

Onesto had a problem. At any time of the day, he had several problems, but this one was special. He could deal with the council hounding him for further actions against the Death Court. He tolerated his charge being a stubborn, recalcitrant old lady with far too much energy to put toward attempting to give him the slip. He even welcomed the challenge of conversing with Shy and gently, patiently attempting to steer the man away from thoughts of genocide and mental domination of his creations. These things were normal challenges that took up no more than a standard amount of his time and focus.

No, Onesto's problem was a single, infuriating, madly passionate and wildly temperamental woman whom he had volunteered to guide toward recovery and healing. Maramia, daughter of Empress Naeodin, haunted his every thought.

Oh, he knew how to lead her therapy sessions. He'd encountered many people of Maramia's nature before. He even recognized echoes of his past life in her rages and mood swings.

Crazy, they called her. The mad daughter. They stamped that label on her as neat as tying a bow on a gift then walked away. Job done. If any of them had thought to look under the surface, to weather the fury even for a day, they would have seen what he saw.

The hurt that lay at the core of her being was a raw, wounded animal. No wonder she snapped at them. No wonder she lashed out. Fear and pain dominated her soul, and no one at the Vella Crean had stopped to think on what she needed to overcome her grief. They simply grew tired of waiting for her to get better on her own.

It was not their fault, he knew. None of them were trained as he had been. Even on Tris'Hath, his studies were a new field. They had learned so much in twenty years, and still had so much more to go.

Mia had so far to go. The road to her recovery was a long one and fraught with pain. He should have focused on being her guide and support. He should have dedicated himself to reinforcing positive steps. He should have remained professionally detached.

Instead, Onesto found himself waking to thoughts of Mia. He went through his morning routines wondering if she had slept well, if she ate, if she'd continued with her personal meditation time as he suggested. He went to sleep at night with the image of her burned into the back of his mind and dreamed of when he would see her next. Worst of all, he imagined what would become of him the day she no longer needed therapy, and what he would do when she moved on without him.

That day hadn't come yet, and Onesto practiced a few of his own deep breathing exercises to calm himself as he walked down the hall toward her room. They should have continued their meditations in the garden. It was a peaceful, open environment. Selfishness made him jump at the offer of moving the sessions to the privacy of her chambers, away from prying eyes.

It was ridiculous, he thought as he paused before her door to smooth out the wrinkles from his white robes. He had no reason to be nervous around her. It was childish, he chided himself as he patted down a few stray strands of hair from his braids, that he worried about his appearance in her presence. It was infuriating, he told himself, that he couldn't shake her from his mind. He had no reason to obsess over her in this way. None at all.

Onesto raised a fist and rapped lightly on the wooden door. What answered him was not the familiar soft steps of Mia rushing across the chamber to let him in, but a muffled voice

beckoning him to enter. He could not hear it in full through the door, but something about the voice seemed off. Deeper and huskier than he was accustomed to. Confused, he worked the latch and swung the door open, and then froze in place as solidly as a rabbit before a wolf.

"Hi," Maramia called from across the room. There was no doubt now that she had been the one to call him in. She pitched her voice low, giving it her best attempt at a sultry purr. What came out sounded partially alluring, with the other part being a car engine that refused to turn over. She cleared her throat and tried again. "I thought maybe we could go for a walk before our session today. It's a beautiful day, and the terraces are in full bloom this time of year."

Maramia took a step away from the desk she'd been leaning against. The thin, strappy heels wrapped around her feet clicked against the floorboards. Once, twice, and then a scrape interrupted the rhythm. She stumbled, lurching to one side before righting herself. When the next step also wobbled, Mia cursed and kicked off the heels to tumble hap-hazardly under the couch.

"Barefoot also works," she muttered under her breath. Then, seeming to remember Onesto's presence, she struck a pose.

Maramia was a beautiful woman. No one in the Vella Crean could deny such a fact. Her eyes were as blue as her mother's, but where Naeodin's irises were bright as a sunny day, Mia's eyes held the moody cast of a raging storm. She inherited her mother's fine features as well, but built of stronger material, as if someone had taken a delicate statue and cast it in steel. Her long, brown hair cascaded around her shoulders in a singular, shining wave, and fire curled around her pale frame. The dress (if it could even be called that) consisted of little more than a single drape of red fabric that ran from one shoulder, around her midsection, and tumbled down her thighs to end near her knees. The shoes had been red as well, but somehow the lack of them made her appear all the more wild and untameable.

"Well," she demanded, hands poised on her hips.

Epiphanies were things that Onesto knew of from a theoretical viewpoint. He understood the concept of pulling sudden and inexplicable insight from the heavens. He knew of people who claimed to have had such a moment. As he stood in the doorway, slack-jawed and numb, Onesto experienced the sudden, blindingly painful clarity of comprehension that poets used when composing ballads, and he understood what epiphanies truly were.

A damned gut punch.

He was in love with Maramia. This was a problem. A big, terrifying, unacceptable problem. To begin with, he was her therapist. It was his duty to assist her with dealing with her grief in a healthy manner so that she might move on with her life. He did not want her to move on with her life. Not if it meant leaving him behind. Secondly, he had never imagined that a woman as perfect and passionate as Mia would see him as anything other than a servant of the family. She was heir to an empire after all, and even if she hadn't been, she existed on a level that Onesto could not even see from his vantage point leagues beneath her. Third, and perhaps most importantly, her mother was his boss. The degree to which his thoughts were against the rules did not even register on a scale of professional repercussions. These were the sorts of thoughts that made people disappear in the middle of the night. Not by choice.

Onesto was not a thrill seeker. As his stomach leapt upward and his heart crashed down to meet it in the center of his being, he imagined he would never have to entertain thoughts of thrill seeking in his life, as this must be what jumping off a cliff felt like. He was at once sick and

over-excited and exhausted and dizzy. He closed his eyes, but that only served to take away the fragile control over his center of gravity that remained. He opened his eyes to avoid toppling over and realized that Mia was still staring at him. Still waiting.

Onesto cleared his throat. When that did nothing to wet the sudden desert in his mouth, he tried again. It took a third try before he felt he had enough moisture on his tongue to make it unstick from the roof of his mouth.

"I think," he rasped in a very soft voice, "I should go."

Then he bowed, stepped backward out the door, and pulled it shut behind him. The panic set in moments later. Not the sort that sent him running through the halls screaming his head off. The quiet, insidious sort of panic. The kind that stole his breath and refused to give it back no matter how hard he pumped his lungs. The kind that clamped down iron teeth on his mind, shutting off any hope of rationalization. Onesto recognized this panic demon and knew that he needed to find a quiet, dark corner right away. He turned and quick-stepped back down the hall toward the stairs, praying all the while that Naeodin had no need of him that evening.

The sound of a door opening behind him only made him step faster. Mia called out, her voice tight with its own brand of panic. That alone nearly made him stop, but the terror of facing her, knowing what he knew now, kept him moving.

Down the stairs and through the halls, detouring as much as possible to avoid encountering people. His first thought was to return to his garden. That little sanctuary that was his alone. Yet Mia knew to find him there. And no doubt Shiqinth would be there as well. The fledgling blue had been particularly clingy since the events of the Death Court hatching.

No, he couldn't go somewhere expected. He couldn't deal with questions and requests for help right then.

As he rounded a corner, a familiar figure came into view. The General had been particularly vocal in council meetings of late. They butted heads on many topics, and the man seemed determined to either win Onesto over to his viewpoint or else hammer him into submission with endless argument after endless argument.

The General had his back to him. In a split second decision, Onesto ducked down an adjacent corridor and quickened his steps. Before long, he realized he'd chosen the hallway that led to Shy's labs.

The labs were always open to him, as Shy had mentioned on many occasions. While they teemed with the scientist's latest projects and attendants, none of them troubled Onesto. Unless it was to offer him tea. A flicker of relief eased the pressure in his chest, and Onesto hurried along to the smooth, steel door at the end of the hall.

A soft whoosh of air greeted him as he approached the door, and the same sound followed him after he passed within. The moment the door closed, Onesto paused to catch his breath.

Quiet, peaceful music drifted through the air from invisible sources. The walls, floor and ceiling all displayed tasteful artwork in shades of gold and green. The temperature was warmer than the brisk chill that flowed through the halls without, and everything bore a faintly sterile scent. It was a calm, controlled environment, and the relief it brought to Onesto's frayed nerves was instant.

After a few deep breaths, the cleric collected himself and looked about the main foyer for anyone who might have noted his harried entrance. Not a soul occupied the space with him,

which brought another brief wave of relief. Now he just needed somewhere to collect his thoughts.

The answer to that dilemma was instantly apparent. Shy maintained a small tea room in a terrace that overlooked his complex. They often sat through long debates there. The combination of the greenery and the calming, zen design was exactly what he needed.

Onesto bee-lined for the elevator down to the lower levels, all the while praying he did not run into anyone.

Arriving at the lower levels unmolested, the cleric allowed a fraction of his tension to drain away. He might yet be able to take the time he needed to process what had just happened. He stepped out of the elevator and into the green oasis that was the terrace. Birds called in the distance and leaves rustled below. Shy's projects milled about the garden that the terrace overlooked, but no one shared the elevated space with him. No one had set up the small tea table with cups and saucers, which was to be expected. No one had anticipated his arrival.

Onesto drew in and released a few deep breaths as he moved over to the railing that separated him from the drop down to the garden. He wrapped his hands around the cool metal, using the sensation to ground him as he began to unravel his frazzled thoughts.

"Well well well," cooed a familiar voice from behind him. "I didn't even have to lay out tea this time. You just wandered into my trap all on your own. What a pleasant surprise."

"Shy," Onesto said, taking an extra minute while facing the gardens below to compose himself. He turned, a smile on his lips, but it vanished as soon as Shy's own smile did.

"What's the matter," Shy asked. His artfully sculpted brows crashed together, shadowed by the short fringe of his dark hair.

Onesto let out the shaky breath he'd pulled in to fortify himself. It wheezed past his lips like air leaving a balloon. Things were truly dire if he could not hide his true thoughts even from Shy.

"I just needed somewhere to think for a minute," he said.

"Well yes, you always have that here," Shy said, taking a few quick steps forward. "But think about what? You look positively ashen."

"I just-" he started, and found he had no words to finish the sentence. He took a step back to match Shy's step forward, feeling the man's approach as electricity on his skin. Everything, everywhere felt like an overload of his system.

This was not like him. He did not fall apart like this. Least of all over someone whom he had no hope of engaging in a romantic relationship. Onesto began to pace.

"Hypothetically," he said, "If you knew someone who felt attraction to someone beyond their station, what would you say to them?"

Shy opened his mouth to answer, but Onesto pressed onward. Now that the first words were out, a flood followed after.

"This person knows that such a relationship is beyond attainable, of course. And there's been no indication that the other person even considers them as more than a friend." Onesto thought back to the strip of red cloth crawling up Mia's frame like liquid flame and swallowed hard. "Hypothetically. But if one's station is that of power and the other is in a place of servitude, then it's wrong to even consider it, yes? It should be a simple thing of acknowledging that such thoughts are beyond the realm of understanding. So why then would the thoughts persist past

all reason? And what should happen if the other person, hypothetically, makes an advance? It should be rebuffed, yes?"

Shy appeared in his path, a sudden barrier of soft silks and bright green eyes. His delicate, manicured fingers crawled up Onesto's chest and wrapped loosely around his neck.

"My sweet, darling Onesto. You worry too much."

"How do you mean? I think this is an adequate level of worry." And then he hastily added. "Hypothetically."

"You've invented this separation of stations. I am flattered, of course, that you see me so highly, but it's really no obstacle at all."

Onesto opened his mouth to protest. His mind had yet to catch up to Shy's meaning. The touch of the other man's lips on his own provided that final, crucial piece needed to connect the dots.

For a moment, no thought penetrated his mind. All of his focus went into the softness and warmth of Shy's touch; the closeness of the other man; and the fleeting thought that perhaps this was a better solution.

Mia's face flashed before his eyes. The secretive half smile that hid in the corner of her mouth when she didn't want him to know something had amused her. The shadow in her eyes.

Onesto gripped Shy's shoulders gently but firmly and drew the man away from himself.

"It's Mia," he said in a rush. "I'm in love with Mia."

"Really?" His face dropped into a scowl, then morphed into confusion. "You know she's a little..." he let the sentence trail off and lifted a finger to spin it next to his temple.

Irrational, black fury swept across Onesto's mind for a moment.

"She is working through past traumas," he said in a slow, measured tone. "She is not insane."

Shy backed away, his face closing off and his arms folding together to protect his frame. Onesto feared, momentarily, that he had hurt Shy's feelings. That hadn't been his intention, but clearly there were more people interested in him than he initially believed. That thought alone was troubling.

Yet as he stood and debated how to handle this new development, Shy's expression changed. It became joyous, then devious. His hands unfolded from across his chest and came together before his lips. He turned back to face Onesto, and the cleric's concern for his friend morphed into concern for himself.

"So. Mia," Shy said. "Well this is an interesting predicament, isn't it? Do you know what happened to the last man she fancied?"

Onesto turned away. Now that the words were out, he could no longer deny them. He loved Mia, and any ill words spoken about her woke a furious beast inside him. He didn't have the energy to deal with his own crisis and Shy's digs. He headed toward the elevator.

Shy appeared before him once more, eeling around his large frame like a living shadow. Soft hands pressed against his chest, stopping his determined march.

"Oh, now Onesto, you know I'm only teasing. I didn't mean anything by that."

"Jest or not, I'm not interested in games right now, Shy," Onesto said.

"Of course. Of course." Shy slid one arm through the crook of Onesto's elbow, deftly attaching himself to the cleric. "This is quite the delicate situation. But you don't need to worry. I can help."

Alarm shot through Onesto's mind like a blast of icy water. Shy had never given him reason to mistrust him, but this was still Shy. They'd spent many hours debating the morality of designing sentient creatures. Even more discussing the consequences of forcing his creations to be loyal. Mia was not one of Shy's creations, but Onesto did not doubt that Shy's offer of help came with a heaping helping of meddling.

"That's alright. I should just go. I shouldn't have bothered you with this," Onesto said as he attempted to extract his arm from Shy's clutches. Yet the more he pulled away, the tighter Shy's hold became. The man had turned himself into a snare.

"It's no bother at all," Shy cooed. "You've spent so much time helping me with my conundrums. If there's anything I can do to help you, I want to do it. Even if it's just listening. Please," the geneticist pleaded, giving a little tug on Onesto's arm to redirect him toward the chairs, "let me order us some tea. You talk and I'll listen. You've taught me how important it is to have someone who listens. Let me help, Onesto."

Onesto stood firm, but his mind wavered. He still hadn't sorted out what he was going to do with himself in this new situation. Talking might help. And some tea.

For one fragile second, Onesto let himself go slack, and Shy pounced on the opportunity to drag him back toward the seating area.

"One pot," Onesto stated. "Then I really should go."

Shy nodded and smiled and waved one imperious hand through the air. Some previously unseen creation hovering at the edges of the terrace vanished with little more than a whisper of noise to retrieve their tea. They talked and they drank, and for a time, Onesto forgot any reservations he had regarding the green-eyed geneticist.

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They talked for a long time. Much longer than a single pot of tea. Onesto realized that, for all the assistance he provided others, he has been neglecting his own mental health. Though it was unexpected, Shy did a very good job at being a sympathetic ear as he poured out his concerns over Mia. Beautiful Mia. Passionate Mia. Unobtainable Mia. Shy agreed on every point, making noises of encouragement as the cleric attempted to talk himself through his own crisis of the heart.

Hours later, when the magical tug of the summoning earring Mystic had gifted the Empress reminded him that he still had duties to fulfill, Onesto left Shy's labs feeling drained, but calm. He had come no closer to figuring out how he would deal with this new revelation, but at least now he felt as if he could face Mia without falling to pieces.

That was until he nearly ran into her coming out of her mother's apartments. They froze less than a foot away from each other, as if repelled by an invisible barrier. She'd changed since he saw her last. The red dress and its matching pumps were gone, replaced by her usual, drab riding gear. The dress remained in his mind though, burned forever into his memories.

Mia cast him one scathing look, then glanced away. The turn of her head could not hide the colour creeping into her cheeks.

"Mia," Onesto said, his voice cracking on her name. He cleared his throat, suddenly aware that all the tea he'd drunk had not done a thing to quench the desert on his tongue. "I would like to apologize-"

"Don't," she cut him off. "It was a stupid idea. I shouldn't have been playing around."

Doubt crept over Onesto's thoughts. He thought he had himself sorted out, but if Mia had just been playing earlier, if he'd misinterpreted her actions... He could not control the tornado of emotions that thought inspired. Fear of having embarrassed himself, certainty that he hadn't been wrong, then uncertainty, and a deep, widening chasm of regret at the realization that she might not have been expressing interest in him after all.

This was too much all over again. He needed space. Shy had helped him with a script to request such a thing that would, gods willing, not get him in deeper trouble. He cleared his throat again, repeating the words as rehearsed.

"Perhaps it would be for the best if we paused our sessions for the time being. I think, perhaps we've both confused some signals and..."

He trailed off. The look she shot him as he laid out his plan made the words wither and die on his tongue.

Fury clouded her eyes, and for a moment he saw the old Mia. The tortured soul that trusted no one and welcomed no attempts to see her as anything but the Empress' crazed daughter.

"You know what, you're right. I think we need a break. I'd hate to be the one to take your attention away from Shy." With those words, Mia shoved past him, her head high and her shoulders squared.

The mixture of confusion and unexpected force was enough to cause Onesto to stumble back a step. He stared after her as she marched down the hall, bewilderment replacing the doubt of earlier. For all his years of education and research, it seemed no study had ever captured the mind of one such as Mia.

Onesto stood still and numb in the hallway a moment, then pushed into the Empress' personal chambers.

"Oh good, you're here," came Naeodin's sing song words. The ever-present hum of her electrical wheeled chair chased them as the Empress zipped to and fro across her room. Here she grabbed a shawl, there a shirt, there a comb, then back to the bed where a bag lay open and waiting. "Help me pack. We're going to Ryslen. Hee hee! The Flurry is back! Oh, I can't wait to get my hands on some bubbly pies and a mug of hot cider."

"Ryslen," Onesto asked in a daze.

"Yes, yes. Nidus Ryslen. It's been gone for years. Like the rest of us. Popped up again and sent out some invites. 'Just woke up, who wants a Flurry?'" Naeodin cackled again. "Just like Tiyanni."

"Oh, I see," Onesto said.

"If this is anything like the Flurries of the past, we'll need some warm clothes. Have you seen my winter coat?"

Moving without thought, Onesto walked over to the far cabinet and withdrew a heavy overcoat in bright, summery colours. Though the sheer volume of it looked as if it might drown the frail Empress, Onesto knew it would also keep her warm. He turned to bring it to the bed, then froze.

Naeodin sat before him in her chair, her lips pressed down into a scowl that made Mia's fury look like a childish tantrum.

"What happened," the Empress demanded.

"Nothing, Your Eminence," Onesto replied. He tried to smile, but the movement of his muscles came as an afterthought.

He knew it was too late to hide his distress from the Empress. For all the weakness of her limbs, her mind had not dulled an inch following her coma. It was a fact he cursed and praised all at once, for it meant her progress towards good health could not be more promising. It also meant that he hadn't a hope of escaping her predatory gaze now that she'd caught a whiff of something being off.

Naeodin narrowed her eyes.

"What did my children do," she demanded again.

"It's unrelated, Your Eminence," Onesto said. He shuffled to one side, but with a flick of a button, Naeodin put her chair between him and freedom once more. He drew in a breath, contemplated a moment, then switched tactics. "I think perhaps a short trip away is an excellent idea. Your recovery is progressing well and some fresh air will do you good."

"Hm," came the Empress' disapproving response. Her eyes narrowed to thin slits and her lips compressed into a line. And then, with another quick button press, she zoomed backward, turned, and shot off toward another end of the room.

Onesto released a long held breath. He had banked on Naeodin's insatiable need to explore and it had paid off.

"We'll be going for several weeks so you'll need to pack warm as well," she said.

"I think a week will suffice."

"Two at least. More if the eggs take their sweet time in hatching. Oh, and you'll need to inform Shy that we'll be away."

"Yes, Your Eminence," he said obediently.

“Oh! I forgot to tell Mia to expect some new arrivals when we get back. There’s always a few stragglers at the Flurry and I’ve already written to Tiyanni to tell her that we’ve got room. Mia will need to clear out some of the lower dens. Be a dear and let her know, please?”

Onesto willed himself not to grimace. He had to wonder how much Mia had said to her mother before he’d arrived. What if Naeodin already knew?

No, he stamped down that terror as quick as it came up. If the Empress knew of his embarrassment from earlier, he’d be packing for Tris’Hath, not Ryslen.

“Yes, Your Eminence,” he said again. He bowed low to acknowledge her commands, then caught a glimpse of something as he straightened up. Just a fraction of a second. Just a shadow. Yet he could’ve sworn he saw the Empress giving him the shrewdest of glances, as if she could see inside his mind.

When he looked at her again, Naeodin had nothing but smiles for him. She made a shooing motion, the shawl gripped tight in one fist flapping through the air like a colourful flag.

“Go on then! I want to be out of here lickity split.”

Onesto smiled in response, unable to avoid the Empress’ infectious joy. He ached still, but he would recover. The hows and the whys remained a mystery, but at least for a little while, he would have some distance. He would have time to think. Maybe the cold would do as well for him as it might for Naeodin.

The cleric left the Empress’ chambers, closing the door softly behind himself. He had much to do to prepare for their trip. So much packing. But first, the most difficult message delivery of his life.

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In the pitch black of a room deep beneath the labyrinthine structure that was Shy's labs, a metallic click kept steady rhythm. The click came from a small device tapped against the surface of a stainless steel counter. The momentum came from the hand that held it, lifting and falling with machine-like precision.

It was a simple device, so elegant in its design as to make the creator wonder why he hadn't thought it up before. The perfect solution to all these new-found qualms over free will and choice. A simple, tiny device, inserted just behind the ear, and possessed of a program to allow suggestions.

Not commands. Not an override. A suggestion as common and natural as hunger. A gentle nudge in the right direction. Shy's direction.

It was a perfect, invisible, worry-free solution to everything that had troubled Shy of late. A perfect gift.

Shy was supposed to be perfect too. Yet when Faust arrived on the terrace to deliver his gift, he found his Shy wrapped around another man. His Shy with his lips pressed to that man's lips.

Faust knew of the other man. This cleric from the Warren. This spy. A man with no gifts save his bleeding heart and desperate need to prove his superiority from a moral standpoint. This stranger who had insinuated himself into every aspect of the Crean in a matter of months.

Usurper. Snake. Traitor.

The device slammed into the table and gave way against the solid surface. A crack resounded in the pitch black room.

Faust drew in a deep breath and pressed one hand against his face. His head felt hot, ready to boil out from the inside. His skin felt cold, burning against his fingertips.

How many years had he given to Shy already? He'd lost count. Ages, eons beyond measure, all within the shelter of their dimension away from time itself. Then the Crean returned and the Nexus stitched itself back together, and everything came tumbling down. All the loyalty, all the devotion, all the love. All of it, thrown away as easily as Shy threw away his broken projects.

Was he to be counted as a broken project now? A failure? He was a creation. One of Shy's special little toys. And yet Faust had wanted to move past that revelation. He'd tried so very hard to return to the way things were.

But time had found them at last, and Shy was no longer the perfect, devoted partner that he used to be.

A slick, wet tickle slid down Faust's chest. He shifted his hand, lifting a finger to allow the tendril to wrap around it.

"Call your queen, my pet," he murmured to the tendril stuck to his cheek. "It's time I have a chat with my former bond."