

Green Things Grow From Cinders

By A.E. Ross



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GREEN
THINGS
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NEW
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I. Ash

The bell above the door chimed cheerfully at 2:15 p.m. as the last customer left, giving Ash the chance to tidy and lock up, which put him only twenty minutes behind schedule overall. It had been a young guy in a backwards cap with a flannel shirt tied around his waist, looking for a little cactus to sit on his kitchen windowsill and keep him company in his studio apartment.

Ash really didn't need to leave the shop open that day; he could have just come in for that morning's pickup and then left again, but Saturdays were his best days, and he needed the money. And besides, there was something about the tiny space that made breathing feel easy as he moved calmly between the close wooden shelves. He took stock of the contents; glazed pottery bowls holding spiky cacti and pale shades of floral-looking succulents; making sure that everything was properly watered and willing to thrive.

As Ash locked the front door of the cramped storefront, sandwiched on a narrow street between a hipster coffee joint and a bright salon, his body broke out in an immediate sweat from the summer heat. The skin around the edges of his binder had already begun to chafe as he reached up to pull down the rolling gate that obscured the shop's glass windows, and the place where his thick thighs met was hot and damp despite the interference of his cargo shorts. The metal door clunked to a stop where it hit the cement. "Air Supply" was painted across the barrier in flowing white script, with the shop hours just below written in Ash's clumsy block letters.

Named after one his father's musical guilty pleasures, the little plant shop was Ash's livelihood. Selling aloe plants and hen-and-chicks to fellow millennials needing to brighten up their cramped city-center apartments was his favorite part, although far from the most lucrative. The majority of the shop's income came from older homeowners, looking for accent pieces to put in sparsely furnished rooms and, of course, the wedding orders.

The order that had been picked up this morning was the largest he'd ever done. Tall displays for the ceremony as well as centerpieces, bouquets, even matching boutonnieres for

the groomsmen, all made up of jade, yucca, wax agave plants, and more. Each one was personally created by Ash in his small workroom behind the store, painstakingly formed by his shaking hands in the middle of the night while the pressure of the order caused his anxiety to flare into a many-headed monster. Not only did the revenue mean he could technically afford to close shop for the next three months if he wanted, the groom was none other than Amir Sekhon, the brother of his roommates, Stasia and Zella. Everything had to be perfect.

He had known Stasia and Zella since high school and in that time, their brother had evolved from a bespectacled nerd to a high-powered investment banker. This evening, he'd be marrying his fiancée Lina on the rooftop of one of the nicest buildings in the city, a place where his best friend Roman happened to own the penthouse suite. At the thought of Roman, the heat spread to Ash's cheeks, this time unrelated to the weather. The handsome trust-fund kid had been all Stasia and Zella had been able to focus on leading up to their brother's nuptials, and Ash could see why. A few years ahead of them in school, Roman had always displayed a quiet confidence that Ash had admired. It took a long time to realize that it wasn't just a crush, but that he was actually envious of Roman's muscular build and understated masculinity.

Walking down the crowded street, Ash felt that same oppressive confusion. How had he ended up here? Ash didn't even like the city. The small country town that he had moved from had felt so wide open, so full of possibilities. The city, in contrast, made him feel small and boxed in. Ironically, only Air Supply, a literal cement box, made him feel any sense of freedom.

His love of plants had started young as a lucrative teenage lawn-mowing business. He'd also water, weed, and prune, taking care of neighbours' gardens for pocket money. Once he graduated high school, the progression into a landscaping business seemed natural. Ash probably could have kept doing that forever, but when his father passed, it was time for a change. He sold the truck and all his tools, giving him just enough money to move in with his old high-school friends in the city and buy a very small shop space. Ash, Stasia, and Zella had been inseparable as teens, but four years later, Ash realized that they had grown apart in a few key ways.

As if to punctuate his musings, Ash pushed open the front door of their third-floor walk-up directly into a cloud of hairspray, the air pulsing with the high-energy beat blasting from Stasia's laptop speakers.

"Ash!" Stasia squealed, turning in circles in the middle of the kitchen so that her cherry-red dress swirled around her calves. "Look! It's perfect" Her brown feet tapped the floor, hips swaying, showing off. Her skirt spun out around her like a morning glory as she danced. Only a year apart, the Sekhon sisters might as well have been twins. They both had the same artfully arched eyebrows and would have shared the same straight nose if Stasia hadn't had her bridge broken by a flying shoe during a particularly vicious fight with a high-school nemesis. Her temper had cooled in the years since, but she was still as goofy and excitable as Zella was stern and serious.

The latter stuck her head out of her bedroom doorway, her long dark hair half curled from the hot iron in her hand.

"Ash, put yours on too!" Zella commanded. Immediately Ash's heart sunk like a penny into a well. This was the event that he had been dreading for weeks. As Stasia and Zella's long-time friend and roommate, he had been invited to join them at Amir's wedding, and they had all ordered their dresses online together about six months ago, when it was easy for Ash to pretend that having to wear it was a distant threat. After all, it was an easier choice than having to come out to his roommates at that exact moment, and it wasn't like he could afford a nice suit anyways.

After opening the door to his room, he chucked his messenger bag on the floor and approached the box on the bed with caution and a sense of growing dread. Their apartment was technically a two-bedroom, with Ash bunking in the small sunroom off the kitchen. He liked the space. Despite the fact that it was tiny, the floor-to-ceiling glass made it feel open, with lots of light for his plant collection.

The sun from the windows shone directly onto the glossy white surface of the box. He had left it sitting in the middle of the bed that morning, too stressed out about getting to work for the pickup to really think about having to wear it. Prior to that, it had been buried at the bottom of his closet since it arrived in the mail. Ash had shoved it in there under a pile of

random shit, not even bothering to try it on. He had worn dresses before, of course, but that was different. Before he knew who he was, getting dressed up was an event gently laced with a vexing but unidentifiable anxiety. But over the past year, Ash Zermeno had found himself, and now the thought of having to perform femininity in front of hundreds of people made his skin feel like it was melting off his body. Not to mention, he hadn't shaved his pits or legs in well over a year and the thought of doing it now felt something like self-betrayal.

"Well?" Stasia called from the kitchen. "I wanna see!"

Ash pulled the lid off of the box. He slid the tissue paper aside and lifted the dress out of the box. The black, sparkly material slid against his fingers. He knew he couldn't wear this. He didn't even want to try it on. Feeling sick to his stomach, Ash dropped the dress back into the box and returned to the kitchen.

Stasia turned to him from the mirror she had propped up on the coffee table, a lip gloss wand inches from her mouth.

"Does it still fit?" she asked. Her gaze swept up Ash's body in a way that made him distinctly uncomfortable, like his body was a cartoon villain, swelling uncontrollably to foil their plans.

"No, that's not—" he started, as Zella burst out of her room, eyebrows knit together in thought.

"Ash, what do you want to do with your hair?" She shook her now-curled hair, lips pursed. "I wish you hadn't cut it! We'd have so many more options."

"I—" Ash started, running a self-conscious hand through his hair. The day he cut it had been one of the best days he'd had since moving to the city, even if the anxiety of asking for a men's cut had nearly swollen his throat shut in the barber's chair.

"It's okay, we'll figure something out!" Stasia said from the couch. "What about nail color? With a black dress, your options are super open." She gestured to the collection of little glass bottles littered across the coffee table, featuring every possible color under the sun.

"I don't think I'm going to—" Ash managed to get out, but Stasia cut him off.

"What?! But you love mani time!" she whined, throwing back to their childhood sleepover traditions.

A flash of anger ricocheted around inside of Ash's rib cage, but with a breath, he reminded himself that he couldn't be angry at Stasia and Zella. They were only treating him the same way they always had, and he had never given them a reason to change that. Was it so bad to pretend for one night? After all, there was nothing wrong with nail polish, nothing wrong with being feminine, nothing wrong with wearing a dress; for anyone else, it was a perfectly fine form of self-expression. So why did he feel like someone had his heart in their sinister fist, squeezing harder and tighter with every second?

"You okay, girl?" Stasia asked, popping up from the couch and striding across the room to lay a hand on Ash's forehead. "You don't look so good."

In the kitchen, Zella frowned. "Come on, Ash, you can't miss this," she said, her hands firmly on her hips.

Stasia sighed. "Just think. Roman will be there," she said in a playful sing-song, fluttering her dark lashes. "You'll get to see his place." As if that was a draw, as if Ash had any chance with Roman, who was older and handsome and not even into—

"Did you hear he's bi now?" Zella said, completely oblivious to the way her tasteless comment set Ash's heart soaring.

Stasia let out a romantic sigh. "That's so, like, emotionally evolved." She walked back to the mirror to check for smudges. Several things clarified in Ash's mind at this new revelation, the most important being that there was absolutely no way he was going to this wedding in girl mode if there was even a chance that Roman was into guys. Not that he really thought he had a chance-- they hadn't even seen each other since high school, and there was never any indication that Roman wanted to date a gender-confused green thumb. That said, if Ash could run into Roman as himself, maybe there was some glimmer of possibility—

"I'm really sorry, you guys. I'm just not feeling up to this. I thought I was maybe coming down with the flu this morning, but I tried to push through it. I'm definitely feeling off." Once the words had left his lips, Stasia's mouth fell open and Zella shook her head, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

"Are you serious? This is Amir's wedding. It's not some bar night that you can just raincheck," Zella said, her perfectly lined brows narrowing.

Stasia stood up and stalked over to Ash. "Are you sure? Maybe if you lie down for a bit? I don't want you to miss all the fun." Her glossed lips pouted in a way that felt less like concern and more like a guilt trip.

"Yeah," Ash said. "I'm feeling pretty nauseous. I think I will."

Stasia nodded, eyes downcast. "Okay sis, let us know if you start feeling better." She said, re-hashing an old high school joke. Stasia and Zella used to pretend that Ash was the third Sekhon sister. It was fun for a while, but now it just reinforced Ash's frustration that he hadn't managed to tell them he wasn't anyone's sister.

Shutting the door to his room behind him, Ash left the girls to finish getting ready. There was part of him that felt like he was lying, but when he climbed under the covers, he mostly just felt tired. Like so many little moments before, he could have come out right then and explained the real reason he didn't want to go to the wedding, but it was Amir's day, and he didn't really want to make himself the focus of it. Like all the little moments before, he told himself that any other day would work just as well, if he could only find the nerve. Instead, he curled up onto his side to face out the big sunroom window, his eyelids growing unexpectedly heavy.

Strings of lights crisscrossed the rooftop, illuminating the lingering couples on the dance floor. They swung and swayed, each one a strange mythic creature with one body and two heads. Ash walked through them, snaking his way around dresses that swirled in the moonlight, ducking under elbows and sidestepping as the creatures dipped low.

Once he found his way to the edge of the dance floor, he could see a figure standing on the balcony, his back to Ash. With his shirtsleeves rolled up, his dark skin blurred the edges of his forearms against the night sky. When Ash reached the balcony, Roman half-turned, dark eyes reflecting the moon that hung large beyond the railing. A wry smile graced his velvet lips. He reached a hand out to take Ash's and pulled him forward into a tight embrace. A surprised breath escaped Ash's lips the moment that Roman slid his arms around the back of Ash's suit jacket, tight and secure. He realized with a start that their mouths were a mere inch apart, only

the stars in the night sky filling the space in between. Placing his hands on Roman's broad back, Ash closed the short distance to feel the warmth of his breath when their lips met. He tasted like leather and thyme.

Waking with a start, it took a second for Ash's breathing to calm enough to let him remember where he was. Rather than a moonlit dance floor, he was in his own bed under soft gray sheets, the sun just barely beginning to set. Grumbling, Ash rolled over to check his cell phone. He wasn't even sure whether the sisters had looked in on him before leaving, but there was a text from Stasia saying that he should join them if he was feeling up to it. "No stress!" her message read, which hit hilariously considering the way Ash could still feel a storm of dream-borne tension roiling in his chest.

He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling for a second before putting a hand in front of his eyes to block the light from overhead, shining bright as the sunlight outside faded. Shaking the last vestiges of the dream out of his head, Ash looked up to see that the blinding brightness wasn't coming from the overhead lamp but a small glass ball hanging in front of the windowpane. Ash didn't have a ton of plants in his room, just a small pot of various succulents and one tall aloe, but he did keep an air plant in a hollow glass ball that hung from the curtain rod. At the moment, it seemed to be glowing white hot.

Putting his hands out for balance, he rose up to stand, unsteady, on the mattress. Still squinting into the light, Ash put a hand on the warm windowpane for balance and reached with the other to touch the glass ball. His fingers grasped the glowing sphere, and the light that filled it seemed to dart into the air above him, squid-like and fluid. The unexpected movement caused Ash to fumble his footing and fall backward, bouncing on his ass as it hit the mattress.

"Oof." A little bit of wind was knocked from his lungs upon impact. The light darted down toward him and swam around his head like a luminous jellyfish.

"Hey bud, sorry about that. You okay?" The voice that emanated from it was soft but deep and lilting. It was at this point that Ash wondered if he was, in fact, still asleep. The strange glowing creature circled his head, and Ash struggled to focus his eyes on it.

“Yeah, I’m... fine.” He felt wholly ridiculous having a conversation with a talking, glowing orb trailing tendrils of light. “What’s happening right now? Like, actually.”

The light floated down in front of his nose and then swam in one spot until Ash could finally make out the form at its core. Long pale tentacles seemed to reach out from an elongated body with no head or arms to speak of. How it was forming words, Ash had no idea, but he was sure that the strange velvet voice was coming from this creature.

“I’m here to do you a favor,” it said, propelling itself through the air back and forth in front of his eyes, a dizzying sensation. Tearing his eyes away, Ash looked back up at the glass ball still hanging from the curtain rod above his head, realizing with a start that it was empty.

“Are you... my tillandsia?” It felt as if he had jostled some specific neural pathway loose when he fell back onto the bed.

“You can call me Till,” the strange creature said, its light dimming just enough for Ash to recognize it as the air plant he’d brought home from Air Supply and hung above his bed. His heart skipped a beat.

“What sort of favor?” he asked tentatively, watching while Till took off through the air, gracefully arching its soft green body toward the white box that Ash had tossed into the center of the floor earlier that afternoon.

“I’m going to grant your wish, obviously.” Till’s voice had a slight musical quality to it, making even a snide retort sound like a pleasant riff. Ash shook his head, scooting himself across the bed to swing his legs over the edge. His toes hovered above the hardwood.

“I didn’t make a wish.” He was unwilling to step off the bed, half convinced the floor might be made of lava. At this point, anything seemed possible.

Till darted straight up into the air above the dress box before commencing lazy circles overtop. “Of course you did, bud. You just made it.”

A blush spread across Ash’s cheeks as his dream broke the surface of his clouded thoughts, the feeling of Roman’s arms around him causing his chest to constrict. “That was a dream,” Ash said, tentatively planting his feet onto the floor and raising himself onto shaky legs. Across the room, Till’s circles around the dress box grew tighter and tighter, until it was nearly spinning in place, a tight pirouette.

“What’s a dream, Ash?” Till said a little too loudly, its voice vibrating as the halogen glow around its body grew larger and brighter.

“I don’t know,” Ash lied. The light from Till’s body pulsed suddenly, expanding to fill the room. It washed toward Ash like a wave.

“What’s a dream, Ash?” Till asked again, shouting as the glow nearly touched Ash, its light lapping at his shore.

“I don’t know,” Ash whispered as the light finally covered his body and filled him with a warm, tingling feeling. Every corner of the room glowed a bright and neon white.

He had the distinct feeling that if people on the street outside looked up just then, they wouldn’t know what they were looking at. A breaker exploding? An indoor alien abduction? To be fair, he wasn’t particularly certain what it was that he was seeing. In front of him, Till dove down and disappeared into the white dress box. A pale green flash streaked through the middle of a luminous hurricane that caused a shockwave which sucked Ash’s legs out from under him and tumbled him back onto the bed.

The light faded, a few papers on Ash’s bulletin board rustling in the aftershock. Several stray socks were inches from where they had been a moment earlier, blown astray. The dress box sat in the middle of the floor, seemingly identical to how it had looked prior to being the epicenter of a magical light explosion.

“What’s a dream, Ash?” Till whispered from somewhere just behind his left ear, and Ash jumped a foot in the air before finally answering with the same words his father had told him before bed almost every night.

“It’s a wish your heart makes.”

“That’s what I thought,” Till said, darting out in front of Ash, its long tendrils undulating in excitement. “Go on, check it out.” It darted over to the dress box, beckoning Ash forward.

“Wait,” Ash said, a strange adrenaline pumping through his body. “Are you going to make *that* dream come true?”

A deep musical laugh echoed towards him. Till dipped and dove. “I’m going to make you look good, bud.” It swerved up into the air to hover beside the glass ball hanging from the curtain rod. “The rest is up to you.” With another flare of light so bright Ash was forced to

cover his eyes, Till had disappeared. The air plant sat in its place, silent and unmoving. Still sitting on the edge of the bed, Ash gripped the covers tight and closed his eyes, willing himself to wake up again, for real this time.

After about thirty seconds, Ash opened his eyes to see his room looking exactly the same as it had before he closed them. The sun had finally dipped down behind the skyline, striating the fading blue with indigo, red, orange, and pink. Ash pulled himself up to his feet and walked across the room to hesitate for a moment before picking up the dress box. He placed it on his bed among the tangle of his sheet.

Lifting the lid off, his heart flipped three hundred sixty degrees. The slim insides no longer held the same sparkling dress that had been haunting him for weeks. Instead, it seemed to have become three times deeper and beneath the tissue paper, Ash found the most incredible outfit he had ever seen. A soft gray suit jacket made of light wool with brass buttons and a notched shawl lapel was at the top of the pile. Beneath the matching trousers was a warm fawn-colored vest and crisp navy dress shirt. Below that sat a tooled leather belt featuring small plants, succulents, and wild herbs, with a worn copper buckle. Alongside it, a smart pocket square, fawn tie, navy socks with white polka-dots, and a brand-new binder were also included.

Ash pulled these last pieces out of the box only to discover yet another layer of tissue paper in its unfathomable depths. He lifted it out of the box and gasped at what sat beneath. Reaching in, Ash removed the most beautiful pair of shoes he'd ever seen in his life: expertly brogued wingtips made of cream-colored leather, accented by light-blue embroidery and laces. Without even holding them up against the soles of his feet, he had a sneaking suspicion that the shoes, along with everything else that had been contained in the box, would fit perfectly, just like they had on the rooftop in his dream.

After showering, Ash dressed slowly, savoring every part of his new suit. It was as if it had been cut and tailored exactly for him. Even those parts of men's clothes that usually didn't fit quite right worked with his body perfectly, tapering his waist and hips into one straight line. It didn't change his physique, just imbued it with a confidence and masculinity that he often

found himself admiring in other men. The biggest surprise was the new binder that had been grouped, unassumingly, with the other accessories. Like the dress box, it seemed to accommodate much more than it appeared to, and yet it felt like he wasn't wearing anything at all.

Finishing up with some matte pomade in his short, wavy hair, Ash grinned into the mirror, chest swelling with pride. He was one handsome motherfucker. If only every expensive, gender-affirming thing in his life could be delivered by a magical bromeliad.

"Thanks, Till," Ash said. He grabbed his wallet and headed out the door to the wedding reception, but there was no response from the little green plant that hung above his bed.

II. Roman

Roman wrinkled his nose as he moved a stray beer bottle off the clear, glass cover of his record player. He was about to do another round of hawk-eyed spill spotting when he heard forks clink against champagne glasses out on the patio. Popping his head out the door and into the warm night air, he watched his two best friends share a passionate kiss for the pleasure of their guests. His tuxedo pressed and perfect, Amir released Lina from a tight embrace, allowing her a moment to smooth the imaginary wrinkles from her chic white lace gown before leading her to the center of the empty dance floor. Strings of fairy lights criss-crossed above their heads illuminating the happy couple, who swayed in time.

It was the perfect night, but there was something inside of Roman that wouldn't let him sit back and enjoy it. When he had offered up his penthouse for Amir's reception it had been a relatively small affair, just family and a few select friends. That list seemed to have expanded exponentially with no signs of stopping. It seemed the elevator dinged every few minutes, its doors parting smoothly to reveal yet more well-dressed partygoers. So far, he had spent most of the event wandering around, placing coasters under bottles and glasses and trying to safely tuck away anything he thought might fall victim to a drunken stumble.

Outside, he could feel that the heat of the summer day was finally starting to dissipate as the guests mixed and mingled. The decorators had turned the central part of the garden into a dance floor, with the buffet and bar inside. The lush outdoor space took up the majority of the rooftop of the twenty-floor apartment building, smack in the middle of the city's downtown core. Despite his tendency towards shyness, Roman was proud of decision to purchase the three-bedroom penthouse even though it had taken a significant amount of his trust fund. It gave him a place to call home, far above the lights and car horns, and allowed him to provide shelter and comfort to friends in need.

Earlier that night, Amir and Lina had teased him about his concern for the condition of his apartment as they made their way, arm in arm, out onto the patio to cut the cake. They

were, of course, drunk on love and expensive champagne. Roman, on the other hand, was painfully sober.

Now, with one hand entwined in hers and the other pressed against the small of her back, Amir led Lina in their first dance as husband and wife. Roman leaned back against the balcony railing with his arms crossed over his chest, listening to Whitney Houston sing out from the speakers, pouring out her heart. Roman could relate. He, too, wanted to dance with somebody, let alone feel the heat with somebody. Though he was nothing but happy for Amir and Lina, Roman had to admit that the evening felt bittersweet. He and Amir had been best friends since junior high. When Lina showed up in their first-year philosophy lecture, the three of them became inseparable, and Roman had watched on as Amir and Lina became closer still.

He had spent a lot of time in college looking for the same kind of connection before eventually resigning himself to life as a third wheel. These days the average length of one of his relationships was in the single digits, meaning hours. He wasn't ashamed of that in any way, of course. There was nothing wrong with finding physical connections, but looking out at the wedding guests starting to couple up and join his best friends on the dance floor, an emptiness spread inside his chest. It had been a long time since there was anyone he felt that magic with. It was even possible that he had forgotten what it felt like.

The somberness of his thoughts were bumming Roman out completely. If Amir wasn't busy dancing with the love of his life, he'd tell Roman to hit the bar, try to loosen up, and get out of his head a little. With shockingly good timing, it was at that moment that Amir's younger sisters, Stasia and Zella, rocked up to him with a spare tumbler of scotch.

"Need a swim?" Zella asked, offering the glass. He had better-aged vintages in his personal bar stash, but he could definitely make do with the wedding supply for the night.

"Thanks, Zellie." He reached to grab the glass while Zella glared daggers at him for using her childhood nickname. With her hair curled into glossy ringlets, she looked so much older than he remembered. It seemed like just the other day that they were asking him to buy them beer.

"Roman, I'm so glad we finally get to see your place." Stasia swooned, putting a presumptuous hand on his shoulder. She gazed up at him, eyelashes batting seductively. The

younger of the two sisters had been looking at him like that as long as he could remember, and he didn't really know what to do about it. Zella was there to cut the tension, at least.

"Where's that weird moose statue you're obsessed with? I thought you told Amir you'd never get rid of it." Her voice was dry and sedate where Stasia's was upbeat and bubbly.

"Caramel? She's locked up in my office. Didn't want any drunk party-girls trying to make off with her." He smiled. He and Amir had once stolen the hand-carved moose from a small town diner during a post-graduation road trip. Amir had insisted he keep it as a token of their "wild" youth. "How's the internship going, Stasia?" Roman asked, referring to the summer gig she had started at a local law firm.

"It's really good. Busy. I'm learning a lot." Stasia grinned up at him, her hand shifting down his arm to squeeze his bicep. It made Roman slightly uncomfortable. "Mostly I can't wait to start law school in the fall."

Amir's sisters were both beautiful, but it was hard not to see these two as little sisters, though he rarely saw them at all these days.

"So, Roman, are you seeing... anyone?" Zella interjected.

He instantly recognized her tone of voice, the leading question with which he had recently become intimately familiar. Somehow, despite having only come out as bisexual to a select few friends, the news seemed to have traveled fast. He knew Zella meant well by it, but it didn't stop a small spike of frustration from pulsing through him when she raised a presumptuous eyebrow, waiting for a response. He took a sip of the whiskey, holding for a thoughtful pause.

"No," Roman answered. "I'm sure there's someone out there for me, but I just don't think I've met them yet." The moment the words left his mouth, Stasia's hand retracted jerkily from his upper arm, a small frown crossing her face momentarily before being replaced with a glossy smile as she tossed her hair.

"Are you sure?" she asked, eyelashes in full bat.

Feeling a flutter of awkward anxiety, Roman threw back a mouthful of whiskey. "Pretty sure. I mean, I've met a lot of people lately." He knew he shouldn't wink, but god help him, it happened.

“That’s sweet,” she said, tone clearly meaning the opposite. After sharing a glance with Zella, she flicked her eyes across the dance floor in search of other options. “Hope you have a good time tonight. Maybe you’ll be the next one at the altar... you know, when you meet the *right* person.” She returned the wink with a wing-lined eye, then turned and stalked away.

Zella raised her eyebrows at Roman. “Couldn’t give her one dance, could you? She’s had a crush on you for like ten years.”

Roman shrugged. “I’m old enough to tell whether people like me or just the idea of me,” he said, and instantly felt regret about being so forthright.

Zella frowned.

“Hey, is Ash coming?” He asked, changing the subject as he realized that he hadn’t seen the third member of their posse anywhere since the event began, despite being invited.

Zella shook her head, curls bouncing. “Ash wasn’t feeling well. Bore!”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Roman said, watching Zella drain the rest of her cocktail.

“Yeah, so sad.” She faux pouted before shaking her empty glass. “Gotta get a refill.” With an impish smile, she turned on the ball of her foot and strode away after her sister.

He drained his own glass, a sharp shiver running through him from shoulder to shoulder. The warmth of the whiskey settled in his chest, beckoning for more to slide down and join it. Undoing the bow tie constricting his throat, Roman obeyed the call, letting his feet carry him over to the bar for another glass.

The bartenders had set up in his living room, using his own personal bar as their workspace, with a few additional carts that they’d brought themselves. That said, he had moved all the best liquor to his office, just in case. He handed his glass to one of the bartenders and asked for another scotch, neat. She poured him two fingers and handed it back, her long ginger braid swinging wildly as she moved down the bar to serve another guest.

“What’ll it be?” she asked, with a wide customer-service smile.

“I’ll have one of... uh, whatever that is,” the guy said, pointing at Roman’s glass. His voice was soft but solid, like rough red clay.

Roman smirked. "I don't know if he'll— sorry, is that the right pronoun?" Roman stopped short mid-sentence to ask, sheepishly realizing he had made an assumption based on the stranger's suit.

"Uh, yeah, thanks." The stranger nodded.

Roman smiled and turned back to the bartender. "I don't know if he'll like it," he finished, watching the guy purse his lips in frustration.

"Yes, I will," he said stubbornly.

"You sure?" Not that Roman was one to judge, but if it was this guy's first time drinking scotch, he might not be in for a treat.

The guy nodded, his furrowed brow belying some amount of uncertainty. "Of course. I love—" He looked at the bartender.

"Scotch," she replied, pouring him a glass without missing a beat.

"I love scotch," he repeated stubbornly.

"Fair enough." Roman acquiesced. The server passed another tumbler of caramel-colored liquor over the bar.

Taking the glass, the guy looked over at him, his expression sincere. "This is the nicest place I've ever been in my entire life." His voice was flat. He didn't sound mad about it, just... in awe.

Roman tried to hide a laugh by taking a sip of his drink, somewhat successfully. "Really? Your suit says otherwise."

The guy was wearing a three-piece suit that looked like it cost roughly as much as the bar stock for the reception. Roman's was probably about the same, but then, he was the best man. It was his duty to look good. What did this guy have to look so handsome for? Why bother making sure that the color of his pocket square matched his eyes so that they stood out like warm pools of amber? Roman's gaze lingered before moving down to the man's lips as he lifted the glass of scotch to take a sip.

"Hey, what's your name?" Roman asked, subconsciously relying on his pickup habits. They were technically at a bar, after all.

The guy's eyes went wide in response, halting the flow of scotch between his lips. He blanched on a hard swallow, choking down the malted whiskey with some difficulty.

"I'm Matias." He coughed.

"Nice to meet you, Matias. I'm Roman." He reached out to take the glass from Matias's hands and then moved it safely to the bar while using his other hand to grasp Matias's shoulder in a steadying motion.

"Oh god, why do people drink this?" the guy exclaimed, and sputtered as he tried to regain composure.

Roman smiled, shaking his head. He had heard that one fairly often from guys at bars trying to look classy or tough or just plain interesting.

An idea sparked to life. He removed his hand from the whiskey victim and drained his own glass.

"I'll show you." He slipped behind the bar where he purloined a martini shaker full of ice and half a lemon. "Come with me." Marching off through the penthouse he made a quick stop in the kitchen for a single egg, before continuing on to his study. After unlocking the door, he ushered Matias inside, a strange spark flaring to life inside of his chest as he realized that the handsome stranger had followed at his invitation.

"Make yourself comfortable," Roman said, leaving the door slightly open behind them before getting himself set up. He laid his ingredients out on the desk in the corner of the cozy bookshelf-lined room. He added a small jar of simple syrup and a bottle of oak-aged bourbon from his private stash. He grinned, pouring the bourbon and syrup into the ice-filled shaker.

"What are you making?" Matias asked tentatively.

"You'll see." He took the half lemon and squeezed the entirety of it in, drenching his fingers in bitter lemon juice. "So, how do you know the lucky couple?" He looked up as he dropped the husk of the lemon into the shaker and picked up the egg.

A few steps away on the other side of the room, Matias was scanning the collection of photos hanging on the wall. He turned back, an eyebrow raised.

"Did you take these?" He gestured to a photo Roman had taken of a particularly lovely garden in his hometown. The way the light was coming through the leaves to press up against

the rhododendron flowers had made him feel a certain way, so he had taken a picture. Like everything else he did, it was a hobby, not something he was especially good at.

“Yeah,” Roman said, voice coming out quiet. He turned back to the martini shaker and expertly cracked the egg above it, letting only the white flow in while keeping the yolk encased. A slight warmth kindled in him, flushing his cheeks as Matias took his time looking closely at each individual photo.

“Yolk?” Roman asked, offering out the eggshell to Matias, who turned back with a confused expression that quickly turned to horror when Roman put the eggshell to his lips and swallowed the yellow orb whole.

“Why in the actual fuck did you do that?” Matias asked, eyes wide as Roman put the now-empty eggshell on the desk and placed a lid on the shaker before vigorously agitating it. The ice made the metal grow freezing cold to the touch.

“Didn’t want to let it go to waste.” He shrugged. “Now, try this.” He pulled over two of the nice cocktail glasses he had stashed away and poured each of them a glass of the fizzy golden liquid. Putting the shaker down, he handed one to Matias.

His eyes lit up after his first sip. “Holy shit, this is really good! What is it?” He drank a little more, visibly excited.

“It’s a bourbon sour. Not scotch but... to show you that whiskey can be pretty good even if you don’t necessarily like it neat.” Roman smiled and took a sip of his own, his chest swelling with pride. As the lemony fizz passed between his lips and down through his buzzing chest, he realized that whatever it was he thought he had lost, he was feeling it right then. The hair on his arms stood up on end watching Matias sip his cocktail with giddy delight. Roman had made that happen: had made a cute guy happy; had made somebody feel special. “So, do you want to see the rest of the nicest place you’ve ever been?” He wanted to keep chasing that feeling down. Right now, it didn’t matter what he’d do when he caught up to it.

Roman showed Matias the lay of the land, excluding his bedroom, of course. He didn’t want to be presumptuous. After taking a good half hour to go through his vinyl collection in the living room, they finally made their way to the patio. Matias gasped as they stepped out onto

the rooftop, looking up at the stars peppering the dark sky overhead. A few feet away, a crowd of people swayed to the music.

“This is incredible. I can’t believe you fucking live here.” Matias was grinning wildly. The way his cheeks dimpled when he smiled like that drove it home. Roman was incredibly attracted to this guy. The taste of bourbon on his tongue reminded him that part of the warmth inside of him was the cocktails, but it wasn’t everything. It seemed like it had been a lifetime since he felt this way about someone, and he wasn’t going to let it slip through his fingers. He opened his mouth to ask—

“Hey, do you wanna dance?” Matias said, tipsy smile hanging crooked. He nodded toward the maelstrom of dancers. Roman’s heartbeat quickened.

“Yeah, I’d love to.” When he held out his hand, an electric shock ran through his arm as Matias took it and led him out onto the dance floor. His palm was hot and smooth against Roman’s as he allowed himself to be pulled onto the dance floor. The beat was a little faster than he’d like, but he tried to keep up. Matias couldn’t be more than a few years his junior, but the way he moved was impressive.

“Where did you learn to dance like that?” Roman said, elevating his voice to be heard over the music. Matias looked up at him, smiling wryly.

“I took hip-hop dance classes as a kid. Some things never leave you.” He executed a few perfect body rolls to demonstrate.

Roman laughed, his cheeks starting to ache from smiling. “I wish I had any moves at all. I’m always afraid of looking stupid,” he admitted. Even though he went to a lot of clubs, he usually hung out on the sidelines with a drink, waiting to catch somebody’s eye or be caught himself.

“I just saw you eat a raw egg yolk. You’re not afraid of anything.” Matias rolled his eyes, pulling Roman closer so that they were pressing up against one another as the music picked up. It wasn’t a song that Roman recognized, some electronic number that was probably on Lina’s half of the playlist.

Matias moved his hands to Roman’s hips. “Don’t look so surprised, old man,” Matias said, laughing. “This isn’t middle school.”

Roman mock-frowned for a second before reaching up to place his arms around Matias's neck while they moved their bodies in sync to the rhythm. His breathing hitched as Matias ground against him, his bloodstream responding to the proximity of another warm body. Swallowing hard, he locked eyes with Matias, who certainly must have felt his reaction. Sure enough, Matias looked back at him, smiling with his eyes, biting at his lip as he pulled Roman even closer to exhale warmly against his neck.

His reactions felt mechanical, like he was following a script. This was just like the beginning to every one-night stand he'd had over the past few years, racing from start to abrupt finish. Roman wished he could enjoy the moment like he usually did, savor the physical intimacy and forget about the rest, but as he peered over the crowd, Amir and Lina were not far from him. Amir was looking over at him, a sleepy smile on his face. He cradled his exhausted bride against him, and Roman realized that when they left at the end of the night, they wouldn't go home. As long as they were together, they were home already. His two best friends were building a life together while he stepped in and out of bed, and he had been slow to realize it, but he wanted more than that.

"Roman? Are you okay?" Matias asked, a concerned expression crossing his face as he realized that Roman wasn't reciprocating his advances. Roman shook his head.

"Come with me. We missed something on the tour." He took Matias's hand from his hip and led him off the dance floor. Tucked away in a corner, past where the patio cement ended and a patch of carefully cultured grass began, was a small water feature surrounded by plants and a simple wooden bench. It was the place Roman came to think. Sitting there, he could pretend the city didn't exist and imagine he was back in his small town, when it still felt appropriate to be waiting for his life to begin.

"I'm drunk," Roman said, letting himself fall onto the bench, nearly toppling over backward. The words were truer than he thought. He stared down at his shoes as Ash eased down beside him.

"Me too," Matias said. Roman looked up at Matias, who reached over to touch the boutonniere pinned onto Roman's lapel. It was a collection of little cactus-like plants. Matias's

fingers ran over the soft blunt edges of the largest one and Roman reminded himself that he had wanted to take a photo of it later, when the lighting was right.

“Green prince,” Matias said unsteadily.

Roman raised an eyebrow in response and Matias nodded down toward the plant beneath his fingertips, soft green spokes edged with dark purple.

“That’s its name.”

Roman reached to take Matias’s hand in his and pulled it into his lap, feeling the warmth and weight as Matias leaned over to put his head on Roman’s shoulder.

They sat side by side in silence for a moment before Roman spoke. “I don’t want this to go any further.”

A sudden intake of breath came from Matias beside him. “Okay, that’s... uh, good to know. Thanks for the dance.” Pulling his hand back, Matias stood up, but Roman reached out to take it again, rising up off the bench.

“No, sorry. I meant—” He locked eyes with Matias. “Tonight. I don’t want to go any further tonight. I know we just met but I really like you and I always— It doesn’t matter.” He stopped himself from spilling every single thought he’d had since Matias followed him to the study. “What I’m trying to say, badly, is that I want to see you again.”

Matias held his gaze, his hair moving in the night breeze. Behind him, the dancers had fallen into a slower tempo, holding each other close beneath the stars.

“I’d like that,” Matias said, but his voice was bittersweet and his face had fallen in a way that impacted Roman far more than expected. He found, had been finding all night, in fact, that he liked it when Matias smiled. More than that, he liked being the reason that Matias smiled. He placed his hand on the side of Matias’s face, running a thumb along his jawline. Matias’s dark eyes reflected the cloudless sky, his lips curving into a slow smile as Roman brought his own to meet them.

A cold splash of water hit him square in the back before they could collide. “Guess you met somebody, asshole!” Stasia yelled from the edge of the patio, shortly before being yanked back into the living room by Zella.

Roman turned around to see what had caused the splash. The calm surface of the pond rippled around a familiar form.

“Caramel,” Roman whispered, eyes on his moose statue half submerged in the center of the water feature. “Not Caramel.” He glanced back to Matias only to discover him bent over, unlacing his shoes.

He slipped them off his feet and handed them to Roman. “Protect these with your life.”

Roman looked down at the shoes. They were indeed worth protecting. How he hadn’t noticed them until that moment, he had no idea. They were almost certainly worth more than Caramel. In fact, the moose was made of wood and unlikely to have been harmed, but Roman’s chest still swelled at the sight of Matias rolling up his trousers and wading out into the water to retrieve the sodden statue. He tore his attention away reluctantly as someone tapped him on the shoulder and turned to see Zella, her arms crossed.

“Ah, I just wanted to say sorry. And that I’m taking Stasia home now. And that I hope Caramel is alright.” Her voice was as flat as ever, even in apology.

Roman nodded. For some reason, he was having a really hard time being mad when his heart was soaring over the guy in the pond with the soggy polka-dot socks.

“It’s okay.” A silly smile spread across his face. “Just get her home safe.”

Zella nodded and walked away.

Roman turned back, his heart thudding to a stop. Caramel was standing on the wooden bench, but Matias was nowhere to be seen. His pulse racing, Roman whipped around and back-tracked across the dance floor and all through the penthouse to no avail. There was no note, no phone number, nothing. The only sign that Matias had ever been there was the pair of cream-and-blue wingtips still clutched tight in Roman’s hands.

III. Ash

His waterlogged feet had left a damp trail through the penthouse, down the street, into an Uber, and all the way up into his apartment as Ash raced home, trying to make it there before Stasia and Zella. After finally peeling the now-disgusting polka-dot socks off his feet, he shucked the rest of his suit and flung himself under the covers. He was breathless, and not just because of the panicked hustle. Listening hard for the front door, Ash lay awake counting his sins.

First, he'd left the shoes behind. Second, he'd bolted for the elevator the moment Zella told Roman she was taking Stasia home. He'd only had time to put the moose down on the bench and slip away among the shadows—no time to say goodbye. Third, he'd said he would see Roman again, knowing that there was no way it could ever happen. And the very worst sin of the evening: failing to seal the deal with the guy he'd low-key had a crush on since he was in junior high.

Now he was ending his once-perfect evening drunk, soggy and alone.

Still, there was a lightness lifting his chest. Showing up to that wedding had been terrifying to begin with, and managing to speak to Roman at all had taken every last inch of bravery he could summon. By the time they hit the dance floor, his heart had been beating out of his chest. At least he knew that he had truly been himself; the person he wanted to be, that he knew he was, lived under his skin, inside of him. Wearing the suit had only been the nudge he had needed to break out of his shell.

Through his bedroom door, Stasia and Zella's voices spilled into the apartment like fireworks. He couldn't quite make out what they were saying, but he was fairly certain that Stasia was throwing expletives like explosives, with Zella doing damage control. Kind of a classic Saturday night look for them, if he was being honest. And hell did it feel good to be honest. Rolling onto his back, Ash glanced up at the glass ball where Till hung suspended above him, sure that he imagined a gentle pulse of light right before his heavy eyelids closed.

Ash woke up early the next morning, planning to grab a coffee and get to the shop where Amir's dad would be dropping by with the other half of his payment. The groom had been kind enough to pay the first half of the fee for the wedding order up front as a favor to his sisters, who enjoyed having the rent in on time.

After showering off the previous night's bourbon-induced funk and getting dressed, Ash found himself on the couch, tying his sneakers when Stasia emerged from her bedroom.

"Hey," he said as she slumped over the counter to grab the kettle and wrench it under the faucet. She looked at him with concern as she hunched over in her robe, clearly in the midst of a brutal hangover.

"You feeling any better?" she asked, returning the kettle to its stand and flipping it on.

"Yeah, much." Ash finished fumbling with his laces and stood up to leave as a muffled tone rang from Stasia's pocket. Frowning, she reached in and pulled out her phone.

"Stasia," she said by way of hello. After a moment, a storm cloud passed over her face.

"What the fuck do you want?" She listened for a moment before hanging up abruptly and tossing her phone back into her pocket. Ash stood, eyebrows raised, trying to decide whether to make a run for it before the tempest really took off when they both turned toward the sound of Zella's phone ringing inside her room. It went off once, twice, three times before she swung her door open, phone up to her ear.

"Hey, Roman," she said, as Stasia rolled her eyes and pulled a box of teabags out of the cupboard, and then popped one into a mug. Zella raised an eyebrow and looked over at Stasia, who was pointedly focused on the kettle. Meanwhile, Ash stood frozen in place, halfway between the couch and the door, anxiety mounting inside of him.

"I don't know what you're talking about. No, I don't know where that guy went." Zella nodded, listening to Roman talk on the other end while Stasia seemed to be trying to force the kettle to boil through spite alone.

"Probably got bored and left," Stasia said.

"Shut up," Zella responded. "No, not you. Stasia. No, I don't know anyone with shoes like that." She shook her head, limp slept-on curls hanging down her back. Sighing, she said goodbye and hung up.

One millisecond later, before any further conversations could be had, Ash grabbed his messenger bag and bolted out the door.

Stepping into Air Supply was like crawling back under the covers. The little shop was more like home than the busy apartment Ash shared with the sisters. The three of them used to be inseparable, but more and more, he was realizing that they didn't fit together the way they used to. Taking a long sip of the latte tightly clutched in his hand, Ash made his way into his back-room workshop, his hangover beginning to clear a little as the caffeine hit his bloodstream.

He spent the morning repotting a tray of portulacaria into individual bowls, attempting to take great care with their wide, flat leaves. His hands were there in the shop, fingernails dark with dirt, but his head was far above the city. All he could do was replay one particular moment in his head—the feeling of Roman's thumb along his jawline, his palm splayed across Ash's neck as he brought his beautiful lips nearly close enough to taste.

The bell over the shop door rang, breaking Ash out of his thoughts to realize that he was nearly strangling the delicate plant in his hands. Wiping the dirt off his fingers, he walked through to the storefront only to dip back behind the barrier, breath pulled from his throat by the sight of Roman standing in the middle of the shop, incongruously dressed in a clean white shirt and dark tie. At that moment, he was bent over, idly reaching out to touch an echeveria that sat on the central display table among a collection of cacti and aloe plants. In a fierce struggle to regain control of his lungs, Ash took a second to compose himself before stepping behind the counter.

"Is this a green prince?" Roman asked idly, at the sound of Ash's footsteps.

"Corderoyi," he corrected, his voice shaking a little. A quick pang shot through his heart at the way Roman stood up straight as he spoke, turning to look at him with an expression of barely repressed wonder.

"Matias?" Clearly, he recognized Ash from the night before, if not from the halls of their high school.

“Sort of,” Ash said, tucking a stray piece of wavy brown hair behind his ear. He looked down at his hands, which he’d done a piss-poor job of cleaning. Dirt still clung to his cuticles. “Matias is my middle name.” He looked up to see Roman staring at him, expression unreadable.

“I have your shoes.” He said.

“And my cheque, I hope,” Ash replied. “I’m really looking forward to getting some groceries.” He was half convinced that Roman was about to turn around and walk out the door. Instead, he reached into his pocket and dug out a white envelope.

“Yeah, actually, I do. Mr. Sekhon asked me to bring it by. He had a bit too much fun last night.” He winced as he mentioned the reception but still stepped up to the counter, placing the envelope down between them. “Ash?”

“I’m sorry. I had to get home before Stasia and Zella, I wasn’t trying to blow you off. I understand if you’re mad that I left. Or that I’m-- me.” Ash reached out to grab the envelope, breath catching as Roman’s hand folded over top of his.

“Mad? Ash, last night was incredible. I haven’t felt this way about anyone in—well, that’s not important. What matters is, I really liked spending time with you.”

A hot blush washed across Ash’s cheeks when he looked Roman in the eye. His expression was as serious as his tone, but his thumb was moving in small circles across the back of Ash’s hand. Slowly, Ash shifted his fingers so that they interlocked with Roman’s, and a slow smile spread across Roman’s face.

“Cool.” There was a tentativeness inside of him that hadn’t been there the previous night, though maybe it had been hiding beneath the warm glow of alcohol. “One sec.” Upon extricating his hand, he walked to the edge of the counter, untied his dirt-covered apron and tossed it into the back room. Heart beating buck-wild, he came from behind the counter to stand in front of Roman. Still moving cautiously, he placed his arms around Roman’s neck. Ash’s breath caught in his throat as strong arms wrapped around his back in return, pulling him closer with surprising certainty. He tipped his head up, surprised to find that Roman was already there, lips smooth and slightly parted as they met his. The kiss was sudden and strong, like Ash was being tipped off his feet, uprooted. Moving a hand to Roman’s cheek, Ash relaxed into him, closing any space that still lingered between them.

The bell over the door rang out, but Ash only pulled away long enough to shout “We’re closed!” at the unseen patron before he was engulfed once more in the taste of Roman.

Leather and thyme.

When they finally managed to surface, Ash pressed his face into Roman’s neck, savoring the feel of warm skin against his cheek.

Roman chuckled. “Can you afford to close the shop for the day?” He asked, tone implying the deeper question at hand as he shifted his hands from Ash’s shoulder blades to his hips, their bodies still pressed close from toe to tip. His fingers had found their way beneath the hem of Ash’s T-shirt, flirting with the skin above the waist of his ripped and mended jeans.

Biting his lip mere inches from Roman’s ear, Ash thought for a moment. “Yeah. I’ve earned it.” He pulled back and moved his hands down from Roman’s shoulders to his broad chest in one long stroke, suddenly thinking about the man beneath the tailored oxford shirt.

“Good.” Roman hummed, grinning brighter than the shafts of morning light that shot in from the front window. “There’s one room we missed on last night’s tour, and it’s a pretty good one.”

Ash blushed unexpectedly, his temperature rising as Roman’s fingers continued to move across his bare skin. “Good,” Ash repeated. With one soil-smudged hand he grabbed Roman by the tie and pulled him in for another kiss. “You’re far too clean to be here.”

They finally made their way out of the shop, with a brief pause for Ash to lock up before climbing into the passenger seat of Roman’s black sedan. Once inside, he looked over at the man in the driver’s seat, feeling excited and content.

“So, where did you get that suit from, anyways?” Roman asked, pulling the car out into morning traffic.

Ash smiled, looking in the rearview mirror at the front facade of Air Supply, just behind them. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

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