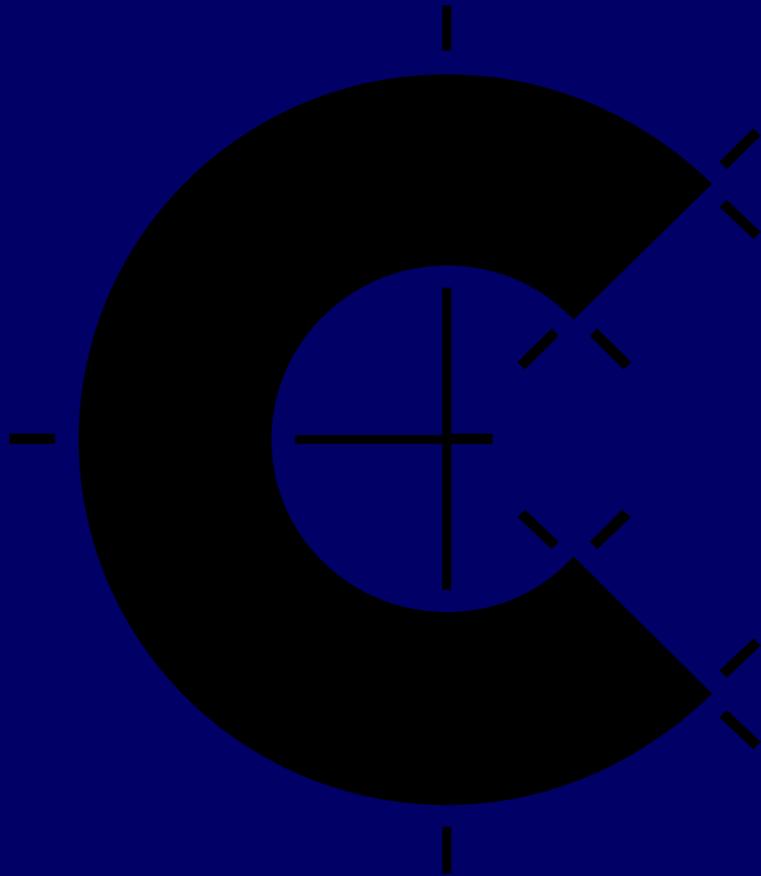


Pæan to Priapus VII a multi-media slash anthology



ircumference
by M. Fae Glasgow

IDENTIKIT

This is set immediately prior to “Call of the Wild” and stems from thinking about differences between first and second season Fraser and third/fourth season Fraser. People are often very different in their mannerism and behaviors, depending on the company they’re keeping—and I was thinking about the way Fraser is with the two Rays and with Francesca (his usual way and that hall conversation in “Dead Guy Running”), and how much of that is real Fraser. And I was thinking about what it might be like to be as handsome as Fraser, to always have that reaction he gets from women (and a lot of men), to be remembered for his face, the uniform, the perception, and not for himself. 

IT WAS VERY

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late; he should be asleep, not standing here like the maudlin teenager he had never allowed himself to be. Had never been allowed to be.

It really was very late: he had work in the morning; he should be asleep, getting sufficient rest to execute his tasks efficiently and well. Or at least he should be getting enough rest so that he wouldn't fall asleep during those...tasks.

Very late, indeed. Too late. He felt...perilously close to too late. So he should be asleep, but he couldn't, time a heavy cloak dragging him down, down, down. Too late.

For what, he didn't know, but his instincts, his wild survival instincts, were wailing that he would be too late.

So never mind that he ought to be resting mind and body in preparation for the morrow; instead, here he was, standing in front of the sink in the small back bathroom, the light on full, staring at himself in the mirror. Thinking about women: one woman, children in tow, on the trail of her (ex?) husband, but who would, still, kiss him. Thinking about the woman skilled

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in bluff, counter-bluff and outright deceit, seeking to murder the killer of a beloved brother, and who would, in the midst of it, kiss him. Thinking about a near-sister, who still, after three years of knowing him, thought bared skin, blatant invitations, and wreaths of mistletoe were the best way to reach him, to finally get a kiss from him. Thinking about a commanding officer who would never dream of harassing a subordinate, but who would...kiss him. And make him pay for that again, and again, and again. Thinking about one man, the only man, gone without a trace, thinking of promises made and broken and left unspoken, thinking about the man who had kissed him, when he needed love more than breath itself.

So he was standing there, looking at himself, trying very hard not to think about Victoria, who had done so very much more than kiss him.

He leant forward, staring at himself, under the harsh, damning light. And thought about the man, who had called him good-looking, but had at least gone beyond the face, and recognized that he spoke Maggie's language. That there might be something

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appealing about him, beyond his face. His looks. But who had never kissed him.

It was late, it was very late, but perhaps not too late—what harm would it do to simply walk past, to see if the familiar flicker of television lit Ray’s apartment window? The walk—a mere 37 blocks—would do Diefenbaker good, and if Ray was asleep, if the television light wasn’t on, then they could camp in the park. Sleep under the stars—what few were visible from under the umbra of city pollution and the penumbra of city lights—and have at least a small taste of what was unavailable. Give him enough air to breathe, for once. Get him out of here, away from this building that more and more resembled a mausoleum with his name graven upon it.

His laden pack felt light on his back, the straps comfortable in the way a familiar chore can be; the wind was as fresh as it ever got in the city, cold and biting, cold enough to feel almost clean. Almost. Not quite. Not ever quite.

“Oh stop grumbling,” he said to Diefenbaker’s latest complaint. “You’re an Arctic wolf, for God’s sake—or at least that’s what you keep telling me when someone calls you a dog.”

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Another mile covered, snow beginning to fall on him like tears, blanketing the city and him with a brand new layer of homesickness.

Complaints forgotten, Diefenbaker was romping now, overflowing with an animal's uncomplicated pleasure in the familiar, the fondly missed. Snow flew and danced in the wind to pile in banks against buildings, while Dief, the umbilical cord that tethered him to home, pranced and surged through the whiteness, an occasional, joyful howl bursting from him to enliven the city. To remind the city of whence they came, and where some of them belonged.

The window was lit with the blue flicker that so eerily mimicked lantern-light, and Dief saw it before he did, racing on ahead, pawing at the front door to Ray's building. Fraser punched in the code Ray had given him months ago, hushed Dief, and in deference to the hour climbed quietly up the stairs and crept softly along the corridor to Ray's door.

He knocked, the familiar rap-rap-rap that he used when Ray wasn't expecting him; common courtesy, not to simply walk in at

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this late hour of the night, for all that Ray was just watching television. He rapped again, smiling a little at the image of Ray no doubt looking at the television for a moment, wondering if it was his door or something on the television. The soft murmur of tinned—no, canned, right, *canned*—laughter muted, and he could hear Ray's steps coming closer. He concentrated on that, banishing any and all other thoughts and images, hewing to friendship, to Ray as his friend, to Ray's friendship with him.

Nothing else, nothing more: after all, Ray simply exuded sexuality the same way he exuded musk; it was pheromones, random pheromones and nothing else, nothing else at all and—

“Ray!”

“You were expecting someone else? Fraser—” a squint-eyed perusal of a watch-face, as Fraser took in the details of his friend's appearance.

“I'm sorry—” he began, stopping as Ray spoke over him.

“It's a quarter till midnight, shouldn't all good Mounties be tucked up in their little Mountie beds?”

He had no idea what had happened to his face, what expression he had let slip, but Ray took one look at him, grabbed him

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by the arm and hauled him in, making him follow in Diefenbaker's wake.

"Get rid of the coat," was tossed at him over a departing shoulder while his hat was tossed onto a kitchen stool, "and those boots too," followed, and was continued with Ray coming back into the living room, a bundle of clothing in his hands, "and put these on before I die of pneumonia just looking at you."

"As I told Diefenbaker—" who was shamelessly curled up in front of the heating vent, "it's really not that cold—"

"For polar bears," Ray snorted, shoving the clothes at Fraser again. "Go on, put these on, I'll make that stuff you like—"

Feeling warmed already, sinking gratefully into their usual backchat as if it were a hot bath at midwinter. "It's tea, Ray."

"Yeah, all woof but no bark. And then you can tell me what made you walk here at this time of night."

"You were asleep," Fraser said, eyes taking in the even more rumpled than usual crimpling of Ray's clothes, and the way sleepy eyes were being rubbed, and the way one cheek was creased from where Ray had been sleeping on the couch cushion. "I'm sorry—"

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“Clothes,” Ray said, actually shoving them into his hands this time and turning Fraser around, pushing him towards the bedroom or bathroom, but whichever, it was away from the front door. “Then tea, then talk. Mush!”

“Well actually, Ray, the use of ‘mush’ is a popular misconception—”

“Go!”

No arguing with that. Cradling the warmth of Ray’s smile close to him, he went.

He really didn’t need fresh clothes: his boots were merely snow-damp and cold, but he could no more go outside in inadequate clothing than he could stop breathing. His feet were warm and dry in good socks, and his jeans were barely damp, certainly nothing that wouldn’t dry quickly in this warm apartment. But still, he’d woken Ray—so much for the barometer of television—and barged in here, so the least he could do was let Ray have his way.

In a sweatshirt that was as tight on him as Ray’s T-shirts usually were on Ray, and sweatpants that left him feeling almost more

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exposed than simple nudity, he went back into the living room where Ray was perched on the couch, remote control in hand, channels changing at dizzying speed.

“So what is it?”

Easy enough to contemplate walking past, but what a pity he hadn’t planned beyond that; had planned nothing beyond coming here, to Ray.

A thoughtful look, from beneath lowered lashes, lashes gone dark in the low flicker of television light. “I told you about Stel and the bank and everything, and fu—screwing up on the Botrelle thing.”

“Yes, that you did. I uh...”

“You told me about Victoria,” voice soft as summer, blunting the stab of the words. “So what is it?”

But he hardly knew what it was. Too big, or not big enough; too complicated to comprehend or too simple to grasp. And Ray, who complained that he would die of waiting, waited. He couldn’t begin at the beginning; didn’t even know where the true beginning was. But there was one beginning he could find—tonight’s beginning, if he could only find the words to explain it.

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“Describe me,” he said suddenly, surprising himself—and Ray too, apparently.

“You came all this way to—” A hand spiking through the half up, half down end-of-day hair. “Okay. Describe you.”

Ray, was leaning back now, against the couch, head tipped back, eyes closed, because, as Fraser remembered, Ray ‘saw’ better this way.

“Male Caucasian; height, five eleven and a half, six foot even in Mountie boots; weight—”

Wrong, wrong, no, that wasn’t it, that was no— He leant forward, counterpoint to Ray, head falling forward, to look at his hands hanging limply between his spread knees. “No, not like a policeman. Describe me.”

A long look for that, long enough and deep enough to make him want to squirm. Ray wasn’t looking away this time, nor closing those eyes to see better. Ray was looking at him. Looking right at him.

“Closer to forty than thirty. Black hair, major cowlick in back, curls everywhere else if you’d ever let it get long enough. Blue eyes, long lashes, kinda girlie lashes. Slightly crooked eyeteeth, crooked smile—right here, your lower lip?”

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Long, narrow finger—so unlike his own spatulates—pointing at exactly the spot, the very precise spot, marking the degree.

“Kinda like someone who’s had a minor stroke or my Aunt Marjorie after she had Bell’s Palsy. Scar on your right jawline, looks like glass did it. Square jaw, slight double chin, laughter lines, dimple in left cheek sometimes—”

Ray was describing him. Him. His face. A human face. A real person’s face, not just something pretty to look at, something to covet. A real person, with lines and wrinkles, faults and flaws to make the face belong to a human being, not simply an object of desire, of wanting. A person. Him.

“Thank you,” he said, and realized there must be something written on his very human, very real face again, because Ray was looking at him oddly, an expression he couldn’t read. “What are you thinking?” he whispered.

“That you have to be a freak to come this far just to be insulted.”

“Not insulted.” Ah. He could read that expression: a question. “Seen,” he answered. “I came all this way to be seen.”

“I see you,” Ray told him.

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“Do you?” the question blurring before he could censor it. Ray still looking at him. Directly, unflinchingly, at him. “I think I do.”

I hope you do, he wanted to say, wanted so much for Ray to be right. Ray was still looking at him, still questioning with his eyes, and he waited, knowing—hoping—that if he just waited long enough, he would be asked what he couldn’t simply say, given an invitation to honesty.

“Why’d you need me to see you?”

He rubbed his fingers over the back of his other hand, let the words rub against themselves in his mind. Heard the rustiness of his voice, so unused to speaking of such things, to making himself seen. “I was the white boy.”

Could feel Ray’s curiosity over that.

“I was brought up in small villages. Native villages.”

“Got it. So you were the white kid, the outsider.”

“Not always the outsider, but always different.”

“Some things never change.”

And that should’ve stung, should’ve made him bleed on the inside where it didn’t show, but it didn’t, not from this man who

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saw him, and still accepted him, and spoke in a voice rough with affection.

“I was the Mountie’s son, the librarians’ grandson. The dead white woman’s son.”

“Ouch.”

“Yes.” Deep breath, hearing his voice creak less, the rust of disuse wearing off. “Then I was the white kid who was going to be a Mountie like his dad, then the white kid who spoke like an Inuit, the wilderness dork who forgot to turn on electric lights the first week in college, the backwoods lug wearing the old uniform, and then I was back to being the legendary Bob Fraser’s son.”

“And then you come to Chicago and all of a sudden, it’s the guy in the red suit, the Canadian, the Mountie.”

“And Benny.”

“Oh. Yeah. Right.” Very nearly bolting, an explosion of energy that left Ray standing beside the couch. “Here, you want more tea?”

If Ray could see him, he could hear Ray. Every last detail, tonight, clear as a bell, explaining why Ray was on his feet, fight or flight, and babbling about ‘more’ tea. “I thought it was...freedom.

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I thought that 'Benny' was my manumission, but instead... I was someone called 'Benny Frayzhier,' Ray Vecchio's charity case or crazy friend."

Ray sitting back down, edgy and nervy as a buck in spring.
"And?"

"And I was this face. Or what people thought this face was."

"But you weren't you?"

"Oh, I was, but..." he could feel how twisted his smile was, from both emotion and the nerve damage in his lip. Six years old, alone in the woods, build yourself a fire, son... Unseen, even then. "If a tree falls in the forest, if no one hears it, does it still fall?"

"Oh no, Fraser, it's too late at night for existential crap."

Another smile, from him, and a new one from Ray. Who saw him. Who saw what he was trying to say, and was sitting there, waiting to hear it. Waiting, for him. "I went back to Canada, to my home, and I was the American Mountie 'just visiting,' the guy who went to Chicago. I came back here and—"

"The one person who knew you wasn't here."

Harder, this, than the rest, but Ray, impatient, quicksilver Ray, was still waiting. "And I suddenly didn't know who I was to him."

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“Okay, so I don’t get that.”

Honesty, glorious honesty, uncaring of image or pride, letting confusion and puzzlement show. A lesson, there, if he could only learn it. “Friend,” he said, hearing a strange mix of emotions in his own voice, “or more.”

“Oh.”

Long hand rubbing over tight-lipped mouth, the scrape of stubble against palm. The silent sound of Ray thinking, and looking. At him. But there was no shock, and he ought to be more surprised by Ray’s reaction than he was.

“And you never thought about bringing up this ‘more than friends’ stuff in conversation?”

“With Ray? No!”

“No,” with an equally odd mix of emotions from Ray. “With me.”

“Ah.” Then quickly, before Ray started on at him for the ‘ah thing’ again: “No.”

“Okay, I get that. Another label, another fake face, people seeing that instead of you. So uh... were you? More than friends?”

Wondering about that; hours spent wondering and thinking

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about that. “I honestly don’t know. I thought we were—I certainly didn’t think friends did all of the things he and I did. But by the same token, I presumed—” find a word for this, “...lovers did more than we did.”

“Okay, so that’s...uh...clear.”

Like mud, Ray’s expression said, and it made him smile, again.

Ray was looking at him again, the way Ray always did. Thinking about him. Trying to understand him, not trying to make him fit into what Ray perceived he ought to be. He startled, Ray’s question not the one he’d been expecting.

“So what d’you want me to call you?”

He stopped. Swallowed. “I have no idea.”

No mockery, no impatience, from this impatient man.

“Then think about it,” Ray said to him, leaning forward now a little. “Think about it, and when you decide, you tell me.”

“I—thank you.”

“For what?”

“It’s the best gift—”

“It’s not a gift!” temper flaring, making him flinch before he looked, before he saw, and knew that Ray’s anger was only partly

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aimed at him. “It’s common courtesy—decency, that thing, you know what I mean. Even my dad—my dad, with me—calls me Ray. Okay, so he calls me Raymond, which I hate, but at least it’s better than Stanley.”

“The name he gave you.”

“But he calls me the name I gave myself.”

“Ben,” he heard himself say, a name dusty from unuse and once so badly tarnished by Victoria. “I think I’d like you to call me Ben.” But—memories, echoes, old fears and worse patterns.

“Or Fraser.”

“It doesn’t work if you don’t pick one.”

He ducked his head, smoothed his brow, grabbed Ray’s hand when it landed on his thigh, in comfort. In friendship, and probably more than friendship. If he wanted more. If he dared let Ray see this, and his wanting. “I like the way you use it.”

Oh, and he liked that smile on Ray’s face. Pheromones, yes, certainly, and musk, but that smile made him wonder, made him hope. Made him very nearly certain.

“How about your middle name?” Ray asked, quickly enough to make him wonder if he’d been a tad...precipitous in his hopes.

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“Well, I have three, but I don’t—”

“Three? We can work with that.”

Hardly, he thought. “Robert, George and Colin,” he said, holding up a finger for each name. “Robert,” he said, ticking that finger, and folding it down, “my father’s name.”

“Okay, so that’s not it.”

“George,” ticking off another finger, “my paternal grandfather.”

“And let me take a wild guess here, Fraser—Colin was your mom’s dad.”

He ticked that finger off too.

“So we’re back to Ben or Fraser.”

“So it would seem.”

“Not Benton?”

“Only if you wish to remind me of my grandparents or being in trouble. Or a disappointment.”

He could see Ray’s response to that.

“Of course...”

More rubbing of long fingers over stubble, more thoughts obviously racing in that sharp mind, and then a good long look of sheer speculation.

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He hoped his own face was showing the right thing. Careful voice, careful look. “We could always go for Red. Or Big Red.”

The nickname it'd taken him nearly a year in Chicago to associate not just with the uniform, but with a chewing gum ad on television, two people entwined, embracing, forever and... So perhaps it wasn't too late; not too late after all. “So we could kiss a little longer?”

And no, he absolutely was *not* going to tell Ray that the sudden adoption of an aura of cool machismo was simply...adorable. But not in a cute way. Oh no. Much better than cute. Much more grown-up than cute.

“Is uh...that what you want to do?”

Deep breath. Calmness. A moment to think. A decision easier than expected, and now, at least, he knew what he'd hidden from himself, what he'd wanted beyond the driven impulse to come here, to find Ray, and be truly seen. “Yes,” he said, and felt the simple truth of that blossom through him.

Almost as quickly as the doubts and the nerves did.

“Yeah? Yes. Good. That's good.”

And then they sat there for a few moments, their gazes skidding off each other.

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“No, I am not going to ask if you’re sure—” a flicker of amusement, the curl of a smile, “because you’re probably as shit-scared as me, so we’re good, we’re fine, we’re going with this.”

He sat there and watched as Ray jumped to his feet again, all coiled energy and restlessness, and started to leave.

“You coming?” Ray, stopping dead in his tracks, lowering his head and shaking it. “I do not believe I just said that.”

“Nor where your thoughts immediately took you.”

“Which is Fraser-speak—”

And perhaps his name of choice—his identity of choice—would be Fraser after all, if it meant that smile, the strong grip of those hands, and the glory of being accepted for his freakishness instead of in spite of it.

“—for I got a dirty mind, and so do you, cos you knew exactly where my mind went. So,” bright smile, wicked smile, and yes, wonderful, perfect, that impertinent, welcoming wink, “are you coming, or am I on my ownsome with this?”

“I’m coming,” he said. Then added, just to see Ray’s response. “Shortly, I believe.”

Outright laughter, and Ray tugging his hand, leading him to the

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bedroom. “Shortly? Hey, that’s okay, it’s not the size of your ocean, it’s the way you rock your boat.”

“Ray—”

“Yeah?”

“Isn’t it ‘it’s not the size of your boat, it’s the motion of your ocean’?”

And Ray just gave him a ‘who the hell knows and who the hell cares?’ look, smiled and said, smoky and warm, “Gotcha.”

And Fraser had to snap his mouth shut, before it spilled all sorts of dreadfully needy and clingy supplications. Before he pushed them into confession or denial, or worse, an unwelcome truth.

Pheromones and musk, when he wanted more. All right, all right, his conscience kicked at him: he needed more.

Had he misread Ray? He hadn’t misread the original Ray Vecchio; he’d known and understood exactly what had driven that Ray to both reach out and push away, although he hadn’t understood himself. Not then, and only to some degree now, looking back.

But now? At least he knew himself a little better; at least he could see himself, through Ray. And if he was uneasy that perhaps,

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just perhaps, he was seeing his own wishful thinking when he 'read' Ray, well, he'd faced grizzlies, matchmaking Italian mothers, and Dief left alone for fourteen hours. Now was no time for indulging in cowardice.

They'd come to a halt, Ray no longer leading him, and he stood there for an instant, lost. In front of him Ray cast him an oblique look, and then sat down on the edge of the bed, bending down to take off socks, sitting up again to pull off shirts, three layers in one swoop.

Pausing, to give him a very unsure look.

Ah. Yes.

Strange, so very, very strange to do this so...dispassionately. Every other time before, there had been passion first, disrobing achieved with neither attention nor deliberation, just... haste.

But this was—

He took a deep breath, and sat down near the bottom of the bed, pulling his borrowed sweatshirt off, struggling a little—feeling clumsy, so ridiculously awkward—to get the too-tight neck off over his head. He simply dropped the sweatshirt, trying to smooth his hair—that cowlick!—without being too obvious.

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Looked up then, just in time to make his breath catch in his throat.

Ray had risen, had obviously undone buttons, and was bending over now, dropping his jeans, revealing... The long lean lines of him, all pale skin and muscle and bone, and the perfect, scant curve of his buttocks with their perfect shading of cleft, and a tantalizing glimpse between parted thighs. He took a breath again, and made himself blink; it was then that Ray kicked his jeans away—peripheral, unimportant flash of blue landing on already laden chair—for Ray was turning, turning, and he could see now. He could see Ray, from the golden tan on hands, face, neck, to sun-free chest, small nipples, lovely firm belly, and there, not blond, no, definitely no hint of sunlight or peroxide or lemon juice here, just...

Ray, naked and bare, light brown hair and pale flesh. He knew he was staring, was dimly aware that he ought to apologize for his rudeness, but he was fascinated, addicted to the sight; comparing and contrasting, the similarities, the differences, fixing in his mind the exact shade of skin, the slight flare of glans, the—
Oh God. Dear God in Heaven. His mouth literally watered as

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Ray walked past him, flesh swaying, long thighs clenching and releasing, darker hair on his legs, too, such a contrast from the pale, smooth skin near the hips to—

He nearly broke his neck, trying not to miss a single glimpse, and nearly blushed when Ray climbed into bed and he finally raised his eyes back above belt level.

“I’m sor—” he began, then caught the glint in Ray’s eyes, and smiled instead. Not another gift, just the same one, given again and again: freedom to be himself, and willing acceptance.

Which led his mind down some very interesting paths and had him pulling off his equally borrowed sweatpants with an equal amount of difficulty in getting the too-tight opening over his...head. He followed Ray’s lead; lay down beside him in the bed, white pillow under his head, dark blue bottom sheet, a different shade of blue for the top sheet. No color co-ordination here, and Ray hadn’t been expecting this: the sheets weren’t fresh on that second and he could tell that Ray didn’t insist on eating only at the table.

“You want to put the light out?”

“Oh. Yes, Ray.”

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Fumbling a little till he realized the lamp had a cord switch, he turned the light out, and lay down again, still able to see quite well since they hadn't turned off the television nor the kitchen light before they came in here.

Perhaps he should, in the interests of conserving energy, get up and turn everything off. Or perhaps he could persuade Dief to take care of it, because if he were to get up—well, it was difficult enough just lying here *waiting*, to have to walk back in here, bare, and climb back into bed beside the most unnaturally quiet Ray he'd ever known...

Oh. Of course. He was waiting to follow Ray's lead and Ray was waiting for him—the eternal innocent, were he to believe some of the things said about himself—to indicate he was ready.

He rolled over, just as Ray began to speak:

"You c'n do anything you want," Ray was saying, speaking fast as a stream in spring spate, "anything, because I'll...uh...if you do anything I don't want, I'll say something, so you can do anything you want without worryin' if I'm liking it or if you're going too far or any of that stuff. You know?"

Yes, he thought, smiling as he leant forward and touched Ray,

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with intent, for the first time, his lips against the soft skin of Ray's clavicle, no awkwardness now, the first move made, the ice broken.

"Because crazy it is and it's embarrassing to admit which of us's been getting less sex, but looks like you're the resident expert here."

Ah. He'd suspected as much, with a Ray so slow to make a move. "I'm the resident expert?" There were jokes he could surely make based on that, frivolous repartee that would lighten the moment, but for the life of him he couldn't think of a single thing.

"Yeah, so lay on, MacDuff."

Another obvious opportunity, but he was still floundering, and it occurred to him that his so-called expertise was built on impulse, on loss of control—when someone or something had broken down his walls, exposing his vulnerable underbelly, and swept him away with his own passions. Given him an excuse to let loose, or taken away his excuses for staying in control—for staying distant, and safely untouched.

But here... Here was choice, and deliberation, and desire building; he was still here, he was more than just wordless, aching need and desperate hunger. But he wasn't unaffected enough to

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still be able to think much beyond what his senses were telling him: that Ray's skin was warm under his tongue and growing damp; that Ray's heartbeat was speeding up, that Ray was breathing hard, that Ray was getting hard, a wonderful handful rising to fill his palm with heat and pulse and need. He could feel the calluses on Ray's right hand, and the stubble on Ray's chin, and the bob of his Adam's apple as he licked his way up and then down the side of Ray's neck, where the pulse beat fierce and strong. Down lower, more smooth skin, and he wondered fleetingly if Ray, too, had ever yearned for a truly manly hairy chest, or if Ray—with his Stella to make him feel like a real man—had been content with what Nature had bestowed. He nipped at a nipple, and felt Ray surge up against him; knowledge, precious knowledge freely given, and he applied it just as freely, nipping and biting and letting his own strength come through.

And Ray didn't recoil, or remonstrate or try to prove his manhood. Ray didn't even try to even the balance, taking everything he could dish out and demanding more, more, more, his erection pushing insistently, so demandingly, at whichever part of him Ray could reach.

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Moistness trailing against him from Ray's circumcised penis, moistness and heat, and the intoxicating scent of Ray, aroused. He licked again, following the pelvic groove down to where Ray's true hair color showed, to where hair rubbed against his chin more softly than stubble had; where Ray's flesh had risen to meet him, a voiceless shout of want, need, hunger.

He opened his mouth, and tasted. Tasted everything: skin, fluid, musk, even traces of cotton and indigo dye. He could almost swear he could even taste the heat that was pouring off Ray, could definitely taste the need, sharp and salty against his tongue, as sharp and strong as the sounds coming from Ray's mouth as his own mouth devoured Ray.

As sharp and strong as Ray's hands tugging his hair, insisting, even as he ignored them, until the sharp pain broke through as communication.

He wasn't willing to let go of Ray; held him in his hand, licked the head, refused to move away as he looked up at Ray, unwilling to free his mouth for anything so pointless as speech.

"C'mon," Ray said, tugging at him again, considerably more gently. "There's more than just one of us in this bed, let me—"

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Interrupting, allowing himself to demand. “You said anything I wanted.”

“Yeah, but—”

“This is what I want.”

A huge smile, uncomplicated and warm, and Ray squirming around a little for pillows. “In that case, be my guest,” Ray said, propping himself up then stroking one hand through his hair and down to where his mouth had gone back to feeding on Ray’s erection. “I’m just gonna lie here and let you do all the work.”

Which was fine by him.

But it was different again, with Ray watching. He could feel Ray’s gaze like a caress, as real as the now constant touch of Ray’s hands against him. Ray’s fingers, carding through his hair, rubbing at his scalp, tracing his ear, inside, outside, down his neck, to his back, up again, along his jaw, back down his neck, then up once again, over his jaw, to where his mouth was open and stretched, to where his skin was wet, to where Ray entered him.

He could hear himself then, suddenly, as if he’d been deaf and then cured; wet, slurping, messy sounds, and a thrumming moan

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of pleasure from deep in his throat. He faltered for a moment, and then Ray's voice was steadying him, approving, accepting, encouraging him. Goading him on, in truth, urging him on like the crack of a whip on a team, and he could feel himself flying.

Then—Ray shifting again, a leg pushing between his own, hairy skin, warmth and softness, offered up for him to rub against.

He fell into his own body with a thud, focus shredded, his concentration suddenly shot to hell as his own desire flooded him. More than just one person in this bed; more than just Ray, and Ray's desire, and Ray's satisfaction. More than one of us.

Us.

Not solitary, not alone, and oh God—

Ray's hands were on him still, touching his face, such tenderness, and no, he hadn't misread Ray, had only failed to read him deeply enough. He opened his eyes, looked up the length of Ray's body curved over him, to where paleness ended and the rosy flush of arousal began, to where Ray's mouth was open, spilling words, and Ray's eyes were open wide, spilling emotions.

Ray was looking at him, down here, on the bed, with his mouth filled with Ray's erection, with his own body humping against

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Ray's leg with all the dignity of an over-bred pedigree dog, with his own self laid utterly bare.

Ray saw him, and wanted him still, as others had, but this was no surprise for Ray, this was no change in perception. Ray had always seen him, and still welcomed him.

"I'm close," Ray whispered, fingers of both hands tracing semi-circles around and around his stretched, wet lips.

Another opportunity given him, but one he wanted to reject. He made a noise and saw Ray understand what he meant; knew that Ray would insist, if there were any risk factors; wanted to smile, but couldn't around the heated hardness filling his mouth, as Ray nodded, and gave the rest of his answer with his body. Ray's hips thrust and he reached around, filling his hands with the silken strength of Ray's rump, feeling the muscles powering the thrusting that was sending Ray deep into him. Deeper into him, so deep that surely that was his heart Ray was touching inside him.

His own hips were matching Ray's, as if he and Ray were dancing, a tango, all hot desire and perfect motion. He wasn't following Ray, Ray wasn't following him, it was all just a glorious melange of both of them, harmony, synchronicity, choreography—

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Ray's fingers were on him again, and the sound of Ray's voice in his ears, and the taste of Ray in his mouth, and the feel of Ray against his own erection, and the sight of Ray, neck cording, mouth tightening, skin flushing as Ray neared climax, as they both did, together but discrete, not just one person, not even just a 'you and me,' but an 'us.' Teamwork, plied to the most perfect pinnacle, and Ray against him, Ray in him, Ray's fingers rising and falling with the bob of his Adam's apple as he swallowed, and swallowed, and swallowed.

He gentled Ray with his mouth, cradled him in wetness as Ray softened, so unlike himself, who couldn't bear to be touched so soon after climax. But Ray liked it, was humming happy noises and touching him languidly.

Ray, lay there asprawl on the bed, not minding in the least as he suckled and nuzzled and tasted, and thrust. Pushing himself hard against Ray, licking around soft skin—resisting not at all when his hair was tugged this time, sliding stickily up Ray's sweat-dewed skin, stopping when his mouth was claimed and devoured the way he'd taken Ray's erection into himself. His back was stroked, nails scraping lightly, an echo of Victoria made clean again, nothing more now than another pleasure, another level,

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another encouragement to enjoy. A finger rubbing at him, there, where Victoria had used her fingers, and his first Ray had merely skimmed, this touch as tender as he had believed Victoria to be and as sure as he'd wanted his first Ray to be.

No penetration though—

“Too close,” Ray whispered, “do it later when you can appreciate it—”

And then Ray's hand was closing on him, holding his erection firm and strong and hot, sliding up and down, sliding his foreskin up and down, tight then loose, oh, so sweet, so perfect, so—

He shivered, and felt his testicles pull even closer to the heat of his body and the stroke of Ray's hands; was as aware of himself now as he had been of Ray, could think of nothing but how it felt to be touched, stroked, fondled; how it felt to have that building furnace of pleasure pressuring up inside, how it felt to have Ray kissing him, and touching him, and wanting him.

He wasn't expecting it, and gasped when Ray pushed him onto his back.

“Wanna watch,” Ray said, and licked his right nipple. “Wanna see your face when you come.”

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Yes, he wanted to say, but his mouth wasn't working properly, too busy making those sounds of need and pleasure. Ray was propped up beside him, one hand a rest for Ray's head, the other... oh, the other was doing magical things to him, as Ray lay there, and watched.

He was exposed, and seen, and touched. He burst with the pleasure of it all, heard himself make a guttural noise, raw and honest, and felt himself pulse, dissolving into the snowy white ecstasy of climax.

Lay there, for a moment, quivering and spent, until he heard a soft, "Wow," from Ray, and felt Ray's hand leave him when he flinched under even that delicate touch. He opened his eyes, and saw, as Ray dragged a finger through his secretion, and lifted it up. Watched, as Ray tasted him, and tasted him again.

No longer needed to watch, because Ray was spreading over him like a quilt, just as warm and many times as hard, all angles and joints and bones covered by soft skin and tensile muscle.

"You okay?"

He wrapped his arms around Ray, hugged him closer, shifted easily as their bodies fit more fluidly together. Stroked his hand

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across hair that had lost most of its spike, felt the touch of lips against his neck.

Realized Ray wasn't falling asleep immediately. Well, it was just plain silly to think he was the only person who ever needed answers. "I'm fine," he said, and felt the gust of Ray's sigh against his neck. Added, just for Ray: "We're good."

And then Ray relaxed heavily against him, and let them both slide into sleep.

In a fairy tale world, that would've been it, happily ever after and no one ever has to do the laundry or clean the bathroom, but the world wasn't a fairy tale, and life wasn't fair. The alarm buzzed, and Ray jolted, going from sprawled ease to kneeling-up, wide-eyed tension in barely a second.

He was jolted himself, brain trying to wake up enough to take charge of his body, feeling even more out-of-balance because he didn't wake up with his usual quickness, his body still relaxed and heavy, his mind showing a distinct inclination towards hibernation. He heard Ray's groan, and agreed, wholeheartedly.

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“Work,” Ray said, sounding more like someone naming the foulest of tortures.

There was probably an answer called for, but he was still trying to wake up, and take in the sight of a rumpled, head-scratching, bare naked Ray kneeling beside him.

Who was smiling at him. And rubbing his belly, where he’d spilled his seed last night, and Ray had tasted him.

“Wanna play hooky?”

“Yes, but—”

No more smile, and he fought the urge to do whatever it took to bring it back.

“But you got the Ice Queen and I got a court appearance.”

A reluctant sigh from Ray, speaking for him. Then it was getting up, and morning routines made utterly non-routine because the television was still casting its muted flicker over the disorder of couch cushions, where it had begun last night, and because it was the two of them trying to fit in around each other, with Ray starting coffee and reaching for cereal just as Fraser headed towards Dief to take him out. Adjusting around that, Ray heading instead for the shower while he went out to walk Dief; coming

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back, to a damp Ray in a warm bathroom, and uncovering the arcane mystery of just how Ray got his hair to do that. No answer—for he of the cowlick—as to the *why* of Ray wanting to do that to his hair, but there you were. Sidling around Ray, stepping into the bathtub with its plethora of bottles and tubes and adjustable shower head; standing there afterwards feeling absurdly, stupidly awkward about just stepping out naked when Ray was already dressed.

He pulled back the shower curtain, and damning himself for being as contrary as Dief, was almost disappointed that Ray wasn't there. He dried himself quickly with a towel damp from Ray's use, and then he was standing at another bathroom sink, wondering what the etiquette was when you slept over at someone else's place rather than them coming to you.

"After what we did—"

Instinctively, he clutched at his towel even as he whirled around to see Ray standing in the doorway, looking at him yet again.

"—you got scruples about putting my toothbrush in your mouth?"

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More smiles, and all the awkwardness pushed to the side by the comfortable familiarity of friendship, albeit new and improved, as the advertisers would have it. “Actually, I was wondering if you possessed a razor.”

“Oh, Mr. Smartypants. I do have a razor, in fact, I even have two, this—” a standard safety razor balanced across the toothbrush holder, “and this—” Ray, bending over to rummage in the undersink cabinet, coming up to flourish an unopened box, “if you want electric. See? I got ‘em—”

“You just don’t use them.”

“Style,” Ray said, patting his cheek, and smiling at him. “I got it, you shave yours off.”

“Regulations—”

“—probably say something about ‘tardiness.’”

Oh! “Thank you kindly, Ray,” he said, taking the safety razor, and looking around for a second until Ray put a can of shaving foam in his hand. “Ah,” he said.

“Too early,” Ray muttered, “way too early to figure out an ‘ah’ over shaving cream. You want cereal or toast?”

Given Ray’s usual taste for excessive sugar and a fondness for

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the infantile and what Ray had been reaching for before Dief's walk... "Toast," he said firmly, and resisted the urge to ask for it dry.

They were in luck, it seemed, or perhaps Ray's dreams had finally come true and he had a secret signal changer hidden in his car, turning all the traffic lights to green before they had to so much as slow down. They were making excellent time, enough that he wouldn't be late for work, and Ray would still be able to get to the precinct within his normal fuzzy 'ish' start time to prepare for the court appearance.

Conversation was desultory, and he found himself talking more to Dief than to Ray: it was salutary to have a wolf consider you a poor role model. Especially when he could hardly argue some of the more salient points with Ray sitting right beside him—he really didn't want to have to explain to Ray why he was pointing out to Dief that Dief hadn't exactly been wolf-like himself, with his far longer list of dalliances.

He really didn't want to even attempt to explain things to Ray, not when he was so unsure of things himself.

He couldn't help himself, though, turning his head to look at

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Ray, noting the elegant hand holding tightly to the wheel, the hunch of Ray's shoulders, the frown on Ray's face.

Oh dear.

He knew that look, that body language. Any second now and Ray would spea—

“You know this thing we got?”

Not really, no, but he'd play along, pretend that he had some clue as to quite where he stood with both Rays. Or either Ray. Or himself. “Yes,” he said, sounding as convincing as he could.

Got a long look for that, long enough to make him fret for both their vehicular safety, and for his own hopefully-hidden confusion.

“Okay, this thing we got—it's no strings, okay? We got it, you got it as long as you want.”

He waited, while Ray shifted, and breathed out.

“Till he comes back.”

No need to ask whom Ray meant by ‘he.’ “Ray, I—”

“It's okay, I see you, remember? I know he comes first, I know how you are about loyalty and stuff.” A shrug, not in the least casual. “I never even thought you'd ever do anything with me.”

Fraser blinked, then stared. “You knew I wanted you?”

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“Yeah.”

“Well, thank you for sharing! You could have told me, Ray.”

They nearly hit a truck before Ray was shocked—white knuckled—back to looking at the road.

“You hadn’t figured it out yourself?”

“Well, no, Ray.”

“Only you, only you could—and have me believe—oh, this is so dumb. How could you not figure it out?”

“Deflection,” he said, unaware of just how down he sounded.

“And repression. I— The last time I let myself find it easier to be in love than be alone, I nearly...”

“Her.”

No need to ask whom Ray meant there either.

“Yes.”

“I thought you were already—with Vecchio.”

“You mean physically? No.”

“No?”

“I—he— that is...”

“Pretend it’s an Inuit story, okay? The wolf and the penguin and the she-shark.”

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“Ray—”

Ray’s voice as low and hard as the flat, reflective stare Ray hit him with. “Tell me.”

No attempt to blackmail him emotionally: no hint of ‘you owe me.’ But then, he already knew just how much he owed Ray.

“Ray Vecchio hadn’t...well, he’d never envisioned himself that way.”

“Oh yeah. Macho Italian-American cop.”

“Not quite, but... similar.”

He owed Ray, but he owed Ray Vecchio too: he couldn’t silence his conscience enough to betray confidences, to unwrap cherished secrets and hold them up to the light.

“So Vecchio’s still allergic to bisexuality, and you don’t know which way he’s gonna jump, but it looks like he’s gonna jump right back into the arms of his loving family and the safe old self-image, when along comes Victoria.”

He couldn’t spill the secrets, but he could concede the truth, if only with a nod.

“And you get from there to here, kidding yourself along the way

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that you don't have a libido, and what libido you do got, a couple of kisses from women's all you need."

"Yes."

"Bullshit."

"Ray?"

And no, he absolutely would not be embarrassed that that had come out closer to a squeak than a growl.

"Are you forgetting? Are you forgetting I've seen you, with that bounty hunter and the singer and Lady Shoes and everybody else? You wanted them, and you wanted a lot more than just a kiss, so you go right ahead and pretend you got a libido the size of an ant—"

"I think I'm a better judge of my libido—"

"Dief's a better judge of your libido than you are—"

"Well, that's because he's a wolf and with his sense of smell—"

"Or maybe because he's an animal and he don't lie about—"

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"To yourself," Ray said, sounding suddenly old, and weary. And scared. "You only lie to yourself."

He sat there, and watched Ray driving, and tried to think about

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what Ray had said. Tried to get beyond the insult, the outrage—tried to admit that he was deflecting again, because facing it...

"I'm scared," he said, wishing the words unsaid—unthought, if at all possible, since he was wishing for miracles anyway—the second they'd left his mouth.

"Yeah, I know," was all Ray said, simply, still heavy with that weariness. "Me too."

He didn't need to ask what Ray feared; himself, nothing else. Or rather, the hurt he himself could wreak upon Ray.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said, seeing the way Ray's mouth quirked in a near smile at that.

"Won't make it hurt any less when you do. You can't help it—"

Absolution and forgiveness, in advance, and a sure and certain knowledge of what lay ahead. "I won't leave you."

"And I know you mean that, but what about when he comes back?"

"Ray—"

"Yeah. Him."

"I love you."

A definite smile now, warped along the edges. "And I you. But you love him too."

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Yes. But— “You love Stella.”

“Difference is, she doesn’t want me.”

And why was he so certain, so deep-down-in-his-gut certain, that Ray was lying to him?

Because it was more than saving face: it was an easy way out, not for Ray, but for him. Which meant...

“When did you realize you were over her?”

Another of those warped smiles, and Ray didn’t even try to evade him; more evidence of how Ray knew him, of how Ray saw him, that Ray knew they could argue for hours, but the battle was already lost. “I figured out I was over her when I realized I’d sooner jump through a window to land on you than dance with her.”

Ah.

“Perhaps...”

“You’ll get over him? And her?” A liquid, one-shouldered shrug. “How can you know? I see Stella all the time. Victoria’s romantically exiled and on the lam, and Vecchio... he’s a hero.”

Three citations, three glowing citations. “So are you.”

“Just doing my job.”

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And he could almost feel a growl of frustration pushing at his throat. “What will it take?” he said, loudly, not caring he was nearly shouting, knowing that it was safe, to be this much himself with Ray. “What will it take to stop you denigrating yourself? Tell me! Just tell me what it would take to make you see yours—”

As Ray had let him see himself. Up to him then. And so he said it again. “I love you.”

“I know you do.”

“Then what will it take?”

Oh, and that smile had gone from warped to something he didn’t even want to put name to.

“Not being second best.”

He opened his mouth, and had to shut it, seeing Ray’s life through Ray’s eyes. “But you’re not second best to me.”

“No? If you say so. But I’m still second.”

“Well, yes, but—”

“So end of discussion. I’m second, I know that, I’m good with that. And I’ll be with you till Vecchio comes back.”

He remembered, suddenly, with vicious brilliance, exactly how he’d felt when they’d told him not to go inside the house, to go

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back to the barn with the dogs, stay there, stay there, no, Mum wouldn't be coming down in a minute...

He was himself with this Ray. More himself than he'd ever been. "What if I don't want you to leave me then?"

A brief, staccato burst of laughter. "You think he'd share? I wouldn't."

He could see Ray clearer than he could see himself. "Yes, you would," he said, as gently as he could.

And watched, pain-filled horror curdling his stomach, as Ray lowered his head, as if that would hide the shame.

"Yeah," Ray said, "I would."

But it wasn't what Ray wanted to do, and it wasn't what Ray wanted. But Ray would do it. Because Ray wanted him that much. Ray loved him that much.

He opened his mouth to reassure Ray, and found he couldn't. He couldn't even ask if it was possible to love two people at once, for he knew that, oh, how he knew that, Victoria and Ray Vecchio tearing him in two, until a bullet in the back had felt like getting off too easy. And Ray knew it, just as well, himself and Stella, Ray's conflicting halves of one whole.

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Ray pulled up outside of the Consulate and sat there, not looking at him.

“I’m quite sincere, Ray. I won’t abandon you. I won’t—”

“You sure of that?” Ray asked, looking out the driver’s side window, looking out at the world instead of in at them. “You sure when he comes back, you’re gonna still want the stand-in? I borrowed you, I borrowed his whole fucking *life*, and... and I have to give it back. Some time.”

“I’m not a thing—”

“You think I don’t know that?”

Fierce eyes, wild with tears held at bay, glaring at him.

“I know you, I see you, and that’s why I know if he wants you, if he says it’s him or me, you’ll go with him.”

“Ray—”

“He’s your *friend*, he’s got first claim and I’m just the temp filling in for him.”

“That’s not—”

“Yes it is, yes it is so shut up, just shut up and let me finish, or so help me—”

No, the threat couldn’t even be said now, not since Ray had,

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actually, popped him one, once before. Too much fear after that, too much fear and suffering to even say such a thing.

“Look,” a single punch to the steering wheel, “if he comes back and he’s like, hey, Benny buddy, and it’s all just friends and forget about the rest, then you and me—we’re fine, we’re good. But that’s it, because he’s gonna want you all over again, when he sees you.”

If Ray Vecchio sees me, he thought harshly. And was it disloyalty, insight, or not wanting to lose this Ray—or himself.

“And Vecchio won’t share. He’s got more pride’n me.”

Again, he wanted to offer the most complete reassurance, to reward Ray’s courage with certainty, but he didn’t know. What he felt for Ray—Ray Vecchio—was it out of sight, out of mind, or absence makes the heart grow fonder?

He didn’t know. Couldn’t see himself that clearly, couldn’t see inside his own heart. He loved this Ray, loved him to distraction; thought it was more than he’d ever loved before. But he’d believed that about Victoria, and turned her in; believed in his love for Ray, and just look at how he’d behaved when Victoria had come back to him. Just look at how faithful and true he’d been then.

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He trusted Ray, this Ray, so taut and tense beside him, but he couldn't trust himself. And he didn't want Ray trusting him, not on this. Not when...

But then Ray looked at him, and saw him, and gave him the smallest, saddest of smiles.

"I'll take everything you can give while you can, and when he comes back... I promise, cross my heart, hope to die, I won't let you hurt me, okay? I'll walk away from you before you can hurt me."

It was the kindest of lies, and the most bitter of cuts. Salt in the wound, to see Ray smile at him again, each of them seeing the other, flaws and virtues and good intentions wrapped up in pain.

He wanted to promise it would be this Ray, and this Ray only, forever. But... he'd believed himself to be true and good before, and look where that had gotten him—where it had gotten all of them.

He wanted to make that promise.

Wanted it more than life itself.

But he couldn't. Because he didn't trust himself, didn't know the future, and didn't even know himself. This was something

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even Ray couldn't help him with, for how could Ray be expected to see beyond his own doubts?

"I'll try," was the best he could promise, and trusted Ray to understand.

"There is no try, there is only do," Ray intoned, cutting them loose from the miasma of emotions with a sharp flick of a smile. "C'mon, you still got to truss yourself up in the red suit."

Oh. Right.

He had no idea what to say next; no idea where they stood, at the moment, although he knew they'd be together as much as they could, for as long as they could. But he'd never planned a relationship before. Had never had to go beyond impulse and need that set him free.

"The Ice Queen cracking that whip this weekend?" Ray asked him.

"No, I won't be on duty at all."

"I got the four till midnight tomorrow, but then I'm free for the whole weekend. You wanna come over?"

"Yes," he said, and was rewarded with Ray seeing just how much he wanted this.

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“Okay, so I’ll pick you up Saturday morning.”

An unexpected diffidence settling over Ray’s face.

“Unless you wanna come over Friday night, bring Dief, hang out in comfort where you can’t be dragooned into counting paper clips.”

“I’d like that, Ray.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“Okay, see you Friday.”

He was just closing the door when he heard Ray’s voice again. Ray wasn’t looking at him, perhaps seeing him all too well.

“And if you ever pick a name for yourself, let me know.”

“You’ll be the first person I tell.”

But he could still see the disbelief in Ray’s eyes. But all Ray said was, “Duty barks,” and there was the Inspector, standing in the open doorway, glaring at him for a second before turning on her well-shod heel and walking away.

He closed the car door, to the sound of Ray gunning the engine and taking off. In the aftermath of Ray’s leaving, it was almost painfully quiet, and he simply stood there for a moment.

He was close to being late for work.

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As for the rest?

As he stood on the steps of the consulate and watched Ray drive away, he felt the heavy mantle of time weighing down his shoulders. He was late; perhaps he was, dreadfully, already too late.

