



# Purr-fect Match

XM Moon

*Perfect Match*

**XM Moon**

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*she*

There's a faint patter of feet in the hall upstairs, just barely audible over the tv. Gavin sighs.

"Daddy!"

"Yeah, pumpkin?" he calls, already pressing pause as he sits up.

More footsteps on the stairs.

"There's something under my bed."

He sighs again and stands, meeting Lila's gaze as much as he can in the shadowy light thrown by the tv. "Something under your bed?" he echoes, scrubbing a hand over his face. It doesn't make his eyes feel any less like they have sand in them.

"Yeah," she says, almost a whisper. "Making noises."

"You want me to go check?"

Lila nods.

Of course. “Do you wanna come with me or stay here?”

She shifts from foot to foot, clearly thinking, then says, “Stay here.”

“Ok. You make sure no one starts the movie back without me.”

Nodding again, Lila runs and curls up in the corner of the couch, watching him from over the arm. Gavin flips the light on the stairs. Flips the hall light too once he reaches the top, then the one in Lila’s bedroom. With a groan, he drops to one knee and bends over to peer under the bed. A couple of stuffed animals, a sock, a picture frame. He debates taking it, or at least moving it. Instead, he grabs the sock and the stuffed animals, tosses the sock in the hamper, and drops the stuffed animals on the mountain of them in the corner.

The pile of stuffed animals chirps in annoyance. Or, more accurately, the small, living ball of fluff that scales the shifting slopes like a tiny dragon to glare at him in an expression that’s all too human.

Gavin sighs. The fucking cat. He hadn’t even thought of that. They’ve only had the thing a couple of months and already it’s causing trouble. Not like Gavin hadn’t expected as much, but he didn’t think it was going to happen so quickly.

He should have gotten her a bearded dragon or something. Would have let her keep the turtle they found by the side of the road if it didn’t need medical attention; Lila had been the one to suggest they take it to the nature center at the park near the house, though. So then, a few weeks later when they’d found the cat at the same park — *one* cat, and not a cat and a whole litter of kittens like they’d found in her playhouse a few months earlier — Gavin gave in and said she could keep it if it didn’t belong to anyone.

And of course, it didn’t. No microchip, and even worse, it

was healthy, didn't have fleas or worms, and seemed to have already been fixed. Maybe a year old, the vet had said, so still young but starting to settle down a little, and the entire time they were there it was a model citizen.

So what if Gavin's allergic and doesn't trust it on principle? What was he going to do, tell her no? He couldn't. Can't. Not when she finally seemed excited about something.

"Fucking asshole," he mutters, catching it first by the scruff when it tries to slip away, then scooping it up in one hand.

The cat bites him playfully, then stretches up to paw at his face with absolutely zero regard for personal space, germs, or the fact that he's allergic.

He read that sometimes the allergies go away with changes in the pet's diet and hygiene. He's pretty sure it's all part of some marketing plan to sell expensive cat food, but he left his laptop open and Lila saw cats and asked him about it, so now the cat's on the fanciest diet in the house. It looks better now, though. Less sad and ragged. If he tells it as much as he carries it back downstairs, no one needs to know.

On the couch, Lila has unlocked his phone and started playing some game she's downloaded. She looks up at him as he approaches and drops the phone on the cushion beside her, extending both arms for the cat.

"You found him!"

"Think he's what was under your bed?" Gavin asks, passing the cat off to her.

Lila wraps both arms around the cat and presses her face into his side. She's not allergic to him in the slightest. "I dunno," she says.

"You dunno, huh?" He picks up his phone and tosses it back onto the coffee table before sitting down beside her. "Well, I

didn't see anything down there that should be making noise.”

“Sorry,” Lila mumbles, peering at him over the cat's head.

Gavin sighs. “It's ok. Were you having another nightmare?”

Lila shrugs and curls into a ball around the cat.

The cat is just *the cat* because Lila has already changed his name three times; they've all been wrong so far, she says. The last one that he knows of was after a character from some animated movie she likes with a wizard who also can't seem to pick a name. It's almost enough to make Gavin worry if there's something else there. If maybe... He cuts himself off mid-thought, then scoops them both up. “You wanna talk about it?”

Lila shakes her head *no*, burying her face against his chest.

“Ok,” he replies. He's not going to force it. It's something he even asked her therapist about — if he was supposed to push more. She looked him in the eye and asked what he thought. Apparently, *no* was the right answer, at least judging by the fact that she smiled when he said it. One thing in the correct parenting pile. It does remind him, though. “We go see Dr. Emma on Thursday if you want to talk to her about it.”

This time, Lila shrugs again.

Gavin doesn't even have to wonder where she gets it. He's gotten plenty of reminders; if he wants someone to blame there's a perfectly good mirror in the bathroom.

“You think you might want to try going back to sleep?”

For a long moment, there's only silence. Well, if you didn't count the damn cat purring because at least someone is happy about this. Then, Lila says, “Ok.”

“Yeah?”



She nods.

“Ok. Is he coming or is he sleeping down here?”

“Does he have to?” Lila asks.

“I think it’d be good for you to get some sleep without anyone bothering you,” Gavin replies, as much a clear answer as Lila’s was.

“But then he’ll be alone.”

He exhales a slow sigh. “But then he can get some sleep too.”

“But he can come back upstairs if he wants to, right?”

“Yeah, pumpkin.”

\*\*\*

It’s not every night. After the first time, a good month passes without any issues and Gavin almost forgets about it until he hears feet on the stairs again.

“Daddy?”

“Hm?” he grunts, half-asleep. He isn’t watching anything this time — doesn’t even have the tv on — but still, Lila waits at the foot of the stairs, a lesson learned from the time she’d come in while he had Alien on.

“Can I...?”

“Yeah.” He sits up, and tries not to be annoyed at the fact that he probably won’t fall asleep again. Not for a while. “What’s up, buttercup?”

Lila tiptoes closer. “Can’t sleep.”

“Yeah?”

She nods and climbs onto the couch next to him. “You can’t either,” she says, almost judgmentally. Like he doesn’t get to say anything as a result of his own ongoing insomnia issues, which he can’t really argue with. He isn’t entirely sure he likes his six-year-old daughter pointing it out, though.

“No, but you need to get some good sleep so that brain of yours can grow,” Gavin replies, spreading one hand over the top of her skull.

Lila gives him a skeptical look that he also isn’t sure he particularly loves getting from her, but it could be worse, he supposes.

He half yawns, half sighs.

“There’s something under my bed again,” Lila says around a yawn of her own before he can ask what happened.

“Huh?” he replies before the words form fully in his brain. Then, “Is it the da-uhh, the cat again?”

Lila hesitates for a moment, eyes wide, then she shakes her head.

“No?” Gavin pushes her hair back out of her face, holding eye contact. “You sure?”

She nods.

He doesn’t sigh. Barely, but he doesn’t. “Ok. You want me to go check?”

Another nod. Her curls fall back in her face.

“Ok. Wait here.”

“It’s really dark,” she mumbles.

“I’ll be careful.”

Famous last words. He trips over the cat in the hall, sprinting away like it's fleeing the scene. Catches himself on the wall and lets out an exasperated sigh to keep from swearing aloud. Just so he can say he did, he looks under Lila's bed. More stuffed animals, a glass that looks like it had chocolate milk in it at some point, some clothes, the same picture frame. Since he's already down there, he pulls the clothes out and dumps them in the hamper, and carries the glass back downstairs. He doesn't even bother mentioning it, just puts it in the sink to be dealt with later.

"Sweetheart, I checked and there's nothing down there," he says when he goes back into the living room.

Lila frowns and shifts on the couch, expression vaguely guilty.

"Come on." He outstretches both arms, picking her up when she stands.

"Are you gonna go to sleep too?"

"I'm gonna try," Gavin says.



Two

Gavin calls off work. He didn't plan on it.

Lila seems fine, so he takes her to school like normal, but then he just goes home.

He forgets to call Logan, former college intern turned sitter, and tell them he can pick Lila up. He also loses track of an entire day sitting in the shadow-streaked living room, jumping when the door opens. Logan is just as surprised to find him home as Gavin is when the two of them come in.

Gavin knows it's bad when Logan takes one look at him, then urges Lila into the kitchen; they don't even ask if they should stay their usual hours, which he's beyond grateful for because he can't deal with dinner and bath time and the rest of being a fucking parent right now. He takes his phone and goes outside. Not quite pretending to be working and therefore not quite lying, but it's enough that maybe Lila won't ask questions.

A couple of hours later, Logan comes out with a beer extended in offer.

“You... look like you might need it?” they say.

“You bring you one or would that be corrupting you?”

They hold up a second in their other hand that Gavin hadn't noticed. “I um, don't technically turn twenty-one until next month?”

Gavin gives them a look, then shrugs. He's not going to force it one way or the other. Logan hesitates for a moment, shrugs, and sits in the seat across from him.

After a moment, they say, “It's um— it's today, right?”

“Yeah,” Gavin eventually manages. “Yeah, it's today.”

One year, since...

He takes a slow, unsteady breath. A sip of his beer. Stares into the space over Logan's shoulder. How Logan knows, how they remembered that, Gavin doesn't know. He's not going to ask, either.

“Do you, um— I'm sorry, I'm not great at this. But if you want to talk about it?”

“Logan,” he says.

“I— you don't have to!” Logan pauses and looks over at the sliding glass door where the cat is pawing at the glass. “Can I bring him out?”

“Sure.” Gavin doesn't see why not. Doesn't see why, but doesn't care enough to argue. He takes another sip of his beer, long and slow, and tells himself that if the cat runs off he gets to take it as a sign that it doesn't want to be here even though he knows he'll end up looking for it.

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Logan open the door and scoop up the cat before sitting back down. Gavin keeps staring into space while they make the cat pantomime

playing piano on the glass tabletop. Finishes half of his beer. Realizes it's Thursday.

“Don't you have better places to be?” he asks.

The piano solo stops and Gavin feels two sets of eyes on him. One makes sense, but the cat's sudden shift from happy little puppet to active participant is weird.

“I can... leave if you want? I'm sorry, you just seemed um—” Logan says, clearly panicking. The same thing he tried to get them out of all summer at the firm. The doubt.

“No, I just—” He takes a slow breath. Another. “Logan, this is outside of your job description.”

“You spent almost four months telling me nothing was outside of my job description if it needed to happen for me to be able to do my job.”

Gavin breathes a laugh. There it is. “You might actually do something with yourself one day.”

“Gee thanks, Mr. C,” Logan says with a nervous laugh of their own.

“I'm serious, though. Why aren't you out... I don't know, drinking beer with someone fun. Friends. People your own age.”

“I dunno. Because I'm here?”

In their lap, the cat makes a questioning little chirping sound.

“Think he just called you a liar,” Gavin says.

“Woooow, sold out by the cat.” This time, Logan actually laughs.

“So, you wanna tell me what's up?”

“It’s... you have other things to worry about. Mine’s small shit by comparison, and definitely not your problem. And Lila is my job. You literally pay me to take care of her when you can’t, so uh...”

“Ok, shots fired.” Gavin takes another long sip of his beer. “And it’s not the uh... the fuckin’ shit Olympics. My problem’s over. At least as over as it can be.”

Plus, whatever’s going on in the life of a college senior now might serve as some sort of distraction. He’s grasping at straws.

Logan shifts in their seat. Adjusts the cat. Takes a sip of their beer and grimaces. “It’s just been um. A week. Honestly, I know it sounds shitty, but I was kind of glad when it seemed like I needed to stay longer. Gave me an out from everything for a bit. Sound familiar?”

He gives Logan an appraising look. Long enough that they start to pick at their chipped nail polish, then run a hand through their hair, turning it into a mess of white-blond tufts.

“I’m sorry,” they mutter. “That was too far. I just— I had an exam this morning and my... *ex*, we split up, the day before yesterday. And our friends, well, I guess I figured out who was more essential to that group.” Logan clears their throat loudly and looks away, downing half of their beer in one swig.

“Well, that’s some shit.”

“Yeah,” Logan agrees. “Yeah, it is. But let me guess, it gets easier, matters less, whatever.”

“That’s a little bitter, especially coming from you.” Gavin takes a sip and thinks before he adds, “But no. Not really. It still fucking sucks, even when you’re almost forty and supposed to have your shit straight.”



At that, Logan laughs again, the sound of it slightly choked. “Yeah, I think that’s like, completely out the window for me.”

Gavin laughs, too.

The silence that falls is broken by the sliding glass door.

“Daddy?”

He takes a slow breath and meets the blue of Logan’s eyes over the table. “Yeah, pumpkin?”

Lila shuffles back and forth in the doorway. “I woke up and I couldn’t find you.”

“I’m sorry,” Gavin says, groaning as he stands. He picks Lila up and closes the door, sits back down with her in his lap. “Logan and I were just talking.”

“Is everything ok?” she asks seriously.

“Yeah, I—” Logan stops abruptly and meets his eyes over a table. Seems to reconsider. “I’ve kind of been having a bad week and your dad was just talking to me about it.”

She nods. “He’s good at that. Is your dad good at that?”

“No, he’s not,” Logan says.

“Oh. What are you sad about?”

“Well, I had a friend, and we got into a fight.”

It goes on like that; Lila asks questions, and Logan answers them, glancing at Gavin every so often when they’re not sure if they should answer honestly. After the third time or so, Gavin says, “You know my thoughts on this.”

Logan looks at him for a minute, then nods. Eventually, the questions run out. The beer runs out. Lila goes back to sleep, Logan in tow, leaving Gavin with the cat.

“I— can’t you just—” he calls to their retreating backs. Logan gestures at Lila as the two of them walk away. The meaning is clear enough: he should be able to handle the cat.

Gavin sighs and stands, cat in one hand, empty bottles in the other. The cat purrs, blissfully ignorant of the stresses of everyone around him. He glares at it as he makes his way back inside, pushing chairs back in with his feet. The cat purrs louder and blinks at him slowly.

“It’s like you fucking like misery or something, I swear,” he mutters.

The cat chirps at him in an uncomfortable semblance of confirmation and wiggles out of his hand, up the stairs in a black streak before he can even turn around to close the back door.

# Three

It gets worse.

Gavin isn't sure what changes, but it gets worse. Holidays, maybe, at least that's what Lila's therapist suggests. She also says it's normal for children who've been through traumatic events to struggle more with personified manifestations of fear, and that even that aside, Lila's not beyond the age where such fears are common. She also very pointedly said that it might help to keep her away from age-inappropriate media that might exacerbate her anxieties; somehow, Gavin had avoided snapping that it's only happened *twice* and that the two very much didn't seem to be related.

But the point remains that Lila's occasional sleeping troubles are now competing with his. A few times, she's even woken him up. Nightmares, and now monsters under the bed instead of the former ambiguous *something*.

He still checks, although he insists on having Lila look with him more often than not. There are, of course, no monsters under the bed. The only other thing ever in her room is the

cat.

But it just. Keeps. Happening.

During daylight hours, he tries other things. Asks her what the monster looks like — dark, furry, shadows, all extremely helpful — and if the monster has done anything scary. More practically, if she wants him to shut the door to keep the cat out. Not that he thinks it's inherently doing something insidious because that seems far-fetched, but the cat was supposed to help with all of this. That's why he let her keep it. And if he's not doing that, then they need to try something else. Except Lila very emphatically says no to both questions, and somehow that's weirder.

He might not be the best suited to parenthood, but this is well outside of his wheelhouse.

If the monster “isn't scary” and Lila doesn't want him to shut the cat out at night — or somewhere else, like the bathroom or the garage, apparently that's too mean so he doesn't even bring up getting rid of it — then what is he supposed to do? So, he goes back to telling her that there's nothing in the dark that isn't there otherwise. No monsters. Not even saying there's nothing to be afraid of, because if she's not already, he's not going to add to it. God knows they don't need more therapy topics.

Night after night, she just. Keeps. Insisting. And that's not like her. Sure, she's only just turned seven, but she's a smart kid. Reads a lot of books, one hell of an imagination, but never anything like this before. It hits the point that he starts seriously considering taking her to the regular doctor to make sure there's nothing else going on, as much as he hates that idea. The last thing he wants is for her to stop telling him things, or to think something is wrong with her. She's already been through too much as it is.

But this has to stop.

One night in a frustrated move of desperation, he locks the cat in *his* room even though that's the one place he very pointedly isn't allowed in. He's not happy about it. Definitely doesn't want to do it, but maybe if Lila knows there's nothing else in her room, it'll make a difference.

The rustling starts shortly after he's settled in for the night, a book pulled up on his phone.

"Jasper," he sighs, "fucking cut it out."

It stops for a few minutes. Starts again.

"Jasper!" He rolls out of bed and crouches, glaring at the golden green eyes that peer out from the shadows.

The cat makes a little *mrrp* sound and bats at his treasure: a receipt.

"Give me that! You have an entire house of toys to fuck around with all day and you're really going to keep me up playing with this?"

In answer, Jasper attempts to swat it out of his hand.

"No. You really are a monster." Shaking his head, he gets back in bed. He can hear the cat purring from beneath the bed, an oddly deep, gravelly sound for something that's maybe ten pounds of black fluff, but it's almost soothing. Tolerable, at least.

A bit after ten, he turns out the light, and the scratching starts up. Not at the door, like Jasper needs to go out, but under his bed again. With a loud sigh, he turns on the lamp and gets up *again*.

"Enough!" he yells, reaching under the bed for the cat. He catches it by the scruff and yanks. The cat hisses, eyes sparking brightly with annoyance, and swipes at him.

He hits the wall with a thud in his haste to avoid Jasper's

claws, letting out a hiss of his own when his head connects with the windowsill. “Ow.”

“Your own fault,” a man’s voice says.

He blinks, first at the side of his bed, then up, at the golden green eyes of the decidedly strange, if beautiful, and *definitely* naked creature perched on the edge.

“Wh-who the fuck are you?”

The... man blinks at him, slowly. “Well, if I’m being honest, I’m starting to quite like Jasper.”

His mouth opens and closes of its own accord, no sound coming out. “*What* are you?”

“Oh, now that seems a little bit forward, for our first proper conversation. I know I’ve been living here for a bit now, but do you have any idea how difficult you are to get alone like this?”

“Alone... for what? What do you want with me? With us? Whatever it is, just leave my daughter out of this,” Gavin blurts, heart racing.

The stranger frowns. “Why would I do anything to her? She’s lovely.”

“But you’ve been giving her nightmares. For months! That’s not nothing!”

Jasper makes a tsking sound and shakes his head, long black hair shifting over his shoulders with the motion. “I didn’t— I promise you, my intentions were never to harm her. I actually cannot. Under the current terms.”

“Current terms,” he repeats.

The man nods. “Hospitality and welcome dictate reciprocity, although that’s all I ever wanted in the first place. Like I said,

I just want to talk. Well..." Jasper's smile is a dangerous, slow thing. The kind he's spent his whole life avoiding.

"Right. Um. Talk. What do you want?"

Smile still in place, Jasper shifts on the bed, tucking one knee up under his chin.

"That's, um—" he starts, about to say that cats aren't allowed on the bed, but then Jasper isn't really a cat, clearly.

"I had this whole thing prepared, but you've got me a little off balance."

A hysterical giggle slips out. "Off balance. You?"

Jasper's eyes narrow. "Is that a cat joke?"

"I— what? No. You're the one sitting on *my* bed. Naked. And you're off balance?"

With a little sniff, Jasper says, "No one's stopping you from also being on your bed, naked. Evening the playing field."

"I don't— I'm not—"

One of Jasper's pitch-black eyebrows arches. "Aren't...? Lonely? Alone? Because you *are* looking," he says with a sharp smile.

He forces his eyes back to Jasper's, his cheeks burning. Gavin wants to say that he's not either of those either, or that if he is, that's his business, but he can't quite form the words.

"Tell me," Jasper says, letting his leg drop and leaning forward to look him in the eye. "How long has it been since you had someone who cared for you?"

His mouth opens to protest, and Jasper lifts a finger. His nails are still sharp, Gavin notices, like his teeth. Not human.

"Not your daughter."

“I’m fine.”

“Would it really be so bad if someone did?” Jasper asks like his answer had been something else.

“You mean you?” he croaks.

Jasper smiles again, wicked and full of promise.

“And what, um— what do you want?”

“Me? I want what I already have. A nice home. Somewhere to sleep at night. Maybe someone who...” He catches his bottom lip between his teeth, tugging it out of shape. Takes a breath and sighs. “Look, I might know something about being lonely. Alone.”

Swallowing hard, he says, “You’re not going to like, steal our souls or anything, right?”

Jasper laughs, his pointy white teeth glinting in the lamp-light. “Your souls? What would I do with those? Do I look like a demon?”

At his blank look, Jasper says, “Oh. Right. No, I don’t. I’m much prettier, and I do not now or ever have any interest in your souls, thanks. But maybe you can find something else to offer?”

He follows Jasper’s unsubtle glance down to his boxers and flushes. “Uh.”

The silence stretches a bit awkwardly until he finally manages to ask, “You’ll stop... the whole under the bed thing?”

Jasper gives him another grin. “Well, that depends. Are you offering somewhere else for me to spend my nights instead?”

“I can’t deal with this right now. I have to be up in like seven hours. That side,” he says, pointing at the stretch of



mattress closest to the wall. “And if you wake me up again—”

“Don’t worry. You won’t even know I’m there.”

\*\*\*

Gavin wakes up suddenly a bit after two in the morning. He switches on the lamp again, and two emerald-and-amber eyes blink at him sleepily from across the careful buffer zone of empty mattress.

“*Why?*” Jasper hisses, his pupils slits.

“You said Lila’s seen you... not a cat?”

Blinking again, Jasper says, “Yes?” In a move that’s still incredibly catlike, Jasper rolls over to face him and stretches. “I’m not exactly sure why you’re yelling at me now?”

He had, somehow, rapidly fallen asleep after their brief conversation; the answers he got were apparently enough for his brain — yes Jasper is some sort of shapeshifting *thing*, no he doesn’t mean them harm, the rest can wait — but now his pulse is once again frantic. Gavin gapes at him. “My *daughter* has seen you *naked* and you don’t see why I’d be a bit upset? You don’t— It’s— She’s a child, and you’re a—” he flounders.

“I’m a...?”

He sighs and flops back down onto the pillows.

“There’s a fair bit of territory between looking like a cat and looking like you,” Jasper says softly. “She was never supposed to see me *at all*, but certainly hasn’t ever seen me like that. I get that I’m a monster, but I’m not...”

“I—” Guilt floods Gavin, staining his cheeks red again.

One of Jasper's pointed nails dimples the skin under Gavin's chin as Jasper uses it to turn his head, forcing Gavin to meet his eyes. He looks different now, although Gavin can't quite concentrate on him hard enough to pinpoint exactly how. His face shape has changed, he thinks. More feline but also strangely hazy, somehow, the same soft, glossy black fur he's come to expect on his cat and his couch and his carpet trailing into inky shadows.

He's even more strange than earlier and entirely inhuman like this, but interesting. Oddly appealing, somehow. Gavin wonders what it'd feel like under his fingers — if the pitch-black edges would have the same impossible velvety softness that his fur usually does or if it's more like the silky strands of his hair, which Gavin only knows about because he woke up with it in his face and definitely *not* because he then twirled some of it around his finger in his half-asleep state before his brain kicked on.

“Turn off the light? We can talk more tomorrow if you want, but I'm tired.”

“Don't you sleep for like, sixteen hours a day?”

Jasper laughs softly. “Not exactly.”

He runs a fingertip along Gavin's jaw, just touching. It's a simple thing, but one that should be too intimate, somehow. Too familiar. Except it isn't. No more than it was the countless times that Jasper-the-cat put a little paw on his cheek, or his nose, or licked his fingers with his sandpapery tongue.

That bit threatens to rapidly spiral out of control, in light of recent events. Gavin squeezes his eyes closed, trying to block out the image of the *weird-but-hot cat creature Jasper* and the worse option of *ethereal and definitely hot, almost-human Jasper* in his bed from his mind. It doesn't work, though. There's not enough space for that.

God, this was a terrible idea. Adopt the stray cat, they said, it'll be fun, they said, all cats are kind of weird, watch Jackson Galaxy and you'll see, they said. He's pretty sure Jackson Galaxy doesn't know a damn thing about this.

"Is everything alright?" Jasper asks.

"Great. Fine. I'm a single father with a naked literal catboy in my bed, and tomorrow I'm supposed to give a presentation on the design for the new convention center. What part of that isn't awesome?"

When he opens his eyes, midnight-black fur has dissipated like smoke, leaving him passably human once more.

"I can't tell which way you find less distressing," he explains before Gavin can ask. "Would it be better if I went back to being a cat for tonight?"

"If you—" Another high-pitched noise slips out of him.

He's going to have a nervous breakdown.

No, he's *having* a nervous breakdown. That's what this is.

"No!" he whispers, reminding himself that it's after two in the morning and even if he's not asleep, Lila is. "That's not going to make it better! Because I'm still going to know that you're— and I'm going to keep picturing—"

"Is that what this is about?"

"Is it— Yes! Until a few hours ago, I was a perfectly regular guy who maybe sometimes wondered about other men, but I'm not at all in a place to deal with that right now so I did the normal adult thing and *ignored it*. Now I have a-a naked... *you* in my bed, and I have to worry about whether or not I'm an, I dunno, a fucking furry or something worse!"

Jasper frowns. "What's a furry?"

“Person who dresses up like an animal and, y’know?”

He blinks, his pupils quickly expanding before contracting back to slits. “I see. And it’s not going to help if I remind you that I’m not *really* a cat?”

“I have scooped your shit out of a box for the last eight months,” Gavin says, trying not to lose his mind.

“I mean, how many times did you *actually*? I figured out the toilet pretty quickly. More to the point, you’ve also spent eight months with me sitting in your lap, and you didn’t seem quite as stressed then.”

“I— god, that’s even worse! Are you— how old are you? Please tell me it’s more than like, a year and a half.”

Jasper shrugs. “Yeah, probably. I don’t know, time isn’t exactly... the same where I come from. I existed for a while, got *really* bored, and now I’m here.”

“And you know that exposing yourself to children is bad, but not how old you are or what a furry is?”

With a sigh, Jasper rolls so he’s halfway draped over Gavin’s chest. He crosses his arms, then sets his chin on them, staring. A moment later, Gavin feels the same familiar rumble he knows from the nights that he’s fallen asleep on the couch and woken up with the cat curled up on top of him before retreating to bed. Only now he’s in bed, and Jasper is very much not a cat, but still, he finds himself stroking a hand over Jasper’s head. And still, far less surprisingly, Jasper presses into the touch, eyes closed.

His fingers find their own way into Jasper’s hair, just as silky now that he’s awake as it was earlier. Jasper hums, pleased, and the purr intensifies, seeming to reverberate through Gavin’s chest.

“Turn off the light,” Jasper says quietly. “We can talk more

tomorrow.”

This time, Gavin does it. He’s too tired to argue. Too... too. It’s all once again more than he can deal with tonight and trying to force it is just going to make it worse.

Falling asleep with Jasper pillowed on his chest is even easier than falling asleep beside him, and this time, Gavin doesn’t wake again until morning.



four

Somehow, he makes it through the presentation. It takes all of his self-restraint to sit through the rest of the day, though, and he knows his coworkers notice because he gets asked about it. If he's feeling alright. If everything is ok at home. All Gavin can do is nod. What is he supposed to say, after all? How would he even...? Ignoring all of the bits where their *cat* had turned into a *man*, it's still crazy. He let someone he just met spend the night in his bed, in his home, with his daughter.

Said that Jasper could *stay!*

God, what is he even thinking?

That, half asleep, he just needed the problem solved, and that the particular details of who was doing the asking were particularly effective because he hasn't gotten laid in... fuck, years. And Jasper isn't threatening; he's pretty, and soft, all graceful lean lines. Not like Gavin.

No, not like him at all.

He's been asked if he played football, or hockey, or rugby, or wrestled maybe, since he was a kid. At least by the time he got through his first year of college people stopped trying to talk him into trying out. Just because he's big doesn't mean he wants to hit people. No, he's perfectly fine behind a desk, drafting plans, and he's mostly *happy* just doing that and going home. He doesn't have a whole lot of free time between work and taking care of Lila anyways. Especially not for dating, which has never really gone well when he tried. The one time it did, sort of, he wasn't trying; even that one didn't turn out well in the end.

Gavin swallows and sighs. It's been long enough now, and it's easier, at least for him, but it's still... If he's honest with himself, it's part of why he's pushed even the thought of dating aside. How's he supposed to explain that, anyways? Because it's not like it's not going to come up. He has a kid. Kids come from *somewhere*. "Oh, Gavin, what happened to her mom?" he can imagine them asking.

And he says what? "Well, you see, she offered herself a couple years back because she couldn't fucking stand either one of us." Yeah, because that's gonna go over really well. It's already a small miracle that he's not in prison by virtue of being the husband.

So, Jasper is attractive for more than one reason if he ignores a couple of key details and lets himself consider it. He shouldn't be. He knows that, but... well, Jasper wasn't wrong last night, either. Gavin does want *something*. That's always been the case. It's why he kept trying for so long with Lila's mom, hoping that one day he might actually make her happy. Sure, in the process he'd also made himself completely miserable and is only just now in a place where he actually feels alright most of the time, as bad as that might sound, but it's true.

On the way home, he stops by the store.



One night a week, he pays Logan to stay late so he can go without having to drag her out for the bulk of the shopping; it might've been thirty years ago, but he remembers how much he hated going as a kid, so it's another one of those things he tries to spare her. Today, he's especially grateful for it. For all that Lila would have thoughts on clothing selections, he's definitely not ready to explain *this* to her yet. But he also most definitely can't have Jasper just traipsing around naked. He'll definitely lose his mind then.

By the time he reaches the car, he's honestly not even sure what he bought. Everything on the shopping list, sure, but there are three other bags of clothes and other odds and ends that he somehow ended up with and truth be told, also on the list of things he can't deal with. Not when he knows what's waiting for him at home.

“Daddy!” Lila is on him as soon as he's in the door, halfway tackling him before she starts trying to pry bags out of his hands

“Oh, hey, hi, careful pumpkin there's stuff in there that'll break. That's— ok thank you,” he says as she tugs two bags — some produce, coffee, and a few other fairly safe purchases — from his fingers. He follows her into the kitchen, nearly tripping over a streak of black fur in the process. Gavin exhales loudly. Saying fuck in front of a seven-year-old is on the list of things he's not supposed to do, he reminds himself.

Papers and notebooks cover one end of the kitchen table. Some of them are Lila's homework, he notices immediately, but most are well beyond the second-grade curriculum.

He sets the bags down on the counter, carefully tucking the ones meant for Jasper behind the groceries. As if he knows, the cat slinks in close, wiggling like he's preparing to jump. “Don't even think about it,” he mutters. “Hey Lila, where's Logan at?”

“Bathroom. They said they had tooooo much coffee because they have a big test tomorrow.”

“Toooh much coffee?” Gavin echoes, scooping her up like she expects. “Are they gonna explode? Is it gonna be a coffee disaster?”

She laughs and shakes her head.

“Hey Mr. C!”

Gavin turns just as Logan scoops up Jasper, using one of his paws to wave. “Hi Logan,” he replies, strained. “The monsters behave?”

“Always,” Logan laughs. “This one’s been especially cute all evening. How’d your presentation go?”

Jasper’s feet are silent as he slips out of Logan’s arms and winds between Gavin’s feet.

“Great.” He puts Lila down, hoping she’ll take the cat away, but she doesn’t. “Yeah, it was uh. Great. Looks like you have something big coming up too?”

“Oh, yeah, just um, renewable systems design. But I’ll go ahead and get out of your hair. I’m sure you’re tired and I’ve got a good y’know... six... ten more hours of this,” they say with a forced smile.

“You’ve got this. If I can make it through, you’ll be more than fine.”

“Here’s hoping you’re right. I just put the leftovers up, so they should still be warm if you’re ok with turkey mac and cheese.”

“Thanks, Logan.”

“You need me tomorrow? Any big weekend plans?”

“No,” Gavin says with a laugh. “No, you know me. Old and boring. Enjoy your weekend. Give me a few minutes to unpack all of this and I’ll send you your money for this week?”

“Yeah, no worries!” There’s a shuffle of papers as Logan begins packing up their notes, so Gavin turns his attention to the groceries. He’s almost done — one more bag before all that’s left is what he got for Jasper — when Logan says, “Alright, I’ll see you two on Monday?”

From the floor, Jasper gives a little chirp and looks up at Logan.

“I’m sorry, you *three*,” they amend, crouching to scratch Jasper’s chin. “And you, lil miss, need to go get ready for bed.”

Lila giggles like she’s just been caught doing something she wasn’t supposed to. “Daddy, can we read a story?”

“Yeah, pumpkin. You go get your bath and get started, ok? I’ve still gotta eat.”

“Ok,” she says again before hugging Logan and retreating upstairs.

“How’re the nightmares?” Logan asks quietly once she’s gone.

Gavin shrugs. “I think they’re getting better. I hope.”

“Any more monsters under the bed?”

Jasper chooses that moment to let out another *mrrp*, stretching up on his back legs to paw at Gavin’s thigh.

“No, cut it out.”

“Aw, be nice to him! Look at his little face,” Logan says.

Sighing, he meets Jasper’s golden-green eyes, watching as

they close slowly. “The only monster under the bed is this thing,” he says as he bends down to pick up the cat.

Jasper chirps happily and headbutts his chin, making Logan laugh.

“Alright, well if you’re sure you’re good here, I really am gonna go. Have a good night.”

“You too.” He sees Logan to the door, Jasper still stretched on one arm like a miniature panther. As soon as the dead-bolt’s locked, he says, “Seriously? This is what we’re doing now?”

“Well,” Jasper says, his voice even stranger coming from the cat’s mouth, “what would you have preferred?” The whiskers over one eye twitch slightly, much like a raised brow. Even like this, the look is dangerous. An indisputable smirk.

His fingers curl in the cat’s scruff. After a slow breath, he says, “I have dinner to eat, and a kid to put to bed, and *then* I’ll deal with you.”

“Yes, *daddy*,” Jasper purrs.

It shouldn’t make his cock twitch, but it does. “Don’t—”

With another tiny, amused noise, Jasper rolls out of his grasp and drops to the floor, disappearing up the stairs without a sound.

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“Jasper?”

The rustle of plastic is all the warning he gets before sharp teeth and claws prick at his ankle in a play attack.

“What are you—”

Jasper laughs and releases him, rolling over to expose his soft black fur on his belly. He stretches out, the tips of his little toes tickling Gavin’s leg hair. “You could use more surprises in your life,” he says.

Stepping over him, Gavin picks up the bags and sets them on the bed. “Get over here.”

“Oh, so *now* I get to find out what’s in the bags?”

The hair on the back of his neck prickles at his sudden, silent proximity, now human-shaped and just tall enough to peer over his shoulder. One after the other, Gavin dumps the bags on the bed; Jasper picks through the pile, his expression betraying nothing.

“And these are for me?”

“Well, yeah. If you’re uh. Staying. You’re gonna need clothes.”

Jasper lets out an unamused little huff.

“It’s just some stuff to start. I kind of guessed on sizes and all since we’re not exactly, y’know..” He huffs and takes a step back. “Just put something on and meet me downstairs. We can figure out the rest from there.”

Gavin is almost asleep on the couch when he finally hears the creak of the stairs. At first, he thinks it must be Lila, up with another nightmare, but when he turns he instead finds the lean silhouette of Jasper in the empty stretch of darkness between the kitchen and the living room. “Are you gonna sit, or is this gonna be one of those?”

“One of what?” Jasper asks, cocking his head.

He’s about to explain when Jasper takes a hesitant step closer and Gavin sees what he’s done.

“Are you— are you wearing my clothes?” he asks, out of shock more than anything because the too-large shirt and pajama pants he has on did not come from the pile on the bed.

Even Jasper’s shrug is graceful, his footsteps once again silent as he pads across the carpet. “You told me to get dressed. You technically never said in what. Those are itchy. And smell bad.” He sits, not in the chair or even on the other end of the couch like Gavin expects, but right in his fucking lap like he’s still a goddamn cat.

The noise that escapes Gavin is wholly undignified, and there’s no hiding it. “Tell me you’re not wearing my underwear at least?” he jokes weakly.

Jasper’s nose wrinkles. Adorably, because *of course* it has to be adorable. *Of course* even his look of distaste has to make Gavin want to kiss the tip of his nose, just like he would if he were still ten pounds of black fluff.

“I can take it off if you’d like,” Jasper says.

“What? Um, no? Unless you really are wearing my underwear, and then— No, still no, just... Keep them on and I’ll wash them later.”

The rumble starts faint, paired with the curve of Jasper’s smile. “So, what did you want to talk about?”

“I um— This.”

“You um this,” he echoes, amused, the vibration intensifying to the point that Gavin can really feel it, and not just in his chest.

His eyes close. *Fuck*. Gavin forces a slow, controlled breath, struggling to get a grip on himself. “Can you not do that? Please?”

“Do what? Oh. Not really,” Jasper says.

Even his frown is pretty, accentuating the perfect downturn of his lips.

“Sorry. I can just...” He starts to retreat, the purr falling silent almost immediately.

“I— wait.”

Jasper freezes, eyes wide with confusion.

“I’m not very good at this. And like I mentioned last night, I’ve never um, I’ve never really done any of it with a man, so I’m a little...”

This time, Jasper settles on his thigh, one of his long legs folded between them. “Well, I’m not *really* a man, if that makes it easier.”

He breathes a laugh. “Not exactly.”

“Didn’t think so, but it was worth a try,” Jasper replies with a small smile. He sighs dramatically. “Don’t like me when I’m a cat. Don’t like me when I’m person-shaped.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“No. But you don’t have to for me to know I make you uneasy, so I’ll gladly tell you whatever it is you want to know if it’ll help.”

“And what, I get to just hope it’s the truth?” The question is out before Gavin can catch himself. Can turn it into something slightly less bitter.

Jasper sighs, genuine and heavy with dismay. “I can’t lie, by nature. And even if that weren’t the case, why would I? I want to stay, but that’s dependent on you wanting me to stay. Here—” he takes Gavin’s hand and presses it to his ribcage, just over his heart. The beat of it is rabbit quick and steady

under his palm. “Ask me something.”

It takes him a second, but then he says, “Why’d you steal my clothes?”

Jasper’s breathing stutters for a second before he says, “I told you, those felt wrong,” but his pulse stays the same.

Gavin swallows, licks his lips, and reminds himself of the questions that have plagued him all day. “Why are you here?”

Without any sign that he’s lying, Jasper answers each of his questions. Even when Gavin’s responses get sharper, there’s nothing even vaguely begrudging or annoyed in Jasper’s tone and his posture somehow remains relaxed but focused all at once. It makes no sense.

And yet, it makes perfect sense if Gavin just accepts it as the truth. Jasper literally isn’t even from this plane of existence — he came here to get away from his world and happened to find them. He wanted to help and intended to approach Gavin sooner, but then Lila caught a glimpse of him in that shadowy in-between, not a cat, but also certainly not the version of himself sitting in Gavin’s lap, and he panicked. Apparently, staying a cat all of the time was a lot of work and throwing off his magical abilities, making it more difficult to get rid of Lila’s nightmares.

As unbelievable as it should be, it wasn’t.

“What else?” Jasper asks softly, eyes locked on him.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why us? It’s not like you cared about us before you uh, moved in? So, like, what was in it for you? If it’s all of this work, I don’t get why... any of this.”

Jasper’s expression softens, his eyes liquid gold in the



lamplight. “You know how sometimes you just have a feeling about something? Well, I got— it’s a little bit more than that, but I just saw something that caught my attention, I suppose. And like I said, I want to actually belong somewhere. To make a difference. So, I hoped that maybe that would be enough for something to work out,” he says with a little shrug.

“And just like that, you know what you want enough to...” Gavin shakes his head in disbelief. It feels like the exact opposite of how he does anything, even the idea of that level of certainty almost too incomprehensibly foreign to imagine. “Meanwhile I don’t even...” he mumbles before shaking his head again.

Jasper’s head cocks slightly, his expression giving the faintest twitch of amusement. “You don’t even *what?* I can’t exactly read minds, you know.”

“Can’t you?” Gavin huffs. He finds his attention drawn to the curve of Jasper’s bottom lip, again.

“I could guess, but it’s more fun if you tell me.”

“I...” Gavin starts. He can’t do this. He especially can’t look at Jasper and do this. Can’t have Jasper looking at him if he’s even going to think about talking about this. Only once has Gavin even tried to discuss it, so many years ago that it feels like another lifetime, and that was more than enough. “I mean you know what you want and that’s great and all, but I don’t. I don’t even know if I actually like— I haven’t even ever—”

“Ok,” Jasper says, breath warm on his face. He’s purring again, Gavin realizes, the sound and feeling of it oddly comforting as long as he doesn’t think about it too hard. “One way to find out... If you did want to, you could.”

It takes a moment for Gavin’s brain to realize what Jasper is saying. What he’s offering. After that, it’s only a matter of

seconds before any reservations he has crumble. Before he can talk himself out of it, Gavin pushes his hand into Jasper's hair. He barely has to tilt his chin for their lips to touch. A quick brush, nothing more, and he pulls away in time to see the way Jasper's pupils go wide.

Immediately, he needs more.

The second kiss is nothing like the first, and it certainly answers any remaining questions he might've had about his sexuality. He moans at the feeling of fingers in his hair, of sharp nails prickling his scalp, and that quick breath is all the air Gavin needs. His lips map a path from Jasper's mouth to his jaw, then down his throat to the neck of his stolen t-shirt where he seals his lips over the pale blue of a vein and sucks.

Jasper hisses something, his hips shifting in Gavin's lap. Somehow, he manages to move to face Gavin fully without ever actually pulling away. The new angle lines them up too well, and it isn't long before they end up moving in tandem, Jasper grinding on his cock while Gavin makes a mess of his throat.

"We can't," Gavin says, his face still tucked against Jasper's throat.

"But..." Jasper whines.

"Not like this. Lila could come down and— Bed."

"Bed," Jasper agrees.

He nods, not trusting himself to speak. Jasper climbs out of his lap and stretches before he offers a hand to Gavin. He takes it, stands, and kisses him again because something tells him to.

Relocating isn't the worst thing.

It means he gets to watch Jasper slink upstairs, the fluid

motion of his hips inhuman. Unfortunately, it also means he gets caught up in the thought of what it would feel like pressed against him. Gavin catches Jasper by the waist, fitting them close and tugging at an earlobe with his teeth. He has no one to blame but himself, but when Jasper lets out a shocked little moan, icy panic spreads through his veins.

“Shhh.”

The sound dissolves into a whine as Jasper presses his face against the side of Gavin’s, both of them breathing hard and frozen as they wait to make sure they haven’t woken Lila. A moment passes. Two. Each one of them agony because he’s pressed flush against Jasper with too many layers between them.

“Ok,” he whispers, “go.”

“Are you sure?” Jasper asks in a quiet hiss. “You wouldn’t rather just take me here?”

This time it’s Gavin who has to fight back a groan, his hips rocking against Jasper of their own accord because yes, yes he would and that’s exactly the problem because then they’re definitely going to wake Lila up.

“*Bed*,” Jasper says, high and strained.

After one more sloppy kiss pressed to the side of his neck, Gavin releases his grip on Jasper’s hips.

The door closes with a soft click of the latch, and uncertainty sets in again. A whole new variety, this time.

It’s his room. His mismatched dresser and nightstand and queen-sized bed pushed into the corner with his pile of blankets, all of which he’d bought because he liked them and no one else was going to see them anyways. And no one has, really — Lila here and there, and maybe, doubtfully, Logan — because it’s *his*, but now Jasper is in here. Except he’s been

before. Last night, and who knows how many times before when Gavin has been at work, or when Lila has come in and left the door open. So it shouldn't be a problem.

*But.*

Eyes bright even in the darkness of the room, Jasper takes a step closer. The featherlight drag of a claw under Gavin's chin makes him shiver, and when Jasper laughs he can feel it on his skin. Another claw traces along the edge of his jaw — Jasper's thumb this time, he thinks — teasing and comforting all at once.

Gavin opens his mouth to say... something, and Jasper steps even closer, settling both hands on his chest and stretching up to kiss him again. It's still hot, still makes all the blood in his body run south, but it's lost the frantic edge it had before they made it to the privacy of the bedroom.

“What should I— How do you want me?” Jasper asks, sounding hesitant, of all things.

He didn't know that was even possible. “You getting nervous on me?” he asks, hoping the weak attempt at a joke will ease some of the tension.

This close, he can see the way Jasper catches his bottom lip between his sharp teeth. “A little, maybe.”

And *oh*. “Are you sure you want to? I mean we don't— we don't have to do anything you don't want to.”

Any remaining space between them disappears as Jasper says, “Does it seem like I don't want to?” directly in his ear.

“No,” Gavin manages hoarsely. No, it really doesn't, especially when Jasper's nails are kneading at his chest and his cock is pressed flush against his own. More than that, it makes him want. Makes him want this, *Jasper*, really fucking bad. “Can we um, bed?”

Nodding, Jasper walks them backwards with an ease that seems like it should be impossible. When he hits the bed, which he apparently cleared off at some point, he goes down lightly. By comparison, Gavin feels clunky. Awkward. But if Jasper is bothered by it, he doesn't show it.

They make it fully onto the bed without incident, another stage of the progression that gives Gavin pause once he realizes it's happened. It's been years since he's done this, especially for the first time, and now he's got no fucking idea what he's doing. He wants something he doesn't even know how to get. How to give.

Jasper's fingers find their way into his hair, nails scratching over his scalp and sending a shiver all the way down his spine. His mouth is inviting. Hungry. He's obviously done this before, at least, and a sudden rush of jealous curiosity floods Gavin at the questions of when and with whom. The impatient shift of Jasper's hips forces the thought from his mind, though, and any others with it that don't involve touching and more and *now*.

"You still haven't answered my question?"

"Hm?" Gavin grunts questioningly, his mouth busy on Jasper's throat.

"How—" Jasper gasps and shivers, "how do you want me?"

"I don't know. What's going to be best? Easiest? What do you like?"

The little laugh that gets from Jasper goes straight to his cock, making his hips buck in search of more stimulation.

"Which answer do you want? Because you asked for three different things."

With a groan, he bites down on Jasper's shoulder, hoping the fabric of his shirt will blunt the force of it at least a little.

From the shocked whimper that Jasper lets out, it either doesn't, isn't enough, or it does something else entirely.

He's not sure how to answer that question, so once he gathers the necessary focus for words, Gavin just says, "Answer all three?"

At least then he can maybe find a starting point. Find a direction.

"Easiest, I suck your cock and enjoy it. Best, you fuck me until I can't breathe. And as for what I like, well, are you seeing a trend?"

Another strangled sound claws its way out of Gavin's throat. He's not going to survive this. Not with both his sanity and dignity intact.

"If we're looking for a good happy medium, though," Jasper purrs, right in his ear, "switch me spots."

Gavin struggles to obey, not because he doesn't want to but because he seems to lose all coordination in his eagerness.

"There's um, there's lube in the bottom drawer." He isn't entirely sure what Jasper needs, but he's fairly certain that he's at least in the right vicinity there. With a pleased hum, Jasper kisses him then stretches to turn on the lamp then reaches into the drawer, easily doing so without his hips ever leaving their spot atop his own.

"One of these days, I'm going to get you to tell me what it is you think about when you're locked in here, alone with this," Jasper says, shaking the half-empty bottle. "But not tonight."

"Are you— is that for me or for you?"

The noise Jasper makes at that is equal parts startled laugh and purr. Gavin never wants it to end, even when the sound that replaces it is a moan muffled by his own mouth.

“You are *fascinating*,” Jasper says, punctuating it with another press of his lips. “But I suppose the answer is both.” He drags his nails down Gavin’s chest and huffs in annoyance as they catch in his shirt. “We could have easily skipped this step.”

“Mm.” He curls his fingers under the hem of Jasper’s shirt — *his shirt* — and pulls it up to his armpits before Jasper gets the message and moves so he can take it off it entirely. It takes a bit more work to get out of his own, but it’s worth it for the feeling of skin on skin. Once he manages to get them both down to nothing, Gavin is pretty sure he’s going to burn up with it.

He rolls his hips, his cock trapped under Jasper’s weight. The throaty moan he gets in response goes straight to his head, so he does it again.

“Ok, ok, let me...” There’s a pop of a bottle, and Jasper’s weight lifts off of his hips. After a second, there’s a wet bubbling sound, and then Jasper’s fingers wrap around his cock. It’s almost enough to make him scream, someone else touching him after so long; it’s a small miracle, really, that he doesn’t.

“Wait, don’t you need to like— isn’t there prep, or...?” Gavin asks frantically when Jasper lines them up a second later.

Laughing, Jasper leans forward to kiss him, then moans as he sinks back onto the head of Gavin’s cock. Gavin might scream then, but at least if he does it’s mostly muffled by Jasper’s amused shushing against his lips. The bed frame creaks as Jasper shifts, gradually working himself further and further down Gavin’s cock with tiny, panted gasps.

Once he’s finally fully seated, Jasper lets out a slow breath and shivers. His weight is the only thing keeping Gavin still; the feeling of it, of him, is incredible. Tight and warm and clenching around him in erratic little spasms. The muscles of

Jasper's stomach are taut, fluttering faintly with each breath.

It's overwhelming in the best of ways, the feeling of enveloping heat, of being that close to someone who actually seems interested. In him. Add in the fact that he's only had sex without a condom a couple of times in his life and never like this, any and all of that years ago, and, well, he's already closer than he'd like to admit.

Gavin is determined to make it last, though. Now that he's here, something crystallizes almost, turning the thought of a life with Jasper into an idea with some appeal. One with the promise of something more. So, he doesn't want to disappoint.

On top of him, Jasper watches quietly. The lamp casts shadows across his face, but from his place against the pillows, Jasper's eyes look black. His nails dig into the meat of Gavin's chest, not quite unpleasantly, although Gavin's fairly certain it's going to leave a mark. Finally, he says, "Ok?"

Gavin nods. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm— *God*," he breathes, eyes closing as his head sinks back to the bed.

"I'll take that as a compliment. Can I move, or do you need another minute?"

"Please."

"Please what?" Jasper says, the smile plain in his tone.

Fuck, how does Gavin know that already? It's been what, a day? And already he's positive that if he opens his eyes, he'll see that satisfied little cat-that-got-the-canary smirk on Jasper's angular features. Maybe the hint of sharp teeth. His hands find their way from Jasper's thighs to his hips, thumbs tracing the groove between muscle and bone. Gavin wonders if he reaches a bit further if he could touch the place where they meet, could trace the give and stretch where Jasper's body made space for him.



Jasper rocks his hips, just a couple of times. Enough to get a rise out of Gavin, although anything he did could right now. He purrs an amused *shhh* at the whimper Gavin lets out, then moves again.

It starts slowly, but even that has Gavin making all sorts of desperate sounds he knows he's going to be embarrassed about later. Right now, he couldn't care less. Jasper's nails rake down his chest. The prick of pain is enough to pull him back from the edge, and for a second he wonders if that's why Jasper did it. When he opens his eyes, however, he sees that Jasper's are squeezed shut and his mouth open. That's enough to make him curious. Bold.

At the snap of his hips, Jasper makes a high, whining sound, loud enough that there's no way it didn't carry through the walls. As appealing as it is, as much as Gavin wants to make him scream, that just won't do right now. He tugs Jasper down until they're chest to chest again and fits their mouths together before he does it again. Once more, Jasper makes another noise, but this time it's muffled by Gavin's mouth. It's better, fractionally. The alternative is stopping, and that's unfathomable. Like this, it's humid and sweaty with how close they are, skin rubbing on skin and panting into each other's mouths. Right, somehow, as if this is how it's *supposed* to be.

Close. Hot. Easy.

Yeah, Gavin could get used to this. He's already thinking about the next time, and he hasn't even come yet. Hasn't made Jasper...

Working a hand between them, he curls his fingers around Jasper's cock. It's made a slick spot below his belly button, precome easing the slide as he fucks Jasper into his fist before pulling away with cock and hand in near unison.

"Gavin, I'm—" Jasper starts. His hips jerk.

“You’re...?” It’s a tease, but one he can’t quite manage both because he has no room to talk and because as a result, he can barely form a coherent thought.

“Can I?” he asks against Gavin’s lips. “Can I, please? You can keep going, I just...” he babbles, pleading and desperate, like he thinks there’s any way Gavin could say no.

“Of course you can,” Gavin says in his ear. “C’mon sweetheart, come for me.” He doesn’t know where the words come from, but he has no desire to take them back either.

Jasper lets out another hungry little sound and pushes into his fist, then back onto his dick as he chases his release. And there’s no chance that Gavin is going to last through that. It was hard enough when he was somewhat in control, but now that Jasper is moving again instead of smothering his wordless whining against Gavin’s throat, he doesn’t have even the slightest hope. Gavin fucks him through it, reaching his own peak well before Jasper’s stopped clenching around him.

For several long moments after, all he can do is breathe.

“Well, that was...” Gavin says when he can finally manage enough conscious thought for words. He wipes his hand on the sheets, his other still tangled in Jasper’s hair.

Jasper’s laugh is pleased, lazy, his smile slow and easy against Gavin’s skin. “Enjoy yourself?” he purrs, and even that feels too good for how overly sensitive he is right now.

He rubs over the soft skin behind Jasper’s ear with his thumb, wondering how long they have before one of them has to move. Jasper’s lips press to his throat, tongue dragging over his pulse for one brief moment before he sighs and sits up. Carefully, Jasper climbs off of him, silent as he slips out of the room. Several silent seconds later, Gavin hears the toilet flush, the rush of water in the sink, and then the soft squeak

of hinges as the bathroom door opens.

“Are you ok?” Jasper asks from the doorway.

Gavin looks at him, casually naked like this is the most natural, easy thing. Even if he had a million years, he doesn't think he could ever reach that point, but he doesn't feel the way he'd expected, either. Doesn't feel different, or like he's made a mistake.

“Yeah,” he finally manages. “I should probably um—”

His footsteps *do* make noise as he crosses the room, each one too loud as he closes in on Jasper. Gavin barely has to tilt his chin down, the wordless question still not quite formed in his mind, before Jasper is stretching up that last little bit to meet him

five

They make it two weeks.

It isn't entirely smooth. Gavin already doesn't know how to handle this, the transition from having Jasper around as a cat to a strange fae man far easier than he would have anticipated; it certainly should involve more complication than a couple of brief disagreements over acceptable times to make an appearance in human form and the required attire for those instances. In both cases, Jasper concedes quickly and with nothing more than some empty grumbling. The semi-cohabitation is surprisingly comfortable, though. Whatever remains of his unease surrounding Jasper dissipates with each conversation and each successive night that Lila seems to actually sleep now that Jasper is spending less effort concealing himself. Sneaking around and late-night make outs on the couch make him feel like he's in high school again, but they make him feel alive again too, so Gavin isn't complaining.

Two weeks is all it takes, though, before his control over The Situation dissipates.

It's the weekend, so Gavin fights through his body's normal rhythm in an attempt to at least make it through a movie on the couch. But he's tired, and the comfortable weight of Jasper stretched out half on top of him only makes matters worse.

*Gavin.*

The look in Jasper's eyes is just as urgent as the tone that first woke him; Gavin doesn't even have time to ask before Lila's, "Daddy?" jars him to full consciousness.

Jasper is still flattened against him, but instead of draped bonelessly, he's frozen, eyes wide and glowing faintly in the darkness. Even without moving his lips, his question is clear: *What do I do?*

He sighs and taps Jasper's hip, sitting up partially so he can reach the remote. Fortunately, as is her habit, Lila's out of sight at the foot of the stairs where she waits for him to confirm that it's alright for her to come out. Gavin forces his breathing into something even. Pauses the movie. Says, "Yeah pumpkin?"

"I can't sleep," she says. She steps out from behind the wall, a few quick little steps bringing her closer as she continues, "and I can't find— Jasper?"

*"How?"* Jasper asks, expression stricken.

"Eyes," Lila whispers, creeping closer. "What are you doing?"

"We—" Jasper starts, recovering more quickly than Gavin, "your dad is making me watch this movie."

Lila's face scrunches when she looks at the screen. "You've seen the Matrix before. *I've* seen the Matrix before."

And that part is true, although maybe not the best parenting decision he's ever made. In his defense, it had been

a situation much like this one; he couldn't sleep, and apparently, Lila couldn't either, so he'd let her stay with him on the couch until it was over.

Jasper just shrugs and says, "Must've been asleep."

"Daddy watches it when he can't sleep, so like, all the time."

"Yes well, it seems like it worked again since he left me alone with it."

"Hey!" Gavin protests, laughing. It's true, though. At this point, he isn't sure how many times he's seen the original trilogy, although anymore they're mostly just background noise to keep him from slipping too far into his thoughts before he finally does fall asleep.

"Well, what if..." Jasper starts, repositioning himself with an impossible degree of grace to drape his legs over one of Gavin's thighs. "You stay and keep me company since I'm not allowed to leave this couch until I've seen it?" He holds out an arm and pulls Lila up beside him, smiling faintly when he glances at Gavin.

Gavin presses play again because he's not sure what else to do. He doesn't have a script for this. Not under normal circumstances, but definitely not when the person lounging casually between his outstretched legs isn't human and was until recently their pet for all practical purposes.

But then, Lila didn't even question Jasper's presence. She didn't even bat an eye before she curled up at his side like nothing had changed, but Gavin can't stop staring — at Jasper, at Lila, both of them focused on the screen like all of this is normal. Without looking over, Jasper extends the arm not draped around Lila to where Gavin's hand rests on the couch cushion. Awestruck, Gavin threads their fingers together and tries not to choke on the feeling now threatening to smother him.

When Lila falls asleep no more than twenty minutes later, the corners of Jasper's lips quirk up in a soft little smile and his gaze leaves the screen just long enough to confirm that she's dropped off completely. Only once the credits begin to roll does he look over at Gavin, his fingers tightening where they're still twined together.

"Bed?" Jasper mouths silently, dark eyebrows raised.

Gavin nods. "You want me to get her?"

In reply, Jasper shakes his head quickly.

"You sur—"

Jasper pulls his hand free to hold a finger to his lips. Again with a degree of fluidity that Gavin has never possessed, even in his Matrix-induced dreams, Jasper scoops Lila up as he stands. Wordlessly, Gavin follows them upstairs. He's given up trying to process what's happening, at least for now, and just watches as Jasper easily navigates the stairs, dark hallway, and messy bedroom to tuck Lila in.

To his surprise, when Jasper turns back to face Gavin he looks uncertain. Like Gavin isn't actively fighting the urge to drop to his knees right then and there. He doesn't, though. Instead, he just mirrors Jasper's earlier gesture, extending a hand and pulling Jasper into his chest when he takes it. Jasper folds against him easily, face tucked into Gavin's throat.

They don't shower. Gavin gives himself one night each weekend. It's his way of forcing himself to change his sheets regularly, and tonight he doesn't feel like it. Jasper doesn't question it, although Gavin catches him watching curiously more than once as he gets ready for bed like he's trying to parse something.

It's not until they get in bed, Jasper stretched out on his side against the wall, a furrow between his dark eyebrows

and his eyes tracking Gavin's every move, that he gives in, and the silence breaks.

With a sigh, Gavin pulls one arm out from under his head to wrap it around Jasper's shoulders. "I'm sorry. I passed out and then it put you on the spot and—" he sighs. "I haven't ever really brought anyone around her before. Hasn't been anyone to bring, but even before that I've kind of always been the one to handle everything with her so I'm just..."

"Not used to not being alone." Jasper says it so easily, like he's been there the entire time. Like he knows.

"Yeah," Gavin says softly. "And then you just swooped in, and she just accepted it."

"Well, you're both kind of extraordinary. Unless you're saying that's a problem?" Jasper asks, frowning again.

"No? I mean, it's not how I planned on any of that happening, but... No." He shifts onto his side so their faces are just a few inches apart. Still too far away. "No, it's the opposite of a problem."

The frown dissolves into a smile, and Jasper drags him down for a kiss.

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The next morning, Gavin watches Jasper wake up in tiny increments, lit in stripes of sunlight that cut through the blinds.

One eye cracks open, Jasper's pupil a paper-thin slit of black cutting through the gold and green. He smiles before closing it again. "You're up early," he mumbles, inching closer to Gavin.



“Mm. You ever have that feeling where you’re not sure if you’re awake or still dreaming?”

Jasper breathes a silent laugh.

“See, now you get it.”

“I absolutely do not, but I at least know what you’re talking about. Sort of.”

Gavin buries his smile in the top of Jasper’s hair and lets his eyes close. There’s no chance he’ll fall back asleep, but this is a good alternative. Comfortable.

“And there’s two more of them?” Jasper asks.

“Three more, technically. I’ve only seen the new one once, though. Old ones are the ones I grew up with. You don’t have to if you don’t want to though,” he says. He was resigned to that possibility before he even mentioned watching the first one to Jasper.

“I’m pretty sure it’s— what is it the weird one with the sunglasses said? The one who’s part of the computer thing? About inevitability?”

Gavin laughs, feeling lighter than he has in years. “You hear that Mr. Anderson? That is the sound of inevitability!” he quotes, his Hugo Weaving impression horrible even to his own ears. It’s worth it to feel the way Jasper’s grin spreads against his chest, though.

Leaning into the feeling, he rolls Jasper onto his back and kisses him just because he wants to. And to make his morning even better, Jasper’s arms loop around his neck and he kisses Gavin back, easy and eager and open, like he’s happy with anything Gavin wants.

“Not sure how long we have before she wakes up,” Gavin groans, a reminder for himself as much as anything.

“Will she not be ok for a little while on her own?” Jasper asks. When Gavin pulls back with a surprised look, he adds, “That’s a legitimate question.”

He has to concede that point. For all that Jasper handled the night before flawlessly, he can’t be expected to know everything. Gavin shrugs and kisses him again. “It’s a toss-up. Either she reads a book, sneaks TV time, or decides she’s going to make breakfast and I have to put out a fire and go grocery shopping on a weekend.”

“I’m going to assume that last bit is bad.”

“Guess you can find out firsthand at some point.”

“Me?” Jasper replies incredulously.

Gavin shrugs again. “Why not? Lila was my biggest concern, but the cat’s out of the bag there.”

“Seriously?” Jasper deadpans.

“Sorry.” He snorts a laugh and cups Jasper’s cheek. “Didn’t even do it on purpose, but I kind of wish I had. It’d be funnier that way. I do mean it, though. Now that she knows, it’s... easier.”

With a hummed acknowledgment, Jasper stretches up to kiss him again.

“I still have an entire looming crisis about paperwork but that’s a problem for after coffee.” He immediately distracts himself from that same issue with Jasper’s mouth, groaning when Jasper hooks both heels behind his thighs to pull him closer.

Unfortunately, the sound of feet on the hall floor also tells him that the time left on the clock is a big flashing zero. This time, he groans for another reason entirely.

“What’s wrong?”

“Think this is karma for the times I’ve used her as an excuse to get out of doing shit I didn’t want to. And now I’m— can you uh— I need you to let me up. Sorry.”

Jasper’s expression is odd, but he lets Gavin go at once.

“Sorry,” Gavin says again.

“It’s ok.” He pauses, head tilting slightly as he thinks. “Now that Lila’s aware, does that mean I don’t have to um, you know.”

Fortunately for Gavin’s sanity, Jasper doesn’t say *turn into a cat*.

“You have to wear pants. And a shirt. I don’t really even care what pants and shirt, just—”

Jasper rolls his eyes and smiles. Kisses Gavin as he gets out of bed, then pulls on shorts Gavin didn’t realize were quite so short when he bought them and one of Gavin’s sweatshirts. Then he turns, an expectant look on his face, and says, “But it’s a little unfair if I have to and you don’t.”

“I was uh—” Gavin stands, glancing down, “—kind of waiting. But um, I think I might need you to...”

He doesn’t realize he’s crowded Jasper back against the door until they’re pressed flush, but the contact certainly isn’t helping his problem.

“I can keep her from doing anything too catastrophic for a bit. Don’t worry,” Jasper says.

“Mm, how are you even real,” Gavin mumbles into his mouth. “I’ll make it up to you later, I promise. I just— give me a minute to get dressed and I’ll be down.”

Jasper smiles and kisses him again. “I’m not seeing how you have anything to make up for, but it sounds promising so I’m not going to fight you on it.”

Unable to stop himself, he leans in and fits their mouths together one last time, hard and hungry. It's exactly the opposite of what he should be doing right now, he knows. The temptation to test fate and pull Jasper back into bed — or worse still, to keep him right where he is, pinned to the door — is strong. But Jasper will be here later.

He has to believe there's a later.

Gavin forces himself to take a step back, exhaling shakily.

"I'll see you downstairs," Jasper says, eyes full of mischief. Before Gavin can do more than nod, he slips out the door, calling Lila's name down the stairs in a bright little singsong as he closes it again behind him.

He takes another breath, slow and measured this time. Makes himself think about work, the laundry list of things he needs to do this weekend which includes actual laundry, anything that isn't Jasper's ass in those shorts and Gavin's sweatshirt. By the time he's dressed, he can almost think straight again, or at least enough that he laughs at his own bad joke.

Jasper and Lila are sat at the kitchen table, talking about something that happened at recess the day before when he makes it downstairs. Gavin gives him a grateful smile and messes up Lila's hair on his way to the coffee maker, not wanting to interrupt her story.

"We were gonna make it for you, but Jasper doesn't know how to either," Lila says a moment later.

"Is that right?" Gavin asks, turning to lean against the counter. He smiles at the thought of how that conversation must have gone.

"I thought all grown-ups knew how to make coffee," she replies seriously.

“Some grown-ups don’t even drink coffee,” Gavin says.

Lila looks between him and Jasper, the disbelief on her face almost comical.

“It’s true,” Jasper says. When Lila turns to Gavin again, he winks conspiratorially.

Gavin smiles again, absolutely helpless against the feeling that’s made its home in his chest over the last few days. The coffee finishes and he pours a mug for himself, dropping in a couple of ice cubes so he can drink it sooner rather than later then adding half-and-half until it reaches the right shade of brown.

“Do you want some?” he asks the familiar presence now hovering at his side.

“Mm, part of me feels like that’s giving up some kind of title but I’ve got this curiosity problem.”

He snorts a laugh and offers the mug to Jasper, whose nose wrinkles immediately when he sniffs it.

“And this is what you make such a huge fuss about?” Jasper asks, tone dripping in skepticism.

“No one’s making you drink it.”

“Can I have coffee?” Lila asks from the table.

“Absolutely. In ten more years.”

In response, Lila groans dramatically. Jasper’s soft laugh sends ripples across the top of the coffee, the mug still held to his lips despite his grimace.

“Should I make myself another one?” Gavin asks, not bothered in the least by the possibility.

“Mm, do you need an answer right now? I think the smell

is growing on me.”

Gavin fights to keep his hands to himself. Says, “I can always warm that one back up and drink it later.”

“You’re sure?”

He nods and turns back toward the pot, once again trying to rein himself in. Sure, Lila had seemingly accepted things last night, but everything is different in the daytime and there’s a significant difference between watching a movie and kissing Jasper in the kitchen. He hasn’t had a chance to talk to her about this yet. About what it might mean. And until then, he definitely can’t...

Jasper sets the half-and-half on the counter beside his hand and the need to touch him only worsens. Not even in any way that’s inappropriate; he just wants confirmation that this is real. This moment.

In a practiced move, Gavin pushes the ice dispenser just long enough for it to drop two cubes into his hand. He lets them slip into his coffee, then pours another round of half-and-half.

“Is that the *correct* amount?” Jasper asks.

“No,” Gavin replies with a shrug. “Just depends. It’s good coffee so I don’t put as much.”

Brows furrowed, Jasper takes the bottle back and pours more into the first mug, turning it a creamy beige. Then, he lifts it to his lips once more, sniffs, and takes a tiny sip. “Hm.”

“Hm,” Gavin laughs. He takes the bottle back on his way to the fridge, surveying the contents ahead of the inevitable question.

“Hey daddy, what’s for breakfast?”

“Yes, *daddy*, what’s for breakfast?” Jasper echoes quietly,

teasing.

Gavin's fingers tighten around the metal handle. "I need you to not do that. Please," Gavin says, voice low. "Those are wires I really, really do not need crossed."

Immediately, Jasper's expression goes serious. He nods. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"It's— hey," he interrupts softly. This time, he gives in to the urge and brushes the corner of Jasper's jaw with his thumb, the reassurance more important than avoiding a potentially difficult conversation with his daughter. "It's ok, I just... We can talk about it more later?"

Jasper nods, and the only thing stopping Gavin from ducking to kiss him is the fact that Gavin can see Lila watching them, eyes wide and curious.

That's a conversation he's going to have to have soon. Like probably today. And then Logan will have to happen sometime in the coming week or two, because it isn't fair to keep forcing Jasper to hide away every time they're in the house, especially since it's a near-daily thing. The rest, he can figure out in stages.

"Tell me I'm not still expected to eat the gross crunchy pebbles, at least?"

A laugh bubbles out of him, the tension broken. "No. It'd kind of be weird if you did."

The answer to breakfast ends up being waffles. Actual waffles, rather than the frozen ones kept in the freezer for emergencies. As Gavin sits listening to a spirited debate of the merits of pouring versus dipping and watching Jasper suck syrup off of his fingertips, he can't decide if it was the best decision or the worst. He finishes his coffee, then pours what's left in the pot into Jasper's half-empty mug and drinks that as well before he starts collecting dishes. After

announcing loudly that she's going to look for lizards, Lila runs outside barefoot, leaving him alone in the kitchen with Jasper.

Jasper brushes against him as he moves to sit on the counter. He's quiet as Gavin empties the dishwasher, his spot clearly chosen to put him both in Gavin's path and out of the way of any cabinets he might need, but he watches the entire time. Only once he's done does Jasper hold out a hand. It's the first time since they left the bedroom that Jasper's initiated any actual contact.

It's some reflex that makes him glance toward the sliding glass door before he slips his hand into Jasper's, and of course, it doesn't go unnoticed.

"You should talk to her," Jasper says with an odd little smile.

"I'm going to. Later, sometime. But I've gotta finish this, and start laundry, and—"

"Gavin," Jasper says, too gently.

His inhale is shakier than it should be, and it only gets worse when Jasper loops both arms around his neck, his expression soft.

"I'm going to," Gavin insists. "I know I have to, I just... I don't know what to say."

"I can't tell you that, unfortunately."

"Yeah, I know. I just um— after everything with her mom, I don't want her to feel like I'm not here for her, y'know?"

Jasper kisses him with an exhaled laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"Do you have any idea how much she talks about you?"



“I’m sorry.”

“Why?” Jasper asks, the corners of his mouth quirking up just slightly.

He isn’t sure why that’s what does it, but it is. It’s just a question, and clearly, Jasper isn’t upset, but the last of whatever composure Gavin had left cracks.

“I, um— I’m sorry,” he says again, voice rough. “I’m kind of a mess, and—”

To his surprise, Jasper kisses him again.

“Wh—” Gavin starts, then stops because he isn’t even sure what his question is.

“I think you forget that I’ve seen a lot more of you than the past couple of weeks.”

Gavin frowns. He’s aware, obviously, that Jasper’s been around for longer than that. There are a million pictures of him with Lila on his phone, and Gavin might even have a few just of the little black cat. Logically, he knows. There are even things that have come up in conversation over the past couple of weeks from the months *before*. He just hasn’t thought about it.

Now, the realization opens the floodgates, countless little memories – of Jasper waiting for him outside the bathroom or curling up on the couch just far enough away that Gavin didn’t care – surfacing at once. Innumerable moments in which he thought he was alone, so it was safe to let himself sink. He thinks he might experience all five stages of grief in the span of a minute, standing there staring at the wood grain of the cabinet behind Jasper’s head.

“That... didn’t have the effect I expected.”

Gavin forces himself to look at Jasper. To meet the gold and

green of his eyes, even if he can't say anything.

"I'm not doing a very good job of reassuring you, am I?" Jasper mutters with a little huff. He cups Gavin's cheek in one hand, not holding him in place or anything but just... doing the same thing he's been doing for months. Just *being there*. And Gavin crumbles into him, burying his face in his stolen sweatshirt, the ends of Jasper's hair tickling his ears.

"What I'm trying to say is that I don't expect you to be something you're not. I know how much Lila means to you and how much you mean to her, and I don't want to get in the way of the life you two have."

"You're not," Gavin says immediately. Reflexively, almost.

Jasper hums an acknowledgment. "But I am causing tension, and I feel fairly confident in saying you're not going to feel better until you talk to her. So, go. Talk to her. I can figure this out at least," he says, gesturing at the sink.

"You're gonna... do the dishes?"

"I think I can manage that, yes."

"But it's not your—" *house, life, problem*, he almost says.

This time when Jasper breathes what might be a laugh, Gavin feels the start of a familiar low rumble with it. "You remember when I brought up staying here?"

Confused, Gavin nods.

"Do you remember me mentioning not doing anything? I might not know how that thing works," he says with a vaguely accusatory nod toward the dishwasher, "but I think I've seen you do the dishes enough times to get the idea."

Again, he makes himself look Jasper in the eye. He can't find the right words to express the strange combination of discomfort and gratitude, and is starting to worry about it

when Jasper ducks down and kisses him once more.

“Go talk to Lila. Or just go... hang out with her or whatever. I’ve got this.”

Gavin gives him another little nod. It still takes him a minute to drag himself away, and even then he catches himself watching Jasper over his shoulder before he finally steps out the back door. But then he’s committed because Lila notices him immediately.

She doesn’t get up from where she’s lying in the grass, but she does grin and wave him over before returning her attention to whatever she’s staring at in the bushes. When he gets closer, Lila holds a finger up to her lips, pointing emphatically at something he still can’t make out.

His knees protest as Gavin sits down next to her on the grass. It takes him several long seconds, but finally, he picks out the tiny praying mantis balanced on one large leaf as it single-mindedly devours a grasshopper.

It’s gruesome but fascinating. They sit in silence watching until the mantis finishes its meal, looks toward them as if it’s aware of their presence, then begins grooming itself in a familiar, fastidious fashion that reminds Gavin why he’s here.

“Hey Lila, honey, can you sit up for a minute?” he asks before he can overthink it and back out.

She cocks her head, pieces of dead grass sticking to her clothes and in her curls, then rolls upright in one of those strange little moves that seem so easy for kids but so impossible once you cross the threshold of thirty.

“Is this about how Jasper isn’t really a cat?” Lila asks, far more perceptive than he knows how to handle sometimes.

Even then, he can’t deny that it makes some things easier.

“Yeah,” Gavin sighs. “Yeah, that’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about. This whole time when you’ve been saying there was a monster under your bed... I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you.”

That’s the important part, especially to start with. Because Lila did tell him. Or at least, she tried to. And before he even tries to broach the next part of the conversation, Gavin needs to right that. He made a commitment to himself a few years back that he wasn’t going to be one of those parents who didn’t listen to their kid and mostly, he thinks he’s done alright.

Except for this.

“I um, I didn’t think— I didn’t realize, I guess, that um—”

“You didn’t think monsters were real,” she says, her expression serious.

“No.” Gavin breathes a laugh. “I didn’t think they were, not like that.”

Lila nods. “Grown-ups never do.”

“Huh,” is all Gavin says, because what else is there to say to that?

“He’s not a bad monster though. I tried to tell you. You’re not gonna make him go away, right? Because you told me we could keep him. You promised.”

“I did, didn’t I?” He’d forgotten about that. Or perhaps more accurately, the conversation got buried under so many other things. Lila had made him promise that they could *actually* keep Jasper — that it wasn’t an ‘until we find somewhere for him to go’ situation like the other times.

“Yeah. And you let him watch The Matrix.”

“Yeah.” Gavin smiles, his gaze dropping to the grass. “So,

you're ok with him staying even though he's not a cat?"

Her little eyebrows furrow, but Lila nods again. "It's his home now too and we promised to take care of him and be his family."

Count on the seven-year-old to cut right to the core of things. No beating around the bush, no hesitation or regard for so many external complications. Gavin sighs. He wishes everything could be that simple.

"Daddy?"

He meets the steady brown of her eyes and says, "Yeah, sweetheart?"

"Are you ok?"

And fuck if that's not the last question he needed her to ask. To make matters... not *worse*, but more complicated, he can't even lie to her. It's another one of those tricky promises he made years ago. One he still logically believes is for the best, even if it makes his life difficult more often than not.

"Daddy just has a lot to figure out," he replies, not quite an answer but entirely true. "Jasper is... Well, it's complicated."

"Because people don't believe monsters are real?"

"Well, kind of. We have to be careful about how we tell people about Jasper because not everyone will understand, and they might be mean or get scared because they don't understand."

"Yeah," Lila whispers, far too serious for a kid her age.

Unfortunately, it's a problem she has even more firsthand experience with than he does, no matter how much he might try to protect her from it.

Gavin swears internally, anxiety slipping toward something

closer to anger. Oddly enough, it does what he needs it to and makes him bold. If his kid can be open and honest with the world, he can at least do the same with her.

“There’s something else I need to talk to you about.” He takes a deep breath, then says, “You know how daddy loved your mom?”

Lila nods, but what comes out of her mouth is, “She made you sad a lot.”

“Yeah, pumpkin, she was really sad too though,” he says.

Somehow, Lila is on her feet and hugging him before he quite realizes what’s happening. He wraps an arm around her, hugs her back then pulls her into his lap, like maybe it’ll be easier to get out if he doesn’t have to look at her while he says it.

“And um, do you remember when we talked to Logan about how they like boys and girls?”

“And people who aren’t either one!”

“And people who aren’t either one,” Gavin echoes, laughing softly at her enthusiastic reminder. At how easily she just accepted it all when Logan had explained it one night when they were talking after she was supposed to be asleep.

“Hey daddy?”

Gavin knows it’s a mistake, but still, he says, “Yeah, pumpkin?” the same way he always does.

“Do you like Jasper?”

“Well sure, sweetheart,” Gavin replies reflexively.

“No, do you *like* like him?”

“I... yeah, Lila. I think I do.” Again, the conversation isn’t

going as planned, but nonetheless, it feels like a weight he hadn't realized he was carrying is suddenly gone.

"And he doesn't make you sad, right?"

"No, he doesn't."

He feels her nod before she says, "Good." Then, "Can I have a bomb pop?"

"A bomb pop? But you just ate breakfast."

"Yeah, but it's a weekend."

Gavin laughs, the logic somehow absurd and infallible all at once. "Yeah, ok," he concedes.

She stands, grinning as she turns and holds out her hands to pull him up. Unlike Jasper, there's no chance that she can actually do it, but he takes them anyways and pretends to let her drag him off of the ground.

"Can Jasper have bomb pops?" Lila asks as they make their way back across the yard.

"I dunno," he admits. His knowledge of Jasper's diet is fairly limited to the comical lengths he'll go to while stealing bits of Gavin's food, regardless of whether he's small and furry or person-shaped, and their resulting discovery that much like actual cats, grapes and raisins are bad. Fortunately, that one hadn't resulted in anything worse than an uncomfortable late night in the bathroom — unsurprisingly also caused by Jasper swiping part of a cookie from Gavin's hand — but for a couple of hours, Gavin had been actually worried.

When they get back to the kitchen, Jasper is nowhere to be seen and the dishwasher is running. Running properly, as far as Gavin can tell; there's no ominous clanking or explosion of suds to suggest that something has gone wrong, and Jasper fled the scene of the crime.

Gavin *hmpfs* at the empty kitchen and goes to glance into the living room. Also empty. “Grab your popsicle,” he says.

“What are you gonna do?”

Sighing dramatically, he replies, “Laundry.”

“No, about Jasper! Are you gonna tell him?” Lila laughs.

“Tell me what?”

He turns to find Jasper suddenly behind him, one eyebrow raised and a curious little smile on his face.

“I, um...”

Entirely unhelpful, Lila shouts, “Ok I’m going back outside!” and darts for the back door, popsicle in hand and laughing once more.

“You um...?” Jasper slinks closer, hair still wet from a shower and wearing one of Gavin’s t-shirts.

All at once, Gavin crowds him against the wall, a thigh slotted between his legs, one hand in his hair and the other slipping under his shirt. It fits perfectly at the dip of his waist. Like it’s meant to be there. Jasper goes loose and pliant. All except for his nails, which dig into Gavin’s chest; ten tiny, bright points of pain that make Gavin groan into his mouth. He pulls away panting and finds Jasper’s pupils blown wide, twin points of jet black just barely ringed in emerald and gold.

“What?” Jasper asks, gaze flicking to his mouth for a moment before meeting his eyes again.

“Lila was concerned that you might not be aware that I like you.”

“Is that so? She just asks me things like how I speak English and why I sound funny, and I have to tell her that I don’t know



and presumably the same way she does.” The question is coy, aloof, much like the deflection that follows, but the soft purr that accompanies it seems to betray something more.

Curious, Gavin presses on, ducking to fit his lips to the notch at the hinge of Jasper’s jaw. “Mhmm. I mean it’s not like we talked about where you’ve been every night for the past couple of weeks, but she was very concerned about whether or not you made me happy?”

“And?” Jasper asks, suddenly tense. The purring stops.

“And what?”

“Do I?”

Gavin pulls back again to look at him. The thought that this is an actual concern of Jasper’s hits hard, years of ingrained worry surfacing at once. This is Jasper, though, not *her*, and it’s early enough that maybe he can still fix it.

“Yeah,” he breathes, knowing full and well that that’s not nearly enough. He bends and drops his hands to the back of Jasper’s thighs. Lifts him like nothing, because he weighs *nothing*, even when he’s not a cat. Fortunately, he’s pretty good about being picked up either way and wraps his arms and legs around Gavin.

As he turns them toward the stairs, Gavin says, “You are absolutely, terrifyingly the best thing that’s happened to me in a long time. And I don’t even begin to know what to do with that, and I’m probably gonna fuck this up a lot, but just... bear with me, please.”

He risks letting go of Jasper with one hand just long enough to turn the knob, pushing the bedroom door closed behind them with his foot.

“What happened to not leaving Lila on her own?”

“Guess we’ll have to be quick,” Gavin says, voice low. He sets Jasper down on the bed, blanketing him with his body and burying his face against his throat. Despite his own words, he gives himself a few seconds to linger. To breathe in the increasingly familiar smell of his body wash and Jasper’s skin. Of both of them, lingering on the sheets. Then, he makes quick work of getting Jasper out of his clothes, herding him up toward the head of the bed so he can stretch out between his legs.

It’s only the second time he’s made it down here. They’ve somehow managed to take things fairly slow since that first night, and most of their encounters thus far have been managed by Jasper, but he doesn’t want it to always be that way. But he knows he was sloppy the last time. Inexperienced and ineffective, and that was after he fumbled his series of realizations of everything he hadn’t noticed before that point. What his brain had decided Jasper meant when he said he wasn’t really a man was that he wasn’t *human*, and while that’s also true, apparently what he’d meant was that he isn’t, strictly speaking, male.

That Gavin hadn’t noticed the differences in their anatomy was entirely on him, but even a week and change later, he isn’t proud of how much it threw him off in the moment. He doesn’t even know why, because it doesn’t bother him. He just... anticipated one thing and found something else. It’s one more thing for him to make up for, though, and he means to start now. To do things right this time.

Gavin kisses a trail from Jasper’s knee to his hip, listening to the catch of his breath and the quiet noises he makes. He smiles to himself and nips the soft skin at the crease of his thigh. Jasper shivers, his hips shifting against empty air.

Some other time, Gavin thinks he might have fun seeing how long he can draw it out, how many of those needy little responses he can get. But not now.

Now, he licks a wet stripe between Jasper's legs, over the tight little slit just below his cock, then all the way up to the tip before taking it into his mouth. He still doesn't really know what he's doing here, but he at least has some idea of what feels good. Between that and the way Jasper's fingers tighten in his hair every so often, he starts to get into some sort of rhythm.

"Oh *gods*," Jasper moans quietly.

Gavin hums around his cock, pleased. He keeps going for another couple of minutes, trying to maintain a consistent pace and good suction, but he doesn't have the stamina for it that he wishes he did, and he doesn't know how to breathe like this. At the little mewl Jasper lets out when he pulls off, though, he questions if he should've risked oxygen deprivation instead.

He quickly replaces his mouth with his hand to make up for it. Gives himself some time to breathe and watch Jasper's reactions then drops back down to lap at the narrow slit below. This time, he gets a sharp, choked sound before Jasper catches himself with a palm over his own mouth. That only turns the steady stream of moans into a muffled tumble of *mms* and Gavin can't get enough. He licks at the edges of Jasper's slit, still absently playing with his cock and increasingly aware of the heat growing low in his belly.

"I can't. I can't, Gavin I—" Jasper whines, hips stuttering like he can't decide if he wants to push up into Gavin's fist or down against his tongue.

Gavin moves again, sealing his lips around Jasper's cock once more and tracing the edges of the narrow entrance with his thumb. There's not much give, really; he doesn't think he could even work a finger in comfortably, but even the teasing contact seems to work. It only takes a few more seconds before Jasper comes with the cracked beginning of a scream, dropping into silent, harsh breaths.

He swallows, presses a kiss to Jasper's belly, then stretches out next to him on the bed.

"I—" Jasper starts before Gavin decides next to him isn't close enough and tugs at him until Jasper rolls halfway on top of him.

"I *just* showered," he grumbles, his finished complaint completely undermined by the contented purr that Gavin can feel in his chest.

"Yeah," he says.

"You know how I feel about showers."

Gavin laughs. He does; Jasper has made his feelings extremely clear, although he's also admitted it's preferable to the cat option of grooming himself with his tongue. "You're still clean."

The purr stutters around Jasper's quiet huff, like the sound catches in his throat.

"I still have to. And do laundry."

"Mm, I weep for you," Jasper says, this time exceedingly unsympathetic. "I think I'm going to take a nap unless you need me for something?"

Shifting to one side, Gavin leans over to kiss him. "Nope. Enjoy your nap."

"I will." Jasper smiles against his lips.

He groans as he stands, wishing he could take a nap as well when a wave of exhaustion crashes over him. But he has too much to do for that, and Lila to worry about. Really, he should get her to come back in before he goes to shower... Gavin sighs and goes through his to-do list again. Too many things for two days off.

“Out of curiosity,” Jasper says when he reaches for the doorknob.

Gavin turns and looks at him, still loose-limbed and stretched across the bed like an invitation. He’s still hard. Still wants more, but it will have to wait.

“Was that you making it up to me like you said you were going to earlier this morning, or something else?”

“What do you want it to be?” he replies, the deflection coming out rough. This isn’t the conversation he expected, his threshold for things like this maxed out for the morning. Any more, and he might actually give up and get back in bed.

“I want it to be something you wanted to do, rather than something you felt like you owed me.”

It’s a mistake, probably, when he walks back over to the bed and leans over Jasper again, hands planted on either side of his chest. “And if it’s both?”

“What do I need to say to convince you that I’m happy here too? That you don’t have some perceived wrong to repent for?”

Gavin swallows, unable to meet Jasper’s eyes.

“I might not have a future back there, but I’m here because I want to be,” he adds softly.

That was one of the things he’d mentioned in Gavin’s interrogation — he didn’t fit where he’d come from, which is why he’d decided to leave. That here, at least, he hoped to find something worth *being* for.

And that’s something Gavin can identify with, far more than he’d ever like to admit. For the past seven years, it’s been Lila. She needs him, and that’s always enough to force him to keep going, at least. It couldn’t always quite be called

living, though.

No, that he's only just started doing, and for all that he doesn't want it to stop, he doesn't know how to keep it going and the thought that he might lose this before it's even truly begun is terrifying.

## *epilogue*

“You’re sure about this?”

“Yeah. Are you?”

Jasper looks at him, expression inscrutable, then kisses him in a non-answer before he slips out of the kitchen.

He thinks that’s the end of it, that it’s settled, because the next few days are easy, if busy in sudden, frantic busts. Last-minute wrapping. Opening presents. Food. Logan comes over around dinner time on the 24th and stays the night; “I don’t give a shit about Christmas either, but it’s still weird being alone,” Gavin says when they try to argue. It makes sense, and it’s nice, but it also throws off the groove of things.

But even with the near misses when Lila says things they have to explain away, it goes... well, all told.

Then, it’s over, and they enter the weird, empty span between Christmas and New Year’s when Gavin goes to work for at most half of a day and most of the office does the same. That’s nice too; they get a little less done, but it means ev-

everyone gets some time away. As soon as January rolls around and their new projects begin, it'll be back to full days and then some, but for now, he's glad to be home. There's no arguing that he doesn't need the break.

He's doing a good job of taking one, too, stretched out on the couch and half asleep in the middle of the day with Jasper's weight warm and comfortable against him. Lila is at a friend's house, so Gavin has absolutely nothing he has to do or worry about.

At least, until Jasper huffs and says, "I'm not sure I have anything to wear."

"What?" Gavin blinks, frowning.

"To this party. I don't know what to wear, and I tried looking it up but it's all very conflicting."

Gavin sighs and closes his eyes. He wraps both arms around Jasper's ribs and drags him down until he's lying flush against Gavin's chest. "You've got four days to figure it out. I'm sure you've got something. And if not, we can go find something."

To say Jasper's wardrobe is extensive... Well, it might not be, in comparison to some people, but as far as Gavin is concerned, it's substantial. He isn't even sure where it all comes from; he's tried asking, but Jasper sort of just waves his fingers vaguely. But Gavin's bank account and credit cards are all fine, so he hasn't seen a reason to push the matter.

He's pretty confident there's something in there that Jasper can wear, though.

"It's a work party. Nothing fancy. Definitely not something worth worrying about."

"See, you say that, but considering the only other work function I've attended with you went the way it did..." Jasper



trails off pointedly.

Right. That. Gavin sighs again. “It was *fine*. Pretty sure you even had fun.”

“Speaking of, are they going to be there?”

“Uh, I dunno. The client list all got invites but I’m not sure what the RSVPs look like. Why?”

“Then I’d at least know someone,” Jasper says.

“You know Logan.”

“Yes, but Logan isn’t— I mean Logan is great and all, but—” Jasper sighs loudly and shifts, his frustration palpable.

It clicks in his head without Jasper having to finish his thought; Logan doesn’t know the truth. Gavin pushes a hand under Jasper’s shirt, palm spreading over the steady thump of his heartbeat. With a little shiver, Jasper relaxes against him, predictable in the best way.

After a moment, Gavin says, “I’m sorry.”

“Why?” Jasper arches and twists to look at him, the angle odd but his expression is incredulous.

“Because hiding who you are all the time is exhausting.”

Jasper twists impossibly further and kisses him, fingers of one hand threading into Gavin’s hair to give him better leverage. Against Gavin’s lips, he says, “Not all the time. I’ve got you, one uncanny small child, and now the two of them and they are, all things considered, quite lovely.”

Gavin can’t help the strange feeling that returns with the reminder that Jasper isn’t the only supernatural being in his life. At the initial revelation over the summer, he’d felt like the ground had been ripped out from under him. Now, it’s more of a little somersault his stomach does, but it still

makes him uneasy. Everything Jasper's told him of the fae makes him glad that they're *there* and he's not — and that Jasper's not either — but when *there* is Michigan and the individuals in question come to town for a visit, it's another matter entirely.

“Whatever you're worrying about, stop it. I still don't regret coming here,” Jasper says.

“Not that. Just... them. 'S weird.”

With a soft laugh, Jasper kisses him again. “There are worse things. Like this party and figuring out what to wear to it.”

Gavin groans dramatically, shifting both of them so he's sandwiched between Jasper and the couch cushions. “Lila's gone until dinner time and you wanna worry about the party?”

“Well,” Jasper looks at him, expression thoughtful, “I could probably be persuaded to do something else instead.”

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“You're sure about this?” Jasper asks, fidgeting in the passenger seat.

Gavin leans over the center console and kisses him; he was sure before, but the fresh wash of comfort settles something in him.

“That's not an answer.”

“We should go in. Other people are gonna start showing up soon. That enough of an answer for you?”

Smiling, Jasper rolls his eyes and opens the passenger door.

“Don’t worry,” he says, one finger on the doorbell. “They’re gonna love you.”

It’s as much reassurance for himself as Jasper. He hasn’t told many people he’s even bringing a date and even fewer that his date isn’t a woman. Not that he’s especially worried; he knows most of his people will just be glad he’s brought someone, anyone, and the rest, well...

The door opens, and Gavin finds himself eye to eye with the only person whose reaction he does care about. Deacon. The original owner of the company, and Gavin’s boss until he retired a few years ago. Not long enough that Gavin doesn’t still feel the weight of his legacy hanging over every decision he makes.

“There he is!” Deacon says, reaching out to clap Gavin on the shoulder. “The big boss. It’s been so long, I was starting to wonder if you’d forgotten where I lived.”

Gavin exhales a laugh. “I don’t know where the last year went. Been busy.”

“Yeah, I’d imagine you have,” Deacon says, his gaze sliding from Gavin to Jasper. He extends a hand. “Deacon Hale.”

Jasper’s head cocks slightly, appraising Deacon just as openly as he’s being studied himself, as he takes Deacon’s hand. “Jasper Datura.”

“This guy causing you as many problems as he used to cause me?” Deacon asks, pointing at Gavin with his free hand.

“Problems? He used to cause *problems*?” One of Jasper’s eyebrows raises now, his smile wicked as he looks at Gavin. “I think you might have been right. This is going to be fun.”

They get some time to catch up before other people — the real guests — start arriving, but then it’s all Gavin can do to try to keep an eye on Jasper through the shuffle. At one

point, Gavin loses him entirely only to eventually locate him draped across a chair in the half-lit home theater engaged in animated conversation.

His first assumption is Logan, but then the other person laughs and the sound of it is wrong.

Back still to Gavin, they freeze, cock their head, and say, “Well, I guess that answers the question of whether or not I’ll get the chance to talk to him tonight.”

“Ari,” Gavin says, hoping his smile isn’t as tight as it feels as two sets of eyes settle on him. To Jasper, he says, “I was starting to worry you left me here alone.”

Jasper gives him a knowing smile.

“I don’t think *alone* is something you get at this thing,” Ari says, standing.

Gavin takes the outstretched hand, his smile shifting to something rueful and a bit more honest. “Yeah, tell me about it. Speaking of, where’s—”

“Home,” Ari replies before he can get the question out. “Believe it or not he’s babysitting. Until I ran into your dreamy little counterpart, I thought I was gonna have to find a corner to hide in until I could say hi, then bolt.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here I think Jasper was worried about the same problem if you couldn’t make it.”

“Yes speaking of,” Jasper says, “am I allowed to introduce Ari to Logan, or is that going to set off your protective instincts?”

Grimacing, Gavin says, “Make me sound worse, why don’t you.”

He means it as a joke, at least partially, but Jasper looks genuinely worried.

“I didn’t— That came out wrong. Yeah. Of course.”

Ari looks between them, but Gavin’s attention remains on Jasper until he nods. He rolls lightly to his feet, slipping in close enough to make Gavin uncomfortably aware of the other people in the room. It’s not enough to keep him from reflexively wrapping an arm around Jasper’s waist, though.

“Everything alright?” Jasper asks, quietly enough that no one else should hear.

At least, no human, because Ari says, “I’m gonna go find something to drink?”

Gavin waits a few seconds before letting out a slow breath. “Yeah. These things are just always a lot. I’m not sure what I’m gonna do when Deacon stops offering to host. Can you imagine this many people crammed into our house?”

“Our?” Jasper echoes, his smile shy but impossibly pleased.

Confused, Gavin frowns. “Yeah?”

The silent rumble of a purr vibrates through his chest. After a moment, Jasper says, “Sorry if I said something I shouldn’t have with Logan. I just thought they both might like having someone else to interact with at this thing who isn’t going to be..”

Understanding, he hums an acknowledgment and scans the room. For the most part, people seem to be minding their own business, but near the bar, he spies a contractor who seems to be waiting to say something — either to him or about him. Gavin nods toward the stairs. He doubts there’s anywhere here that they can have a private conversation, but he might at least be able to escape the blatant scrutiny.

“You didn’t. I just didn’t want Ari to think I’m um, some kind of bigot,” he says when they reach the ground floor. Sighing, Gavin checks his watch; they still have a good hour

and change before they can even think about leaving.

Jasper huffs a laugh. “I think that would also make you the first person I’ve met who’s concerned about seeming bigoted toward werewolves.”

“Nice change of pace, though. Sorry, did you two still need a minute?” Ari asks, gesturing vaguely with their glass.

“I think I’m on borrowed time before someone else comes to claim me. At least unless there was something *incredibly pressing* you needed to talk to me about?” Gavin replies.

“Well, I was trying to put off talking about work tonight,” Ari says, barely suppressing a smile, “but since I’ve finally got you for a minute, I think I might have a few things.”

Ari manages to buy him almost half an hour, but then Deacon’s wife asks him to help bring up a case of champagne, and then, and then...

One thing after another, and then it’s 11:56 and everyone has migrated to the enormous television in the living room, coverage of the New Year’s Eve celebrations playing on mute. It’s too many people packed in one space, but Gavin can hardly leave, not even to find—“Jasper!”

Jasper freezes on his way out of the kitchen, eyes wide until he locates Gavin. With catlike grace, he picks his way through the assembled crowd until he reaches Gavin’s side. He pauses, then. As he glances around them, Gavin realizes why. Even though the majority of the people surrounding them are couples — friends, colleagues, contractors, and even a few city council members — they’re alone.

He realizes, then, that he’s already made a decision somewhere in the back of his mind. Before now, before they arrived, even, although he can’t say when. Gavin drapes an arm over Jasper’s shoulders, pulling him into his side.

Jasper's relief is as palpable as his own. Much like in the basement, the world doesn't end. No one pays them any particular attention, at least not that Gavin notices. There is no dramatic outcry.

"Was there anything left in there to scavenge?" he asks, lips close to Jasper's ear to be heard over the conversations around them.

"Some grapes." Jasper frowns. "Nothing good, though. What are we doing now?"

"Ball's about to drop."

Jasper chokes on a laugh, his face turning into Gavin's shoulder.

"The— look, that," Gavin says, pointing at the TV. "It's in Times Square in New York. At midnight it drops, and they shoot off fireworks and all. I think they used to drop a car down in Indy, but I've never cared enough to go."

"The ball is odd, but a car? Why?"

He shrugs. "Race car. If you ever want to be really hot and really bored for an entire day, we can get race tickets."

"Is this something you enjoy?"

"Absolutely not. Unless you mean your reaction to things like this, then yeah. I do."

Jasper's acknowledging hum vibrates through his chest, rolling into a longer, now familiar sensation. He has no idea how he'd explain it if someone else happened to notice, but the odds of that happening are low enough that Gavin has no interest in saying anything.

The sounds of Times Square fill the room as the broadcast volume is restored. He tries to remember the year before, or even the one before that, but it's all fuzzy and distant. Not

worth remembering, he thinks, but this year feels different.

One minute out, and the tone of the room shifts, anticipation amusingly heavy.

“People really take this seriously,” Jasper murmurs.

“Yeah. I’m sure his neighbors will shoot off fireworks. They do most years. We can go out after if you want.”

He feels Jasper’s nod against his shoulder; Gavin doesn’t care one way or the other, but he’d taken Lila and Jasper to the park for the Fourth of July and discovered that Jasper *does* care for them. He’ll tolerate the cold, at least for a few minutes, to watch Jasper’s expression as he waits for each explosion in the sky.

“Five, four, three, two—”

Both the broadcast and the room around them erupt into chaos as the clock strikes midnight, but Gavin’s entire world narrows to the feeling of Jasper’s lips on his — first the surprised hesitation, then the next second when Jasper responds.

“What was...?” Jasper asks, blinking dazedly.

Gavin smiles. “One of those things. Supposed to start the year the way you want to finish it. I didn’t think you’d object.”

“No. Not in the slightest.”

Finally, a little after one in the morning, they make it home. Jasper stretched out beside him, Gavin inches toward sleep, the last year replaying in disjointed flashes in his mind. Throughout all of it, one thing is clear: the nightmare of his life has become something else entirely, and that something is how he’d like to spend the rest of his years.



# acknowledgments

Especially as I pieced together my notes to write this, I was astonished by the idea of a self-made anything. Even in self-publishing — a world in which I’ve heard so many authors claim they did it “all on their own” — I cannot fathom publishing a story without anyone else. This story would never have been born if not for Johannes T. Evans’s Monstrous May writing challenge, and that’s just the tip of the iceberg. If I forgot anyone, I apologize in advance.

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