Gerard's mouth, and as he watched the wounds on his wrists opened like flowers, and it hurt, it *fucking* hurt, it hurt so bad Frank could barely think, but he kept his eyes on Gerard's and through gritted teeth he forced out, "You sick son of a bitch, you think I'm afraid of you? You think you can do anything to me that hasn't already been done? You aren't *shit* to me."

"Get out!" Mikey was shouting, slamming his fists into the table next to Gerard's shoulders. "Get out of him, get *out*."

Gerard arched painfully, once; he made a choking noise, and opened his eyes, and he was Gerard, Frank could tell it just by looking at him. He yanked the rosary out of Gerard's mouth straight away, and then it was burning his hand, it was like molten fucking lead in his palm and he dropped it with a cry.

He heard Howard yell, "It's transferred, tie him down, *tie him down*," and then he wasn't hearing anything anymore - or he was, but he was hearing them through someone else's ears, or with two sets of ears, or something. He was sort of used to that, from the channeling, but he wasn't used to the way this felt, how huge it was, huge and old and so, so angry, this endless tirade of screaming rage running through his veins, and he wasn't used to being scared of his friends.

*You're scared of them*, he realized, and then convulsed with pain as he felt the noisy, chaotic rush of a presence in his mind, something alien that didn't belong. When he'd done similar things before the struggle had always been to relax and let it happen - usually the spirits or whatever were scared and lonely and confused, and he would grit his teeth, trying to let them creep around inside his mind, trying to fight his instincts, which were to slam his own consciousness up against them and

get them the fuck out.

This time, he had to do no such thing. *I'll show you uncomfortable*, he thought, and pushed back at the presence inside him with everything he had. The Cardinal was standing over him now, and Frank couldn't hear what he was saying but it *fucking hurt*, whatever it was, and he twisted and snarled, fighting to keep that alien *something* at the front of his mind, between him and the Cardinal, not letting it retreat or find shelter for one fucking second. He felt like his head was going to explode; his skin was splitting open further, he could feel his flesh ripping itself apart and he felt that his bones would be next, that his skull would crack like an egg, that his spine and his wrists would shatter inside his body.

It was like being shredded by a thousand knives, like being eaten from the inside out. Everything outside hurt, Holy Water seeping into his blood and making it sear his skin like acid, words laying into him like bullets. Inside, something huge and terrifying was clawing at Frank's mind, shrieking and frantic in its attempts to get away; and Frank could feel himself starting to weaken, feel his defenses start to give. It was just so *big*, it was so much stronger than he was and he didn't know how much longer he could hold out.

Frank was trying, he was, but he felt like he was trying to hold up the world while the world was at war. He didn't know how Gerard had carried this thing inside him for so long, it was *poison*, it was cancer, it was beyond anything that Frank could comprehend. He could hear the Cardinal saying God's name, he could hear himself snarling in response. Images flashed rapidly in front of his eyes; the guys, his Mom, his own face, bleeding and turned up to the Heavens. Mary, Mother of God, sad and so far away, and he thought, *please. Help me, please.*

Then, in the middle of the chaos and the pain and the din, somewhere right on the edge of his mind, Frank felt a hand in his own, and he heard somebody speaking, somebody urging him to hold on.

Mikey.

*Just a little longer*, he said, or - he wasn't saying it, because Frank couldn't *hear him*, he couldn't hear anything besides the sound of his own crazed, screaming rants, but it got through just the same.

*I know you can hear me. Just hold on.*

Frank latched onto Mikey's voice and used it to throw himself forward again, inside his mind. Xaphan's fury threw him back like a wave, and Frank just kept throwing himself against it, again and again and again until everything was broken and he couldn't pick himself up anymore. He cried out, and the blood filled his mouth, and his eyes, and his ears, and he didn't have anything inside him but darkness and anger and pain, there was no fight in him, he had nothing to fight *with*.

He heard his friends calling his name, he felt the Cardinal's prayers slicing into him, and just before he fell into the blackness, he felt the undercurrent of the wave; and it wasn't anger, not really, not when you got down deep enough. It was hopelessness, aching and raw and unchanging and endless. That, Frank knew, wasn't coming from his own mind.

Then the wave closed over his head, and he knew nothing more.

\*

"Am I dead?"

"Do you feel dead?"

"I don't know." Frank opened his eyes, slowly. Nothing hurt. He was in a bed. White sheets. White walls. White room. Hospital, then. He looked up. The Cardinal was sitting by his bed. "Um," said Frank. "Hi?"

"Hello, Frank," the Cardinal smiled. "That was a very brave thing you did for us."

"I didn't do it for you," Frank scowled, then his eyes flew wide. "Gerard. Is he - ?"

"He's fine," the Cardinal said, soothingly. He touched Frank's shoulder and Frank sank back against the pillows. "They're all fine."

"They're all fine," Frank repeated, just to make sure. His eyes were heavy and his limbs felt fuzzy at the edges. "This is some quality morphine they've got me on," he slurred. "I love hospitals."

"You hate hospitals."

"I hate hospitals," Frank agreed. He rubbed his fingertips against the sheets. "If I'm not dead, can I assume the world's not getting barbecued right now?"

"You don't think God can take care of that Himself?"

Frank raised an eyebrow. "Evidently not. Otherwise he wouldn't need us, would he?"

The Cardinal hummed. Frank could see his hands folded up on his knee. "So you think He does? Need you."

"You're really annoying," Frank told him, crossing his feet under the sheets.

The Cardinal laughed. "I've heard that before."

"You're all annoying," Frank went on, gaining momentum. He was too stoned to really be annoyed, but stoned enough to tell it like it was. "Your whole fucking Church. I mean, you seem like an okay guy, don't get me wrong, and I know Gee's a big fan of yours. And you got rid of that demon asshole before he could roast me from the inside out, and I guess that makes me like you a little bit."

"Thanks," said the Cardinal in a dry, amused voice.

"Although mostly that was Mikey. You know I heard his voice? He can do that, you know. Brain stuff. I don't know what to call it. But he can."

The Cardinal inclined his head very slightly. "I know."

"And I know you want to help people," Frank rambled on. "Gerard does too. But all the decisions are made by these old dudes who don't live in the real world and are just trying to keep people under their control."

The Cardinal was quiet for a while. Then he said, "I think that's not untrue. But imagine what the Church would be like in forty years, if every priest ordained in the last ten was like Father Way."

"But they're not," Frank said stubbornly. "They're not."

"You sound very certain, so I suppose you must be right," the Cardinal said, in that annoying superior placatory tone, but Frank didn't have the energy to call him on it. The Cardinal said, "You

really have an extraordinary capacity for withstanding-

"Things that hurt, I know," Frank interrupted. He didn't want to talk about it. Instead he asked, "Why do they hate us so much? Demons, or whatever. I mean, we never did anything to them, right? What is it about us that makes them so mad?"

The Cardinal considered for a long time before answering, "Forgiveness."

"Hmm," said Frank. He was sure that was super-profound, but he was too stoned to appreciate it. "What, that we can be forgiven, or we can forgive each other?"

"Both," the Cardinal said. Then, "You know he can't work with you anymore. Not from inside the Church."

Frank physically flinched, he couldn't help it. "Why not, because we make you look bad? You think what we do is less worthwhile because we're not fucking monks or whatever?"

"On the contrary," the Cardinal said gently. "Not everyone who does good work has to do so from inside the Church. God needs friends everywhere."

"God needs to stop messing with my life," Frank moaned. He could feel himself slipping back under; the heavy drowsiness was too warm and comfortable to ignore, so Frank slipped away into a dream. He was on the beach, and the Cardinal was sitting next to him in a deckchair.

"For fuck's sake," said Frank, brushing sand off his hands. "Are you just going to follow me everywhere?"

The Cardinal looked affronted. "I can't help it if I'm in your dream, Frank."

"Ugh," said Frank.

They watched the clouds rolling along in the heavens. Gerard was building a sandcastle by the water's edge. He was wearing pink sunglasses.

"Why does he bother?" Frank asked the Cardinal. "The tide's going to come in again and wash it away."

"Hmm," said the Cardinal. "That is a problem."

Out to sea, Bob and Ray were sitting in a rowboat. Ray had the oars. Bob stood up. His mouth moved. Frank shook his head and pointed to his ear to show he couldn't hear him.

"Your friends want you," the Cardinal observed.

"They're far away," Frank waved his hand. Bob shouted his name, Frank heard it, this time. "And I can't swim."

"No, Ray Toro can't swim," said the Cardinal. "You're afraid of spiders and your immune system could be better."

"Frank!" shouted Bob.

"Yeah, man, what's up with that?" Frank said, ignoring Bob.

"Frank!" shouted Bob.

The Cardinal smiled a little. "Just the way you're made."

"Where's Gerard?" Frank noticed he was gone, suddenly, and his stomach dropped as he scanned the beach. "Where is he?"

"Frank!" shouted Bob.

"Tide came in," said the Cardinal, and then a wave crashed over Frank's head,

"Frank?"

Frank opened his eyes.

He wasn't on the beach. He was lying in the hospital bed. Bob was sitting next to him, wearing a hospital gown. He looked like shit. Frank felt like shit. Ray was sitting next to Bob, fully-clothed. He looked marginally less like shit.

Bob said, "Finally, jeez. You can sleep harder than a whole shitpile of rocks."

Frank laughed, which made him cough, and he flailed around until Bob fished him out from under the sheets and pulled him up against the pillows and found him a cup of water with a straw in it. Frank sipped until the vile taste in his mouth was a little less overwhelming, then croaked, "Why are you in here?"

"Leg." Bob rolled his eyes. "Brian made me. You know how it is."

Frank eyed the tube coming out of Bob's arm, trailing up to the bag hooked onto a mobile stand behind him. "Brian made you get an IV?"

"Antibiotics or some shit, I don't know," Bob waved his hand. "And they made me wear this stupid gown. It doesn't even close in the back, the nurses keep staring at my ass."

Ray laughed. "Well, it's a nice ass."

"I know that," Bob grumped. Frank hacked out another attempt at a laugh, and Bob handed him the water again.

Ray put a hand on Frank's leg. "You feel all right? You lost a ton of blood. They had to drain the bank for you, I'm pretty sure."

Frank thought about it, moving all his body parts a little, one by one. He felt like he'd been run over by like, a plane, but there didn't seem to be anything broken, and he wasn't bleeding anymore - the scars on his wrists were the only ones he could see, and they were closed, but they were red and angry, not like the silvery-pale they'd faded to before. Fucking great. "I'm okay, I guess. When did they take my morphine away?"

Ray looked puzzled. "Morphine?"

"They had me hooked to it before," Frank explained. "When the Cardinal came to see me."

Bob raised his eyebrows. "The Cardinal came to see you?"

"Yes," Frank said impatiently. "Didn't he come to see you too? And where are the other guys?"

"Brian's back at Craig's under a blanket of ice."



If you didn't know Bob, Frank thought, you might not be able to tell that he felt guilty for breaking like, all of Brian's ribs. He said, "You saved his life, dude."

Bob scowled. "I never said I didn't."

Frank rolled his eyes. He looked at Ray. "How are your hands, man? And your lungs, for that matter?"

"Lungs are fine. Hands are starting to heal," Ray said, holding them up for Frank to look at.

Frank blinked. "How long was I out?"

Bob hesitated. He said, "A long time."

There was something else, something they weren't saying, Frank could tell. "Guys," he said, his spine tingling a little with nerves. "Where's Mikey?"

Bob kind of chewed the inside of his lip. He shifted a little in his chair, and he sounded really sorry when he said, "Frank, man. I don't know how to-" he was cut off by his cellphone ringing. "Shit."

"You're not supposed to have that in here," Ray told him, watching in amazement as Bob produced it from inside his gown. "And where were you even keeping it?"

"You don't wanna know." Bob flipped it open, hunching down in his chair a little. "Hello? Hey, man. Yeah, he's awake. You wanna talk to him? Okay." Bob passed the phone over. "It's Mikey."

Frank pressed it to his ear. "Mikey? Are you okay?"

"I'm at the airport," Mikey said. He sounded tinny and far away. "With Gerard."

Frank knew this was going to happen, he knew it, he'd known it all along and that's why he'd said it himself, *no promises*. He still had to close his eyes and suck in a breath. "Oh."

"You can still catch him."

Frank blinked. Bob was watching him, his face concerned. "Catch him?"

"He doesn't know I'm calling you." Mikey paused. Frank could hear announcements and bustling in the background. "If you come right now, you can catch him."

Frank shook his head. "Mikey, what do you-"

"He's coming back," Mikey said abruptly, and hung up.

Frank took the phone away from his ear. He stared at it. He looked at Bob. "Hey," he said, his heart starting to beat faster in his chest. "You feel like getting out of here?"

"Oh, God," said Ray. "Not again."

Bob just grinned.

\*

The easy part was finding Frank's clothes and sneaking out of the hospital. The hard part was convincing Bob he had to stay put because the odds of them finding a cab driver who would let Bob hang his IV bag from the rearview like a really bizarre air freshener were pretty fucking low.

The really hard part was not dying on the way there, because it turned out that feeling like shit when you were lying or sitting down translated into *really seriously feeling like shit* when you were speeding along in a car.

"Go on ahead," Ray said, helping Frank out of the cab when they arrived at the airport. "I'll pay the guy."

"Okay," said Frank forcing himself to stand up straight and put one foot in front of the other, even though it felt like his bones were grinding together like jagged pieces of glass.

He found Mikey hovering near the main entrance, peering anxiously into the parking lot. "Frank," he said when he saw him, and hurried over to give him a hug. "Are you okay? You look terrible."

"Thanks," Frank said dryly, but he knew it was true. He was incredibly pale, and his hair was sticking up from lying in bed for so long and he couldn't make it lie down flat to cover his scars, and while he did have clean clothes, he also hadn't showered or shaved for what felt like a month. Other people were giving him weird looks, but he found it hard to care about it. "Are you all right?"

Mikey twisted his fingers together. He kind of nodded, then blurted out, "They said he really can't work with us anymore. It's too dangerous. Brian and the Cardinal had a big fight about it, but I guess Brian lost."

"I know," said Frank. "He told me."

"Gerard's by the Starbucks inside," Mikey said, shifting awkwardly in place. "I'll wait here."

"Okay." Frank nodded. He squeezed Mikey's fingers, and went inside.

He found Gerard standing with his head tipped back, watching the flight information on a big screen. He was holding a coffee in one hand and his sunglasses in the other. There were marks on his face, his neck, his hands, that must have been from the exorcism. An ugly, poisonous-looking bruise on his throat. Frank knew what that was. He looked pale, and tired. His collar was back in place around his neck.

"Hi, Gerard," said Frank.

Gerard turned to face him and his eyes widened, startled. "Frank!" he said, and took a step forward before immediately reversing again. "What are you doing here? Should you be out of bed? Are you all right?"

Frank started to say he was okay, but Gerard interrupted him, "I waited until they said you were gonna be all right. I mean, I didn't just leave," he said earnestly, clutching his sunglasses to his chest.

"But you're leaving now."

Gerard's face fell, and he paused a long time before saying, "Frankie, I have to go back."

"I know," Frank said. "I'm not here to stop you."

Gerard looked troubled, but it was the truth. Frank still thought the Church was full of shit, but he'd seen what they were really up against now and he couldn't argue with that part of it, the part of the Church that was still about helping people and keeping them safe. He thought about what the Cardinal had said; about how it would be if they were all like Gerard. He swallowed painfully and

said, "I guess they need you pretty bad, huh."

Gerard set his coffee down on a nearby low table, moving with odd, precise, jerky little movements. He folded his sunglasses up and hooked them in the pocket of his shirt, and then stepped closer to Frank. "What you did for me," he said in a low voice. "I don't know how to-

"Will you do something for me?" Frank interrupted him. "When you get back to the Vatican?"

"Of course," Gerard said quickly. "Anything."

"Will you - will you tell Luke that I forgive him?" Gerard's eyes bugged out, and Frank explained. "The Cardinal said that he can't remember, so he can't be sorry, so he can't be granted absolution, which is bullshit if you ask me, but I thought, what the hell. If God can't forgive him, then at least I can."

"Frank," Gerard said. "Are you sure? He hurt you so badly."

"I know, but I'm just - I'm so tired of being angry all the time."

He had to stop talking for a minute, because the memory of that feeling, that hopeless, all-consuming anger, with no end to it, forever, was kind of a lot to bear. He gathered himself and went on, "And besides, it wasn't his fault, right? After - after what happened with you, with us...I understand that now. So I'd like him to know that I don't blame him for it, anymore."

Gerard was so tense, he looked like he would break into a thousand pieces if he moved. He said tightly, "I'll tell him."

Frank nodded. He took a deep breath and went on, "I didn't get it before. I thought that I could give you-" he cut himself off and blinked furiously, trying to keep his voice steady long enough to find the right words. "I didn't understand. About your Calling. About what it means."

Gerard's eyes flickered back to the information screen. "Frank," he said miserably.

"I know you have to be where you can do the most good," Frank pressed on recklessly. "I know that now."

Gerard twisted his hands together. He nodded, slowly, like it hurt. He moved suddenly, fumbling in his pocket and dragging out the rosary, which he held out to Frank. "Here," he said hoarsely. "This is yours."

Frank looked at it, and his fingers twitched with how bad he wanted it back in his hands. He clenched them into fists and then looked at Gerard's face. "No," he said, forcing the words out around the lump in his throat. "It's not."

He turned to leave and headed for the exits; every step felt like a mile, all he wanted to do was run back to Gerard and beg him not to leave, not to go away where Frank might never be able to see him again, but it would be no use and Frank didn't want to keep beating his head against that particular wall. Eventually even he had to admit defeat, or at least that's what he kept telling himself as he marched determinedly towards the doors.

Mikey's face fell as soon as he saw him. "He's still leaving?" he said incredulously. "But I thought-

"

"It was never gonna happen," Mikey," Frank said, folding his arms and tucking his hands under his elbows because they wouldn't stop shaking. "You should probably get back in there, I think his

flight's leaving soon."

"I shouldn't have called you," Mikey said miserably, visibly, physically torn - he kept rocking towards the doors and then back to Frank again. "You shouldn't even be out of bed. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"But it is," Mikey insisted. "Frank, you don't understand - I think I knew this was gonna happen."

Frank shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

Mikey hugged himself. "You and Gerard. I think I always knew this - that it would be like this, between you two, and that's why I never wanted you to meet, you know? That's why I never told you about him. And then you did meet, and I just, I just had this feeling, and if I hadn't stood between you then, if I'd just let it happen back at the beginning then it wouldn't be like this, Frankie, he wouldn't be leaving *again* and you wouldn't be - be so sad all the time, and it's my fault, Frank, it is."

"Mikey!" Frank grabbed Mikey and shook him, more than a little freaked out by that many words spilling out of Mikey's mouth at once. "Breathe, okay, just breathe."

Mikey shook his head, but he tried, his skinny shoulders rising and falling with the effort. "I just wish-"

"He's a priest, Mikey," said Frank, shaking Mikey again, gently this time. "A *priest*. It was never *you* that was standing in the way."

Mikey took a sharp breath. He shuffled so his feet touched Frank's. They stood there together as the crowds of people rushed by.

"I heard you, you know?" Frank told him quietly. "I heard your voice. When I was under."

"Yeah," Mikey whispered. "I knew you would."

\*\*

"Mark! Mark, you have to come see the size of my room, it's like a football field!" Danny came racing down the stairs into the hall, yelling for his brother. He skidded to a halt by the main doors, his face falling as he took in the bags stacked up by the wall. "You're leaving now? I thought you were staying until tomorrow!"

"Got an earlier flight," Mikey explained, moving out of the way so Craig's guys could get to their stuff to pack it into the van. "You have my number though, dude, you can text me."

"It's not the same," Danny frowned.

Mark appeared from somewhere and sidled over to his brother, putting an arm around his shoulders. "I can't believe the Father just left."

Ray shot a nervous glance at Frank. "It's his job."

"It's stupid," Mark complained.

"Kid," said Frank, "you will never know how hard I agree with you."

"Are you sure there's nothing else you need?" Craig said as they were climbing into the van. "Call

me when you land, okay? I know the kids will want to speak to you."

"Right," said Brian, smiling sideways. "The kids."

Craig grinned unabashedly. "Have a good flight," he said, and slid the door closed.

\*

"Are you okay?" Mikey asked him for the billionth time, just after the pilot announced their final descent.

Frank growled in frustration. "I'm *fine*, Mikey. I don't want to talk about it."

"But you usually do," Mikey adjusted his glasses. "You usually do, to me."

Frank sighed. "It's nothing personal, man, I'm just sick of being a walking *Dear Abby*. I want a break from that for a while, okay? Let's just - tell me about you and Toro, okay? What's happening with you guys?"

"I'm not sure." Mikey kept his voice low - they both did, because Ray was asleep in the seat behind them. "I mean, we talked about it a little, but so far all we've really done is have like, Doom Sex. You know?"

"Doom Sex?" Frank grinned. "What, like it's all in the first person and you have to kill off a big Cyberdemon? Kinky."

Mikey shoved him with his arm. "Jackass. You know what I mean."

Frank laughed. "Well, no doom now, right? Do you still wanna have sex with him?"

Mikey made a thoughtful face. He struggled up in his seat and eyed Ray speculatively over the headrest while Frank muffled his giggles in his sleeve. Eventually he sat back down and said, "God, yes."

Frank cracked up, folding forward and banging his head on the seat in front of him. "Ow," he rubbed his forehead, turning back to Mikey. "So go for it, man, why not?"

"I don't know." Mikey was all smiley, it was disgusting. He had *dimples*. "I've never really had a boyfriend before."

"Boyfriend?" Frank teased, fluttering his eyelashes. Mikey rolled his eyes and Frank cracked up again.

"You're just jealous," Mikey said loftily, and then looked horrified. "I didn't mean-"

"Just promise me," Frank talked over the top of him so they couldn't get into the guilt. Frank wasn't okay, not really, not at all, but he would never get there if Mikey couldn't help him just act like it. "Promise me you'll still tell me all about it even though I know him."

Mikey looked both suspicious and relieved at once. It was a lot of facial expression, for Mikey. "Promise," he said.

They shook on it to seal the deal. After that it was a blur of baggage claim and finding a cab and deciding who was sharing with who, and then before he knew it they were turning onto his street and pulling up outside the house Frank grew up in, and best of all, best out of pretty much anything else in the whole wide world, Frank's Mom opening the front door and beaming at him, wiping her

hands on a dishtowel.

"See you when I've slept for a month," Frank said to Bob and Brian, and then he climbed out of the cab, dumped his bags on the sidewalk, and ran through the front yard, up the steps, and into his mother's arms.

\*

He didn't actually sleep for a month. He slept for most of a week, though, only waking up to eat his Mom's food and mumble answers to her questions and fall asleep again with his head in her lap. He only really felt like a human being again on Sunday, when he woke up early and stumbled into the kitchen to find his Mom already up, sitting at the table with the paper, drinking coffee and smoking a cigarette.

"Morning, sweetie," she smiled, pushing the chair opposite out with her foot so he could slump into it, clutching his coffee cup to his chest. "I'm supposed to go over to Rose's house after Mass, but did you want me to come back here instead?"

"Hmm? No, Mom, you should go, I'm fine." Frank drank about half his coffee in three huge, scalding, absolutely necessary gulps, then played with the handle of his mug for a while before asking her, "Can I come?"

His Mom gave him a look. "To Rose's house?"

Frank shuddered demonstratively and snuck a cigarette out of the open pack. "To Mass."

"Of course!" she said, beaming at him but also managing to look like he'd just told her he could fly. "That would be wonderful!"

"Well, all right then," he said, putting the cigarette in his mouth.

His Mom frowned and clicked her tongue. "You know I don't like you smoking," she said, and then leaned across the table and lit it for him.

Frank inhaled deeply and nodded his thanks. "Like mother like son," he said sadly. "I never had a chance."

"Oh, smart guy." His Mom turned the page and bent over the paper, ignoring him. Frank grinned at the top of her head.

At Mass, he was totally unsurprised to see Mikey, Ray, Bob and Brian. They gathered in the parking lot afterwards and Frank was instantly thirteen again, huddling around one shared cigarette and pretending they weren't scared of their Moms finding them.

"If you guys aren't busy," Brian said, sounding weirdly nervous, "I kind of have something to show you."

Frank had no plans for the rest of, oh, ever, so he followed Brian with the others until they came to a shuttered-up building on a side street Frank knew so well he could have found it in the dark.

"Uh," said Mikey. "Am I insane, or are we at the shop?"

Brian beamed and shook a bunch of keys at them. "Surprise!"

It was so weird to go back inside again. It hadn't changed at all; it smelled exactly the same, just a

little musty from being empty for so long.

"I mentioned it to Craig and he found out it was empty right now," Brian said excitedly. "He convinced the current owners to sell it to him."

"Brian," Ray started. "I don't want to rain on your parade or anything, but I don't know if I want to go back to cutting hair."

Brian waved his hands impatiently. "No, no - okay, you have to imagine this all cleared out, okay?" Brian pointed to the back wall. "And I thought we can have a board up there for brainstorming, you know when we research, and then maybe, Frank, if you don't mind, Ray can have your old room for his kit, because I think it should probably have a door in case anything explodes."

"Hear, hear," said Bob.

Brian bounced a little on his toes. "And then we can use the backroom for books, you know? And anything else we need to keep away from the public," he went on excitedly. "And then there's my old office, and that's more private, you know, if a client has something sensitive to discuss."

"Client," Frank said blankly. He looked at Bob. "Is he making sense to you?"

"Yeah," Bob nodded. "But only because he already told me about it."

"Told you about what?" Mikey said, frowning. "Brian, what are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about what we do. I'm talking about helping people." Brian looked at Mikey. "I haven't heard from the Father - I mean, I assume he's okay?"

"He is," Mikey said quickly, glancing at Frank.

"But I know we're not allowed to work with him anymore," Brian went on. "And I was on the phone with Craig, and you know he's always saying how he wants to help, and I thought - I started thinking, maybe it doesn't matter that the Father isn't here. It sucks, but - it doesn't have to mean that we can't carry on."

Ray asked, "How exactly can Craig help?"

"With money," Brian said. "He wants to set this up like a business, or really more like a charity - I don't know how exactly it's gonna work yet, but I know we'll have this base to work out of, and the supplies we need and - well," he ducked his head a little, "we won't ever be millionaires, but he can pay you more than I ever could."

"You paid us enough," Bob said staunchly.

Brian gave him a small smile. "Well. Either way, it'll mean that we can do what we do without worrying where our next meal's coming from. And I know the thought of doing this on our own is daunting, but I just..." he trailed off, looking embarrassed, and shrugged. "Well, I guess that's it."

"No," Frank pressed. "No, what were you going to say?"

Brian hesitated, rolled his eyes at himself, and said, "I just think that we could do some real good, maybe even more this way because we're not answering to people who don't understand us, and we don't understand them. Maybe it wasn't Gerard's calling we were following, you know? Maybe - maybe it was ours."

"I'm in," Bob said. "You already know I am. But how are we supposed to know who to help? How are we gonna get people through the doors?"

Brian smiled. "Same way we always did. Mikey."

Mikey blinked, and folded his arms, but he was pleased, Frank could tell. He saw Ray squeeze his shoulder, rub the back of his neck. Mikey said, "Will I have to answer the phone?"

Brian smirked. "God knows you never did before."

Mikey pretended to think about it. He said slyly, "Well, but do we even have access to the sewers here?"

"What?" Brian frowned, and then his face cleared and he rolled his eyes. "This is nothing like that. None of us is a vampire."

"Yet," Bob said darkly.

Ray grinned. "Can we embarrass Brian by handing out poorly-designed business cards at bars?"

Frank gave him a look. "Dude, Brian is not embarrassed by business cards, okay. He dreams about them at night."

Brian flipped him off. "Look, I just think we can make this work, for real. I know it's a lot of work to remodel and everything. I don't know, maybe you just wanna forget this year ever happened and go work in an office or Burger King or something. What do you guys think?"

Nobody spoke at first. Bob, Ray and Mikey all looked at Frank, and he knew they were waiting for him to decide. He looked around at the shop, at all the things that had happened there and all the things that hadn't come to pass yet. He thought about the scars in his skin, about Gerard. He thought about what the Cardinal had told him.

"I hate Burger King," he said. "Let's do it."

\*

"I'm not telling you, stop asking."

Frank sat back on his heels and used the back of his hand to wipe flecks of plaster and grouting and who the fuck knew what off his forehead. "Come on, Mikey, you have to tell me!"

"No." Mikey dug unenthusiastically at the tiles with his spatula. "It's too weird."

"You promised," Frank scowled. "You promised you would still tell me shit even though I know him, Mikey, and it's not like I'm asking for a diagram, all right? I just want to know if it's, you know, how we thought it was?"

Mikey frowned and tapped his spatula against the wall again, ignoring him.

Frank made his eyes as big as he could and injected just the right amount of hurt into his tone. "We're *supposed* to be best friends."

"Ugh." Mikey put his spatula down and crawled backwards a little, checking through the doorway to see if anyone was listening. Then he crawled back and leaned in close to Frank. "Bigger," he whispered.



"Really?" Frank yelled, cringing when Mikey glared and shushed him. "Sorry, sorry. Just - bigger? Really? How big?"

"You said you didn't want a diagram," Mikey reminded him, but he was totally grinning, Frank could tell.

"Bigger," Frank said reverently, attacking the tiles with renewed enthusiasm. "Wow."

"Just don't tell him I told you," Mikey hissed.

"Don't tell who you told him what?" said Ray, sticking his head (and all his hair) around the door.

Frank immediately collapsed into giggles, unable to stop even when Mikey sighed his most put-upon sigh.

Ray glowered at him. "Fine, have your secrets. I came to tell you Bob needs help with the sink."

"Thank God," said Mikey, dropping his spatula. "My hand is killing me."

"Yeah," Frank gave Mikey a hand up. "That one tile you took off was a doozy."

"You can't rush art," Mikey sniffed.

Frank shoved him out into the main room. Bob was lying underneath the sink Ray used to wash people's hair in, an impressive array of tools that Frank didn't even know what some of them were lying around him.

"Okay," he said, "Frank, can you get in on the other side of Ray and take the weight of the sink when I detach it down here?"

"What should I do?" Mikey asked

Bob pointed to a towel. "Hold that over my face and catch the water."

Frank got his hands under the sink. "Shouldn't we turn it off?"

"Wow, genius, I didn't think of that," said Bob. Frank kicked at him. "Brian turned it off already, it's just to make sure I don't get a faceful of drips."

"Where is he, anyway?" Ray wondered.

"Craig sent him some stuff over, I think he's looking at those, I don't know." Bob picked up one of the tools and clanked around with it under the sink for a while. "Okay, are you ready?"

"Ready," Frank and Ray confirmed. Mikey waved his towel like a flag.

"All right." Bob's arms corded with the effort of what he was doing, and he grunted, "On the count of three, okay? One, two, three!"

Frank nodded at Ray, and they both pulled as hard as they could - and the sink went flying up in the air and a stream of water came shooting out of the wall, soaking Bob, who yelled and rolled out of the way, and hitting Mikey square in the face.

"Glargh!" Mikey garbled, and Ray slipped over trying to get to him and went crashing down to the floor on top of Bob, who bellowed in indignation, and Brian came running out to see what was going on only Frank was laughing too hard to tell him, leaning on the wall and *crying* with it. Bob

climbed to his feet and stood there looking full of rage except he was dripping all over everything, and Ray's hair was soaked, and Mikey was still just sitting there staring at the wall like he couldn't believe it had just *done* that to him, and every time Frank looked at them it made him laugh harder. In the end Mikey put his hand out and yanked on Frank's ankle until he fell on his ass in the water, soaking through his jeans immediately, but even that didn't stem the tide of giggles and Frank just flopped on top of Mikey and rolled him around in the huge puddle, ignoring his indignant protests.

"When you've finished," Brian said dryly, "I have some news."

When they'd calmed down and dried off enough to listen, Brian said, "Okay, this is just a copy of the basic policy all Craig's employees have, and we'll probably need something a little different on account of our, uh, increased risk factor, shall we say." Brian gave Bob a look. "Especially if you're going to keep soaking them every day. Anyway, uh, here." Brian handed a sheaf of papers over to Frank. "I thought you should see them first."

Frank had no idea what Brian was talking about. Policy? Increased risk factor? He gave Brian a questioning look, but Brian just gestured at the papers, so Frank turned the first page. He read the first few lines. Then he read them again.

Then he read them again. He looked up at Brian, who was beaming at him and practically clapping his hands. "Dude," Frank said reverently. "Health insurance?"

"I know!" Brian said gleefully, and Frank grabbed him and hugged the shit out of him, ignoring it when Brian said something unimportant about not being able to breathe.

"I love you," Frank said fervently. "I love you so fucking much."

Brian laughed and patted Frank's shoulders, before pushing him back and saying sternly, "Don't take this as an invitation to get sick, though, okay?"

"Okay," Frank promised, bouncing on his toes. "Man, I can't wait to tell my Mom."

"I can't wait for you to tell your Mom either!" said Mikey, holding his hand up for a high-five.

Frank slapped it and spun in a circle. "Man, health insurance, Bob got wet - this day can't get any better."

"Uh," said a voice that didn't belong to any of the people Frank knew were there. "Hi?"

"Gerard?" Mikey's jaw actually dropped. Frank had never seen that happen before, it was interesting. He concentrated on that rather than the fact that Gerard was standing just inside the door, wearing the same black coat and billion scarves he was wearing the first time Frank met him. Frank couldn't concentrate on that because he was pretty sure it couldn't be real, and if he turned and looked directly at him Frank would either wake up or Gerard would disappear or everyone would turn to stone, or -

"I heard you guys fight evil here," Gerard said hesitantly. It *sounded* like it was really him. Frank still didn't look. "I thought maybe you could use a spare pair of hands."

See, there, it wasn't real. Frank heard Mikey say, "But I thought the Cardinal said you couldn't work with us anymore."

There was a long pause. Then Gerard said slowly, "Yeah, about that. It turns out there are some compromises I'm just not willing to make."

Brian cleared his throat. "But won't you get in trouble? Not that I'm not glad to see you, Father, I just don't want you to-"

"Brian," Gerard interrupted him. "Call me Gerard."

Mikey made a noise, and Frank looked up. Gerard had unwound his scarves and was holding the mess of tangled wool in his hands. He was wearing a T-shirt under his coat.

His throat was bare.

"Oh my God," Ray whispered.

Gerard took a deep breath. "When I lost my ministry," he said, "I spent a long time feeling like I wasn't doing any good. Then I met you guys, and that changed. And in the end - in the end I want to be where..." Gerard's eyes met Frank's. "I want to be where I can do the most good."

"And that's here?" said Bob, in a voice tinged with disbelief.

Gerard smiled hesitantly. "It is. If you'll have me. I promise not to try and kill you all again, if that sweetens the deal any."

"Wait," said Brian. "Did you just refuse to stop working with us? Were you defrocked?"

"Laicized," Gerard corrected him. "The Cardinal - well. I guess he managed to convince them that these were some pretty fucking extreme circumstances, I don't know."

"You didn't tell me," Mikey said, disbelief dripping from every word. "I spoke to you two days ago and you didn't tell me."

"I know," Gerard said apologetically. He dumped his scarves on the counter and then looked down at his hands, frowning, before shoving them into his pockets. "I didn't want to put you in a position where - I need to talk to Frank," he said decisively, meeting Frank's eyes for the first time. "First."

Frank's head swum. He hung onto the chair next to him just to make sure he didn't actually pass out.

Mikey looked at Frank, then back at Gerard. "Yeah, we'll leave you alone."

Frank was only vaguely aware of the guys filing out - although he did see Mikey yank Gerard into a hug as he moved past.

After they left, silence settled in the room again. Gerard shuffled his feet, putting one hand out to touch the action figures Mikey had set up on the counter. He picked one of them up and examined it briefly before setting it down.

"It's an Ewok," Frank said unnecessarily.

"I know," said Gerard, even more so.

Frank said, "Just to make sure I'm on the right page: you're not a priest anymore, right?"

"I'm not a priest anymore," Gerard confirmed. He sounded terrified. They stared at each other for a moment, then Gerard said in a rush, "I didn't do it for you. I was doubting my place in the Church long before we met, you know that."

"I know," Frank said, automatically, he wasn't even really aware that his mouth was moving.

"That said," Gerard went on, looking somewhere over Frank's shoulder, "It would be grossly unfair of me to claim that my feelings for you weren't a factor. A big factor." Gerard shook his head a little, and then met Frank's eyes. "It wouldn't just be unfair, it would be a lie. I care for you very deeply, Frank."

Frank held his breath, ignoring everything that was going crazy inside him. "But?"

"When I entered the seminary, I was very young - well, I actually wasn't all that young compared to some of the others. But I was straight out of college, and I hadn't done anything with my life except to be mad at everything all the time. Then I entered the seminary, and suddenly I had a purpose, and it very quickly became my whole life. It's been my life ever since. I've never really been just a person," Gerard looked nervously at Frank. "I'm not sure I know how. I've never - relationships were never my strong point, not even the one with myself."

That was bullshit, as far as Frank was concerned. Gerard had held down five perfectly good relationships over the past year, but Frank knew that wasn't what he meant, so he bit his tongue and forced himself to wait for Gerard to untangle what he was trying to say.

"I'm not sure what I have to offer you right now," Gerard said carefully. "I don't want to screw this up, Frank. I don't want to rush into something and make a mess of it and then - " he broke off and shoved his hands through his hair, visibly frustrated. "If I got it wrong," he tried again. "If I got it wrong, it would be - "

"Gerard," Frank bit out. "*What are you saying?*"

"When we had that fight in the kitchen at Pete's house," Gerard said hurriedly, like he was afraid Frank was going to throw him out if he didn't get to the point. "I told you not to wait for me."

Frank's hands were fisted so tightly they were beginning to hurt. "And now?"

Gerard finally stopped fidgeting and just looked at Frank, scared and hopeful. "I'm asking if you will."

Frank breathed out, his stomach swooping. "No," he said.

"N - you - oh," Gerard stuttered, flushing and looking down at the floor. "No, I - it was stupid of me to expect anything, of course, when I spoke to Mikey he said you seemed like you were doing just fine without me, I shouldn't have assumed - "

"I wasn't 'doing just fine'," Frank said, unclenching his fists. "I was faking."

Gerard stopped babbling, giving Frank a nervous, confused glance. "Yeah. He said that too."

"I'm not saying no to you, you dumb motherfucker," Frank crossed the room and stood in front of Gerard with his arms folded. "I'm saying no to your stupid 'I'm not worthy' bullshit. You think I'm going to like you better after you...I don't know, find yourself or whatever? Don't bother, okay? I found you. You're standing right there. Job done."

Gerard's mouth twitched. "Okay?"

"You know what I don't get about you?" Frank went on, raising his voice so Gerard couldn't interrupt with any more monumentally stupid ideas. "How you know so much and fuck all at the same time. You think this," he gestured between them, "happens every day? Let me tell you something that I know, okay: if you find someone who would *die for you*, you don't wait around to see if it sticks!"

Gerard bit his lip. "What do you do?"

"You don't put me on hold!" Frank snapped. "You don't invent more stupid reasons why you can't be with me *now!*"

"So, then," Gerard kind of reached for Frank, then took his hands back and waved them uncertainly in front of his chest. "But - so I would get to have you right away, is what you're saying."

"Of course that's what I'm saying," Frank yelled, slamming his fist down on the counter. "What the fuck do you *think* I'm saying?"

Gerard put his hands on his hips and frowned. "Well, in my defense, this is confusing, okay? I came here to tell you how I feel about you and now you're yelling at me!"

"That's because you're fucking - aaargh," Frank grabbed Gerard with both hands and yanked him in as hard as he could. "Just *come here.*"

"I just thought that I - *mmph,*" Gerard slid his arms around Frank's back and held on, opening his mouth to Frank's and letting Frank back him up against the counter.

"You drive me fucking crazy," Frank tried to tell him, but he couldn't seem to stop kissing him long enough to make the words, so it came out as a moan, which was pretty much what he was trying to say anyway. He cupped Gerard's face in his hands and stroked his cheekbones, his jaw; kissed him hard and deep until they were both breathless and Gerard's hands were clutching compulsively at Frank's shoulders.

"I have to tell you something," he gasped, tipping his head back when Frank bit at his jaw.

"Jesus Christ, *what?*" Frank growled, nipping with his teeth and then nuzzling to soothe it.

Gerard laughed, the sound broken in the middle when Frank licked a broad, firm stripe up his throat and Gerard shivered all over. "It's the last thing, I promise."

"Ugh, *fine,*" Frank bit his earlobe, grinning when it made Gerard squeak, and pulled back just enough to see his face. "Make it fast, though, for the love of God."

Gerard nodded hard. "Yeah, no, I will, I just - okay, do you remember when we first met, well, not really when we *first* met, but like, after we got away from Luke, you know. And then I came to see you after I got back from the Vatican, and - "

"Gerard," Frank said warningly, pressing Gerard back with his body and moving against him. "I said *fast.*"

"Fuck," Gerard's eyes fluttered closed and his hands closed hard on Frank's waist before he went on in a rush, "Do you remember I said that I hadn't been sure where my path was, and then I met you and I thought God sent you to show me where I ought to be?"

Frank scowled at the memory, and Gerard laughed breathlessly.

"Yeah, you didn't like it then either. But the thing is, I still believe it. I still think it's true that I was meant to meet you, and the others, and we were meant to find a way to do the work we do. But I still couldn't understand about *you*, specifically."

Frank raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"So many times since we met I prayed to God to ask Him why," Gerard said urgently. "Why He would put you in front of me when I couldn't touch you, why He made us so that we would want something we couldn't have from each other. I didn't understand why He had brought me into your life if all I was ever going to do was hurt you, and now I finally understand."

"Well, that makes one of us," Frank said grumpily. He'd pretty much come to terms with believing in God whether he wanted to or not, but that didn't necessarily mean he was a fan.

Gerard disentangled himself a little, ignoring Frank's protests until he could hold onto Frank's hands. "I was right the first time," he said, stroking Frank's palms with his thumbs. "I just didn't think that the reason could be this simple, you know? I didn't consider that maybe I was supposed to meet you...just because I was supposed to meet you."

"Gerard," Frank looked down at their joined hands. "Let me get this straight. You saved my life. You literally died for me. And now you're telling me you think God's plan is for us to be together?"

Gerard smiled wonkily. "Sums it up."

All of Frank's breath left his lungs in a rush, and his head spun, and he grabbed clumsily at Gerard's shoulders before he managed to get out, "You better make me that promise now, motherfucker," and Gerard pulled him in and held him tight, not kissing, just holding, his hand warm on the back of Frank's head, Frank's face tucked into the crook of his neck, his fingers curled tight in Gerard's jacket.

"It was never that I didn't want you," he whispered fiercely against Frank's hair. "It was never, ever that."

Frank took a couple of deep, shuddering breaths, rubbing his face against Gerard's throat. Gerard kissed his ear and whispered his name; Frank lifted up and found his mouth, kissing him softly now, unclenching his hands so he could touch Gerard's face with his fingertips.

"Let me take you home," he murmured against Gerard's lips, and Gerard sighed, stroking his fingers through Frank's hair and pressing another kiss to the corner of his mouth. "Let me take you home, Gee."

"Okay," Gerard nodded, and when they managed to pull away from each other, he reached down and took Frank's hand.

\*

Gerard looked around curiously when Frank ushered him into the house. "Is your Mom home?"

Frank took Gerard's hand again and led him up the stairs. "She has work, and then she's getting her hair done. She'll be gone for like a month. Here, this is my room."

He pushed the door open - he felt oddly shy, showing his childhood bedroom to Gerard. His Mom hadn't done that creepy thing of keeping it a shrine to him or anything, but it hadn't changed all that much - single bed, low desk against the wall, a few photographs scattered around. "We didn't find new apartments yet," he said, shutting the door behind Gerard. "So, you know. Back with the mothership for a while."

"You and me both," Gerard said ruefully. He shrugged his coat off, unwound his scarves and dumped the whole mess on the desk, then twisted his hands together, looking awkwardly at Frank. "So."

"So," Frank agreed, dropping his own jacket on the chair. All his ranting at the shop aside, the last thing he wanted was for Gerard to do something he wasn't prepared for, for it to be something he would regret. He also really, *really* didn't want a repeat of that night at Craig's house.

He moved towards Gerard and put his arms around him, kissed him until he felt Gerard start to get into it and relax. "We don't have to rush this," he said softly, moving his hands over Gerard's back. "If you're not ready."

"I'm ready!" Gerard said quickly, blushing when Frank laughed. He ducked his head. "I'm just really nervous."

"That's understandable." Frank kissed him some more, taking his time, stroking Gerard's tongue with his own, keeping it light until Gerard pressed in, asking for more, deeper, and as soon as he did, Frank gave it to him. He actually wasn't nervous himself, weirdly, he just felt awesome, but then, it hadn't been a hundred years since *he* had sex, and also, he had never been a member of the clergy. He felt a tug at his waist and looked down to see Gerard's fingers curled in the hem of his shirt.

"Can I see you?" Gerard said shyly, and Frank yanked the shirt over his head in one movement, tossing it carelessly off to the side. Gerard's eyes went wide and he bit his lip, hands coming out to smooth over the skin on Frank's chest and belly, touching each of his tattoos in turn. "These," he said, flattening his palms over the birds on Frank's hips. "I couldn't think about anything else after I saw them, Frankie."

Frank barely bit back a moan, it was just surreal to look down and see Gerard's hands moving on his skin. He pressed into every touch, trying to encourage him, and Gerard gained confidence quickly, leaning in for a kiss as he stroked down Frank's belly and rested his hands on his belt. They'd both taken their shoes off downstairs, so it was easy for Frank to unbuckle, unzip, and get rid of his jeans. He realized belatedly that maybe Gerard might have assumed Frank would be wearing underwear, but it was too late now, and anyway Gerard didn't seem to be complaining.

Slightly shell-shocked, maybe, his comically-wide eyes centered squarely on Frank's dick, but not complaining. "You," he said in a strangled voice, then fumbled to pull Frank close to him, kissing him hard and moving his hands all over Frank's hips and thighs. "You're fucking beautiful," he said, and the thing was that Frank could tell he really meant it, that it wasn't seduction, wasn't flattery or hyperbole, it was what Gerard thought and he wanted to say it. "You're beautiful all over."

Frank didn't know what to say to that, so as a reply he lifted Gerard's own shirt over his head, watching him carefully to make sure he was okay with it. Gerard's instinct was obviously to cover himself up with his arms, but Frank caught his hands and held them down by his sides, just letting himself look. Gerard's skin was pale and smooth-looking and Frank could feel the warmth coming off him and he had to touch him right that second or he was going to go insane.

Gerard whimpered when Frank got his hands on him, arching up into the press of Frank's hands, a deep, pink flush on his cheeks. "I don't," he stuttered, but when Frank leaned in and started kissing his shoulder, whatever else he was going to say was lost in a sigh. He was shy, definitely, but he was eager, sliding his hands around Frank's waist and squeezing when Frank mouthed the dip of his collarbone, the hollow at the base of his throat. Frank moved further into the circle of his arms and they both moaned at the feel of it, skin on warm skin, Frank's cock riding Gerard's thigh and it was almost painful, the burn of denim on skin, but it was so fucking *good*. Gerard's chest rose and fell rapidly with his breath, which hitched in his throat when Frank stroked his chest, his sides, and followed the thin line of dark hair from Gerard's navel down to the button on his jeans.

"Oh," Gerard said in a choked little voice, his hips jerking under Frank's hands like he couldn't help it, but there was an edge of panic there, too. "Yeah, um. Okay."

Frank stilled his hands immediately. "Too fast?"

Gerard shook his head. "It's not that. It's just been a while since anyone's, you know. Seen me. Naked."

"Oh." Frank pressed a kiss to the soft place underneath Gerard's jaw, and let his fingers wander a little, tracing the skin right above Gerard's waistband, pressing in until he could hook his fingertips underneath. "How long exactly?"

"Oh, you know," Gerard said, probably aiming for casual but ending up somewhere around hysteria. "Just a decade. Plus. And this may come as a shock to you, but I wasn't exactly Don Juan before that, you know? Shit, Frank, I don't know what I'm doing."

"It's okay," Frank murmured, slipping his thigh between Gerard's and pressing up. "I do."

Gerard whined a little, pressing against Frank, then pulled back and nodded. "Yeah, no, okay. Okay. Ahhh. Okay."

"Okay," Frank repeated solemnly, popping the first button open. The others followed easily, and Frank gave Gerard another kiss to reassure him, before going down on his knees so he could peel Gerard's socks off and then the jeans, too. When they were gone, Gerard stared down at him, obviously turned on and equally terrified; Frank slid his hands up Gerard's legs, leaning up to loop his arms around Gerard's hips. He rested his forehead against Gerard's belly.

"I can't believe you're really here," he said, sliding his hands down to rest on either side of Gerard's hips, at the join where his body met his thighs. He looked up; Gerard was panting harshly, his hands holding on to Frank's shoulders like that was the only thing keeping him upright. Frank curled his fingers in his waistband of his underwear, raising his eyebrows, and Gerard hesitated just for a moment before nodding, stumbling a step backwards so he could brace his shoulders against the door.

Frank kept his eyes averted until Gerard was bare; then he just let himself *look*, at all the places Gerard was soft under his fingers, the places where Frank could trace lines with his lips; at the evidence that Gerard wanted this just as bad as Frank did. Frank swept his hands over Gerard's hips and thighs; pressed in closer to rub his face against Gerard's belly and kiss everything he could reach, letting his hands wander over Gerard's ass and between his legs.

When he sat back on his heels and brought his hand to cover Gerard's cock, Gerard shook his head and stammered, "I'm not - Frank, shit, *shit* I'm not gonna make it, don't."

"Don't what?" Frank said innocently, curling his hand around Gerard and stroking him gently.

"Frankie," Gerard whined, letting his head fall back against the door with a thump. He wasn't kidding either; he was already leaking in Frank's hand. Frank leaned in and licked at the wetness there, took just the head of Gerard's cock into his mouth and sucked, gently, still stroking him with his hand. Gerard's hands flexed on his shoulders, slid up to tangle in his hair, instead, and Frank could already feel Gerard shaking against him.

"Frankie, Frankie, that feels - *fuck*," Gerard groaned, writhing against the door a little. Frank hummed around him and rubbed the underside of his cock with his tongue; it was overwhelming, his lips stretched around Gerard's cock, the weight on his tongue, the hands alternately tugging and



stroking his hair. He pressed down as far as he could, until his lips met his own fist, and swallowed: Gerard made a noise like he was dying and his hands tightened on Frank's head to the point of pain, and he came, shuddering and panting and flooding Frank's mouth.

Frank swallowed and pulled off, resting his head on Gerard's hip and panting a little himself, wrapping his arms around Gerard's waist to make sure he didn't collapse.

"Fuck," Gerard gasped above him. "Oh, fuck, Frank, I feel like my legs have dissolved."

Frank chuckled and kissed Gerard's hip one more time before struggling to his feet. "In that case, I think the bed might be a good idea."

He squeezed Gerard's hand and turned towards the bed; Gerard made a strange gasping sound, and it was only then that Frank remembered about his scars. "Don't," he said, starting to turn around, but it was too late, Gerard had pushed himself up off the door and was there behind Frank, his hands coming to rest lightly against Frank's back.

Frank squeezed his eyes shut and bit his tongue. Gerard said, hushed, "Do they hurt?"

All Frank wanted to do was turn around, hide himself, put his fucking clothes back on, but that wasn't fair, not when Gerard was being so brave. Instead he gritted his teeth and forced himself to answer. "No. They're just ugly."

"No," Gerard murmured, slipping in closer and brushing his lips against the back of Frank's neck. "They're not."

His arms encircled Frank's waist and he hugged him back against his chest for a moment before urging him towards the bed. Frank stumbled forward, suddenly feeling like he was the one who didn't know what he was doing, nervous and unsure, but when Gerard pressed him down with a hand on his shoulder, Frank went easily, climbing onto the bed and lying down flat on his front, his arms wrapped around a pillow.

The bed dipped; Frank felt Gerard's knees settling either side of his thighs, felt Gerard's fingertips sweep over his shoulders. "They're not ugly," he said, and leaned down to press his mouth against the back of Frank's neck.

He moved his hands slowly, deliberately, tracing lines across Frank's skin and following with kisses. Frank pressed his face into the pillow and just tried to breathe; he'd been strangely unaware of his own arousal while he was concentrating on Gerard, but now it all came slamming back into him like a tidal wave, he was hot all over and all the skin Gerard hadn't touched yet was tingling in anticipation.

"You don't ever have to be ashamed of these, Frankie," Gerard murmured, his lips moving against Frank's shoulder blade. "You got these because you're brave, because you're selfless, because you were chosen for something. You should be proud of them."

He shifted and licked up Frank's spine; Frank whined and pressed his hips down into the bed, rubbing his cock against the mattress, he couldn't help it. Gerard made a soft, appreciative noise, and settled his hands on the small of Frank's back. "I know you didn't choose them," he said, stroking the skin there, his fingers venturing down a little further each time. Frank bit his lip and struggled not to arch up into it and freak Gerard out. "But they're just like your tattoos. They're part of this story in your skin, telling the world about this huge thing that happened to you, this thing that you survived, the sacrifice you were willing to make to keep other people safe."

Gerard was so gentle, he was always so gentle, Frank might have been almost lulled to sleep by his warm voice and the steady movements, if he hadn't been so turned on he was about to explode. Gerard grew bolder as he went on; sliding his hands over Frank's ass, pressing a wet, open kiss to the base of his spine, another at the back of his thigh. By the time he slid off the end of the bed and urged Frank to turn over, Frank was just a whimpering mess who would have done anything Gerard told him, just to get more of his hands and his mouth.

All Gerard was asking him to do was turn onto his back, though, so Frank twisted around on the sheets, too turned on to be embarrassed by the way his cock stood up over his belly. Gerard's eyes raked over him, that eat-you-alive look Frank remembered from that night at Craig's, and he shivered underneath Gerard's gaze. Gerard bent his head and pressed one kiss to each of Frank's feet, over the red, raised circles there. Then he climbed back onto the bed and crawled up Frank's body, settling over his thighs and lifting up Frank's hands.

"I wish you had never had to hurt," he said, and kissed the inside of Frank's left wrist. "But I wouldn't want you to lose these, not now." Gerard turned Frank's hand over and kissed the other side, before raising his right wrist to his lips. "They mean too much."

A second kiss, and then Gerard was pulling Frank to sit up, stroking his hair out of his face and cupping his cheeks in his hands. He smiled a little shyly before bending down to kiss his way across Frank's forehead. "They're the marks of God's plan for you, Frankie," he whispered against Frank's temple. "They're beautiful."

"Kiss me," Frank begged, and Gerard did, winding his arms around Frank's neck as Frank gathered him closer; Gerard was starting to get hard again, Frank felt it against his own cock, pressed together between their bodies. He pushed up with his hips and they both moaned; the air in the room seemed damp and thick and Frank struggled to fill his lungs. "Fuck," he gasped when he had to tear himself away from Gerard's mouth because his head was starting to swim. He gripped Gerard's knees where they were tight around his hips. "Fuck, Gerard, I need to be in you, please, let me, Gerard, *please*."

Gerard said, "Yeah, yeah," and sat back to let Frank rummage in the nightstand with shaky, desperate hands.

Frank put the condom on first, then poured some lube over his fingers, looking up at Gerard as he guided his hand back between his legs. "Okay?"

Gerard nodded - he looked so nervous, and Frank settled his other hand on his hip, stroking the damp, warm skin there. He thought maybe this wasn't going to work, that Gerard would be too tense, that it had been too long, but the first press of Frank's finger inside him had Gerard moaning and arching his back, head falling back as he clutched at Frank's shoulders. "Fuck," he said, his voice strained, as his cock jerked visibly. "Mmm."

"Yeah," Frank had to lean up and mouth at the line of Gerard's throat, salt-sting on his tongue and the rapid beat of Gerard's pulse underneath the skin. He sucked there lightly as he slid a second finger in beside the first, and crooked them, pressing deliberately against Gerard's prostate and grinning when it made Gerard whine and buck. Frank kept that up for a while, then with more lube and three fingers. He licked his way around Gerard's throat, pressing a ring of kisses there, working his fingers inside Gerard with his other hand wrapped around his cock, not stroking, just holding, so he could feel Gerard's pulse there too, feel the rush under the hot, soft skin when Frank touched him just right.

Gerard was sweating and shaking by now, gasping half-words between sucking in huge breaths, and when he actually started to push down on Frank's fingers by himself, that was seriously all

Frank could take. "Okay, okay," he pulled away enough to shove his pillows into a pile behind him so he could lean back on them and still keep his arms around Gerard. He found the lube and spilled some more into his hand, slicking himself perfunctorily until he realized Gerard was watching his hand move with huge, dark eyes. Frank slowed it down a little then, stroking himself properly, but he couldn't take much of it, he just didn't have the control.

"Okay," he said again; his face was burning, and the flush on Gerard's cheeks had spread all the way down to his chest. He lifted up and shuffled forward when Frank touched his hips. "Put your hands on the headboard," Frank told him, and Gerard did it, staring down at Frank the whole time. Frank pushed up to kiss him, then settled back against the pillows.

"Take it slow," he said, holding Gerard open with one hand, and guiding his cock with the other. Gerard nodded jerkily, and started pushing himself down onto Frank's cock, his eyes fixed on the ceiling, his lower lip caught hard in his teeth.

"Gee," Frank moaned, clutching at him; he wanted to be gentle, he knew they had to take it easy but it was *so good*, the hot, tight clutch of Gerard around him, the friction when Gerard caught his breath and lifted back up a little before sinking back down. Frank ground his teeth and forced himself to hold still. Gerard let out a shaky, determined breath and sank all the way down, suddenly, so that Frank was completely inside him. Gerard curled forward, abruptly, hands dropping from the headboard to come up around Frank's face. He kissed him, deep and a little desperate, rocking a little in Frank's lap, sighing and biting down on Frank's lip when Frank got his hands on Gerard's hips and started helping him to move.

He didn't move up and down so much as they just rocked together, Frank rolling his hips and Gerard following his lead. It was best like this because they could kiss, and Frank could put his arms around Gerard and whisper reassurance and encouragement to him, tell him how amazing he was, how good he felt, how much Frank wanted him. Eventually Gerard started to move more, and harder, making little noises that were half pleasure, half frustration. Frank wrapped his hand around Gerard's cock and stroked him in time with the rhythm they'd set, and Gerard gasped and kicked with his hips but that still wasn't it, Frank could tell he was looking for something else, and maybe just didn't know how to get it.

"Lean back," he said, nodding when Gerard looked skeptical. "It's okay. I've got you."

He wrapped his hands firmly around Gerard's waist - he had to let go of Gerard's cock to do it, prompting Gerard to make an unhappy noise - and eased him backwards, wriggling down himself a little so he could lift his hips up off the bed and really thrust. "Back," he bit out, because it felt fucking amazing and he wasn't going to be able to hang on much longer. "Back further, Gee, it's okay, I've got you, *trust me*."

Gerard gave him another worried look, but leaned back finally, and Frank lifted him up and dragged him down again, hard, slamming his hips up off the bed and thrusting into him for real, crying out with pleasure and relief. Gerard gave a strangled half-yell and let Frank support his weight so he could get his own hand around his cock, stroking himself and shuddering as Frank thrust up into him over and over, unable to stop now he'd started, he'd been waiting for this for so long. His eyes were stinging with how good it felt, his vision was blurred and he could barely see, but he could hear the noises Gerard was making, beautiful, desperate, overwhelmed sounds, and he could feel Gerard tightening even further around him, feel his movements start to stutter and lose focus, and he blinked furiously so that he could see it when the flush on Gerard's chest deepened and his eyes and mouth were open so wide as he gasped and shook all over and came, writhing and panting, a total mess, the most incredible thing Frank had ever seen.

He could feel it the minute the intensity started to fade and Gerard's spine started to buckle; the stupid fucking tiny bed was too small for Frank to just roll them over, so he had to ease Gerard off his cock for an excruciating minute while he scrambled up and pushed Gerard over to lie on his back, cursing in frustration until he could slide back in.

Gerard brought his legs up around Frank's hips and encouraged him with hands on his back and his voice in Frank's ear. "So good, I didn't know it would be like this, you're so - ah! - so good, you're," his breath hitched and he stuttered out, "Love - I love you, Frankie, I love you, I love you, I love you."

"So *much*," Frank answered, surging into him, shoving his tongue into Gerard's mouth as he felt his orgasm coming on, coiling in his belly and between his legs and spreading out until he felt like he was on fire all the way down to his toes, and he wrapped Gerard around him as tightly as he could and just went with it, riding the wave of pleasure right out to the edge and then over it, pounding into Gerard and saying his name over and over and over again, shaking as he fell apart at the seams and just collapsed, gasping and twitching with aftershocks, waiting to be put back together again.

Eventually he managed to work his limbs enough to pull out and get rid of the condom and pull the covers up. Gerard curled willingly into his arms, and Frank kissed him, on his cheek and his nose and his mouth, and that was pretty much it before they both dozed off for a while.

Frank blinked awake because a phone rang.

"It's mine," Gerard said blurrily, stirring under Frank's arm. "Where-"

"I'll get it." Frank slipped out of bed and dug through Gerard's clothes until he found the phone, then hurried back to Gerard, snuggling back down under the covers.

"Thanks." Gerard took the phone and squinted at it before answering. "Mikey, hey - no, I know, I'm sorry. I'm fine. I'm - I'm with Frank," he said, his voice going shy and turning up at the corners. Frank grinned and kissed under his ear. "Do you want me to - no, okay. Yeah, I will. Okay. Bye."

Gerard folded the phone up and bent his arm backwards to slide it onto the nightstand. "He says to take our time."

"That's why I love him," Frank said, rolling until he was mostly on top of Gerard and could kiss him properly. "Mmm."

"Mmm," Gerard agreed, then said enthusiastically, "I feel so good. You know? Like it's been a really long time since I just felt good all over. Physically, I mean. I forgot what that's like."

Frank spread his arms and legs out so he could touch as much of Gerard at once as possible. "Seriously, man, how did you ever give it up?"

"I don't know," Gerard said seriously. "It wasn't ever - well. Let's just say I don't remember it being like that."

"Me neither," Frank said honestly. Gerard smiled shyly at him. Frank settled against him and closed his eyes. "If this turns out to be a dream, I'm gonna be pissed."

"Well," Gerard said thoughtfully. "Not that this isn't amazing and everything, but in your dreams are we usually being observed by a framed picture of you in your high school uniform?"

"Oh, God." Frank fumbled his hand up over Gerard's face to cover his eyes, grinning when it made Gerard laugh and squirm. "No, come on, don't look at it! Don't, it's from before I got cute."

"You should see mine," Gerard laughed, then pulled Frank's hand off his eyes and peered at him. "Unless you already have. Have you met my parents?" Frank shook his head and Gerard raised an eyebrow. "Not through Mikey?"

"I told you," Frank slid off to the side a little and rearranged the covers around their shoulders. "Mikey never talked about his family."

Gerard let his head fall back on the pillow, bringing his hand up to rub viciously at his eye. "I have so much big brothering to make up for."

"Well, don't get all crazy with it." Frank captured his hand and held it against his chest before Gerard could blind himself. "No chasing Ray off the porch with a shotgun, okay?"

Gerard laughed, shaking his head. "Shit. Mikey and Ray."

"Hey, I think it's great." Frank really did, too, and it was such a fucking relief to have the edge of jealousy taken off. "You know Toro's gonna treat that kid like gold."

"Yeah," said Gerard. He sounded off, and when Frank looked up at him he was frowning deeply.

Frank could tell he was going down that don't-deserve-this-going-to-fuck-it-up route again, so he pushed himself up on his elbow and made Gerard look at him. "Listen to me. Nobody is expecting you to be King Normal, okay? I know it's going to take you some time to adjust. I'm okay with it."

Gerard smiled wonkily. "It's just that I have this history of getting it wrong."

"Well, then, congratulations," said Frank, patting his chest. "You're exactly the same as everyone else."

"Guess so," Gerard said quietly.

"Gee, it's like you said." Frank sat up and pulled Gerard with him. "It's like with my scars. I wouldn't change you, not at all. Whatever happened, it already happened, and if it was different then maybe we wouldn't be here right now. God has a plan for you too, right?"

Gerard looked down; his shoulders hitched a little and when he looked up his eyes were full, but he was smiling. "You have no idea what it means to me to hear you say that."

He was wrong; Frank had some idea, at least, but he just cradled Gerard's face in his hands and kissed him. "I love you," he whispered against Gerard's mouth. "I love you just like this. Exactly as you are."

\*

Later, when Frank reluctantly released Gerard from his bed because he had a family who loved him and needed to see him or some bullshit, they stood kissing in the front hall for a while.

"Oh," said Gerard, fumbling in the pocket of his coat. "I have something for you."

He uncurled his fingers and Frank looked down to see the rosary nestled in the palm of his hand. His breath caught and he didn't know what to say for a moment.

"You're not going to turn it down again," Gerard said nervously. "Right?"

Gerard lifted his hand and wound the beads gently around Frank's wrist. Frank touched them with his free hand. His throat was tight and his fucking eyes were filling up. He blinked and rolled his

eyes at himself and said, "Don't try to change your mind, though, okay? It's mine now."

Gerard smiled, broad, happy and relieved. He said, "It always was."

\*

*Six months later*

"She's not here."

Mikey looked at Frank sideways. Frank took a drag on his cigarette and exhaled, looking back.

"She's here," Mikey said.

Frank looked at Bob, who shrugged and said, "If Mikey says she's here then she's probably here."

"But you've *been* saying that for the last three days," Frank complained, blowing smoke in Mikey's face. Mikey wrinkled his nose and half-heartedly tried to wave it away. "I'm just saying, we've been sitting here for hours, ok, my ass is completely numb and probably permanently flat."

"It was already permanently flat," Mikey said immediately, then cocked his head slightly, his eyebrows creasing very faintly.

"What is it?" Frank asked.

"I don't know yet," Mikey frowned. Then he said, randomly, "I'm thinking about getting Lasik."

Bob made a face. "That lasers in your eyes shit?"

"My glasses keep getting broken," Mikey said, then slithered off the bench they were sitting on and headed over to a big gaggle of kids who'd just come into view on the other side of the park.

Frank and Bob followed him, but stayed far enough back that it didn't look like they were all together. Mikey had his thing, his Mikey-power or whatever it was, to find these people, and they mostly seemed to trust him but for some reason Frank and Bob didn't have the same effect. Frank understood it with Bob - dude could look pretty intimidating when he wanted to, all beard and Mr. Angry Eyes, but Frank didn't see what was so off-putting about a regular short dude.

Gerard said it was all his tattoos. Whatever.

They could see Mikey moving through the group, pretty much indistinguishable from the rest of them, really. He stopped and touched the arm of a red-haired girl wearing a fedora.

"I hate this part," Bob confided to Frank. "This is the part where fights start."

It was true. Sometimes people - or their friends - didn't like Mikey rolling up all oh, hey, total stranger, let me tell you about how me and my friends can help you with your supernatural woes, and then Mikey might end up with a fist headed for his face. That's why Bob and Frank went with him in the first place.

This time, though, it didn't happen. The girl didn't look thrilled, and she hugged herself with skinny arms while Mikey spoke to her, but in the end she nodded and took the card Mikey held out. Some of the other kids were giving them curious looks when Mikey slipped away to re-join Frank and Bob.

"She'll come in Monday," he said as they started making their way back to the street.

Frank flicked his cigarette butt away. "She say that?"

Mikey shook his head. "She will, though."

"You're so creepy when you're like this," Bob observed. Mikey rolled his eyes.

When they got back to the shop, Brian and Ray were in Ray's room doing...something that smelled really terrible, Frank didn't know. He left Mikey and Bob to fill them in, and slipped into the back room instead, where Gerard was practically hidden behind a huge pile of books on the desk.

"Hey," Frank called, softly, but Gerard still startled and flailed his arm out, knocking at least half the pile onto the floor. Frank laughed and bent down to start picking them up. "Sorry."

"Not your fault." Gerard crouched down to help Frank stack the books up again. His hair was everywhere and he had pencil smudges on his nose. He caught Frank staring and smiled, shyly.

"Hi, by the way."

"Hi." Frank bent over awkwardly, still on his knees and clutching an armful of books, and pressed his mouth to Gerard's in a brief kiss. "Mikey found our girl. He says she's going to come in on Monday. Are you ready to leave?"

"I don't know." Gerard straightened up and looked worriedly at his desk. "I still have a lot of research to do - visions of the Virgin Mary is a big deal, Frank."

"I know that," Frank said, knowing he sounded surly and not caring. Whatever, it wasn't like he was *jealous* that some random chick was getting visions of Mary, whatever Mikey said. He dumped his armful of books on the desk and moved around it, putting himself between Gerard and his work. "Come on, Gee," he coaxed, biting Gerard's chin gently when he frowned. "It's Saturday. You're allowed to leave before the sun goes down once in a blue fucking moon, all right?"

Gerard wavered, but Frank stayed where he was, forcing Gerard to look at him instead of his books, and eventually Gerard sighed and nodded reluctantly. "Okay. Let me just finish up."

"Five minutes," Frank warned him, releasing him and moving towards the door to the main room.

"I'm gonna say goodnight to the guys. And don't even think about bringing those books home."

Gerard froze, his hand (which had a fucking book in it, Frank wasn't blind) halfway to his bag. "It's just a small one," he said guiltily, making pleading eyes at Frank. "I won't read it in bed or anything."

Frank had heard that before. "Promises, promises."

They all ended up leaving at the same time, for once, which seemed to make Gerard feel better about not falling asleep over his desk. When they got home, Gerard barely waited for Frank to close the door before pushing him up against it and kissing the hell out of him, which was awesome but totally unexpected.

Frank went with it, though, wrapping his arms around Gerard's neck and kissing him back. Gerard still had a pretty serious business attitude to sex, so on the rare occasion he was spontaneous or playful, Frank did everything he could to encourage him.

Gerard pulled away enough to tug Frank's shirt over his head and then went to work on his jeans.

"Right here?" Frank blinked at the top of Gerard's head. "Before dinner, even?"

Gerard looked up, and the grin he gave Frank was so completely gleeful at his own daring that Frank laughed out loud. Gerard kissed Frank's mouth again, then lifted the rosary over Frank's head and handed it to him. Frank wound it around his hand carefully and slipped it into his pocket, while Gerard nosed under his jaw and kissed his throat, his shoulders, his chest, slipping his hand into Frank's jeans. Frank sighed and pushed up into the touch, resting his hands on Gerard's hips.

"I was thinking about this while you were out today," Gerard whispered in Frank's ear.

"Yeah?" Frank shivered. Sometimes it seemed like Gerard didn't think about sex at all unless Frank was laying it out right in front of him. The idea of Gerard thinking about this, wanting it when Frank wasn't even there, made him tingle all over and press closer. "What were you thinking?"

"Just about you," Gerard said shyly, working Frank's jeans down over his hips. Frank arched away from the door to help. "How you feel. How you sound."

Frank made a pathetic noise and Gerard went down on his knees, looking up and smiling a little bashfully. He wrapped his hand around Frank's cock and leaned forward to slide his tongue over the head.

"Shit." Frank let his head fall back against the door, his hands sliding into Gerard's hair. The feel of Gerard's wet mouth around him, hot and fucking gorgeous, it was like it was new every time, Frank would never ever get used to it, and he didn't want to, either. He loved the way Gerard's eyelashes fluttered against his cheeks, the way he still had to pull off to breathe every so often, the pleased noises he made when Frank moaned or sighed or rocked gently into his mouth.

Gerard was a quick study; it hadn't taken him long at all to learn what Frank liked best, but he didn't always put that knowledge to use. Frank couldn't really tell if that was because he liked to tease, or because he just forgot, but today wasn't one of those times anyway. He let Frank grip his jaw and rock deeper into his mouth, he rubbed with his tongue in the way that made Frank's eyes roll back in his head, touched the skin behind his balls with his fingertips and hummed when Frank jerked and whimpered, encouraging him. The humming was really Frank's undoing, he couldn't take the vibration on top of everything else, Gerard's mouth, his hands, and he eased Gerard back a little before he came, gasping, his hands cupped around Gerard's face.

One thing Gerard couldn't get the hang of was afterglow. He was back on his feet and pushing his tongue into Frank's mouth before Frank could even start to get his breath back. It was okay. There were worse crimes, and besides, it turned Frank on to know that Gerard was so into it he couldn't wait. He waited long enough for his heart to slow down a little, then kicked out of his jeans and walked Gerard backwards until he bumped into the couch and sat down unexpectedly.

"Oof," he said, then smiled and reached his hands out for Frank. He totally had a thing for Frank being naked when he was still fully clothed, but he wouldn't admit it and he got all red-faced and weird if Frank brought it up. Frank started to kneel on the floor but Gerard pulled him up into his lap instead; Frank went willingly and worked Gerard's tie loose, lifting the loop up over his head and dropping it on the floor.

"I don't know why you wear those things," he said, and leaned in to cover Gerard's mouth with his own so he wouldn't have to hear Gerard's manifesto on how formal wear helped him concentrate. He wormed his hands down between their bodies and palmed over Gerard's cock, hard inside his pants. Gerard whined and pushed up; Frank undid his pants easily and took Gerard in his hand, bringing him to orgasm with just a few strokes.

"You see," Frank said after a few minutes, "This is why there's always twice as many of your clothes in the laundry."



Gerard didn't even open his eyes. "It's not my fault you're such a nympho."

"Hey." Frank poked him. "Who pushed who up against the door?"

"I did!" Gerard said giddily.

Frank laughed and kissed his cheek. "Come on, I'm starving."

Gerard was a way better cook than Frank, so Frank left him to it while he took a shower. He could hear Gerard talking to himself while he was toweling off - well, not to himself, probably, but technically there was nobody else in the kitchen. Frank grinned and went into the bedroom to find his sweats. He hung the rosary over his lampshade, touching the crucifix with two fingers.

He rummaged in his nightstand and fished out the ointment Ray made for him, unscrewing the cap and rubbing some quickly onto his feet, wrists and forehead. Then he padded into the kitchen to find Gerard poking enthusiastically at the stove. He looked up when Frank came in. Frank wagged the tub at him.

"I think they're still getting better," Gerard said when he'd got Frank turned around and was sweeping his hands over Frank's back. "But they're not fading as fast as they did last time, are they?"

"No," said Frank. He looked down at his wrists. He was sort of getting used to them, in a way, but he was glad for his tattoos. He thought they would stand out a lot more on bare skin.

Gerard kissed the back of his shoulder. "All done."

Frank turned around and took the tub back, dabbing some onto his own fingers so he could smoothe it over the side of Gerard's neck. The scar there was very faint, and Frank could only see it when he was up this close. He was pretty determined to keep it that way.

They ate dinner on the couch so they could watch *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* at the same time. Frank almost choked on his rice when Gerard started yelling at the guy on screen, so incredulous that he didn't know who wrote 'The Dark is Rising' that his voice got all squeaky and his ears turned red.

"He obviously hasn't read it, Gee," Frank laughed, dodging a fork to the eye.

"Then he shouldn't be allowed on television!" Gerard fumed. "This is *insulting*."

Televised morons aside, the rest of the evening passed without incident. When Frank returned from brushing his teeth, he found Gerard sitting up in bed, wearing pajamas and reading the book he'd smuggled home from work.

Frank leaned in the doorway and folded his arms. "That wasn't the deal, baby."

Gerard looked up and made a guilty face, closing the book hurriedly and stowing it in his nightstand. "It's just there's this one chapter that--"

"No," Frank said firmly. He slid into bed next to Gerard and pulled him down, wrapping around him so he couldn't read or do anything equally annoying and inappropriate for their fucking bedroom. "It's after midnight, anyway. Day of rest, officially."

Gerard clicked his tongue. "That's convenient."

"Hey, I don't make the rules." Frank snuggled them down further under the covers. He could feel Gerard's fingers running over his back, tracing the lines in his skin there. He wriggled a little and Gerard made a soft noise, but didn't stop.

"Mass tomorrow," Gerard said quietly. Frank groaned, purely out of habit. Gerard wheedled, "We can go to that bakery you like on the way back."

Frank pretended to think about it. "I do like that bakery."

"Do you think there'll ever come a day when I don't have to bribe you into church with free pastries?"

"Sure," Frank said comfortably. "The day I no longer fit into any of my pants."

Gerard laughed, and Frank leaned over him to turn off the lamp. He lay back down and found Gerard's mouth in the darkness. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Frankie."

\*

He woke up a few hours later, groggy and sticky-eyed and instantly aware that something was wrong. He rolled over and sure enough, Gerard's side of the bed was empty and cold, and there was a soft slither of light coming from under the door to the living room.

Frank rubbed his hands over his face and sighed, before sliding out of bed and opening the door. "Gee, what the hell."

Gerard was sitting in a chair with his back to Frank. He didn't even look round, probably too engrossed in his fucking book, as usual.

Frank marched up behind him. "This is ridiculous, Gerard. I try to be patient with you, God knows, but it is not unreasonable for me to expect you to sleep one night through in the damn bed!" Frank reached the chair just as Gerard spun around to face him.

He wasn't reading. He was fully dressed, and he was wearing his - "Are you wearing your *collar*?" Frank gaped. "Is this a fucking joke? Because I don't even have words for how not funny it is, man."

Gerard didn't say a word. He just smiled, and it was weird because it didn't look like his smile, it looked like he was wearing someone else's, and Frank felt the anger in his veins go cold and turn into something else. Gerard's hand moved, and Frank's eyes were drawn to it; he was holding the rosary, Frank's rosary, and as Frank watched in horror, the skin on Gerard's fingers began to sear and crackle everywhere he touched the wooden beads.

"No," said Frank, taking a clumsy step backwards. "No, we fixed you, we - I saved you."

"Saved me?" Gerard laughed, watching his hand burn with detached interest. "Is that what you think?"

He got up from the chair and Frank turned and ran; or he tried to, anyway, it felt like he was stuck in tar or something, he couldn't get away, and when he opened his mouth, Gerard's hand covered it, muffling the sound.

"Don't scream," he whispered, and then Luke was there, advancing on Frank with his hands

outstretched, a manic smile on his wizened, blank-eyed face.

"Frankie, Frankie," he cooed in his cracked old voice, and Frank struggled and kicked and bit, but he couldn't get free, he couldn't - Gerard was gone, he was gone again and this time Frank wouldn't be able to save him and it was all for nothing, it had all been for nothing.

"*Frank.*"

Frank's eyes flew open and he found that Gerard was in front of him now; Frank threw a punch, which missed by a mile because he couldn't fucking *move*, it was like all his limbs were filled with sand.

"Frankie, it's *me*," Gerard grabbed at his hands and held them still. "Wake up, it's okay, it's only a dream."

Frank shook his head; his chest heaved and his heart was hammering, and there was cold sweat running down his temples and the back of his neck. He fought Gerard; trying to shove him off the bed - but they weren't in the bed before, they were in the living room, and Gerard was...

Frank swallowed the acid in his throat and looked at the lamp by his bed. The rosary was draped over the shade where he'd left it, and Gerard was wearing PJ's, not a collar.

"It was a dream," Gerard repeated, shuffling closer to Frank on the sweat-soaked sheets. He was still holding Frank's hands, but he let go of one now to clasp Frank's shoulder firmly. "Just a dream, sweetheart, it's over now."

"You were," Frank started, and then just folded forward against Gerard, who wrapped his arms around him tight and rocked him a little bit.

"It's over now," he repeated softly, pressing a kiss into Frank's hair. "I'm right here."

Frank wriggled his arm out enough to touch Gerard's side of the bed, where the covers were thrown back. It was cold, and he drew back. "But you weren't. You went to read in the living room, didn't you?"

Gerard ducked his head. "You were sleeping," he said guiltily. "I didn't think you'd notice."

"Yeah, well." Frank pushed him away a little and curled up, hugging his knees to his chest and squeezing his eyes shut against the memory of the dream. "I did notice."

"I'm sorry," Gerard came to sit next to him, hugging his own knees so he was mirroring Frank's pose. "I came as soon as I heard you shout."

Frank wiped his face against his shoulder and sighed, looking up at the ceiling while he tried to find a way to explain it that Gerard might finally be able to understand. "If you'd been here then you could have woken me as soon as I started to make any noise. As soon as the dream started."

"Well, actually even what feels like a really long dream can last just five minutes in real time," Gerard began, and Frank just wasn't in the mood for his fucking lectures right now, so he started to climb out of bed but Gerard stopped him. "No, Frank, don't, please, I'm sorry, okay? I won't do it again."

"Gerard," Frank sighed. Gerard was trying, Frank knew he was. "Just shut up and lie down."

Gerard pulled the covers back up and spooned around Frank from behind, holding him close. He

laid his cheek against the back of Frank's neck. "What was it? The dream?"

Frank closed his eyes and pressed back into the warm curve of Gerard's body. "I don't want to talk about it."

Gerard was quiet for a minute. "Okay," he said, and Frank could tell that he knew, but there was no point in discussing it. They'd been down that road before and it just ended up with them both getting upset. Frank was too tired and too pissed and he didn't have the energy. On the other hand, he would never get back to sleep with Gerard lying behind him, all tense and sad and frustrated.

Frank wriggled around to face him. Gerard's eyes were closed, and his mouth was turned down at the corners. Frank sighed. "It's all right," he said. He found the cross around Gerard's neck and tangled his fingers in the chain. "It's okay. We're okay."

Gerard shook his head against the pillow, then opened his eyes. "I just wish that I could make them stop," he said anxiously. "The dreams. I wish I could find a way."

Frank shushed him. "You can - just, you can be here when I wake up. Okay?"

"Okay." Gerard nodded hard. "I will, Frankie. I promise. I mean it this time."

Frank had heard it before, so he wasn't sure if he believed it. But he knew that Gerard did, and that was what counted, in the end.

\*

"Does she only ever appear to one person?"

Gerard shook his head. "No, Mary has been seen by more than one person at once, or different people in the same spot, but it's usually children. There was this one case in Egypt where she was reportedly seen by millions of people over like three years, but, uh, well. It was the sixties, so."

Bob tapped his pen against his teeth. "Is our girl even Catholic?"

"That doesn't really matter," Gerard told him. "Typically visions of her are reported by Christians, but we have to remember that Mary has a place in lots of other faiths too."

Frank cleared his throat. "How do we even know she's really seeing Mary?" he asked, ignoring Mikey when he wrote 'JEALOUS' in long skinny letters on his pad, and pushed it over for Frank to see. "Sometimes people just see a lady, and everyone assumes it's Mary, right?"

"Yes!" Gerard nodded happily. He loved it when Frank let slip he'd been reading up. It was kind of adorable. "Especially kids. And of course, there's always the possibility that she's seeing something that's only claiming to be Mary."

"Or," Brian said heavily, "She's up to her eyeballs in drugs."

Ray shook his head. "Mikey says she's not."

Brian made a face. "He said that about that kid with the blue hair, too."

Mikey rolled his eyes. "Man, I make *one shitty call* and you never let me live it down, Schechter. What about that time you gave Ray the brimstone instead of the limestone and the whole place stank like eggs for a week?"

Brian scowled. "It was labeled wrong."

"It was labeled perfectly!" Ray corrected him, affronted. "You can't fucking read!"

"Anyway!" Gerard said loudly, over the top of them. "There are different types of Marian apparition, depending on whether she speaks, whether she gives specific instructions. If it seems like it's the real deal, then we'll have to pass it off to the Church and the bishop can assess it himself."

"The real deal?" Bob raised an eyebrow. "Like this actually happens?"

"The Vatican have officially approved Marian apparitions as recently as last year," Frank nodded.

Bob rolled his eyes. "Since when do you believe anything the Vatican says?"

Gerard made a long-suffering face. "Bob, you can't still be skeptical about this shit, after everything we've seen!"

"You would be amazed at what I can be skeptical about," Bob said darkly.

Brian nodded. "It's true. He doesn't believe in the moon landing."

Ray sputtered. "What's not to believe?"

"It looks like it was filmed in someone's garage!"

"Oh please, like that many people could keep that big a secret for this long? You and your conspiracy theories, Christ. I'm gonna start calling you Doubting Bob."

Bob crumpled up a sheet of paper and threw it at Ray's head; Ray squawked and threw it back, but before they could get into a repeat of The Great Stationery Fight of Last Month, Mikey slapped the table, sat up straight and said, "She's here."

They all turned around, and sure enough, thirty seconds later, the doors opened, and the skinny red-haired chick from the park walked in, looking freaked out and like she pretty much thought they were going to try to kill her.

"Hi," said Brian, moving forward to take her hand. "I'm Brian Schechter. You must be Ruth."

She nodded, darting skittish glances at the rest of them. "I'm not, I mean," she looked at Mikey, then at the floor, scratching her elbow. "Mikey said you could help me."

"I'm sure that we can," said Gerard, coming around the table. He pulled out a chair. "You want to sit down?"

She looked like she wanted to run, but Gerard made that face, that face that you couldn't help trusting no matter how freaked out you were. Frank knew from experience that nobody could resist it, and Ruth was no exception, moving slowly forward and sinking into the chair.

"I know it's weird," she said, huddling further into her sweater. "I don't expect you guys to believe me."

"You'd be surprised how often we hear that," Frank told her, giving her what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

"And we almost always do," Ray said kindly. "Hey, you want a coffee or something?"

"I do," Gerard said immediately, then frowned. "I don't have the right books - Frankie, come help

me?"

"Sure," said Frank, pushing his chair back and following Gerard into the back room.

He held his arms out while Gerard sifted slowly through the pile on his desk, muttering to himself and occasionally passing a book to Frank.

"I'm really not jealous," Frank told him.

"Uh huh," Gerard said absently.

"I'm *not*," Frank insisted.

Gerard just dumped another book in his arms. "I am, kind of. I always wanted to have a vision."

"The closest I ever came was dreaming that me and the Cardinal went to the beach."

"What?" Gerard laughed, startled, his face splitting into a huge grin and his eyes crinkled at the corners. "You never told me about that!"

Frank grinned back, shifting the books in his arms. "Yeah, it was when he came to visit me in the hospital, you know? I fell asleep while he was there, and I guess my subconscious decided to carry on the conversation. You were there, too. You had a bucket and spade."

Gerard laughed again, but his eyebrows creased. "The Cardinal came to visit you in the hospital?"

Frank nodded. "Before I came to see you at the airport. I don't know when it was, exactly. I was pretty out of it. I didn't tell you about it?"

Gerard was frowning for real, now, the book in his hands forgotten. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Frank said impatiently. "Why?"

"I just - he never told me."

Frank shrugged. "Like he's usually so free and easy with the info?"

Gerard ducked his head, allowing that, but he said, "I just don't know when he would have had time. I mean, I was all," he waved a hand around his face, which Frank guess was meant to mean 'recently recovered from demonic possession'. "And there were kind of a lot of confused people in hooded robes for him to take care of, too."

"But we had this whole conversation," Frank started, then he remembered the way he'd felt, how everything had been floaty and painless and not like when he woke up to Ray and Bob at all. "I guess the whole thing was a dream," he said reluctantly.

"I guess." Gerard was looking at Frank intently, like he wanted to ask more questions about it, but then Mikey stuck his head around the door.

"She's ready to talk, guys," he said.

"All right." Frank took the last book in Gerard's hands, and jerked his head for Gerard to lead the way. "Let's get to work."

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