

Drop

by Wrestlr

[M/M, MC, Hypno]

Synopsis: Arousal isn't the problem--it's the answer. In this fraternity tale, college boys find connection through trance, surrender, and the heat of wanting more than just sex. Bracelets mark who belongs ... and once you wear one, you're never alone again.

Disclaimer: The naked hypnotist strides confidently into your room. His lips curl in what might be a smile as he dangles his shiny crystal pendulum before your eyes and announces, "Listen and obey. If you are not of legal age, or if you offended by sexual situations, you will leave this place immediately. From here on, no matter how realistic it may appear, everything will seem like fiction to you, a pleasant dream where scientific possibilities and laws may change according to my suggestion. Now, if you are willing, sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride."

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Part 1: Brother Johnson and Brother Milo

Chapter 1

Three days before fall semester started, Milo kicked the fraternity bedroom door open with his gym bag slung over one shoulder, a duffel bag in his opposite hand, and a grin already on his face. "New year, new conquests, bitches!" he bellowed to whomever, plopping his gym bag next to the desk. "Fuck, I've missed this dump!"

Room 206, back corner of Delta House's second floor. Plaster walls, stained carpet, a single window that half-opened if it was hit just right, and two bunk beds. The bottom one was already made--neatly, impossibly so--and someone was sitting on the edge, reading with earbuds in.

Johnson.

Milo barely knew him. Johnson had been living off-campus last year and wasn't around much when Milo was a pledge, but this year Johnson, a junior, was back--no problem, brothers came and went--and they'd been assigned to room together. Cool. Milo prided himself on his ability to get along with just about anyone.

Johnson looked up. Calm. Shirtless. Jeans. Big, quiet eyes and lean muscle stretched across a chest that looked like his torso had built-in accent lighting. Not smirking. Just watching. "Hi, Milo," he said, voice low.

Milo deposited his larger duffel and grinned wider. "And hi to you, guy I'm gonna traumatize with my sex life this year!"

Johnson's eyebrow barely ticked up. "Oh. Cool."

The house was already vibrating with bass from downstairs speakers. Someone bellowed *Dammit, Trevor!* from the hallway, followed by the unmistakable smack of a towel whip and the thunder of sneakers running the other way. Milo barely noticed. This was home.

He stripped his shirt off by reflex, because of course he did. Sweat from move-in still clung to his skin, and the house's obviously substandard air-conditioning didn't do upstairs very well. His boxer-briefs peeked out over mesh shorts as he rifled through the mini-fridge to check if anyone had stocked it yet. Nothing but an energy drink can that seemed suspiciously close to its expiration date and a three-quarters empty bottle of sriracha.

Johnson didn't move. Just watched.

"So what's your deal?" Milo asked, flopping backward into the desk chair. "You party? You play?"

"Depends on the day."

Milo smirked. "Ooo, mysterious."

"Depends on the person."

Milo raised one brow and intensified his smirk. "You hitting on me already, bro? Sorry, I'm straight." That kind of teasing usually embarrassed the fuck out of whoever, so of course Milo loved saying shit like that.

Johnson, though, didn't blink. "If I was hitting on you, you'd know it."

Milo snorted. "You'll have to fight off a line of sorority babes first." He meant it. Milo's rep was earned. He'd been back on campus less than half an hour and his phone had buzzed twice with new notifications already--both blondes, both flirty. He hadn't even opened them yet. Let them wait.

Johnson's eyes flicked to Milo's phone as it buzzed again, then back to Milo. "You like being wanted, huh," he said.

Milo grinned. "Fuck, yeah! Who doesn't?"

Later that night, the house hadn't gotten any quieter. The hallway was alive with shouting, laughter, someone blasting old EDM songs from cheap speakers. Someone else was showering and singing along, horribly off-key.

Milo sprawled in boxer-briefs on his upper bunk, still a little hyped from day-one energy, scrolling through thirst traps on that hook-up site and flexing every time he saw his own tagged photos.

Across the room, Johnson stood up from the desk and unplugged his earbuds. "Mind if I play something while I sleep?" he asked. "Just a focus loop. Background stuff."

"Like ocean waves or whatever? White noise stuff?"

"Sort of."

Milo shrugged, already half-thinking about whether he could sneak down to Delta House's kitchen in the morning to make himself pancakes without all the other brothers catching on and demanding some too. "Whatever, man. I can sleep through anything."

Johnson tapped his phone, placed it on the shelf above his pillow, and the sound began: a gentle hum, layers of noise, like a party heard from two floors away, steady and constant. Beneath it--faint tones, almost like voices, too buried to make out.

Milo didn't care. He set his phone aside, turned onto his side, let his eyes drift shut, and let the pulse of the house blur into the sound.

He didn't remember falling asleep. Didn't remember dreaming. Just the faint memory of feeling--watched. Assessed. Not in a creepy way. In a ... studied way. Measured. And somehow, that felt fine.

Chapter 2

Milo didn't notice the first time it happened.

He was standing in the hallway outside the downstairs bathroom, post-shower towel around his hips, texting some Phi Mu girl he'd hooked up with during spring semester last year. She was being flirty again, thirsty even, and Milo naturally was fanning the flames.

Then, mid-message, thumb hovering over a winking emoji ... he blinked.

And forgot what he was going to type.

He stared at the screen. Backed up. Read the thread. Still nothing.

"Dude, you spacing out again?" one of the brothers called, pushing past him to get to the bathroom door.

Milo shook his head like he had water in his ears. "Nah. Just chilling."

That night in the room, Milo climbed the ladder and collapsed face-first onto his bunk after an evening of touch football on the house's back lawn, still sweaty, still shirtless, shorts stuck to his thighs. The background noise of the house was the usual playlist of thumping beats, shouts, footsteps, laughter. He reached for his phone.

Johnson didn't look up from his desk. "Do you always text with your mouth open?"

"What?" Milo turned his head. "Shut up."

"You do this thing when you drift. Jaw slack. Thumb still. Eyebrows scrunch like you're reaching for a thought you let slip away."

Milo grabbed his pillow and flung it without sitting up. Johnson caught it one-handed and released it to the floor.

"You like watching me that much?" Milo teased.

Johnson didn't smile. "Only when I need to."

Nothing tense about what he said. Nothing heavy. But Milo felt weirdly understood. Like Johnson wasn't just watching him, but ... reading him, maybe?

Two nights later, Milo was gearing up for a party: freshly showered and shaved, cologne, gum, half-naked mirror flex. His date was a Chi O, classic sorority babe, who'd sent a selfie captioned *Need a ride? Or just a seat on my face?*

Textbook Milo bait.

He should've been all in. Instead, as he stared at her picture, something in his chest felt off. Not repulsed. Not grossed out. Just ... uninterested. Which made *no* sense. Milo was always on, never uninterested. Not with a body like hers. Not when he was half-hard from the memory of her grinding on him last semester.

So why the flatline? Weird.

"You okay?" Johnson asked from behind him.

Milo startled a little. He hadn't heard his roommate stand. "Yeah. Just ..." He shook it off. "Weird vibe. I dunno."

Johnson leaned against the bedpost, casual in just his boxers. He was trim and muscular but he wasn't jacked like Milo. He didn't need to be. His calm had a different kind of gravity. "You're chasing heat, but she doesn't see it."

Milo frowned. "Huh? What the fuck's that mean?"

Johnson shrugged. "You're easy to turn-on. But not many people know how to aim it to keep your interest."

That night, Milo ghosted the girl.

He stayed in. He lay shirtless on his bed, scrolling through messages and not answering any.

Another of Johnson's audio loops played. Layers of voices, noise, movement, the kind of thing Milo always tuned out ... until he realized his breathing had synced to it.

Milo rolled over in bed, looked over the edge of the mattress. "Hey," he muttered into the dark, "those loop things you play, they're nice ... They feel like a little massage for my brain before bedtime." Milo's thoughts drifted for a moment. "You ever get so horny you just ... stop caring?"

Johnson's answer came quietly, from the other bed: "Only when I'm not being seen right."

Milo didn't respond. He didn't know *how* to respond.

He drifted off before midnight, cock half-hard in his shorts, brain circling the drain around a single strange thought: He didn't want to hook up with anyone tonight ... but he did want someone to tell him what to do about it.

Chapter 3

The main fraternity house bathroom, on the first floor, was communal. Nothing special about it. Yellow-tiled floors. Two rust-stained sinks. Mirrors smudged with fingerprints, toothpaste flecks, and occasional erasable marker graffiti--usually clumsily drawn dicks or boobs that the pledges would be tasked with scrubbing off each weekend.

The bathroom was never quiet. Even now, two or three brothers were showering. Someone was singing along to a Flo Rida song like the world was stuck in a 2012 time loop. Someone else was yelling about beer pong stats down the hall.

Milo leaned over the sink, wiping sweat from his neck. He'd just finished a quick supplemental set in the makeshift basement weight room. Shirtless as usual, basketball shorts clinging low.

The mirror reminded him that he looked good, damn good. But his reflection ... felt distant. He watched himself blink. Watched his jaw clench. And for the first time in a long time, he felt unsettled.

That night, he didn't go out. Didn't respond to the girl who sent three back-to-back messages:

where u at?
my kitty misses you!!!
you dead babe???

He wasn't dead. He was here--trudging to his room, climbing the ladder and sprawling on his unmade bed, one hand behind his head, the other absently scrolling.

Johnson walked in from the hallway, fresh from a shower. Hair damp. Towel around his neck. Boxers only. Milo didn't flinch--no reason to. Fifty percent of the house was in underwear eighty percent of the time. But as Johnson crossed the room to the full-length mirror on the closet door, Milo's eyes caught something he didn't expect.

Stillness.

Not *quiet*. Not *peaceful*. Just ... centered.

Johnson stood in front of the mirror and looked at himself. Not flexing. Not posing. Just looking. Like he knew exactly what he was seeing.

Milo watched without realizing it. Something about it--about Johnson--pulled at Milo's chest like a low drumbeat.

Then Johnson turned slightly. Their eyes met in the glass, just for a second. Milo jerked his gaze away.

Later, lights low, Milo sat on the floor in his boxer-briefs, his back against the foot of the bed. Johnson was at the desk, tapping on a keyboard. Milo didn't say much. He didn't know what to say. He'd snuck away to a private spot earlier, tried to jack off, couldn't finish. He didn't want to think about why.

Eventually, Johnson spoke. Didn't look up. Just the words in the air: "Girls make you run too fast."

Milo blinked. "Huh? What do you ...?"

"Fast. Pushy. Like you're rushing to the end. Like they only want you for something quick."

Which should have been fine--Milo didn't mind a fast hookup--but for some reason he shrugged, defensive without knowing why, and protested, "Some girls like it slow." Was Johnson challenging his status as an

uber-stud? "Either way's fine by me--I can go all night."

"But the girls you have sex with don't hold you open, do they?"

Milo opened his mouth, then closed it. Hold him open? What the hell was his roommate talking about? What did he even mean?

Johnson looked up. "You ever just let the heat, the arousal, just ... sit inside you? No touching. No finishing. Just holding it there. Letting it grow until it buzzes through every part of you."

Milo didn't answer.

But later that night, in the dark, Johnson's focus loop playing like background static in the air, Milo felt as though he was somehow synchronizing with its slow rises and falls, his breathing starting to match. He'd assumed the loops were just background noise, like white noise for focus. But lately, they didn't feel passive. They felt like scaffolding. Like his thoughts plugged into them more easily than into his own mind.

He was horny and hard-dicked. His eyelids felt heavy, sleep coming, and his hand drifted down beneath his waistband ... And somehow he simply ... stopped. And just held the arousal inside, in his dick, his balls, in his hips and chest. Breath coming shallow. Muscles tight. Waiting for something. Not just for release. Didn't know what.

Milo didn't sleep well. Not because he was restless, but because the focus loop static filled his brain and his dreams kept cycling back to that moment in the mirror. The look on Johnson's face when their eyes met. Like Johnson knew something.

Chapter 4

Of course, the house on Friday afternoon was chaos once again, its default state, with speakers blasting from at least three rooms, two guys shotgunning beers in the kitchen, and someone shouting *Dammit, Trevor, did you take my fucking bananas again* from somewhere.

Milo was in his room, sprawled across his bed, on his back in nothing but boxer-briefs, phone resting on his chest. He'd tried texting three different girls. Two hadn't answered. One had--but the flirting just didn't catch his attention. He kept typing, deleting, rephrasing, staring at his reflection in the darkened phone screen like it held secret answers. He was horny. Obviously. But this wasn't a fun-horny, not the kind that came with cocky grins and frisky hands that got him laid and laid and laid. This horny was restless, unfocused, unresolved, as if Milo hadn't found the right target yet.

Johnson sat at the desk below him, earbuds out, typing slowly. No shirt. No rush. He didn't turn around when he spoke. "Don't finish today."

Milo blinked. "Huh?" *Finish what?*

"Don't cum. If you're gonna touch yourself," Johnson said, "don't just shoot you load and let it end. Instead, hold back. Build it. Just sit in it."

Milo rolled onto his side to look at him. Who the hell was Johnson to tell him when to cum and when not to? "The fuck does that mean?"

Johnson finally glanced over. "It means your body doesn't need release. It needs pressure. Structure. Friction without escape. Try it. Then thank me."

Milo scoffed. Was Johnson talking about edging? Milo *hated* edging. When he was horny, he wanted to cum. That was kind of the point of being horny, wasn't it?

But he absolutely tried it. That night, after lights-out, Johnson's weird-ass focus loop playing, Milo edged himself three times. Not all the way; not even close. Just near. Just until his arousal buzzed in his stomach and thighs as well as his dick and balls, flickers along the base of his spine, just until his breath turned into fast gasps.

And then he stopped. Pulled his hand away like doing so had been trained into him. No climax, just that burn, that pleasant throb in his body, even more fucking horny than before, as sleep began to claim him. His hand found his cock again and drowsily stroked, making the arousal build a fourth time ... until his eyelids closed and he slept.

Johnson didn't say anything the next morning. Didn't need to. Milo knew Johnson knew. The dorm room wasn't *that* big.

That afternoon, Johnson tossed him a protein bar as Milo laced his sneakers. "You're holding better."

Milo caught the bar in midair. "Holding what?"

"The tension. Most guys blow it out the second it gets too big. You're starting to ride it. Feels better, doesn't it?"

Milo shrugged, didn't answer. But, yeah, riding his horniness kind of did.

Sunday morning, Milo came back from a run soaked in rain and sweat, stripped to his boxer-briefs, towed off his head and torso, and collapsed onto his bed.

His cock throbbed in his underwear. He'd been semi-hard for blocks during his run, semi-hard more often than not since the start of the weekend. No porn. No dirty texts. Just the thought of being horny was enough now. The build. The pressure. The control. He lay there for a while, breathing slowly, not touching his cock.

Johnson, sitting nearby and reading on his tablet, didn't even look up when he said: "You're learning where the real high is found."

Milo swallowed. Didn't speak. He just let the hum of arousal crawl back into his spine--and stayed exactly where he was.

Chapter 5

"Bet I can get you hard in under a minute," Johnson said, apropos of nothing. Not a dare, not even loud--just a statement.

Looking up, Milo laughed uncomfortably. "What the hell, bro. I'm straight." He was sitting in the desk chair, having just pulled his sneakers off, still in gym shorts and socks, still flushed from his latest lift in the basement weight area. His bare chest and arms gleamed with sweat. His muscles twitched faintly, post-adrenaline.

Johnson stood across the room, shirtless as usual, arms folded, leaning back against the closet door, unbothered and unmoving.

"This isn't about being straight or being anything else. You trust me?"

Milo snorted. "Is this some Jedi mind shit? We're not talking some weird-ass Jedi shit, are we?"

Johnson didn't smile. "Pay attention for a moment." He stepped forward, one slow pace at a time.

The noise outside--music, shouting, doors slamming--kept pulsing through the background; Milo didn't hear it. Or rather, he did, but none of that mattered.

Johnson half-circled him, slow, silent. Not touching. Not rushing.

Milo's skin felt suddenly hot. A little tight. No, not fear. Anticipation? That seemed strangely right.

"Lower your arms," Johnson said softly.

Milo's hands slid down to his sides without thought.

"Back straight. Chin up."

Milo obeyed. His breath snagged for a second. His cock twitched inside his mesh shorts. What the hell?

Johnson's voice came lower now, right by his ear. "You hold it better now. Your arousal. You feel it build faster. You like the tension."

Milo swallowed tightly.

"You don't chase a quick cum anymore. You wait. Let your arousal grow."

Another cock-twitch. Tingling in his balls. Then more twitches.

Johnson stepped in front of him. Looked him in the eye. "You're already hard, aren't you? For the record, that took less than thirty seconds."

Bewildered, mentally off-balance, Milo didn't answer, didn't need to. The outline of his erection was obvious, pressed tightly against the front of his shorts. No one had touched him. No one needed to.

Johnson smiled faintly. Not smug. Just ... a smile acknowledging he had already known what would happen. "Told you--your body listens faster than your ego does."

What did that even mean? How was this even possible? No touching, no porn, no reason. Just a voice. Running zero to hard in thirty seconds, just from being told? What the fuck? Was Johnson doing something to him? Some kind of hypnosis? Subliminals? Were those focus loops actually--?

No--Milo would know if he was being hypnotized ... right? Wouldn't he?

Johnson walked away, just like that, to the other side of the room. Back to normal.

Milo stayed sitting. Shorts tight. Breathing shallow. So fucking hard! If he moved, he'd cum. Took a while before the iron stiffness faded in his crotch.

That night, Milo didn't sneak off to find privacy to jack off. Somehow he didn't need to or want to. He just lay there in his bunk, in the dark, cock pulsing, brain spinning, chest filled with something he couldn't name--

And all of it wrapped in one impossible realization: Milo hadn't done that. Johnson did.

Chapter 6

During the beer pong match on the fraternity house's back deck, red Solo cup in hand, Milo realized something had changed. His teammates, practically vibrating with sweaty drunken frat-boy energy, howled as the other side overshot another ball, which pinged up and bounced off Milo's open-chested hoodie.

Textbook Milo territory.

Except ... he didn't feel it. Not like he used to.

Somebody's girlfriend had brought along two of her sorority sisters in crop-tops, pushing against each other near the couch, whispering and giggling and posing like they wanted him. And he knew, two weeks ago, he'd have eaten that up.

But tonight? He saw. He just didn't want them.

Back upstairs in his room, approaching midnight, alone, Johnson nowhere around, Milo peeled off his sneaks and socks, sat down hard on the floor.

He didn't even know when the loops had started running again. Seemed like one was almost always playing in the room, but when had they started playing in his ears, in his *head*, like a pressure behind his eyes, a whisper he couldn't quite catch, an itch he couldn't quite scratch.

Milo lay on his back on the rug. His skin buzzed, hot and overstimulated. He'd started to strip his hoodie, got halfway, one arm still in a sleeve; somehow he'd lost track mid-motion. His cock strained against the fabric of his shorts, so hard it throbbed, the head slick with unrelieved want. He had felt like this all day: a slow, steady burn under his skin, his thighs twitching when he moved, his chest prickling, arms sensitive to every shift of air, and his mind so filled with-- *What the hell is happening to me?*

He'd tried jerking off earlier, more than once. Touched himself, stroked himself, even edged himself until his abs were clenching and his eyes were rolling back. Well, he hadn't intended to *edge*--he hated edging--he's intended to *cum* ... but nothing. No climax. Just a heavier pulse. Just more heat and arousal all through his body and mind.

Now, his hands trembled. He couldn't bring himself to touch his cock again--not because he didn't want to, but because touching would feel somehow oddly *wrong*. Like doing it would cross some unknown line he hadn't been given permission to even approach. Like his horniness and his erection weren't *his* anymore to finish. He didn't know where that thought had come from, only that it felt true.

The door opened and Johnson walked in. Milo's eyes locked on and watched Johnson watch him as the man walked to the desk. Johnson's expression was calm, unreadable, perfectly composed--as fucking usual--as if he hadn't caught his roommate lying on the floor, half-dressed and half-writhing from horniness. Johnson was calm, barefoot, dick bumping the front of his boxers. Was he partly hard? Milo couldn't look away. For some reason, Johnson's calm seemed to soothe Milo more than anything else had all night.

"You good?" Johnson asked as he settled into the desk chair.

Milo didn't answer right away, then, quietly: "I think something's wrong with me."

Johnson didn't laugh or tease. "Tell me."

Milo swallowed. "I had every chance tonight. I mean--these two girls, they were basically begging me. I could have nailed one or both of them. And I just ... didn't care."

Johnson tilted his head slightly. "That feel bad?"

"I dunno," Milo admitted. "The whole thing just felt off. Like I'm not ... me."

A pause. Then Johnson said: "You're still you. Just not the version they trained you to be."

Milo looked up. *What the hell?*

"You were taught to pursue, to rack the numbers, pull in the wins. But always pursuing left you running on empty, didn't it?"

Milo didn't respond. He didn't have to.

"Now," Johnson continued, "you're not reaching out anymore. You're reaching inward. Holding. That's what they don't teach guys like you, but sometimes that's the only thing that works."

Silence, except for the usual bass line coming up through the floor from downstairs. Milo felt the sound thudding in his ribs.

Then Johnson's voice cut through: "Stand up. Back straight. Chest out."

Milo sat up. "What are--" He stood, pulled that damned hoodie the fucking rest of the way off.

"Hush. Don't talk. Hands behind your back. Eyes forward."

Milo obeyed.

"Breathe out."

He did.

"Good." Johnson rose slowly and stepped in front of him, closer than usual but not touching. Just looking, assessing. "This is what you were made for. Not chasing women or leaving yourself empty. You were made for holding. Waiting. Synchronizing. Responding."

Milo's eyes stayed fixed on Johnson's chest. He didn't move, didn't speak, but he felt his breath slowing, aligning to that voice.

"Well, now. You're shifting," Johnson said. "Finally. Good boy."

And Milo, without fully knowing what he meant, whispered back: "I guess, yeah." He stayed standing like that long after Johnson sat back down. He kept his arms behind him, his breath still slow. His cock was so very hard in his boxer-briefs, but mostly he felt calm--and not confused anymore.

As if naming a shape Milo had just grown into, Johnson said, "So, you're finally ready."

Milo swallowed hard, tongue dry and thick. "Ready for what?" he rasped, though he knew the question had weight beyond what he could name. He felt too vulnerable, too raw.

Johnson crossed the room in measured steps, until he stood in front of Milo. Eyes steady. Voice low. "You're ready to *drop*."

Something mule-kicked in Milo's brain. Not a thought. A whole series of gears locking into place.

His knees hit the rug before he could stop them. Before he even realized he'd moved, he was kneeling, head slightly lowered, shoulders loose, throat tight. His cock didn't soften; if anything, the pressure surged--blood

rushing, breath catching, arousal *intensifying*. His whole body was energized, with every nerve tuned to some impossible frequency. *What the fuck is happening to me?*

But the fear wasn't *panic*. It was *exhilaration*. Like the moment the rollercoaster tilts forward and the rider anticipates the plunge that's coming next and can't go back.

Milo's thoughts--normally fast, sharp, chaotic--were quickly slipping away, sliding. His attention had already narrowed to a point: Johnson's voice. Not the words now, just the tone, cadence, the weight of it in the air.

"Good," Johnson said, and Milo's spine *thrummed*. "Keep going. You're ready. Let yourself *drop*."

Everything inside Milo was bending toward that voice. His awareness was falling in layers--each shallower, blanker, than the last.

Thoughts: gone.

Doubt: dissolved.

Need: *magnified*.

His cock throbbed in rhythm with his heartbeat. His skin buzzed. His eyes unfocused, then fluttered closed--not because he chose to, but because his body *obeyed*.

Whatever was happening was progressive, happening faster now. He wanted--fuck, he *wanted*--to sink further. Some corner of him still fought, still tried to hold on. *This isn't normal. This isn't me*. And yet ... this was. This felt more *him* than anything had in weeks. He moaned--not from pleasure, not from pain, but from the helpless *weight* of what he felt in his chest, his thighs, his cock, his *mind*.

And that was the moment the last of his resistance gave way. *Fine*--Yes, he thought, or maybe said. *Please take me*.

He let go. He dropped deeper.

The floor didn't catch him--the *voice* did, steered his sinking mind into a warm, humming, helpless nowhere, a blurry space where Milo floated, skin tingling, cock full and aching, brain finally quiet.

And as the blur pulled him into blankness, he heard Johnson say, "Good boy."

And Milo *shuddered*. as his cock erupted and filled the front of his boxer-briefs with ball-juice.

Chapter 7

Milo slammed the bathroom stall door and backed away like he'd just escaped something alive.

This was the only place in the house he could have guaranteed privacy. He didn't pace, exactly; the stall was too small. More like he just stood there inside it, turning in circles.

His hands were shaking again. His cock was *still* half-hard. He couldn't stop breathing like he'd run a mile: shallow, fast, lips dry. His heart wouldn't slow down. His thoughts wouldn't *start*. *What the fuck was that?*

He wiped a hand over his mouth. Pushed it back through his hair. His skin felt too tight. His thighs kept tensing. His chest ached. His cock--*fuck!*--his cock had been hard the *whole time*.

And not in a background way. Not the way he'd get when he was spooning some girl at two a.m. and pushed his cock against her, hoping she'd take the hint for another round. No, this erection had been *different*. This had pulsed, *begged*, felt like it was hardwired into *whatever the hell had just happened to his brain*. He said *drop and I just ... did. Like my body belonged to him already. What the fuck!*

He sat down too hard on the toilet seat and leaned forward, elbows on his knees, his palms pressed into his eyes. His breath caught and dragged. *That wasn't sex. That wasn't even physical. That was--Shit, what even was that? I don't even know.*

And the worst part? *But it sure felt better than sex.*

Not the climax. He'd had one, sure, no denying that, not with the wet proof staining the front of his shorts, but that hadn't been the satisfying part, not even close. No, the part that felt better than sex was that *moment*--that *fall*--that *voice* in his mind pulling him down-- *That felt better than any girl's ever made me feel. Better than I've ever made myself feel.*

His stomach flipped. Not good, not good, not good. He pressed his forehead into his hands and tried to breathe. *This can't be real. I'm straight. I like girls. I don't get off on guys whispering in my--*

But his cock had.

His *cock* didn't seem confused at all. It had loved the command. Loved the surrender. Loved *him*.

Milo bolted upright, like the thought physically hit him. *Him? Oh, fuck, no-no-no!*

Johnson was hot and all, but ... *just no!* This wasn't like admiring a guy's abs at the gym. Wasn't like locker room roughhousing, hands on each other's nearly naked bodies. This wasn't bro-code curiosity glances in the showers or checking out what a dude was working with during a three-way with a chick. Every guy did that, right? Sometimes Milo was curious, sure-sure-sure, but not *bi*-curious or whatever. But this? This was something *invasive*. This was something *deep*, something *felt*. Something *always there, buried deep, now opening up*. And he hadn't fought it. He'd *wanted* to sink. He'd *let himself* sink.

And now his body hummed like it already wanted to go *right back there*.

"I dropped," he whispered, repeating Johnson's word though Milo was still not fully sure how the word unpacked into meaning. Some vocabulary for sex Milo had never heard before?--No, the word seemed more loaded, but it seemed to fit the *slats pulled out from under* falling that Milo had experienced, so it seemed as good a word as any other. "I dropped for a guy." *Liked it too--a lot--too much.*

He stared unblinking at the stall wall, someone's marker graffiti that the pledges hadn't scrubbed off yet, while his pulse roared in his ears. *What the fuck is happening to me?*

Milo didn't mean to go back to the room he shared with Johnson immediately. He just ... found himself there. He stood in the doorway for maybe a full minute, jaw tight, every nerve strung high. His arms crossed over his chest as if they would hold something in. They didn't.

Johnson didn't look up right away. He sat at the desk, laptop open, eyes flicking between the screen and something on his phone.

Milo cleared his throat.

Johnson simply said, without looking, "Come in. Close the door."

Milo stepped in and obeyed without thinking, heard the door click shut behind him like a verdict.

The room was dimmer than it should've been. One of Johnson's loops was already playing, just barely audible, like the whisper of water moving behind a wall--white noise but with a rhythm woven inside it, nothing Milo could sing or dance to, not exactly, but something his body *felt*.

Milo opened his mouth to speak, to ask what the hell Johnson had *done* to him, but the words jammed up in his head. All he got out was: "I--I don't--" He swallowed. "I can't think right."

Johnson turned in his chair at last, calm and unbothered. "I know things might seem that way, until you understand." He gestured once, smooth and simple. "Sit on the floor."

Milo sat. Not because he meant to, and not because he was giving in--but because his knees folded *without input from his brain*. Weird. He sat cross-legged, hands on his thighs, like a damn obedient puppy. And that should've scared him more, but ... somehow it didn't.

The loop was louder now. Still faint, but insistent. The sound made Milo feel as though someone was breathing inside his skull, quiet and regular, like the sound had tiny teeth and was starting to chew. He ... liked the feeling, wanted to listen closer.

Johnson didn't raise his voice, nor did he move nearer. Low and clean, he said: "*Drop*."

And, dammit, Milo felt something being pulled from under him and he *dropped*.

Not like that first time, wild and headlong and perilous; this time was smoother--maybe more practiced? And quicker, more like diving into warm water. His eyes closed on instinct. His shoulders melted. The tension that had been clawing at his chest and spine all day just *evaporated*.

And suddenly, the panic--

The shame, the arousal, the freaked-out *what's happening to me--*

All of it went *muted*. Still there, but so very quiet now, like Johnson had turned a dial and lowered the volume inside Milo's brain.

Milo sat, still cross-legged, hands still on his thighs. His cock remained hard but didn't feel urgent now. His erection was background noise. Something he didn't need to *control*, because something--*someone*--was already doing that for him.

Johnson's voice rode over the loop; "Good," he said, and the word slid straight to Milo's head and sank into him. "Breathe deep. Let go. You're exactly where you're meant to be."

Milo felt himself *believe* the words, not because they made sense but because they felt right and made everything stop spinning.

"You feel calm. Grounded. Horny, yes--but steady. You don't have to get off, don't have to chase that feeling. It's already yours. And it'll always be yours when you listen."

Milo's breath slowed. His thighs stopped trembling, mostly. His cock was solid, waiting. He felt ... good. Not the intense ecstatic shock of orgasm, but a longer, slower burn of arousal that folded around him, made his thoughts drift. Not thirty seconds of pleasure but something that accumulated, growing by layers and his arousal continued to wrap around him, wrap his ...

"The loops are part of you now. You don't need to think about what's happening--or think at all. You don't need to fight. You only need to listen."

The words seemed etch themselves into Milo's head. His mind felt open, impressionable, like wet clay taking a shape he didn't know he wanted.

Johnson leaned forward slightly. No rush. Just presence. "Whenever you hear me say *drop*, you'll do what you did just now. Easily. Instantly. Naturally. You'll drop and feel safe. You'll drop and feel owned."

Milo shuddered--not from fear, but from recognition. This somehow was what he'd wanted, even though he hadn't known how to ask.

"Good boy," Johnson murmured. "Just like that."

Milo didn't move. Didn't need to. He was already exactly where he belonged.

Chapter 8

The frat house was never quiet, not even after midnight. But inside Room 206, Milo stood in his pants, back straight, arms behind his back. What had started as just another focus loop seemed to slide into Milo's ears and weave through his mind. His thoughts already seemed to float.

This time, when Johnson said, "Strip," suddenly the loudness outside no longer mattered. Music still pounded faintly from someone's room down the hall. Someone was laughing; someone else was rapping badly along with a beat. None of that reached Milo as he stripped away his pants and boxer-briefs.

Then Johnson said one word: "Kneel."

Milo went to his knees like he'd been waiting all night to obey. Maybe he had. He hadn't hesitated, hadn't thought about what he was doing. He simply moved.

Now he stayed: hands on his thighs, back straight, eyes lowered. And his exposed cock--twitching, swollen, three-quarters stiff and rising--knew what his brain was only starting to understand: This was *real*.

Johnson's bare feet stepped slowly in front of Milo's downcast eyes. He didn't need to raise his voice over the noise. "Look up."

Milo obeyed, eyes skimming up over jeans, bare abs and chest, Johnson's stoic expression.

Johnson's eyes held him, steady and certain. "You know what you are now. You've heard it every night in the focus loops. You understand what you are now, don't you."

Milo swallowed. "Yeah."

"Say it."

Milo's voice came low, rough. "Yours."

Johnson nodded once. "Good boy."

That did something in Milo's chest, in his spine. His pulse jumped like it *recognized* something in those words.

"You've been hard since the moment you knelt. You know that too."

Milo didn't need to look down. He felt the steady ache in his cock and balls, the weight in them, the pulse. But Johnson was wrong--Milo had been hard since before he knelt, and he acknowledged that too.

"You've been edging yourself for me for days while the focus loops played. They've had you rewiring your cock to respond to *my* presence now. My voice. My rules. And tonight you're finally ready to show me you know how much more being a good boy really means."

Milo swallowed nervously. His skin seemed to sing along with the loop, seemed to be calling out to be touched.

Johnson circled once behind him, slow and smooth, a fingertip gliding across the back of Milo's shoulders that made Milo shiver, and when Johnson returned, he stood over Milo--voice lower now, measured. "You'll touch your cock now, but just enough to feel the pleasure climb, enough to make yourself even more aroused. You won't cum, though, not until I say."

Milo's breath became a gulp. But his hand was already moving, already wrapping around his meat, already stroking, already obeying. He was masturbating at Johnson's command, struggling to control himself. The experience felt entirely different from his usual jerk-off sessions: heightened, sharp, deeply erotic, the pleasure coming not from the friction of his hand rubbing his cock but from Johnson telling him to. His pleasure, he realized, was coming not from the masturbation but from the obedience.

Johnson crouched down, eye-level now, voice running through Milo's mind like a thread of fire. "You're not straight anymore. Not when this is what has your cock hard and leaking. Not when you're this close, kneeling for me."

Milo moaned--barely--like something had torn a hole in his chest.

"Your arousal doesn't need a girl. Doesn't need porn. Doesn't need friction. All it needs now is me. You've chased girls your whole life, but you cum for *me* now. Only me. Say it."

Milo nodded, panting. "That ... feels true."

"Because I make it true," Johnson said. "You want me to let you cum now, don't you."

"Please," Milo said, voice begging before he realized how he sounded.

"Good boy. Even your pleasure is mine now." Johnson smiled. "Cum now."

Two fast hand-strokes. A spike of pleasure. Two more strokes, and Milo gasped, body jerking, as he felt the rise. Faster strokes, and Milo began to orgasm under Johnson's orders--powerfully, involuntarily, completely. His first climax driven entirely by a man's presence, a man's voice, was overwhelming pleasure, sending him soaring into mind-exploding ecstasy, sensations that also seemed to reprogram something in him. As his cum squirted out in heavy bursts, what he was feeling wasn't just sex and release--it felt like surrender.

Afterward, Milo slumped slightly, still kneeling, breath ragged, cum-blasts caught in one palm, as the last of his load smeared through the fingers of his stroking hand. Johnson stood and stepped back. Didn't touch him. Didn't comfort him. Didn't need to.

"That's how you learn," Johnson said, tossing him a rag to use for clean-up. "That's how you're claimed. That's how you'll remember who owns you and your release."

Milo nodded, still kneeling. What Johnson had said about the focus loops, about his pleasure ... Milo had stripped, knelt, gotten hard, stroked, and cum, all at the orders of another man. His brain was too blurred by the afterglow to process any of this, especially not the emotional head-spin of *liking it when a dude makes me feel better than anyone ever has*, and just defaulted to acceptance. He was still kneeling, still panting, still--his. Still Johnson's.

Then Johnson bent, kissed Milo's forehead once. "Good boy." He walked back to his bunk. "And now, time for you to *drop* ..."

Chapter 9

By now, word was starting to spread. Someone had heard moaning noises, sexual noises, through Johnson and Milo's door. Someone claimed Milo had started twitching hard in his boxer-briefs just from hearing Johnson say his name. Nobody confronted them; nobody laughed. This was a fraternity house--weird shit happened, and whatever two roommates did together behind closed doors was just between them, right? But with Johnson and Milo? This felt different. This felt deliberate.

By now, Milo just slipped inside Room 206, closed the door behind himself with a sharp click, and the hallway noise was muffled instantly by the walls he knew so well.

Johnson was waiting on the edge of his bed. Shirtless. Boxers. Legs spread slightly. Calm. Commanding. "Clothes off."

Milo obeyed, easier than breathing.

Naked now, he stood in the center of the room, erect, attentive, but not self-conscious. He was past that. His stiff cock knew this place. His chest, his nerves, all of him did.

"Kneel."

He knelt. Not just obedient. *Ready*.

And Johnson didn't look away as he stood. Didn't rush. Just approached, inevitable as gravity. "You've done everything right; you've been a good boy," he said, circling behind Milo. "You've held when I told you to. You've given your body to my words." A pause. "Now I'm going to give you something back."

Milo's breath deepened, but he didn't speak. He *felt* the order before he heard it: Johnson's fingers--on his shoulder, trailing down his spine, electric with intention. Milo's skin burned in a slow, growing way. This wasn't restraint anymore. This was about *welcome*.

"On the bed," Johnson said. "Lie down."

Milo rose, muscles buzzing, and climbed onto Johnson's lower bunk. He lay on his back. Eyes on the ceiling. Cock erect. Exposed. Waiting.

Johnson climbed into the bunk beside him. Not over him--*beside* him. Close enough for body heat. Close enough for breath. He leaned in, and Milo turned instinctively, mouth parted--

And Johnson kissed him.

Not a hypnotic suggestion or a symbolic reward. A *kiss*. Real. Slow. Hot.

Johnson's hand pressed lightly against Milo's chest, grounding him, keeping him from floating too fast. When

they broke apart, Milo was shaking slightly. But smiling.

"You cum when I tell you to," Johnson said.

Milo nodded.

"You cum *for me*. Only me. Say it."

"I cum for you," Milo whispered. "Only you."

Johnson stroked Milo's dick slowly. Milo writhed against the bed, held down by nothing but Johnson's calm grip and presence. Johnson whispered cues--words that drove Milo higher. Finally: "Cum for me." Milo's orgasm, now triggered, ignited through his full body, gasping, helpless as he climaxed hard, loudly, desperately, into Johnson's touch.

Afterward, Milo's chest rose and fell with slow, heavy breaths. Johnson didn't pull away. He stayed right there, against Milo's side, hand still warm on Milo's stomach. Neither said anything for a long time. They didn't have to.

From the hallway: bass, footsteps, voices, the usual frat house chaos.

But inside the room? Milo was finally still, not because of some quiet but because he didn't have to chase anything anymore. He'd been claimed.

Now he *belonged*.

Chapter10

By this point, the entire house knew.

Room 206 wasn't *just* Milo and Johnson's room anymore. It had become known as *the* room. The one with the late-night noises. The one where, if you walked past after midnight, you didn't ask questions--because the rhythmic thump of a bedframe and the low, hungry moans coming from behind that door had *names* now.

Johnson.

Milo.

No one was shocked anymore. Hell, Milo barely tried to hide it. He wandered around the house in just boxer-briefs most days--standard frat attire--or even naked, but he didn't even blink now when Johnson passed by and murmured, "Milo." Because that voice hit like pressing a button. And when it did?--Milo's cock *moved*.

Every. Single. Time.

Sometimes just a twitch. Sometimes full wood. All in full view of whichever brothers were hanging around.

"Bro," Carter whispered once to Kyle at breakfast. "I think he's hard again."

Kyle didn't look up from his cereal. "He's always hard. That's, like, his baseline."

Textbook Milo condition.

No one teased Milo, not really, because watching the former pussy-hound, the king of weekend hook-ups,

follow Johnson around with that dazed puppy look?--That was kind of impressive. Also, kind of a little hot.

Maybe even a *lot* hot, if you caught the way Johnson touched his back at parties. Or how Milo would casually nuzzle Johnson's neck when he thought no one was paying attention. Except everyone was paying attention.

"Bro," someone finally asked during beer pong, "are you two like, *together* now? Do we, like ... congratulate you? Or send a fruit basket? Or ... something?"

Milo grinned, arm looped lazily around Johnson's waist. "Why not both?"

Laughter. Eye-rolls. But no pushback. They'd seen Milo *before*, and they'd seen him *now*. And *now* looked good on him.

In private?--Johnson's voice increasingly did things to him. All Johnson had to say was *Drop*, and Milo's knees went loose. His cock throbbed. His thoughts emptied into trance.

And after?--After everything, Milo lay curled into Johnson's side, skin still buzzing. Johnson didn't move to get dressed or wipe away the sweat, the lube, the cum--he just stayed there, letting Milo press against him, skin to skin. No words. Just warmth and breath. Johnson's fingers traced small, lazy circles on Milo's back. Not hypnotic like the loops or his voice. Not commanding like his presence. Just connection. Milo sighed and relaxed more deeply, as though his nervous system finally understood that he was safe.

When Johnson did speak, his voice was quiet, reassuring. He might murmur *You're still here; you did so well*, or *You can feel your body now; all yours again*, or *Breathe with me, Milo*. His voice guided without compelling, and the sound of it helped Milo climb back into himself.

Maybe Milo was shaky. Not sad, not ashamed, just still ... pried opened. And Johnson would hold that space without needing to fix it. *You let go*, he might say, and *You let me in, and that's not small, Milo*. No judgment or teasing. Just recognition.

Eventually, Johnson might pull a sheet over them. He might hand Milo a water bottle, say something like *If you die of dehydration, I'd have to tell the rest of the house and there's probably a lot of paperwork to fill out, so don't do that, okay?* Milo might snort at the dumb joke. Johnson would grin. They'd be back in the world again, two people emotionally recalibrating after their sex and surrender went deep.

Milo didn't miss chasing girls, not even a little, not when he got *this*. Not when Johnson knew how to catch Milo's breath in his hand. Not when obedience meant this intense pleasure. Not when belonging meant *came so hard I forgot my own name* and then being held afterward meant he'd *earned it*. Because he had. Milo might whisper thanks into Johnson's shoulder as he drifted.

And if he moaned a little loud sometimes? If his thighs shook and the whole hall could hear? Well, wasn't like anyone in the house didn't already know.

Chapter 11

Late nights were not unusual for the house, not when the brothers kept a variety of schedules that at all hours involved the sound of music, laughter, the distant thud of someone dropping a case of beer in the kitchen. Inside Room 206, the lights were dim.

Johnson sat at his desk, laptop closed. Milo lay across the Johnson's lower bunk, sprawled and naked, in the kind of contented daze that only came after intense sex, or hypnosis, or both.

Then: a knock, gentle and uncertain.

They looked at each other. Johnson reached for his boxers, tugged them on.

Another knock, just two knuckles. Johnson stood, opened the door.

In the hall, lit by the yellow glow of the overheads, stood a freshman pledge, hoodie half-zipped, chest bare underneath, cheeks red, eyes flickering with hesitation. "Hey. Um. Sorry. I'm not disturbing you, am I? I just ..." He shifted his feet. "I mean, you guys are kinda ... legendary."

Milo raised an eyebrow from the bed. "Legendary, huh?"

Textbook Milo smirk.

The pledge nodded quickly. "Not, like, in a bad way. Just ... you're open. Real. I mean--the guys talk. Not bad talk. Just ..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I mean ... I'm like you."

After a moment of silence, Johnson stepped back. "Come in."

The pledge stepped inside like he was entering sacred ground--which, in a way, maybe he felt like he was. His nervous eyes flicked over Johnson's bare chest, then Milo's bare everything, ricocheted downward, as if the floor was the only safe place for his gaze.

Milo sat up. The pledge process had just started; he hadn't paid much attention to the pledges yet. He probably should--he'd pledged the year before and remembered how intimidating the process had felt. "So what's your name?"

"Noah."

Johnson closed the door. "And what are you're looking for, Pledge Noah?"

Noah swallowed. "I ... I'd like you, uh, *both* of you, to be my Bigs. If that's allowed? I just ... I trust you. And I think you're hot--er, I mean, I think I could learn a lot." He flushed harder. "And I think I'd be safe here. Like, I can be me, you know? I mean, really me."

Johnson and Milo exchanged a glance. Then Milo patted the bed beside him. "C'mere."

Noah crossed the room, nervous but steady, and sat.

Johnson sat on the other side of Noah. Calm as ever, voice low now--lower than Noah had probably expected. Milo had heard that voice from Johnson before, many times now. "You ever listen to a focus loop before, Noah?"

Noah blinked at Johnson. "What's that?"

Milo smiled. "It's like a meditation. Just for us. You don't have to say anything. Just breathe."

Milo saw Johnson place his hand gently on Noah's shoulder. Steady. Not forceful, not guiding--just present. Still, Noah froze for a second. Then, almost involuntarily, his back straightened. His breath came in slightly shallower pulls. He seemed to relax a little into Johnson's touch and didn't move away.

Milo, naked, on the other side of Noah on the bed, leaned just a little closer and let the heat radiate off his bare chest and thighs toward Noah. Milo didn't say anything. He didn't need to.

Noah's eyes darted between them. Milo knew what he was seeing: Two older fraternity brothers, both attractive, one naked and the other nearly so in just boxer shorts, both confident, both very clearly *together*--

and both now very clearly focused on him. Milo saw Noah's ears blush bright pink. The pledge's hands curled slightly in his lap, unsure whether to fidget or hold still. His legs were pressed tightly together. But his hips shifted once. Subtle, but telling. "You okay?" Milo asked softly.

Noah nodded too fast. Then slower. "Just ... never been in a room this quiet before," he murmured, voice dry. "I didn't know the frat house could get this quiet."

"This room isn't quiet," Milo said, smiling. "Just tuned."

As Johnson's thumb traced a slow, grounding arc through the hoodie fabric along Noah's shoulder, Milo said, "You're not nervous. You're just waking up into your own body."

"Huh?" Noah turned toward Johnson, startled. When Milo, very casually, rested a hand on Noah's knee, skin to skin, the pledge looked at Milo's hand but didn't move. Didn't flinch. Didn't say no. His breath quickened, a pace somewhere between panic and possibility.

"Want to listen to one of our focus loops?" Johnson asked.

Noah licked his lips. "Okay, sure," he said. "Uh, now?"

Johnson nodded.

Milo gave a small hum of approval. "You sure?"

Noah looked at both of them--head swiveling from Johnson's calm, unreadable expression to Milo's warm, slowly building smile. "Yeah," Noah said, voice trembling just slightly. "I think I want ... that. With you."

Milo stood and crossed to Johnson's laptop. He opened a folder. Clicked play. Low tones filled the room. Not music. Not words. Just layered pulses, barely there, like a heartbeat too close to your ear.

Johnson stayed at Noah's back, hand now gently sliding up and down along the pledge's upper spine through his hoodie.

Milo sat down beside him again, thigh to thigh.

Noah, between them on the bed, was jittery in a way that didn't show in his voice but did in his hands--twisting the hem of his hoodie, then letting go.

"You said you want to belong," Johnson murmured.

Noah nodded slowly. "Yeah. I do."

"Then just listen," Johnson said, voice low and unhurried. "That's all."

"You don't have to say anything," Milo added in a murmur. "Just listen, and let yourself feel good."

Noah listened, then listened closer. Gradually he closed his eyes. His lips parted. Early signs.

These initial loops still hit Milo, but not as intensely--he'd built up a tolerance. Still, he knew what Noah was feeling. Milo leaned in to whisper: "You're safe here, Pledge Noah. You're with us now. Just listen."

The loop played, somewhere in the background--a sound not just heard, but *felt*, like bass through floorboards, like breath behind the ear. The sound wasn't about words, which were too quiet to make out. It was about *tone*--rhythmic, velvety, suggestive--a lullaby made for grown boys who needed to know how to

rest.

"Let your body listen too," Johnson whispered.

Noah's shoulders slowly relaxed, expression going slack as Milo watched. Maybe the pledge didn't even realize the change as his spine loosened. His legs stopped pulling as tightly beneath him. And Milo's hand--when it slid, gently, to rest higher on Noah's thigh--didn't startle him.

"You're safe here," Milo said.

"You're wanted," Johnson added.

Noah's breath glitched, then slowed. His cheeks flushed, not with nervousness this time but arousal. He didn't move away when Johnson's fingertips brushed his jaw. He didn't stop Milo when that hand on his thigh slowly slid toward his knee, then back again in an easy rhythm--hypnotic in a different way.

The loop hummed. The heat built. And still, Milo and Johnson didn't *take*. They didn't lean forward, didn't claim him, though the swelling lump in the crotch of Noah's shorts showed what his body wanted.

Noah leaned in first. Just a tilt of his body. A shift toward Milo, whose lips were suddenly very close. The pledge struggled to open his eyelids, a glance at Johnson, with eyes that were dark and dilated.

"Shh," Johnson coaxed. "Relax. Just let it happen."

Noah's eyelids lost their fight with the inevitable and closed, this time staying shut. The pledge exhaled and let them. Milo unzipped the hoodie. Johnson eased Noah's torso back to lie on the bunk. And when Milo slid his hand alongside Johnson's on Noah's chest, their palms lightly pressed to the pledge's skin, the heat became something shared.

And when Milo finally kissed the corner of Noah's mouth, and Johnson kissed the curve of his neck, the pledge's head rolled loosely against the mattress, a low moan of bliss.

Neither Milo nor Johnson told him to drop--Noah wouldn't have known that word at the time for what he was feeling--but Noah *was* dropping, into the feeling, into the touch, into trance, into them.

Part 2: Pledge Noah and Brother Drew

Chapter 12

Noah had gone back to the pledge room after that first night with his head buzzing, a mix of comfort and super-orgasm afterglow. He thought about Milo's smile, Johnson's voice, the way the world had dropped away around him. It was hypnotic, right? Had to be. But the experience didn't feel like losing control. It felt like finally not faking who he was. His cock throbbed in his boxers for an hour.

The next night, he went back to Johnson and Milo's room. And the night after that too.

Noah didn't even remember when he started kneeling. This wasn't some big ritual. Nobody told him to, but doing so felt right. He'd just ... strip and drop to his knees on the floor while another loop played. His whole naked body felt boneless and buzzy, especially his displayed hard-on.

Five days had passed since he had asked them to be his Bigs, five days of loops and being trained and learning and cumming--

Tonight was a subdued night in the house, rain tapping the windows, the low purr of one of Johnson's loops pulsing from the speakers. Noah was supposed to keep his eyes forward, but he risked a look at them. Johnson sat shirtless at his desk. Milo, naked and stretched out on Johnson's bed, was watching him with a look of pride, like Noah was a baby critter who was starting to figure out what kind of animal he really was. Milo grinned like he already knew what was about to happen.

Noah's brain was cotton candy and sex haze. His cock was full-bore hard, aching, obvious. He should've been embarrassed. But somehow all of this felt normal.

His Bigs--whenever Noah wasn't in class or busy with some pledge chore or challenge--had been keeping his head foggy with trance and his balls thoroughly drained. Which was weird; Johnson was always so restrictive with Milo's orgasms, abstinence-play, letting Milo cum only when he'd done something to earn his release. But with Noah?--They'd turned the dial completely in the other direction, three, four orgasms a day, like training a puppy by being generous with the tastiest treats.

And yesterday, when Noah had slipped into the room after the night's pledge torments were finished, still wearing his "pledge uniform" of boxer shorts and mismatched crocs handed down from who knows how many prior pledge classes, and found them mid-scene? Johnson saw him enter and gave wide-eyed Noah permission to stay with a small smile and a nod. Milo had been kneeling, naked, hands behind his head, just like Noah was now, the inspiration for Noah's pose, and Milo had looked so ... torn open, vulnerable, as though Johnson had pulled away all of Milo's defenses and Milo had let them fall aside because he knew he was safe. So ... hot!--So very fucking hot! And when Johnson had opened his shorts and taken out his cock and fed it into Milo's mouth, and Milo had sucked and slobbered, and Johnson hip-pumped gently, fucking Milo's face until Johnson's head fell back, mouth open and gasping, and Johnson shot his load into Milo's mouth? When Johnson stepped back, cock still dripping the last few drops, and ordered Milo to lick his dick clean, and still denied Milo the ability to cum after Johnson's own orgasm, and the way deeply entranced Milo whimpered so needily? Nothing Noah had seen in any downloaded porn compared to that, their connection, their intimacy. Noah had never seen anything so mind-blastingly sexy in his life.

Johnson finally spoke to him, voice as calm as ever: "You've been showing up, listening, coming back every night."

Noah swallowed, throat dry, and whispered, "Yeah. I mean--yes, sir."

"You like how this feels."

"Yes, sir." Well, did he ever! His balls had never felt so thoroughly, happily spent for so many days in a row. But the physical was only part of what he felt, maybe the smallest part. He saw the way Johnson and Milo were with each other, and he felt the way they were with him. He knew the words--*training* and *arousal*, *hypnosis* and *orgasm*--but, seeing and feeling, the actual experience of the words in motion was so much more ... intense, deeply affective. Noah felt so very ... not *loved*--too soon for that word, though he felt himself tilting ever further in that direction--but definitely *cared for*, intensely *cared for*.

Milo rolled onto his side, propped his head on his hand. "But it's not just the loops you come back for, is it? It's us."

Noah looked up. First at Milo--broad-shouldered, tan, handsome, casually hard. Then at Johnson--cool, confident, completely unreadable, just as hard in his shorts even after cumming just now. Noah's voice dropped to a whisper. "Yeah. It's you guys."

Johnson leaned forward a little. "You're not broken. You're not confused."

Milo added, "And you're not 'turning' into anything you're not. You're just horny, man. And we make you feel

good."

Johnson: "We can stop at this *feel good* level if you want. But what we're saying is ... if you want to keep going?--explore deeper levels?--deeper connections? We're here and we're ready."

Milo grinned wider. "And we're good at it."

Noah let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. His whole naked body flushed--face, chest, neck, all the way down, his whole body trembling with arousal. He was so hard his cock and balls *hurt*. All he could do was nod. He didn't how much further *deeper levels* might go or what *deeper connections* might fully mean, but he knew what he wanted. "Yeah," he gasped. "Fuck, yeah. Deeper levels--Want that. Fuck, yeah."

Milo leaned over the edge of the bed and pressed a kiss to Noah's temple, then his jaw, then right under his ear. Noah shuddered.

Johnson stood and stepped in behind him. His hands rested on Noah's bare shoulders, not pushing or guiding--just *there*. And Noah tilted his head, closed his eyes, and let everything happen.

Johnson--calm, steady, still--looked down at Noah. "Say the word."

Noah's heart thudded hard in his chest. His mouth was dry. Which word? He didn't now, but some part under the surface of his mind seemed to understand the exact one.

Milo offered, "Say 'I'm ready to drop.'" The statement hung in the air, weightless and heavy all at once.

Noah wasn't sure he *was* ready, not in the way people usually meant. But his body felt as though it had already made its decision, his stomach and his chest muscles fluttering, anticipating. Which word was the one Johnson wanted?--*ready*, or *drop*? Or did the choice matter that much as long as he said yes? Noah swallowed. "I'm ready," he groaned low. "I'm ready to drop."

Noah felt Johnson's fingertips sliding through his hair to touch his scalp, just resting, a point of connection, a claim maybe. But not one that scared him.

Milo moved closer, sliding alongside him on the rug, his body warm against Noah's side, his breath teasing at the shell of Noah's ear. Then Milo's lips brushed the side of his neck. "You're ours now," Milo said quietly.

Noah inhaled. The words went straight down his spine, then lower. His rigid cock vibrated.

"You want that, don't you?"

Noah didn't answer out loud. He didn't have to. He *did* want that--had wanted it for longer than he could admit. Had already confessed his want. His confirming nod was small and honest.

"You're not pretending anymore," Johnson said, his voice a low hum beside him.

Noah shook his head, barely.

"You're not holding anything back."

"No," Noah whispered.

"Then listen." He reached to one side to start the focus loop. "This one is just for you. It'll hit slow, so you can feel everything."

Noah tried to listen closer than ever, but the sounds that might have been words buried in the mix still evaded his grasp. The loop was low and slow, like a heartbeat he was sinking into. The sound seemed to bore into his mind, like so many of these loops did, a sweet feeling of penetration, then a diffusion through the core of him. It dipped into a deeper tone, vibrating through his chest, into his stomach, into his groin. Milo's hand followed that same path down Noah's body, slow and light--like he was learning the geography of it, not just touching it.

"Breathe in," Johnson said.

Noah did.

"When you're ready, you can drop."

The words didn't feel like a command. They felt like permission. "I can drop," Noah found himself quietly echoing. Something inside him *let go*. No other words for it. He exhaled, trembling, as if the words had opened a secret door in his chest.

Milo's fingers slipped across Noah's hip. His touch was patient, teasing, reverent. Johnson's fingers curled a little deeper in his hair, as he bent closer. "You belong. You're ours. You want this."

Each phrase echoed in Noah's head; each one loosened something knotted. He didn't feel stripped-down. Didn't feel like anything was being torn away. He felt revealed. Like he'd been seen all along, and now he had no more need to hide.

His body rocked forward, craving, seeking--seeking not just pleasure, but connection, confirmation. Milo's hand found Noah's cock, moved with more pressure now, stroking him slowly, steadily, in time with the breath and the loop and Johnson's words that somehow slipped through Noah's grasp. His moans came quiet and unguarded. His hips moved on instinct. Noah was dizzy with it--arousal and surrender tangled up so tightly he couldn't tell one from the other. He wasn't *chasing orgasm*. That wasn't what this was. He was sinking into the idea that he *wasn't alone anymore*. Was he ready to drop? Was he dropping? Was the word slowly showing him its own meaning?

Noah felt his pleasure building. He wasn't running toward his orgasm, but it caught him anyway, rose in him, enfolded him. He felt the tension crest. His whole body shook as he came, balls tightening, semen arcing out of his blazing cock, a jagged gasp escaping his lips, eyes fluttering closed as everything inside him went still.

And then--

Nothing but warmth, floating in warmth.

Milo was still beside him, holding him. Johnson was still of the other side of him, hand still sliding through his hair. No one let go.

Noah's breathing slowed. He didn't feel like he'd given something up. He felt like he'd been given *back to himself*. And for the first time in a long time ... he didn't feel lost. He felt *theirs*. And he liked it. No chants, no pledges, no contracts. Just a horny pledge between two shirtless frat-bros who made him feel wanted, hot, and high as hell off touch and suggestion. Because that's what initiation really meant here. Not *control*--Just *belonging*.

And when he came a second time--shuddering, gasping, into their hands? They laughed. Kissed him. Held him there.

"I like this," Noah said drowsily, "going slow, being kind of awake as it starts to happen. Feels good." He

smiled through his afterglow at Milo, at Johnson, feeling so much, hearing something change in the still-playing loop, feeling himself open still further--"Wait, I think it's ..."--a moment when something tugged downward at his thoughts and his breath became a quick, shallow gasp. His eyes widened for a moment before sliding closed. He knew how now. He could let this happen.

And he dropped.

Chapter 13

The smell of coffee hit first. Then: sunlight, too bright, through slatted blinds that offered no privacy but weren't trying to.

Noah blinked himself awake. His first thought: *warm*. His second: *naked*. His third: *Oh, fuck, that actually happened!*

He stretched a little--slow, sore in places he hadn't expected--and rolled toward the body beside him. Milo. Still out cold. One arm thrown up over his head, the other draped across Noah's stomach like he'd forgotten whose bed he was in. Johnson's bed.

Correction: *their* bed.

Johnson had pulled Noah up onto the mattress sometime during everything. Noah had been deep in trance at that point, the focus loop scooping anything that resembled consciousness out of his head, but he remembered that moment. Vaguely. Hands, lips, weight, being lifted. Johnson's voice like smoke in his ear: "You're one of us now."

This was his second time today waking. The first time, around dawn, his urgent bladder had prodded him from sleep, requiring he slip out of bed and down the hall to the bathroom to piss. When he returned to their bed, Milo had roused, pulled Noah into an embrace, kisses. Milo's fingers had found Noah's asshole, still lube-slick, and Milo had been so ardent, pressing himself to Noah, nibbling his neck, lifting his legs for better access to his hole. Still-drowsy Noah had asked *I thought you can't cum?*--And Milo replied *I can fuck your tight little ass just fine; I just can't cum until this asshole*--nodding toward sleeping Johnson--*says I can, but I can fuck you just fine; ever been fucked by a guy who can stay erect for an hour without cumming?* And then Milo had re-lubed his hard-on, promising that Noah could fuck him next time, and lifted Noah's legs higher, and proceeded to do just that, sending Noah up and up into clouds of bliss ... until they heard a sleepy voice beside them say *Cum, Milo, cum*. And Milo had gasped and swore and lost all control of his body to a powerful orgasm that left him spent-limbed. Johnson had then taken his own turn at Noah's sensitive ass, a different style of fucking, but lighting up Noah's nervous system just as well--until Johnson came too, while Milo sucked Noah, and Noah's orgasm, in both his cock and ass, slammed him hard. They'd all collapsed on the narrow mattress for more well-deserved sleep.

This time, awakening probably in mid-morning judging by the sun, Noah lay there a few more minutes, the scent of lube and cum, last night's and this morning's, still clinging to his chest, his thighs, his *everything*. His whole body felt ... used, but refilled. Touched, but not taken advantage. Owned, in the most *wanted* way he could imagine.

Eventually, carefully, he slipped out from under Milo's arm and padded to the door, not bothering to dress fully--just pulled on his "pledge uniform" boxers and a hoodie, probably Milo's, maybe Johnson's, from the hook on back of the door on his way out--legs bare, hair wild. This was a frat house. Nobody cared.

And anyway, his boneless, glowing, just-fucked shuffle wasn't going to be fooling anyone. Hopefully the hoodie would hide most of the dried cum and lube that dotted his torso.

Downstairs, the kitchen was half full of brothers reviving themselves with cereal, coffee, a sports channel on mute. Carter nodded at him. Kyle raised an eyebrow, then a spoon.

"Morning," someone teased. "Looking pretty loose there, pledge."

Noah just smiled, a little dazed, a little proud.

And when someone else muttered, "Lucky bastard," under their breath?--Noah smiled wider. Because, yeah, he was.

After coffee and a shower, Noah sat cross-legged on their rug, wearing nothing but his pledge uniform boxers. Bare chest, still a little flushed from scrubbing away the dried residues in the shower. His hair was damp, curling at the edges. He hadn't even tried to tame it. Noah was betting--hoping--his hair would get mussed again very soon.

Nearby, Johnson sat at his desk--not working, just watching.

Milo was sprawled on his own top bunk, diagonally, head on a pillow, legs dangling off the side, long and lazy, looking down like he'd seen this part before and knew *exactly* how it would go but wanted to see it again anyway.

A refresher, Johnson had called this new focus loop. To help everything from last night lock in. Noah swallowed. "So, uh ... what do I do?"

Johnson smiled faintly. "First, you kneel."

Should he strip off the boxers first, Noah wondered. Johnson hadn't said to, so maybe better to follow orders exactly as given instead of try to supplement them?

As Noah shifted to his knees, hands behind his head, Johnson clicked something on his laptop. A low hum filled the room--barely a sound at all. Just soft vibration, somewhere behind the ears. "Now," Johnson said, "you listen, and you feel."

Noah exhaled slowly, blinked. His stomach was tight--not with fear. With anticipation and heat.

"This isn't like the other loops. It's more like the one yesterday, tailored just for you. You'll enter trance but you'll be mostly awake through it, so you can experience everything, up until it drops you deep to do the real work."

The tone deepened, subtle as breathing.

Noah blinked slower. Already thinking felt trickier. The room didn't shift, but his *focus* did. Johnson's voice was suddenly more *present* than the walls, more real than the posters or furniture or even Milo in the background leaning forward and grinning down at him like a wolf.

"You like this," Johnson said. "You like listening. You like being still and open and a little too turned-on to think clearly."

"Yeah ... Yes, sir," Noah murmured, feeling the *too turned-on to think clearly* already locking in. His fingers flexed against his knees. His cock definitely stirred under the loose fabric.

Johnson's voice curved lower: "Let it build. Don't rush. You don't have to pursue anything here. You're allowed to *want*. Let the arousal come to you. Want it. Let the trance come to you too."

Noah closed his eyes. He was hard now. His hands wanted something to grip. But he didn't move. Not yet. Not without permission.

"It's hot, isn't it," Johnson murmured, "knowing how much control you're giving up--not because I took it, but because you *offered* it."

Johnson's voice and the loop seemed to curl around Noah's thoughts, affirming, intimate, even euphoric. Noah felt amazed by the depths they showed him. These sessions with Johnson and Milo were the first times someone looked past the surface Noah and *understood* what he couldn't articulate; they seemed to have found the places inside him that had always ached, and they pressed there, a gentle comfort.

"Touch your cock," Johnson said, "through your shorts."

Noah's head was feeling the early dizziness, the disorientation, and he needed a moment to interpret Johnson's words. By the time Noah's mind caught up, his hand was rubbing his crotch: *rub, squeeze, rub, squeeze*. Nothing frantic--just slow strokes, lazy teasing, guided by Johnson's voice and his own horniness.

"Yeah, that's hot--good job, Noah," Milo said as he slid from the top bunk to the floor, his own cock blatantly hard.

Johnson whispered deeper cues, words that slipped past Noah as he breathed faster. Then, just as Noah was about to tip over into orgasm, Johnson ordered him simply: "Stop."

Noah gasped. Froze. His whole body shook. Not from fear--from how *badly* he wanted to tip the rest of the way into physical bliss.

"You don't cum until I say," Johnson said with quiet authority. "Even when you're this close. Even when your whole body is begging. You wait. You wait until I give you permission."

Noah moaned--bit his lip--and waited.

Ten seconds. Twenty. Forty maybe?--Noah lost count.

Then Johnson gave the cue. "Cum."

And Noah rubbed his crotch, and his cock bucked, and his orgasm cracked, broke through him, fractured him. He came hard, shooting his cum into his shorts, breath ragged, muscles tense, his head spiraling up, up, blind to anything but the ecstasy, up ... then his body collapsing back against the rug, loose, dazed, skin burning with afterglow, but not stopping there, falling into some depth, eyes closing, dark folding around him, like sleep but somehow more ... subterranean, burrowing deeper into his own head, dropping ...

A time later, Noah blinked up at the ceiling, still floating, thoughts fuzzy and sputtering, sluggish, slow to restart.

Johnson's voice reached into him again--not loud, not sharp, just *near*. "See how easy that was? See how good you feel when you're guided?"

Noah tried to nod, but his response emerged as a sigh.

Milo lay beside him on the rug. Not touching, just ... nearby. The way you'd stay close to someone who's just coming down from a high and needs something to tether to. Noah turned his face toward Milo's shoulder, panting, and accepted his presence. Milo leaned in and kissed his forehead. Noah felt he was already exactly where he needed to be.

Johnson stepped beside them. "You did great, Noah, and it only gets better. But now it's time for you to *drop*."

For Noah the world tipped. His eyes slipped shut again and stayed that way.

Chapter 14

Noah was folding their T-shirts in the basement laundry room, alone. He hadn't been *told* to, hadn't been given a chore assignment to do it. This didn't feel like a chore. He just knew Milo liked when the hoodies were fresh, and Johnson liked quiet initiative--tasks done unasked, efficiently, without needing to be noticed. So Noah was doing it. His pledge boxers rode low on his hips; he was shirtless, barefooted, which seemed to happen a lot recently, so technically, officially, he was out of uniform without his pledge T and crocs. The air moving on all his exposed skin felt ... good, relaxing somehow, like it was *intended* somehow. The loop from that morning still faintly echoed in his head.

He didn't hear Drew come in.

Drew was a junior. Midfielder on the soccer team. Friendly enough in the kitchen or at parties, but not someone Noah had ever really talked to much. Now he was leaning in the doorway, T-shirt, gym shorts, flip-flops, sipping from a water bottle, eyeing Noah with a raised eyebrow. "You aren't the pledge on laundry duty this week," Drew said, his tone teasing but also accusatory and dangerous, as if threatening demerits in jest that might turn out to be real. "Are you even supposed to be here? Pledges don't get house laundry privileges."

Noah straightened instinctively, startled but alert. "It's for my Bigs," he said, which was technically true. "Just figured I'd do it before they told me to."

"Huh." Drew stepped inside, still casual, but slower now. Studying Noah. "So, you and Johnson have some kind of ... thing?"

Noah blinked. His heart thudded once, hard. His fingers kept folding, neat corners, finishing one T-shirt, reaching for the next. "He's helping me stay focused," Noah said carefully. "He's setting a good example, like a Big is supposed to."

Drew gave a short chuckle. "Sure, sure. And Milo?"

Noah hesitated. He shouldn't say anything, shouldn't *give* anything, but his mouth had already started moving before his brain caught up: "Milo's ... a real cool guy."

The words seemed weird now that Noah had spoken them. Not *wrong* but just somehow *too honest*, too *intimate* for laundry room banter.

Drew tilted his head. "You're into them." It wasn't a question.

Noah didn't look up. His fingers flexed around the next T-shirt.

Drew stepped closer. The mood shifted, becoming not overly hostile, though Noah wondered if it might turn that way. For now, the mood just felt *curious* in a way that made Noah feel nervous, as though his skin had grown too tight.

Drew's eyes narrowed and his smile seemed insincere. "You're, like, their pet or something? They say fetch and you bark and wag your tail? Lick their cocks if they say they're horny?"

Noah stood straighter. Voice quiet and even. "I do what feels good."

Drew's gaze sharpened. Not mocking now. Just more *interested*. He watched Noah's face for a long second. Then his eyes dropped, down to Noah's bare chest, a hickey on his collarbone, the way his skin flushed just from being noticed like this.

Drew's fingertip ran down Noah's arm, and he obviously saw the way that brief contact made Noah shiver. Drew stepped back, smiling like he'd just confirmed a rumor. "Damn. Guess some of you pledges *really* want to be here."

Noah didn't answer, didn't have to. His silence was just one more confession that said too much.

Later, upstairs, Milo would kiss Noah's cheek and tell him: "You didn't do anything wrong. He was gonna figure it out eventually. I'm surprised he didn't catch on sooner. We haven't been keeping this much of a secret."

And Johnson murmured: "If anything, I'm impressed you didn't drop to escape."

Noah would still go quiet at that word--*drop*--his breath catching just a little. He didn't now, but almost, because Johnson's voice still did that to him. "Escape? I didn't know that could happen. I thought that was just for you guys, for us." He felt their eyes upon him.

And now, Noah had Drew's watching eyes to worry about, too.

Chapter 15

The chain was thin, nothing flashy, simple metal links with a smooth silver pendant the size of a small coin--blank, no insignia. But it sat just below Noah's collarbones when he was shirtless, which was often, and whenever he touched it--fingers brushing it absently--he remembered exactly who put it there, and why.

Johnson and Milo had fastened it in place around Noah's neck two nights ago. Johnson had pulled him into a light trance to give the necklace and pendant *meaning*; Milo had leaned in, kissed the spot just beneath, and whispered, *Ours now*.

Noah hadn't taken it off since.

Now: evening. Johnson and Milo's room was dim. Another Johnson focus loop thrummed from the laptop speakers. Noah knelt on the rug, next to the bottom bunk, while Milo lay stretched out next to him on the mattress, both shirtless, Milo in the blue boxer-briefs that looked so good on him, Noah in his pledge boxers, both of them showing semi-hard dicks. Milo moaned happily, eyes slightly glazed, the loop's doing, his hand lightly resting on Noah's nearby shoulder, just enough pressure to ground him through the float-away headspace that the loops created, to hold Noah *present*.

And Johnson was standing in front of him, speaking in that voice that made Noah's bones feel like warm butter. "You're already feeling it," Johnson said. "Just ride the pleasure. Don't push to reach it. Let the feeling come to you."

Noah's hands curled on his thighs, fingertips twitching slightly as he breathed, deeper than normal but simply *down*, not *dropped*, not yet. Just *horny*. Buzzing. Not yet in a trance, more like feeling the edge of a wave, and Johnson was the tide.

"Every time you touch the pendant," Johnson said, "you remember how good this feels. Every time Milo says your name, you get a little harder. And every time I say *release*, you feel your whole body get looser, hotter, ready."

Noah's cock throbbed at that word: *release*. He whimpered softly, and Milo squeezed his shoulder in approval.

The door clicked and opened.

Drew stepped inside.

Noah didn't startle, didn't look away, just kept breathing, letting the still-playing loop do its work, letting his Bigs deal with the intrusion. But he was aware enough to flush hard. He'd been caught kneeling, wearing nothing but boxer-shorts and the chain around his neck.

And Drew?--Drew froze for half a beat, then closed the door behind him like he wasn't quite sure why.

Johnson turned slowly toward him.

Milo sat up slightly, as if eager to see what came next without letting on. His hand was still on Noah's shoulder. "Hey," Milo said, friendly. "You here to watch?"

Drew gave a half-laugh, like he meant to scoff but the sound got caught in his throat as he processed what he was seeing. "Didn't realize you were in the middle of ... whatever this is." He bobbed his head toward Noah. "He okay?"

Noah didn't look at Drew's face, but he felt Drew's curiosity, felt Drew's gaze caress the tented boxer shorts, move up his bare chest, pause at the pendant, and find the faint flush along his neck.

But then Noah tilted his head, just a little, and caught sight of Drew's hand at the waistband of his gym shorts. Not full-on groping. Just ... *adjusting*, as if casually. But the shape beneath Drew's shorts didn't lie. Drew must have been translating what he saw into a scenario where near-naked Noah in his boxers would kneel and his Bigs, Johnson, Milo, would step up, push their pants down, and stick their hard dicks into Noah's open mouth, which was right there, perfect height, and blow-jobs would happen. Drew must have been imagining himself stepping up too. *Hot!* Noah felt himself lick his lips.

"Oh, yeah. He's not just okay," Johnson said, voice smooth as always, riding over the loop sound. "He's *perfect*. And he's yours, too--if you want."

Noah's breath jumped. John was offering him to Drew? Was Noah into that? Drew's long, muscular legs, his soccer-trained torso under that T-shirt, handsome features, needy cock in his shorts? *Yeah!*

Johnson knelt in front of Noah again, lifted the pendant lightly between two fingers. "So, do you want to make Drew feel good too?"

Noah nodded.

Milo murmured behind him: "You're allowed."

And Johnson turned to Drew. "You want to feel what he's feeling? Then just come closer."

Drew hesitated, blinked, expression showing a hint of confusion, because by now the loop must have been digging into his mind. Then he stepped forward, barefoot, bulging shorts, T-shirt, his chest already rising slower with each breath.

And when Drew stood in front of Noah, eyes wide and hard with want, Noah looked up at him, smiled, as Johnson whispered: "Give yourself a few minutes for everything to sink in, then you'll feel better than you

can imagine."

Dazed, Drew blinked, blinked again, the tension around his eyes loosening as something inside him--curiosity, confusion, desire, surrender--started to open. His breathing shifted. He didn't speak, didn't need to.

And Johnson smiled as if he'd just seen the next piece fall into place.

Noah reached out, brushed Drew's waistband--tentative, curious--and Drew didn't pull away. He just let the touch linger, the moment soft and slow, as if time had thickened in the warmth of the room.

Nearby, Johnson's voice came low and smooth: "Good. Just listen and let it happen. Relax. Focus on the moment."

Noah's hand slid higher, under Drew's T-shirt, reaching his chest, then sliding over the muscles there, fingertips grazing a nipple. Drew inhaled sharply, not startled, just ... affected. "Shirt--take it off," Noah told him. Drew's body leaned forward almost imperceptibly, responding without thought. His arms came up, lifted his T-shirt, dragged it over his head to bare his torso, and dropped it.

Noah's hands found the waistband again, pulled at shorts and underwear. Drew's clothing slipped down his legs, revealing his erection. Drew's breathing grew deeper, as if receiving blow-jobs was familiar territory. Skin met skin in soft contact: Noah's hand on Drew's cock-shaft, other hand on Drew's balls, warm, exploratory, reverent. Noah felt the pendant around his neck shift slightly, swing gently with their rhythm. It rested now just below his throat, brushing Noah's chest each time he leaned back slightly. The contact was small, but *meant* something. Johnson and Milo were *there*; they had given permission. Noah's thoughts noted the movements of the pendant, not focusing, just ... drawn to it.

Noah didn't speak. Neither did Drew. No need. Johnson's voice filled the space beneath them--low, guiding, grounding. "Feel each other. Feel more. So intense. Let the loop take care of the rest."

"Huh?" Drew moaned, momentarily distracted from Noah's mouth kissing the side of his cock. "That sound? Feels like it's making my brain itch." Then a long gasp slipped from Drew's throat as Noah began to thread Drew's cock into his mouth, the sound of Noah's breathy moan around dick-meat quiet but unmistakable. Drew pressed his hips closer, not grinding, not frantic, just moving in a shared current. The loop pulsed around them, and Johnson's voice whispering to relax, focus, feel became a second heartbeat.

And when the moment came--when Noah's mouth-strokes on Drew's cock built too high and the fraternity brother's orgasm broke open in the space between them, he climaxed so quietly, body stilled by pleasure-locked muscles. Nothing rushed. Nothing forced. Noah felt in Drew's relaxing thighs, and Johnson saw, the moment that his voice and the subliminals in the focus loop did their work, and Johnson was there behind Drew to catch him as Drew's body tipped slowly backward. Johnson lowered Drew to the rug, and the spent-dicked brother seemed to be floating now in a headspace of intense stillness, completion, silence--not deeply entranced, not yet, but ready to be deepened.

They lay on the floor in a tangled sprawl, Noah on his side, Drew beside him, one arm draped over his stomach, eyes still glazed. Milo reached down and stroked Noah's hair.

And Johnson simply said: "That was lesson one. You both passed."

Chapter 16

They hadn't left the floor yet. Drew was still on his side, breathing softly, like his body hadn't fully realized what just happened. Milo had pulled a blanket down and tossed it across them--not like he was trying to hide

anything, just *closing the scene*.

Noah was tucked against Drew's chest. The pendant brushed both their skin. He could feel Drew's heartbeat. Too fast. Awakening? Still climbing. Not panic. Not arousal anymore. *Awareness*.

"You okay?" Noah asked softly.

Drew didn't answer right away. Then: "Yeah." Then: "... Fuck, man."

Noah smiled into his shoulder. "That was good, right?"

"Too good." Drew's voice was hoarse, low, like saying anything at all was difficult. "What was that?" he asked, looking around, finding Johnson. "What the *fuck* was that?"

Johnson was sitting at the desk again. Laptop closed. Loop off.

Milo, cross-legged nearby, lazy and content, said, "That was *you*, man. That's what it feels like when you stop pretending you don't want it."

Drew shifted slightly. Noah felt the change. That little ripple of discomfort--not *regret*, but vulnerability. The awkward part after the release. The mental static starting to rise again. "I didn't mean to ...," Drew said, then stopped, shook his head.

Johnson watched him, calmly, expression showing no judgment. "You didn't mean to want it?" he asked. "Or didn't mean to let the want show?"

Drew swallowed.

Noah turned his head, looking up at him. "It's okay," Noah said. "You weren't tricked. It just ... felt really good, right?"

Drew's eyes flicked to the pendant. Then to Johnson. Then to Milo. "How long's this been going on?" he asked. "The loops. The ... The *training*."

Milo smirked. "Depends on what you mean by 'training.'"

"Is it hypnosis?"

"Close, but not like that," Johnson said. "Not like you think. It's just suggestion. Focus. *You* chose it. You stayed."

Drew sat up slowly, the blanket sliding off his chest. His hair was a mess. His skin still glowed. He didn't look scared, or angry. He looked ... *hooked*--like he was trying to find a way to *walk it back*--but part of him was already chasing the next hit. "You're gonna mess with my head now?" he asked.

Milo shrugged, grinned. "Only if you want."

"You gonna make me forget this?"

Johnson stood, walked over, crouched alongside Drew. "Why would we do that? What would be the point? You look good like this."

Drew didn't answer. He just let out a long breath--and his hand found Noah's. Held it.

Noah squeezed once, felt Drew squeeze back.

And just like that, Drew relaxed and the tension in the room settled. Noah on the floor. Milo watching from the mattress. Johnson a steady presence. And Drew--hard-edged, confident, cocky Drew--watching them in a dazed hush, still reeling from how good he had felt when he stopped pretending he didn't want any of this.

Chapter 17

The lights were low--not romantic, nothing so staged, just the way the room looked on weeknights after everything else faded, after the frat house noise got sleepy and distant, the hallway cleared out, the music from other rooms had dropped to a dull roar.

The door clicked shut as Noah entered. That alone made something in his chest tighten, like the start of a ritual, one he'd come to crave. Inside that door, the rest of the frat house disappeared, even the noise, the yelling from the hall, the beat of music pounding downstairs--it all slipped sideways, like static fading under something deeper. Something *closer*.

Noah crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed; he was shirtless as usual, and now his pledge boxer-shorts pulled tight across his thighs, the pendant resting warm against his chest. Milo leaned back on the pillows, naked, lazily stroking his own abs like he was watching a show. And Drew, in nothing but a pair of gym shorts, commando underneath, cock-head peeping out of one leg-hole--Drew sat in the desk chair, elbow on one knee, watching everything, not hiding his gaze.

Johnson stood in front of Noah, in full hypnotist mode without the theatrics. He didn't need to stage anything, not with Noah. And just being near Johnson now made Noah's body and mind buzz.

The pendant lay against Noah's chest. Johnson and Milo each had one too. Three points of belonging, one signal. That bound the three of them together, showing they belonged to each other; but now that the circle was expanding, they needed another marker for the others who belonged not to the three of them but to the larger whole.

"You've got the loop," Johnson said. "You've got the pendant--that's for us alone, you, me, Milo. This is something new, for the ones outside the core who join." He held out a thin woven leather band, black, a single small silver ring at the center--not flashy, just subtle. "Slip it on your wrist."

Noah did. The leather was cool at first, then warmer by the second.

Johnson tapped the silver ring once. "Whenever I touch this," he said, "you remember why you're here. Not what you are. Not who you're with. Just that you *want* this. You chose it."

Noah, drifting in a light trance already, every nerve alive and humming, looked at the bracelet. The leather hugged his wrist like it belonged there. Like it always had.

Behind him, Milo gave a soft sigh. "God, he looks good like that."

Drew, from the chair, tilted his head. "Do *I* look that sexy when I'm hypnotized?"

Milo grinned. "Fuck, yeah, you do. Dude, when you go under, we should be charging admission."

Drew rolled his eyes, but Noah didn't miss the way his chest rose slightly faster. Or the way he adjusted himself in the chair without thinking.

Johnson stepped closer. Hooked his finger lightly through the silver ring on Noah's wrist, just a gentle tug.

Noah's breath held for a second.

"You want it now?" Johnson asked, voice velvet.

Noah nodded before he could stop himself. "Yes, sir," he whispered. "Please."

"Good."

Their eyes locked. Johnson's fingertips on Noah's chest guided him gently back. Noah went easily, spine melting into the mattress, breath already stuttering, settling back onto the bed and Milo behind him. The mattress shifted: Milo, sliding in close, wrapped his body around Noah's, like gravity had pulled him there. His chest pressed against Noah's back, one arm draped over his waist, the other brushing his hair aside. Milo's right wrist already wore a leather bracelet like the one on Noah.

Johnson knelt beside them, fingers finding Noah's bracelet first. A slow stroke across the band, just enough pressure to remind. The metal ring seemed to hum under Johnson's touch, but Noah was the one who trembled. Then fingers moved, Milo's, trailing up Noah's chest, slow and warm, like each finger had a purpose. Noah moaned, quiet and ragged. His legs shifted restlessly. Johnson had given him no command, no script, no voice saying *drop now*. Noah didn't need there to be.

"Let the feeling take you," Milo whispered at his ear, breath hot, tone reverent. "Just feel it."

Johnson's hand splayed over Noah's ribs. His other skimmed lower. Each word he murmured was a pulse. "You're open. You're wanted. You're allowed."

Noah arched helplessly between them. He felt Drew's gaze before he saw it--still seated in the chair, chest bare, lips parted, one hand now openly stroking the cock sticking out of the leg-hole of his gym shorts. No shame; just awe.

The room thickened around them. The heat was everywhere--Milo's voice curling in one ear, Johnson's fingers brushing fire in their wake, Drew watching like the sight itself was a trance.

The bracelet caught a glint of light as Johnson touched it again. Noah gasped. His body bucked, hands fisting in the sheets. He came without anything touching his dick, with a sound he couldn't swallow, loud and aching, every muscle tensed, every nerve lit. Caught between their voices, their hands, their eyes.

And when he finally slumped back, boneless and glowing, Milo kissed his temple and whispered, "That's it. You're perfect like this."

Drew exhaled like he'd been holding his breath the entire time.

Johnson just smiled, and stroked the bracelet one more time, Noah's cue to lock in the sensation, lock it into the bracelet.

Later, when they were untangled, Noah rested his head on Milo's chest and traced lazy shapes his thigh.

Johnson sat again, casual now, as if this was just another night.

Drew looked dazed, amused and loose around his eyes; he'd cum from stroking himself, streaks of semen on his thigh and knee. "That bracelet's gotta be unfair, like a cheat code," Drew said. "You gonna make me wear one too?"

Johnson shrugged. "Only if you ask. I think you will, soon."

Milo glanced at Drew, smirked. "You asking now?"

Drew didn't answer, not out loud. But the way he looked at Noah's wrist--yeah, he was thinking about it, hard.

Johnson sat back in his desk chair, laptop open. The loop wasn't playing yet, but the screen glowed. The atmosphere in the room felt expectant, a breath held just before a kiss. "This loop's for the three of you," he said. "It'll hit different. This one's not about following or being led. Just *feeling*. Together."

Noah shifted slightly, aware of his own arousal--not overwhelming, not urgent, his half-hard cock just *there* in his pledge boxers, the sensation pulsing through his body. Milo's cock in his boxer-briefs was hard already. Drew hadn't adjusted himself in his gym shorts yet, but Noah could see the eager tension in his thigh muscles as Drew moved closer to him. They were all riding the same current.

Johnson pressed play. The sound started low. An even quieter subaudible voice this time--a rhythm. A hum layered with breath.

Noah felt his head tip, just slightly. His vision softened. His cock stirred.

"Crap," Drew grouched. "Those things always make my brain itch."

"You don't have to try," Johnson murmured from the corner. "You don't have to think. You don't even have to drop. Instead, just let it *rise*."

Milo leaned into Noah, resting his forehead against Noah's shoulder. Drew exhaled hard beside him and let his fingers slide up Noah's thigh. Noah didn't move, didn't need to. His skin lit up at every contact--every shared breath. They weren't mimicking each other. They were *syncing*.

The loop pulsed low and steady, like a heartbeat they were starting to share. Noah's fingers brushed Milo's arm, then clung. He pulled Milo closer without thinking. Milo came willingly, aligning his body to Noah's like a magnet, like this was where he'd been trying to get all day.

Drew was already behind him, breath warm on the back of Noah's neck. He nosed into the hollow beneath Noah's ear and whispered, "You feel it too, right? Is it always this ...?"

Noah didn't answer. Didn't need to.

The rhythm of the loop curled around them, made everything slower and hotter. Stillness wasn't what held them; they were bound by heat, tension, thick charged breaths between touches.

Drew's hands slid over Noah's waist. Milo's mouth caught Noah's lower lip and they kissed, then again--deeper, wetter, more needy. Noah moaned into it. Drew nipped his shoulder, laughed quietly at the sound Noah made.

Their sex wasn't gentle, but wasn't rough either. It was urgent, fluid, a trance-drunk kind of hunger. Their touches found skin, then more skin, chests, hips, between thighs. Friction built. Moans bled into sighs. No one gave commands. No one led. They didn't need to.

Noah gasped as Drew's hips rocked his cock into the pledge's ass. Milo's grip tightened on Drew's shoulders as he inserted his rod into Drew's hole. Their bodies found rhythm, synced with the pulse of the loop, like the sound was conducting them--heat in triplicate.

They didn't climax together. Milo was first--his breath stuttering, eyes fluttering shut, a quiet call against Drew's shoulder. Drew followed seconds later, jaw tight, buried in the crook of Noah's shoulder. Johnson,

standing alongside them, jacking off, came next, his sperm raining down on them. Noah lasted longest, barely, with the edge of his orgasm cutting him hard, then twisting and flooding deep through him like light bursting behind his eyes. He clutched at both Milo and Drew as his whole body trembled, his orgasm taking him under.

The loop kept humming.

After, they were a pile, Noah on his back, Milo half-sprawled across his chest, Drew panting into the side of Milo's neck. They lay sweat-slick, tangled legs, the air thick with heat and breath and something *more*--something that *held* between them--nothing so plain as tension or even love--something deeper. *Bond*.

Johnson tucked his cock away slowly. Closed the laptop. Walked over and knelt beside them. He didn't say anything yet, just reached out and lightly brushed skin--Milo's, Drew's, Noah's. His thumb lingered against Noah's pendant. "Now you're *really* one of us," Johnson said.

Noah blinked, eyes half-lidded, brain warm and empty in the best way. "Was I not before?"

"You were," Johnson said. "But this ... is different."

Noah looked at Milo. Then at Drew, who gave a small, private nod. And Noah smiled. Slow. Full. Because he felt it now. The current ran through all of them. The longing. The voice. The *bond*.

Chapter 18

Noah leaned forward, hands braced against the tile. In the communal showers in the first-floor bathroom, even this late at night, the air he breathed was thick with steam and heat. Water poured down his back. Milo stood behind him, so close his chest brushed Noah's spine. Noah touched the leather band around his wrist, just because, just to feel.

Johnson's low and even voice echoed, thanks to the tile walls and floor. "Just stay inside the pulse," Johnson said. "That's all. No thoughts. No worries. Just the pulse."

Noah *felt* it--how the rhythm of the water, the heat of Milo's chest, the constant syllables curling from Johnson's lips that all bled together. His knees wobbled. Milo's arms tightened around his waist, steadying him. Noah's cock was hard. Milo's too.

And Johnson, watching, wrapped his words around them both. "Your body follows your breath. Your cock follows your craving. You crave this."

Noah gasped, head tipping back against Milo's shoulder as pleasure surged along his spine like electricity. His body wasn't his own anymore--it belonged to the sensation, pure and buzzing.

Milo's hand stroked Noah's cock, a slow and firm rhythm, unhurried but relentless. Each pass made Noah's thighs twitch, his breath jitter, his mouth fall open around broken, useless sounds.

And Johnson's voice. Not loud. Not sharp. Just a subtle shift, a quiet edge beneath the velvet. "Not yet."

Noah whimpered.

"Not until I say your name."

The words carved through Noah. This was not a suggestion; this was conditioning, the exercise of control over him. He felt his whole body light up with the need to obey, the need to earn his release. Every muscle

quivered, straining toward a release that was withheld, just out of reach.

Milo didn't stop. His hand moved with quiet certainty, his other arm around Noah's chest locking them closer. "He wants to hear you," Milo whispered at Noah's neck. "He's waiting. Let him hear how bad you want it. You're so close."

Noah's hips bucked helplessly. Fuck, was this how Johnson had used orgasm control to break Milo? Noah understood the power in it now.

Johnson circled closer, cock hard, expression unreadable. His voice coiled around Noah's ears like a silk cord. "You want to cum," he murmured. "But you can't. Not until I give it to you. Not until I give permission."

Noah moaned openly now, shame gone, now that his world had narrowed to the ache rising like lightning under his skin.

Milo's voice joined the chant--low, encouraging, teasing. "Wait for it. Wait for him."

Noah sobbed. "Please--," he choked out. "Please, please--fuck--just say it--say it--please--say--fuck!"

Johnson crouched, eye-level now, hand brushing Noah's jaw with maddening gentleness. "I'll give you what you need," he promised, "when you're ready to beg for it."

"I'm ready," Noah gasped, grinding his cock in Milo's grip. "I'm begging. I'll do anything. Just--please--fuck--please--"

Johnson leaned in, lips brushing Noah's ear. "Noah."

That was all. His name, said like it was sacred.

Noah shattered. His whole body clenched, the orgasm tearing through him so hard he yelped in shock. Milo held him through it, anchoring him, still whispering as Noah convulsed and came in his hand, dizzy and raw and undone.

After, Johnson smoothed a hand over Noah's shower-soaked hair. Noah blinked--had his orgasm made him black out? He found himself slumped in Milo's arms, Johnson hovering close. "There he is," Johnson said softly. "I think he's back with us now."

Noah couldn't speak. He didn't have to.

And that's when the bathroom door creaked open.

A holler: "Yo, hope you left some hot water for--uh--*Holy fuck!*"

Noah lifted his too-heavy head in time to see Brent--a junior, stoner-chill, naked, towel slung over one shoulder, body wash bottle in the opposite hand--frozen in the entryway to the showers. Mouth open. Eyes wide. Brent said: "Uh ..."

The water was still running. Noah's legs shook. Milo was breathless against his back. Johnson was half a step away, naked, calm, cock still hard.

For a beat--just one second--nobody moved.

Then Johnson spoke, his voice as always calm and unbothered. "Brent, this is private, please."

Brent blinked. Looked at Noah. At Milo. Then back to Johnson. And nodded, just once. "Right. Yeah. Shit. Sorry, dudes." He stepped back out of the shower area and hurried out of the bathroom, closing the door quietly.

Gone.

Silence.

Then Milo burst out in laughter. "Well ... that's one way to come out to the house. Hey, sex in the showers isn't against the bylaws, is it?"

Noah groaned and hid his face in his hands, imagining his status as pledge slamming to a halt just weeks before initiation. "Oh, hell. They'll blackball me for sure!"

Johnson just chuckled, slow and proud. "Don't worry, Pledge Noah," he said. "Brent won't tell anyone. He'll just *wonder*."

Chapter 19

Noah wasn't trying to be obvious. That was the weird part; he wasn't even really doing anything. He was just sitting on the floor, legs splayed out in front of the couch, his required pledge uniform boxers and mismatched crocs. He had one hand tucked under his thigh, the other lazily holding a red Solo cup of juice.

Johnson was on the couch above him, lounging like a king, the remote control in one hand, Milo's foot in his lap. Drew was off to the side with a bowl of popcorn, shirtless, like half the room.

And the other brothers? All doing the usual: gaming, yelling, laughing, throwing shit across the room. Standard Saturday chaos. Noah blended in. Or he *thought* he did.

Until Crash--loud, always smirking, probably two beers too far into the afternoon--walked past, glanced down, and *froze*.

"Yo. Pledge."

Noah blinked up at him. "Yes, sir?" He was careful to call all the brothers *sir* as the pledging rules required.

"You've been staring up at Johnson for like ten minutes, dude."

Noah hadn't. He *hadn't*. Right? Except now that Crash was saying it--now that every other guy within hearing distance was looking his way--Noah realized: Yeah, he totally had.

Crash raised an eyebrow. "You trying to undress him with your eyes or just blow him with 'em?"

Someone snorted. Someone else laugh-choked on a corn chip.

Milo didn't even flinch. Just smiled down from the couch. "You'd stare too, bro," he said, "if you knew what Johnson's voice can do."

That made it worse--way worse--because now everyone turned.

Crash barked a laugh. "Okay, we're doing this? Cool. I mean, it's not like the walls are soundproof. Y'all moan like a fucking porn soundtrack in that room."

Noah flushed bright red. "Shut up."

Jake, from the beanbag near the television, raised his cup. "Crash's not wrong."

Noah tried to sink into the floor. No such luck.

Milo grinned wider.

Crash kept going. "Come on, Johnson. Milo used to bark at girls and now he's basically your house-husband." He pointed at Noah. "And *you* go glassy-eyed every time Johnson says your name."

The guys cracked up again. One of them murmured, "Called it," under his breath.

Drew stayed quiet. Just watched.

Eyes flicking from the scene on the couch--Johnson's hand, lightly stroking Noah's nape--to Noah's mouth as he moaned quietly without even meaning to.

Crash gave a slow whistle. "Damn. That's real?"

Johnson met his eyes. "You tell me."

Crash looked at Noah. Looked at the identical necklaces Noah, Milo, and Johnson wore. Looked at the faint blush still blooming across Noah's cheeks, neck, chest. Then Crash grinned. "Fucking hot," he said. "Carry on."

And just like that, the confrontation was over. Sort of.

The game resumed. Guys turned back to the screen. Someone threw a pillow. Someone in the kitchen dropped something glass that shattered.

But now? Now Noah knew they all knew. And not one of them had said a damn word about stopping.

He leaned back a little, pressing into Johnson's thigh, felt fingers rake softly through his hair, a ripple of reassuring pleasure along his scalp, and he smiled.

Chapter 20

Late at night, the room was warm, just lived-in, the way guys' rooms get when the air is thick with bodies and laundry day is still two days away. Still naked, still a little dazed from the evening's loop, Noah sat cross-legged on the bed. The room spun in lazy spirals. Johnson had stepped out a few minutes ago--probably brushing his teeth with Milo or just giving Drew space. He always knew when to vanish and when to be right there.

Which left Drew sitting on the rug at the foot of the bed, looking ... muted. Not tense. Not embarrassed. Just *thoughtful*. But Drew wasn't exactly known around the house for cogitating.

Noah blinked down at him. "You okay?"

Drew slow-nodded but didn't move, hadn't gotten dressed again yet either. "Just ... thinking."

Noah let the silence stretch. He knew that feeling--trying to *think* after a loop. Words came slower. Emotions came louder. Sometimes the body wanted one thing, while the mind circled another.

And Drew had always held back, just a little. Always joked. Teased. Leaned in, then out. Now he just sat on the floor, staring at Noah like the pledge had a secret Drew needed to borrow.

"You don't have to decide anything," Noah said softly. "No pressure. Not tonight."

Drew snorted once, a little smile flickering at the edge of his mouth. "You mean like you waited?"

Noah flushed. "Okay. Fair." But Noah had already accepted the necklace that matched Johnson's and Milo's, so accepting the wrist band was practically a formality.

Drew stood, stretched, stepped closer, just one step. "I didn't think it would be like this," he said.

"What, the hypnosis?"

Drew sighed unreadably. "The ... *wanting*. All the time. It doesn't stop, Noah. Does it?" His voice was low now, rough with something unspoken. "Every time I see Johnson's hand on you, or hear you whispering *yes, sir* in that voice ..." Drew trailed off. His knuckles were white where they clutched the bedframe.

Noah moved slowly, rising to his knees on the mattress. Close. Not touching yet. "So stop just watching. Choose it."

Drew's voice quietened. "But what if I fall too hard?"

"Then fall *with* me."

Drew didn't answer out loud. He just exhaled like the breath had been trapped in his chest for days--and he let Noah pull him down onto the bed.

The kiss started soft. Careful. Like they weren't sure who would be guiding who. But then everything split open. Noah's hands slid up Drew's sides, slow but knowing, as though he already understood how Drew needed to be touched. Drew arched into those hands with a gasp, nerves lighting up everywhere that Noah's fingers found him. The pressure in his shoulders, the tightness in his neck, dissolved beneath lips and fingers and the rhythm of hips grinding just enough to tease.

Drew moaned, quiet and high. He couldn't keep his hands still. One tangled in Noah's hair. The other clawed at the sheet, anchoring him as sensation blurred into want. Noah shifted, moving to top of him, and something brushed Drew's ribs.

The bracelet.

He'd seen it before, sitting lightly on Noah's wrist. Now it was against Drew's skin too, cool and intimate. Not a threat--a *connection*. Drew let his legs be raised; he grunted as he let Noah's hard prick enter his ass, until Noah's pubes scratched at Drew's butt. Their pace deepened. Thrust. Pull. Breathe.

Noah's name caught in Drew's throat--but Noah said *his* name first, low and warm, right at the base of Drew's throat: "Drew ..."

The sound cracked him. Drew's hips jerked, and his legs trembled. A whimper tore from his chest, sharp, helpless. He came hard, noise muffled into Noah's shoulder, his body arching in surrender and release all at once as his cum cast lines across his stomach.

Noah held him through it. Kissed him once, just behind the ear, like a promise kept.

After, they lay tangled, Drew's head tucked against Noah's shoulder. Noah, eyes heavy, stroked fingers

through Drew's hair. "That was ...," Drew started.

"Yeah."

"So I'm in."

Noah smiled. "I know."

Drew lifted his hand, pressed it against Noah's wrist, where the leather bracelet still rested. "I want one too."

Noah smiled, breath still heavy, heart racing. He didn't even think. Just reached up, undid the simple clasp, and took his own bracelet off.

Held it out. "With this ring," he said softly, maybe too playfully, "I thee wed."

Drew laughed, then blinked, then froze. "Wait--seriously?"

Noah was already reaching for Drew's wrist. "I mean, yeah? I want you to--"

"That's yours," came the voice from the doorway, "but it's not yours to give." Johnson. He stepped inside, barefoot, eyes unreadable but not unkind.

Noah pulled back like a kid caught in breaking a rule. "I--I just thought--"

Johnson held up a hand. "It's okay. That one's yours. Drew will need his own." He crossed the room. Opened the desk drawer, reached inside. Noah recognized the leather and metal: Another bracelet, identical.

Johnson held it in his palm for a moment, let Drew see it, then approached--slowly, as though Drew was something breakable and precious. "You want this," Johnson said. His words weren't a question.

Drew looked up, met Johnson's eyes, nodded. "Yes."

Johnson eased closer, slid the bracelet into place on Drew's wrist, fastened it with a practiced touch, left his fingers there, just brushing the new band. Just enough.

"Breathe for me," Johnson said, and then whispered the words that had Drew's eyes drooping, a light trance, just deep enough.

Drew inhaled. Shuddered. His eyes fluttered, shoulders loosened. His mouth parted just slightly.

"Good. Feel that weight now? That warmth?"

Drew swallowed hard. "Yeah ..."

"Every time you touch it," Johnson whispered, "you'll remember this. You'll remember that you wanted this. You asked for it. And you said yes. You'll feel that answer again. In your chest. In your cock. In your spine. You're doing so well."

Noah watched all of it--his own heartbeat thudding, his own cock half-stirring just from seeing how right the band looked on Drew's wrist.

Milo had come back, standing quietly nearby. He gave Noah a slow, smug nod. "Told you he was ready," Milo said.

Johnson stepped back.

Drew, still slightly entranced, looked down at his wrist like it belonged to someone else now, then smiled. It was the first unguarded smile Noah had seen from him in days.

"Thank you," Drew said softly.

"Thank *you*," Johnson replied, and kissed Drew's forehead once, like sealing a spell.

Chapter 21

The room had already fallen into its nightly hush--frat boy quiet, meaning the occasional yell from downstairs, a door slamming somewhere, bass thumping faintly through the walls. But here, in *this* space, the room felt like a different world. Like time had loosened its grip.

Milo sat on the mattress, cross-legged, in a pair of navy boxer-briefs and nothing else. Noah in boxers mirrored his pose. Drew sat between them--nervous, but glowing, staring at the newly accepted bracelet that sat snugly on his own wrist.

"You ready?" Johnson asked from the chair beside the bed. Not *Are you sure?* Not *Do you consent?* Just: *Are you ready?* Because the answer was obvious.

All three of them nodded.

Johnson stood and tapped his phone once. The room filled with sound--not music, not quite. A slow pulse. A shimmer of tone. A rhythm that was more breath than beat. And under it--just barely--a hint of voices.

Noah's body responded before his thoughts caught up. A warmth in his chest. A fuzzing at the edge of his limbs. His thighs relaxed. His lips parted.

Next to him, Milo was already gone--slouched forward slightly, eyes open but empty, breathing like someone asleep with their eyes wide.

Drew was resisting, not hard though, holding back just a little. His eyes darted between the two of them, Milo on one side, Noah on the other, as though Drew couldn't quite believe he'd been invited into this. Into them. Into the loop still humming low in the background, like the steady vibration of something ancient and inevitable. But his breath was beginning to synch with theirs. One inhale. Three chests rising. One exhale. Three pulses slowing.

Noah reached and took Drew's hand. "It's okay."

Drew froze for just a moment as his resistance crumbled, and then he exhaled, long and slow. His eyelids fluttered. His spine uncoiled and his lips parted. When his head tilted back, just a little, his whole body followed. The newly placed bracelet on his wrist shifted with the motion.

Johnson's voice arrived like warm fog. "Three bodies. Three minds. One pulse. Each of you listens to my voice ... Each of you listens to each other ... Each of you listens to *yourself* as you drop."

Noah could feel Drew's hand loosening in his, the subtle shift of muscle and breath as Drew gave in to the trance, not all at once but enough to start. He would continue to drop at his own pace.

Milo moved first, always the one who knew how to follow when he was told. His hand brushed Drew's ribs, then slid to his waist, then lower, palm open, not grabbing, just holding, caressing.

Drew's breath lengthened. Noah leaned in and kissed Milo, soft and slow, one hand resting on Drew's thigh as he did. Drew made another sound, between a gasp and a whimper, and pressed his face into Noah's shoulder like he couldn't hold in the desire anymore. His fingers clutched at Noah's hip, trying to ground himself, wanting more, wanting *everything*.

The loop in the background thickened. Johnson's voice folded in again, smoother now, wrapping around all three of them like silk cords drawing tighter. "Drew," Johnson said, "And Noah. And Milo. Three names, three minds, one body, one rhythm."

Milo's breath quickened. Drew's hips shifted. Noah felt his pulse sync to the loop and the bodies and the hands and the heat until it all blurred. Touch passed between them like a current: Noah's hand on Drew's chest; Milo's lips on Drew's neck; Drew's mouth grazing Noah's jaw; not kissing in pairs but triangles, where every gasp had an echo and every touch had a mirror.

Johnson's voice lowered again. "When you are told, you may release, but not before. You are held now, in heat, in trust."

Drew moaned aloud, twisting slightly between them but not breaking the shape. Milo kissed down the slope of Drew's spine. Noah stroked Drew's trembling thigh. And when Drew reached out, blind need, Milo guided his hand to Noah's chest.

Their sweat mingled. Their breath joined. Their pleasure looped inward and back again. Noah felt it building--not a sexual climax, not quite, but something even more dangerous, more sacred. A completion, like each of them was a circuit, and this--this connection, this surrender--was the current. Johnson's voice closed it.

And something clicked. "Cum." Drew moaned. Milo shuddered. Noah felt his body release, his cum shooting, and he *knew* Johnson had threaded them together like beads on a string, and they weren't alone anymore.

Later, sweat-soaked, clinging to each other, the loop slowing to silence--

Johnson knelt at the edge of the bed. "You'll remember this," he said softly. "You'll crave it. And you'll come back, again and again."

They all nodded. They already knew.

Chapter 22

After initiation the night before, a Sunday morning hangover haze clung to everything, and the house was infested with the smell of bacon grease, stale beer from the night before, and the someone's aggressively awful cologne drifting through the vents.

Half the brothers were still asleep, some sprawled on couches, others in their rooms, a few on lawn chairs someone had dragged inside. The other half wandered, shirtless and groggy, through the house, some showering, some drinking Gatorade like holy water. One brother sang off-key from the kitchen while flipping pancakes with a spatula.

Noah padded barefoot through the dining room, coffee in hand, pendant swinging softly against his bare chest. After last night, he was a full brother now, no longer a pledge, not the new guy with wide eyes and too many questions. He'd been initiated. He *belonged*.

The pendant around his neck wasn't hidden, didn't need to be. No one questioned it--not when everyone had already *heard the rumors*--not when about a third of the house had *experienced the results*, had gone quiet listening to Johnson's focus loops, and wore bracelets just like Drew's and Milo's.

At the long dining room table, four chairs were clustered at the end--*the center of the solar system*, someone once called it. Johnson. Milo. Drew. A place for Noah too. They didn't always sit there, but when they did, the energy shifted, became calmer, closer.

Milo had one leg slung over Johnson's thigh, abs on display, laughing with his mouth full of half-chewed eggs. Drew was leaning toward Milo, tracing circles on his wrist, invisible patterns around the bracelet. And Johnson sat in the middle of it all, coffee in one hand, saying nothing--just *watching*, the way he did.

Their relationship had crystallized by now. Not rigid, but defined--not definitely exclusive, but *understood*. And if they needed to open?--To draw someone in for a night, or a week, or something gentler--study help, focus drills, calming someone after a bad exam?--They did. Then, when the moment of need passed, those brothers drifted back to their own orbits. But they all bore the mark, a bracelet of leather around their right wrist, a sensitivity to voice or touch, an intense sense of *belonging*.

Milo shifted against Johnson's lap. Noah sat with them. He sipped his coffee and let the morning noise blur around him. In the kitchen someone shouted about who left the fucking ice trays empty again. Outside, someone yelled, *Who finished the OJ and didn't say shit?*

From the hallway, Noah spotted Eli--a sophomore like Milo, same pledge class as Milo--lingering at the threshold. Eli wasn't in their orbit, not yet. But he'd asked questions lately. Had gotten himself on their radar. Showed up at Johnson and Milo's door once, half-drunk and talking about how he couldn't focus anymore, how he hated how fast everything moved, but he refused to come inside. Sometimes guys needed more time.

Eli looked better now--showered, dressed, but his eyes were still a little too tight at the corners. Noah caught his gaze, a casual wave. Eli blinked, hesitated, then gave a flick-of-the-chin nod, before he and his coffee mug vanished down the hallway. *Soon*, Noah thought. He wasn't worried. They never forced. They didn't recruit or command. They just invited and made space. Noah's thumb found the chain at his collarbone and pressed gently against the pendant. *And the ones who are meant to belong ... they find their way*. Because when someone was ready--really ready--they came, and they found a place waiting.

Drew leaned into his shoulder. They sat like that for a long time, eating slowly, trading lazy smiles, legs tangled under the table, bare feet nudging, pressing, drifting.

Noah wasn't thinking about hypnosis. Or sex. Or last night's initiation. Just the feel of Drew's breath on his neck, the way Milo laughed when Johnson deadpanned something only he heard, the feel of the bracelet on Drew's wrist as it brushed against his arm again and again. This wasn't a trance, but it was something.

Noah just leaned back and let the noise blur. He let the morning sprawl. And he thought: *I'm not theirs. Not anymore. We're each other's now.*

Chapter 23

The kitchen remained a wreck, but at least the dishes were done. Noah finished stacking the last plate into the drying rack and flicked water from his fingers. Someone had spilled syrup down the cabinet again. He wiped it with a damp cloth, absently, already thinking ahead.

The others were waiting. He could almost feel them already, like a steady rhythm behind his ribs: Johnson's calm, Milo's passion, Drew's hand that always found his side without even looking.

He was just about to leave and go upstairs when a sound made him pause. A shuffle. A voice, low and shaky.

"Hey ... uh ..."

Noah turned. Eli stood in the doorway.

Sweatshirt and stained sweatpants that needed laundering. Barefoot. Eyes puffy like he hadn't slept in days--at least not well. The body language of a scared animal. Hands shoved deep into his pockets. He looked up--and then, just for a second, his eyes flicked down, landed on the bracelet at Noah's wrist. Then climbed slowly--up his forearm, to his bare chest, to the pendant that rested there.

And Eli paused, like something inside him was grinding through a question, what this would mean, what it would cost.

"Can I ask ...," Eli mumbled. He swallowed, looked away. "I think I need help. Can we talk?"

Noah, nodded, not with surprise but recognition. "Yeah," he said gently. "Yeah, of course." He dried his hands slowly, giving Eli time. Stepped forward, not too fast, because some guys spooked easily. "Come on," Noah said. "Let's go talk to Johnson."

Eli didn't move at first. His jaw worked, struggling with some answer that didn't want to come. But then, like some part of him had been waiting for the offer all along, he nodded, just once, as if he *knew*. Eli's expression flickered again, fear or hope or both. Noah saw and rested a hand lightly on Eli's shoulder, not to lead but just to be there. Eli flinched, which Noah expected--and then leaned, almost imperceptibly, into the touch, as if accepting a lifeline.

"Don't worry," Noah said quietly. "Whatever it is, it'll get better. Very soon."

And he guided Eli down the hall and up the stairs. Into the warmth. Into the gravity of something steady.

Something that always made room.

Part 3: Brother Eli and Brother Kendall

Chapter 24

Eli couldn't think. Couldn't stop thinking.

Couldn't sleep. Hadn't slept. Wasn't going to sleep. Nope.

Fuck. Insomnia sucked.

Never this bad before. Too much stress--always made everything worse. Coach yelling at him for fucking up during swim practice. That quiz that caught him off-guard and behind on his classwork. Prep-chores for the big party. His skull felt full of sand, thoughts gritty and dry. Nothing held together; nothing held still. He'd tried everything. Dark room. Cold shower. White noise app. Jerking off. Jerking off again. Empty climax. Felt like his balls were spitting dust. Every night.

Now he was shuffling up the stairs, barefoot, sweatshirt on backwards, sweatpants that should have been washed two days ago, shivering, following Noah as though he was a sherpa. Why was he letting Noah lead him here? Johnson and Milo's room. Where guys went in and ... and ...

Shit, who knew what went on in there?

... And came out happy. Weirdly happy. Too happy, all relaxed and loose like whatever had bothered them just went *poof*.

Eli needed that, or something like that, needed something, didn't have a clue what he needed. Just knew that he *needed*. Yeah, *poof* might work. Nothing else had.

Noah went in without knocking--of course, because he lived there too now, duh. Warm light, a dim amber. Low music playing--well, not quite music but something like it, the sound soft like flowing water.

Milo, naked, stretching on the top bunk. Drew, sprawled on the bottom bunk, laughing at something Johnson said just as the door opened. And Johnson in the desk chair--T-shirt, gym shorts, turning toward the doorway and not at all surprised to see Eli, like he already knew Eli would be coming.

Noah, just inside the door, glanced back to make sure Eli was still there. Had Noah expected him to startle like a deer and bound away? Probably. Eli felt like he should.

All their eyes had turned toward Eli. Why were they all looking at him as if they all expected him to run? He felt as if his body had frozen, so he wasn't. Eli's throat felt dry and tight, and his hands clenched inside his sweatshirt sleeves, a landslide of thoughts tumbling over each other: *what the fuck am I doing here why am I here fuck fuck fuck I need poof what the fuck am I doing I should go I should tough it out fuck that hasn't worked so far has it poof sounds good I need poof I'm interrupting why's Milo naked shit they don't need my problems what the fuck am I doing here I don't even know how to ask what am I asking for they'll think I'm weak for asking I need I need I need--*

Noah's barely audible voice: "Hey. Hey, Eli, you ready? Come on in."

Eli opened his mouth to say *Ready for what* but nothing came out. *Man up*, he scolded himself. *See what happens in here. See if poof works.*

He stepped inside.

He was shaking. He hadn't realized until now. He couldn't stop. Words came in pieces. "I can't ... Everything's ... Insomnia's real bad ... I just ... I need ...?"

They looked at him and didn't laugh and didn't flinch. Johnson nodded and stood slowly. "We can help," Johnson said, "but what you need first is sleep."

Eli blinked. Like the word had pierced him through the chest.

"You should know," Johnson said as he tapped at his laptop keyboard, "if you stay, you're going to sleep hard. Eight, ten hours minimum, maybe more. And when you wake up ..." Pause. "Well, maybe you won't be able to go back."

Eli's heart thudded. He considered. Go back to what? To this, the way everything felt all fucked up? Why would he want to go back? Stress sucked ass. Insomnia sucked dick with extra teeth. He didn't care. He was already staying. "Okay," he whispered. "I don't care. I just need ... Please?"

Johnson nodded and turned to his laptop. "Guys, would you give Eli and me the room, please?"

As the others filed out, a looping sound began to play, rough top notes but a smooth and oddly familiar rhythm, like overlapping voices murmuring. Eli blinked. The sound seemed to be threading into one ear, a

gentle silk thread flossing across his mind, then out through the other, reverse and repeat, hollowing out the inside of his head like a ripe melon, slowly, inexorably, like sleep itself was finally nearby and whispering to him.

Then: Another knock.

Johnson and Eli turned. The door opened a sliver. Kendall. Big shoulders. Loose gray tank. Worried eyes searching, locking on Eli.

"Eli, someone told me you were here. What the hell, man? You should've come to me instead of--" He stepped inside without waiting. "Dude, we're supposed to be bros. Why did you say things were this bad? I could've helped. And I'm here now. Come on. Let's go." Kendall held out his hand as if expecting Eli to take it and follow.

Kendall didn't look at Johnson--only Eli. Eli's throat tightened. A flicker of shame? Last year, when Eli pledged, Kendall was his Big and now was his roommate; Kendall surely knew a little of how bad this had gotten, had tried to help, but Eli had masked this bottomless pit of need as long as he could. He didn't want to suck Kendall into his issues. Not Kendall's fault, not his problem. Eli said, "I'm staying. You go. I'll be okay. We're just gonna ..."--But what were they going to do?

Kendall was looked at Eli as if he was crazy. Maybe he was. Probably was. Fuck, insomnia sucked.

Johnson stepped forward, gentle but firm. "He came to us for help, and we're going to. He's already in the early stages. You should go now."

Kendall didn't blink. "No."

Johnson raised an eyebrow. "You sure? This isn't something target-specific. If you stay, you'll sleep too, and you won't be able to turn back."

Eli swayed slightly, feeling ... fuzzy, swallowed a little yawn, wouldn't meet Kendall's eyes. "You should go. I'm staying," Eli said, voice thick.

Kendall looked at him, looked at his shaking hands, his hollowed eyes, and nodded. "Then I'm staying too. Whatever," he said, and turned to Johnson. "I don't care about whatever mumbo-jumbo thing you're running. I'm here for him."

Johnson looked at Kendall, then at Eli. "You should both sit down," he said, pointing to the bottom bunk.

Eli sat. Yawned. Smiled a little. Because finally, finally, finally, he was going to sleep.

Chapter 25

Eli woke up hard. He had been vaguely aware of rising from some deep state, with a sea of thoughts and impressions rushing by his mind instead of through it and being experienced, until this thought: *If I want to, when I want to, I can open my eyes and be awake*. So he opened his eyes. For once, pulling himself the rest of the way out of sleep and into the stream of thoughts and impressions was difficult, and he had to struggle to rise that rest of the way and turn his brain back on, the thoughts starting to connect back to his mind instead of running past it. Yawned and stretched. One of the first impressions: His cock was so fucking hard, morning wood, thick and insistent, like it had been waiting for him to rouse and notice.

A second impression: A body alongside his. Eli shifted and--yeah, no mistaking it--Kendall was hard too.

They were both naked, on their sides, curled toward each other, cocks pressing lazy and thick between their stomachs, bodies tangled as if they'd done this a hundred times. Eli blinked into the dim light of the room. Kendall's arm was still draped across Eli's chest, heavy and slack. One thigh slotted between his own. Kendall's skin was warm, so warm. And the place where their hips touched, dicks touched--

Fuck! *Okay.*

Now that Eli had twitched a bit, Kendall stirred, a low, muffled groan from his throat, turning into words. "Shit," Kendall yawned thickly. "I gotta piss so bad."

An escape route? "Yeah, me too," Eli croaked, voice raw.

They detangled quickly, half-stumbling over the side of the bed. Kendall's ass caught Eli's eye as he moved--tight, smooth, a slight impression of the fabric texture where he'd slept atop the coarse blanket. Eli realized he was staring. Looked away. Failed. Looked again.

They hadn't paused for clothes, the need to piss too urgent. The bathroom door clicked shut behind them and the cheap light inside stabbed them both in the eyes. "Forgot our pants," Eli muttered, because obviously, but he was testing whether this quiet between them needed to be filled with sound.

Kendall huffed, shuffling toward a toilet. "Fuck it. I gotta go--now!"

They didn't speak further, just surrounded one of the toilets, sharing, as if afraid to be separated. No sense of privacy left--two guys, still naked, two cocks pointed down, each trying to piss with a morning hard-on that wasn't quite going away.

Eli finally managed to coax his urine to stream. *Ahh*, a quiet sigh. Kendall followed a second later. For a minute, the only sound was twin streams hitting porcelain and the shared sense of enormous, stupid relief. Eli pretended to watch their piss going into the toilet, but what he watched most was Kendall's cock, lightly gripped between thumb and forefinger. Was Kendall watching Eli's cock instead too? Eli couldn't meet his roommate's gaze to check.

When they finished, Kendall flushed and turned away to the sink to wash his hands.

Eli glanced in the mirror. Both of them were bleary-eyed and rough-haired, stubbled, half-chubbed and naked, like two college guys who'd spent the night *too close and too much* and now didn't know how to start their words again.

Kendall met his eyes in the mirror. "So ... that happened."

Eli didn't answer right away. Just looked down at his mostly limp cock. "I actually slept," he said quietly, feeling suddenly awed. "Like, *really* slept."

Kendall gave a single, honest nod. No smirk or sarcasm, just acknowledging that fact. "Same."

They dried their hands and padded back into the hallway, still naked of course, and still not talking about that.

Johnson was waiting when they got back. He sat in the desk chair like he had all the time in the world. Milo, Noah, and Drew were still somewhere else.

"You slept ten and a half hours," Johnson said.

Eli blinked. He hadn't realized he had been down that long--must be afternoon the next day? But yeah, that

tracked.

"How do you feel?" Johnson asked.

Kendall rubbed his neck, still too raw to pretend.

Eli opened his mouth, closed it, shrugged. Was this how normal people felt every time they woke up? He kind of liked it. "Weird," he said, "but good, like ... my brain's not screaming at me anymore."

Johnson smiled. "That's a good start." He nodded toward the bed. "Sit. We'll take the next step. Now we'll teach you to drop.""

No hesitation. They sat side by side on the mattress, bare thighs brushing.

And something in Eli's chest unclenched. Because whatever came next?--It already felt better than where he'd been.

Chapter 26

Johnson finally let them leave the room the next morning. Aside from brief breaks for biological necessities, they'd slept nearly the full thirty-six hours they'd been there. If Eli had any sleep deficit?--Gone.

They stepped out of Johnson's room like baby animals leaving their den for the first time, awed, blinking, shirtless, Kendall in his shorts, Eli in his sweatpants. Kendall stretched and yawned and scratched absently at his chest. Loose-limbed, Eli blinked like the world had gone up a notch in clarity. Every noise in the house felt bigger now, now that his head wasn't yelling at him--the bass from downstairs speakers, the pings of someone microwaving something, laughter from the front porch.

Same house. But everything was different.

They noticed now: the bracelets. On Jake's wrist as he passed them in the hall, laughing and heading for the showers. A flash of braided leather. A quiet quirk of a smile that meant something more. Then on Toby's wrist--shirtless, expression still stoner-smoothed as ever but less bloodshot, sitting straighter, accompanied by less of the smell of intoxicants than usual, eyes drifting closed like he was remembering something that made him smile. One third of the house, maybe? This was real. And now Eli knew part of what the bracelets meant.

They retreated to their room. Quiet, but not too far away, still in the noise radius, safe enough. Eli slipped off his sweats, and Kendall followed with his shorts. They didn't talk about it--just flopped on the bed, side by side, naked and slack-muscled.

Their bodies made soft sounds against the sheets. The light thud of Kendall's arm bumping Eli's when he turned. They did not retreat to separate bunks, did not pretend their bodies made no contact. They were just there.

Eli had never really known what *being there* meant before. He felt as though his whole body had learned to exhale in the last thirty-something hours. He closed his eyes, slept again.

Later, when they awoke, one of Johnson's loops was playing from Eli's networked speaker. Kendall stirred first, half-hard, rubbing a hand across his stubbled face. Eli rolled toward him. "Did you turn that on?"

"No," Kendall muttered.

"Do you care?"

Kendall opened one eye, then smiled. "Nah."

They laid there, listening. Not caught in it. Just soaking it in.

The rhythm of the barely there voices. The way the sound turned their awareness inward. The soft, low pleasure it left in their skin, like the loop was touching them from the inside out. Unlike the loops they'd heard in Johnson and Milo's room, this one didn't seem to be speaking about sleep; it seemed to be speaking about connection, like a final polishing after the course sanding had been done.

Eli reached for Kendall's hand without thinking. Kendall didn't let go.

That night, they returned to Johnson and Milo's room again. This time, Milo grinned when he saw them come in. Noah made space automatically.

Kendall said nothing, just smoothed the blanket and laid down like he was doing the most natural thing in the world. And Eli didn't ask what that meant. He just let his body drift down into the voice again. And when Kendall's bare thigh slid against his in the quiet, he didn't move away.

Chapter 27

Kendall was the one who kissed first. Eli didn't plan for that to happen, didn't mean to need it so badly--

But the hour was late, and the light from Johnson's room was low and golden, and a loop was already playing again, slow and steady in the background.

Milo and Noah had crashed elsewhere, possibly in Drew's room or on the couches downstairs. Johnson was letting the trance build for just Eli and Kendall, low-volume, intimate. *Establishing*, Johnson called it, whatever that meant.

And Kendall, warm and naked beside him on the bed. For a moment, Eli stared at his roommate, that chest, those shoulders, that face. He'd known Kendall was attractive, sure--who wouldn't see that?--but now ... now, just looking at him, something more about him made something inside Eli quiver. Kendall's ... presence, maybe? The intense and wanting way Kendall was looking at him?

Kendall rolled closer and whispered something like, "This doesn't have to be weird." And then Kendall kissed him, soft, hesitant, real. Eli didn't kiss back right away, but he didn't pull away either. His chest was tight and ached like he was about to cry, but he didn't. He just let the kiss happen, let Kendall kiss like he meant it.

Hard cocks. Smooth touches, fingers gliding, exploring. Kendall's cock thick and veiny; Eli's smooth as a rocket shaft. Kendall lay back on the mattress, knees lifting: the universal male sign of receptivity. Eli understood the message.

With his knees bent up to his chest, Kendall's ass was curled up on the mattress and easier to access. Eli went down beneath the man's thighs. He'd never done this with a guy before; hell, he'd only eaten out two women, ever, but he moved his mouth close enough to take a first lick at Kendall's buttock and was rewarded by Kendall's hungry moan.

The more he licked and slobbered, the more Kendall groaned and whispered encouragements, caressing Eli's scalp. Eli felt more confident, not in control exactly, but like he was fulfilling at least the minimum skill Kendall needed.

"Use your fingers," Kendall whispered, not scolding an inadequacy but encouraging an addition. A small bottle of lube passed into Eli's hand. He slicked a finger and used it to probe Kendall's hole, added lube, slid

his finger in and out slowly, marveling at the hole's tight heat as it clenched at the intruder. Soon Eli felt bold enough to add a second finger. His reward was a hiss of pleasure as Kendall reached down and grabbed Eli's neck, pulling him up toward Kendall's face for a kiss. Kendall ground his ass cheeks around the invader in his asshole.

Soon: "I'm ready," Kendall whispered, grinning. "Do it."

Eli shifted up on his knees, and Kendall's legs draped over his shoulders. Eli wanted to kiss him as he entered Kendall's ass but too much of his attention was spent figuring out the wheres and hows of fuckin a guy for the first time.

"Go easy," Kendall groaned as Eli's cock-head found his ass. Kendall didn't even whimper as Eli slid the first inches into him. But Kendall's grimace of pleasure-pain and the way he wiggled his but around Eli's next few inches pushing up his ass and the way his expression turned into a grin made Eli want more, deeper, faster. Kendall's cock was hard too. "Fuck!" Kendall hissed as Eli began to move inside him.

Eli's hands rested on Kendall's thighs as he lapsed into the mindlessness of the in-out-in-out fuck rhythm. Under him, Kendall grunted and wiggled his ass, clamping tight when Eli's rod pressed all the way in, when pubes met ass cheeks.

Too soon: "Oh, fuck!--Gonna cum!" Kendall's hand blurred on his own cock.

Kendall gasped and shuddered as he came, his first shot hitting his neck and chest, and Eli followed a minute later, grunting and bucking his cock deep in Kendall's guts. When, spent, Eli released Kendall's legs and fell onto the bed alongside him, they didn't talk about what had just happened.

The loop playing in the background, almost ignored, changed subtly. Eli yawned, the orgasm chemicals in his brain doing their work. The two of them fell asleep tangled together again, skin against skin, and Eli didn't flinch when Kendall's fingers brushed against his ribs. Or his hip. Or lower. Just touch. Just being wanted. Fuck, Eli needed this to be real so badly the wanting almost made him sick.

The next day, Johnson pulled him aside. Not alone--Kendall was right there--but Eli knew this moment was meant for him. Johnson held out two braided leather bracelets, coiled like small question marks. "You don't have to take it today," he said. "But when you do, it means something."

Kendall reached across like he already knew and took his almost immediately, no hesitation. He slipped it over his wrist, and when it settled there, he smiled. His fingers brushed Eli's knuckles. "I want this," Kendall said simply.

But Eli couldn't move. Some reluctance locked in his chest. Not fear, exactly. Just ... an odd weight, as though a spotlight had hit him and the world expected him to say yes and all he could think about was every time someone had said they'd stay beside him and didn't.

Kendall didn't say anything, just waited.

Johnson offered a slight smile, then pulled his hand back and left the second bracelet coiled on the corner of the desk like a promise deferred. "When you're ready." Then he turned to Kendall and took his wrist, brushed the band, and spoke the words that eased Kendall lightly into trance, not deep, just enough, the words that gave the bracelet connection. Eli watched wide-eyed.

Later that night, when they lay down again, Kendall didn't press. He still slid close, still shared his heat, still let Eli wrap an arm around his chest and rest his forehead against Kendall's shoulder.

But neither of them spoke.

The other bracelet sat three feet away, untouched, and Eli didn't know how to explain why he couldn't wear it yet. Except maybe ... because it mattered? And because he was terrified the reasons it mattered might be real.

Chapter 28

Coach blew the whistle, and Eli dove.

The water hit like a slap--cold, jarring, bright. One hundred fly. One minute to prove nothing's slipping.

Swim team practice. He had done this hundreds of times before. He should've been fine. He'd eaten breakfast. Slept. But he'd gone to sleep with Kendall curled around him like a security blanket; awoke to find himself alone. Alone felt nervous and abandoned. *Pathetic*, Eli swore at himself. *Am I so pathetic that one morning on my own undoes all my progress?* Because *alone* and *pathetic* threatened to open the door and invite all the old worries to come back

Today definitely felt off. His arms were too heavy, his breaths too shallow. He couldn't find his rhythm. Kicks were too slow. Hands a fraction too wide. His goggles stung. His pulse roared. Halfway down the pool, everything began to unravel. *Come on, come on. I was fine yesterday. I was strong. What the fuck's wrong with me?*

"Eli! Drive your hips, dammit!" Coach's commanding shout slashed across the water--loud, sharp, too angry, too loud. "You're better than this!"

Eli flinched mid-stroke as his timing shattered. He swallowed water and jerked up coughing, eyes stinging, like this was a fucking preschool swimming lesson, not a college practice. He hit the wall off-balance and slapped it late, sputtering for air. *Idiot, idiot, idiot! Everyone saw that!*

He gripped the edge of the pool and kept his head down.

After practice, he checked his phone. No message from Kendall. Which wasn't weird. Wasn't! People got busy; Kendall had a life, stuff to do. Wasn't weird! Except today, it felt weird. *I'm not abandoned*, Eli told himself. *He probably just had class--or errands--or spending time with his other friends--or one of those "belonging" things with Johnson and his group that I can't join in yet without the bracelet--or literally anything that doesn't revolve around me right this very minute. Idiot, idiot, fucking idiot!*

But the ache had already started.

The house was a blur. Loud music. Someone yelling about doing a keg run before the party that night. Laughter from down the hall. People already crowding in the kitchen where the booze would be. Jabbering and motion and too much everything.

Eli slipped past them all. Didn't go to Johnson and Milo's room. Didn't go looking for food. Just his room. His bed. Shut the door. Sat on the mattress. No Kendall. Still no Kendall. Eli didn't move. Didn't cry. Didn't scream. Just *sat*. Tried to be still ... until the quiet stopped feeling like safety and started to feel like drowning. *Because I can't do this. Because if he's pulling away now, already, I can't take it.*

Even before the party started, the bass thumped through the walls like someone's sonic vendetta. Eli put on his headphones, but that didn't help. The music was everywhere, drowning out everything, vibrating through the walls, the floorboards, his ribs. Downstairs, the party was cranking up toward full chaos. Bros shouting, beer pong cheering, someone yelling that he was undefeated, another voice demanding he shut up and prove

it. The air was thick with sweat, weed, and whatever had spilled an hour ago and never got cleaned up.

Eli paced the small room. One, two, turn. One, two, turn. The air was too hot, his skin too tight, his thoughts too sharp, overstimulated, overwhelmed. Noise everywhere, inside and out. He didn't even know what he was thinking anymore. He just knew it was *too much*.

"Eli?" Kendall's voice. Quiet, grounded.

Eli turned. Kendall leaned in through the partially opened the door, cheeks flushed from the party, hair tousled, wearing only a pair of black boxer-briefs and that glint of black and silver at his wrist.

"You okay?" Kendall asked, stepping closer.

Eli wanted to say *yeah, of course*. Wanted to shrug it off. But he just shook his head. "I can't ... If you're gonna ... Too much. I don't know where to put it." His fingers dug into his own arms, like he was trying to ground himself physically.

Kendall moved forward, arms half-lifting like he wanted to hug Eli but wasn't sure doing so would help. "Should I go get Johnson?" he asked.

Eli hesitated. Shook his head. Hesitated again, looking defeated. Nodded.

When Johnson came in five minutes later, shirtless and barefoot, he didn't ask questions. Didn't tell Eli to lie down or close his eyes. Didn't tell him to breathe deep and slow. He didn't say *drop*. "Not tonight," Johnson said, voice low but not soft. "Not when the house is too loud to ignore and your head is louder. Tonight, we *don't* pull it down."

Eli blinked at him, confused.

As he said the trance words, Johnson's smile was different this time. Not calm. *Charged*. "Tonight," Johnson said, "we build it higher. We raise the chaos until it breaks open." He stepped between them, standing close, eyes locked on Eli's. "Let it spike. Let the adrenaline rise. No shame, no suppression. Just feel it--ride it until it flips."

Kendall was breathing faster now. Eli felt his heart pounding.

"That heat inside you?" Johnson whispered. "It's not panic. It's *potential*. Don't fight it. Focus on it. Let it bloom. Give it direction."

Eli felt his skin prickle, felt sweat bead at his temples, felt something deeper shift.

Johnson's fingers tapped Eli's shoulder. "All that noise? That pressure? That's *desire*. You're already aroused--so give yourself permission to call it that."

Eli's breath skittered as his cock stiffened. What was Johnson talking about? Eli and Kendall had already had gotten off together, had already had sex. They'd already given in to their desire before, so what did Johnson mean about ... *Oh!* Eli understood now.

Kendall's eyes widened. His hands had found Eli's waist, steadying him.

"Let it out," Johnson murmured. "Be messy. Be wild. Just be it together."

Something inside Eli snapped free.

And then everything was motion--Kendall kissing him hard, desperate, Eli's hands on Kendall's chest, his hips, laughter bubbling up like carbonation in their blood. The tension didn't dissolve--it *transformed*, from panic to pleasure, from noise to need, from pressure to incandescence.

They didn't reach the bed. They crashed down onto the floor, limbs tangled, breathing erratic, Kendall's mouth at Eli's throat, Eli's fingers buried in Kendall's hair. Music still throbbed from below, echoing the rhythm inside them. They let it carry them. Clothing came off. Kisses were smeared, starting here, ending there. Cocks hard, tongues, mouths, sucking, figuring out how, figuring out each other's pleasures. Intensity building. Soaring, shooting, skyrocketing. Orgasm, so good, overpowering, shutting out everything else.

And when it was over, they didn't move. Didn't speak. Didn't need to.

Kendall's head rested against Eli's chest. Eli's arm was around Kendall's back, holding him there. They were still buzzing--sweaty, marked, wild-eyed--but *connected*.

"You feel better?" Kendall murmured against his skin.

Eli laughed--real and raw and a little disbelieving. "I feel *fucking alive*."

Kendall grinned. "Then we must be doing something right."

Chapter 29

Kendall sat at the foot of the bed, legs splayed loose and casual--but his hands were not. He kept turning his wrist, watching the way the braided leather hugged his skin like a quiet question. He didn't look at Eli.

After the release, the night of the party, Eli still hadn't taken the bracelet.

Eli sat further back on the mattress, hunched forward, his breath uneven. His heart felt louder than the music bleeding through the walls. Louder than his thoughts.

The silence stretched so long that when Kendall finally spoke, his voice came out too soft. "You don't have to wear it, man."

Eli flinched, not from the words but from what ran underneath them.

"I mean, I get it," Kendall added quickly, still not looking at him. "You were just looking for help. You didn't ask for any of this. Not like I did."

Eli sat up straighter. "That's not fair. I walked in there. I asked too. You followed me in. If you--"

"I *did* ask," Kendall said. His voice was tight now. "Maybe not with words, but--I showed up. For you. I stepped into whatever this is because you needed help. You didn't ask, but I came anyway. And when Johnson said it'd change things, I didn't back off. I said I was all the way in." His fingers found the bracelet again. Twisted it once. "And then you didn't."

That felt like a hard face-slap. Not loud, but deep.

Kendall finally turned toward him. Not angry. Not cold. But open in a way that Eli wasn't used to, where not everything revealed was happy and positive--some things were raw as a bruise that hadn't even had time to turn purple yet.

"I get it," Kendall repeated, quieter. "You don't have to wear it. You don't owe me anything."

But something in the way he said it chipped into Eli's chest like a chisel. Eli stared at him. He could see the leather band, snug around Kendall's strong wrist. He could still hear the restraint in Kendall's voice. The words had said one thing--but what they meant was: *You mattered enough for me to risk something, but I don't know if I matter enough to you.*

Eli felt it in his throat before he heard himself speak. "You do."

Kendall looked at him. "What?"

Eli turned to face him fully. "You mattered. You matter. You ... Shit, Kendall, you didn't just walk into this for me. You walked into it *with* me. You're the only reason I didn't bolt. And when I saw you put that bracelet on ..." His voice cracked. "... sure, I wanted it too. Not because of what it means for the group. Because of what it means *with you*. I didn't say yes before because I didn't want it to be for show. But I want it now. And I want it *from you*."

Kendall froze, like he was trying not to hope too hard.

Eli reached out his arm, extended his bare wrist. "I want to belong," he said, barely above a whisper, "but to *us*."

Kendall looked at him closely and moved carefully to the desk drawer, pulling out the second bracelet. His fingers were steady, reverent. He returned to Eli's side and slowly, almost ceremonially, slid the leather band over Eli's hand and onto his wrist. It settled like a weight--but it felt more like an anchor.

Kendall rested his palm lightly over it. "You sure?"

Eli nodded. "Yeah. But--if it's going to work like yours ..."

Kendall understood immediately and nodded. "We need Johnson." A pause. "You want me to go get him?"

Eli met his eyes. "Yeah. Please."

Kendall kissed his forehead--just a press, warm and firm--then rose and left the room.

Eli sat there, staring at the bracelet. The skin beneath it tingled, like his body recognized something his mind hadn't caught up to yet. A flicker of doubt: He could still take it off if he wanted--wasn't too late. But he did want it.

When the door opened again, Johnson stepped in. He didn't look surprised. He didn't look smug. He just looked *ready*. "You chose it," Johnson said, walking closer, "from him."

Eli nodded. "I did."

"Then let me make it real."

Johnson knelt, pressed two fingers gently to the band. Kendall had returned and moved alongside Eli, watching intently, laying a calm and centering hand on his shoulder.

Johnson's voice came slow and warm, and his words pulled Eli's thoughts down, down into a floating space where the words became power. Once he was there, Johnson told him: "You don't have to do this alone anymore."

Eli's eyelids fluttered once.

"You don't have to keep running. You don't have to keep proving. You don't have to keep guarding. It's already done. You're here. You're enough."

The bracelet seemed to grow warmer against his skin, not hot--just here and shifting, taking on meaning.

"You belong now," Johnson said, and the words wrapped around Eli like a blanket, "to us, yes, but also to him, and he belongs to you."

Kendall.

Eli let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding. His head dipped forward as his mind sank. And when he opened his eyes again, he no longer felt alone.

Chapter 30

A quiet Sunday morning, or what passed for it, probably close to noon. The house wasn't silent, just more subdued than usual. Someone's playlist thumped lazily in the living room. The scent of burnt toast and body spray drifted through the halls. Something somewhere was buzzing--probably a dying electric toothbrush, maybe an abandoned sex toy. No one cared.

Eli in briefs leaned back against the kitchen counter, one hand wrapped around a mug of decaf coffee, the other around Kendall's waist. Kendall leaned back into the hold like he'd taken root there.

Milo padded by, naked and half-wet, grinning like he was up to mischief--which, statistically speaking, he probably was.

Johnson stood at the counter, humming tunelessly while poking at the toaster like it had personally insulted him. His shorts hung loose, looked slept in. He glanced up just long enough to nod in Eli's direction--acknowledgement and greeting in one--and then went back to rescuing the burning toast with unnecessary intensity.

Noah set a stack of plates beside the coffee maker. Shirtless, chain visible, unbothered expression. When he passed Eli and Kendall, he gave a sleepy smile. "Lunch, not brunch," he muttered. "We're a bunch of hungover frat guys, so don't pretend this is something sophisticated."

Drew wandered in a second later, still rubbing his eyes, wearing someone else's open-fronted hoodie and his own very-snug boxers. He smacked Milo's bare ass as he passed. "That's for whatever you did last night that kept me up."

Milo just winked and cheshire-grinned.

All of them wore the bracelet. Braided leather. Right wrist. Some of them joked about it. Some didn't. But it was there. A bond, quiet and sure.

Eli looked at the way Kendall tilted into him now without thinking, his cheek brushing Eli's jaw, the warmth of his bare hip against Eli. The way their skins touched as if they had always done that. Eli didn't feel haunted this morning, didn't feel wired, frayed, or frazzled.

The house was still loud. Life was still a mess. He had a quiz in two days he hadn't studied for yet, and his phone was full of unread messages. But then Kendall's hand rested in the small of his back, palm warm. And the coffee was hot, and Drew was quietly singing some stupid pop song that would probably take up residence in Eli's head for the rest of the day, and none of it felt overwhelming. For once, it simply felt like *now*.

Eli's voice was barely a whisper, so likely no one but Kendall could hear him. "I don't feel broken anymore." He looked at the others in the room--his circle, his constellation. He thought, *We don't have to be perfect.* Sipped his coffee. *We are each other's, and that's more than enough.*

Later, in the common room, they'd fall into each other on two of the mismatched couches, in shifting combinations as bodies moved from group to group as their desires led them. Kisses. Lazy laughter. Hard cocks. Sweat sticking skin to skin. But right now, it was just Sunday noon.

And that night, Eli was working at the desk on an essay, not due until the end of the week so for once he was in pretty good shape, time-wise. Around nine-thirty, he finally noticed that what sounded like the memory of one of Johnson's loops was running quietly through his networked speaker, almost too quietly to be heard over the background din of living in a fraternity house. He reached over ... but the speaker was already turned off, not the source of the sound. Eli listened, realized he was hearing it in his head, like a memory, something he'd been trained to remember. Eli caught himself yawning. Yeah, maybe time to wind down for the night. The memory seemed to be doing something gentle, turning off thoughts Eli didn't need to worry about right then. The quiz in two days?--he'd studied that afternoon and had time to refresh himself again before the test. The changes Coach wanted him to make to his diet?--could wait until tomorrow's mealtime choices. That fraternity chore he'd been assigned?--completed earlier that afternoon and he knew he had done it well, so he could let that worry go too. Eli wasn't afraid of tomorrow.

He felt ... drowsy, once an almost foreign feeling. Not the *you will sleep hard right now* feeling of that first loop Johnson has played, and not the *you want to sleep but you just fucking can't* desert of his insomnia, but a sweet *I could lie down, close my eyes, and really sleep* drowsiness that felt organic and all the more irresistible because it *wasn't* shouting at him.

He yawned again as he saved his essay file. Yeah, if he was in bed by ten, that gave him eight hours before he had to get up and get ready for swim practice. He stood, pulled on a pair of shorts, gathered his toothbrush and nightly stuff, and shuffled down to the bathroom.

He felt almost bleary-headed, but in a good way, as he eased up to a sink, next to Kendall who was also brushing his teeth. They exchanged small smiles and greeting nods in the mirror. Kendall scuffed Eli's hair--"Sleepy is a good look on you, dude"--and Eli grinned sheepishly. "You still hearing the loop in your head?"

Eli grinned wider, nodded, swallowed a little yawn. "Oh, yeah. So real I thought I was actually hearing it."

They pissed side by side, not bothering to hide glances at the other's cock as their bladders emptied.

Kendall didn't pull back right away. He reached and ran the back of his fingers down Eli's jaw. "I'm proud of you, Eli," he murmured. "You know that, right?"

Eli's throat tightened. "Yeah," he said. Then so low only Kendall would hear: "But say it again anyway."

"I'm so fucking proud of you."

Eli leaned in, their foreheads touching. Their exhales merged. Everything slowed. Kendall's hand slid over Eli's bare chest, not rushed, just being there, then splayed across Eli's stomach, fingers tracing the dips between the abs muscles. Eli arched into Kendall's touch, eyes pressing shut.

He didn't need a command or a loop or a trigger for this. He just wanted. Wanted Kendall's mouth against his. Wanted to feel the pressure of that hand moving lower, guiding him back to their room and down onto the bed, never breaking contact.

On the bed, they kissed lazily, but everything burned, teeth and tongue and heat. Kendall nudged Eli's thighs apart with a knee and settled there like he belonged--because he did. Eli's hands found Kendall's back, his waistband, the bare skin just above it.

"Please," Eli whispered. "Please."

Kendall didn't speak. He didn't have to.

Their movements became a rhythm, Eli on his back, Kendall over him, their erect and heavy dicks rolling against each other as they kissed. Then the formalities of lubricant, fingers opening and relaxing holes; then the grinding, gasping, sweat-slick friction. This time, Eli was the one on his back first, Kendall's cock inside him. They didn't cum like that, because soon Kendall was the one on his back, Eli fucking. Eli moaned into Kendall's mouth, one hand on the back of Kendall's neck, trying to pull him ever closer, grounding them both as their hips rolled and pleasure crested in waves. Neither of them came loudly. This wasn't about volume; this was about knowing and certainty, about choosing this moment, this body, this closeness.

Afterward, they didn't rush to clean up. Orgasm was nature's best sleeping pill, and Eli yawned deeply as they lay tangled to each other, Eli's fingers tracing shapes on Kendall's bare chest, Kendall's arm curled protectively around Eli. No words. Just warmth and the smell of skin and the gentle hush as Eli's fingers stilled into sleep.

Part 4: Brother Crash

Chapter 31

Crash was just looking for protein bars. Seriously. That was all.

A late-night craving, a groggy descent into the kitchen in nothing but boxer-briefs and a T-shirt so old the silkscreened band logo had flaked into unintelligibility, and Crash was now standing three feet away from a full-blown, *live-action porno* playing out on the common room couch.

Drew and Noah were fucking on the far end of the couch. Eli and Kendall were on the nearer end. Naked. All of them definitely naked, naked in the way that left absolutely nothing to Crash's imagination. Reclining Kendall was underneath and pinned by Eli's cock in his ass, and seated Drew was being ridden by Noah, all them moaning as their bodies moved together in slow rhythms, like waves, like music--like sex and prayer and surrender all at once. The couch was creaking. A black-and-silver bracelet on Eli's wrist as he gripped the back of the cushion for balance caught the light and glinted once, like a secret signal. And Crash's brain stalled out.

What the actual--

"Oh, hey," said a voice beside him, casually. It was Brent--shirtless, of course, just a lazy and loose pair of shorts that rode low, skin trailing the heavy scent of whatever intoxicant he had been smoking all day. Brent paused, glanced toward the couch like the events there were no big deal. "At it again? You get used to it."

Crash turned to him, mouth half-open. "That's--they're--they're--"

Brent grinned, slapped his shoulder with brotherly ease. "Yeah, bro. It's kinda hot, right? I mean, love is love and all that. Let 'em have their moment."

"But they're having it right in the *open*," Crash hissed.

Brent shrugged. "They're, like, synced. Sometimes it's too strong to wait. Maybe you should try it. I tell you,

it's intense."

And just like that, Brent wandered past him toward the kitchen, whistling.

Crash stared, brain still feeling stalled. He wasn't sure what disturbed him more--the sex happening ten feet away, the way no one else in the house seemed to care ... or the slow, mindless heat burning low in his groin while he watched. *It's just sex*, he told himself. *You've seen it before. You've had it before.*

But not with his fraternity brothers, and not out in public in the common room. And definitely not like this--not like they were having it. Sure, all of them were guys and they were right out there where anyone could walk in and see, but something *else* in their breathing caught Crash's attention, the quiet intensity, the way Drew gripped the back of Noah's neck, the way Kendall's voice fell into a low, murmured chant, *Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me*.

Crash should look away. He should stop staring. He should *leave*.

Instead, he took one small step backward and pressed himself against the wall, suddenly unsure how he could possibly feel both shocked and aroused at the same time.

Noah groaned something, softly, needy. Kendall pulled Eli down and tightened his legs around Eli's waist.

Crash turned and fled up the stairs, having forgotten about his protein bar.

Chapter 32

Crash didn't sleep. He lay in his bed, staring at the ceiling fan that turned shadows across his wall, heart still thudding like it hadn't gotten the memo that he was safely away from the chaos downstairs. His brain kept playing the scene on a loop--Drew and Noah, Eli's naked back, Kendall's fingers digging into his ribs, both sets of bodies moving together like they were one organism.

And the bracelets. Always the bracelets. What was they? A signal? A code? A kink thing? *Snap out of it*, he scolded himself. *Stop being weird*. This was college. The time for experimenting with weird shit. Frat houses were weird. Naked dudes having sex on the couch wasn't *typical*, but it wasn't illegal. Not unless they'd, like, used his protein shake as lube or something.

Still, the image wouldn't fade. Not just the sex--but the calm intensity. Like there wasn't anything else in the world for them.

That wasn't how people looked at each other when they were just horny.

That was how people looked when they'd been hypnotized into joining some gay love cult or something ... probably. How would he know?

"Okay," he muttered aloud to himself, dragging a pillow over his face. "You need help. Or porn. Or both."

The next morning, the house was its usual hurricane of shirtless chaos. Someone was blasting retro '80s New Wave from the second floor. Someone else was frying bacon, wearing nothing but a jock-strap. Two naked guys' towel-snap war spilled out of the showers and into the hallway as they giggled like naughty toddlers. Typical frat Tuesday.

Jake, in just mesh shorts that rode so low that Crash could tell he wasn't wearing underwear, passed him in the hall with a nod and an unbothered, "Sup." Jake's bracelet caught Chase's gaze.

Then Crash saw Toby. Same bracelet. Same weird casual confidence. Toby was sitting on the back deck in his briefs, reading a *textbook* on his tablet. Like, an actual class textbook with graphs and everything, instead of playing a game? And he wasn't drunk or high? Was Hell in the process of freezing over?

Crash slowed, squinting. "What the hell is happening in this house?"

Toby looked up. "Huh?"

"Are you guys running a sex cult or something and somebody forgot to tell me?"

Toby chuckled smoothly. "You say 'sex cult' like it's a bad thing. You asking for an invitation? Want to give it a try?"

Crash froze. Hadn't Brent said the same thing last night? "Uh, no, thanks." Crash backed away.

Toby simply shrugged--"Okay, dude"--and went back to his textbook.

All day long, Crash kept trying to forget and ignore. He really tried.

But then naked Milo brushed past him in the hallway, laughing at something Johnson just said, and Crash's eyes were drawn to the band on Milo's wrist: Simple, worn casually, like something whose private meaning had been given public force.

Later, he saw Noah--shirtless and sweat-damp from a run, chatting with another brother who was clearly glowing from something that wasn't just exercise. The other brother's bracelet was newer. Still settling in.

They were everywhere. Half the brothers, at least, maybe more, wore them--always calm and laughing, seemingly marked, seemingly connected. Crash felt as though he was standing in the middle of a party where everyone else but him had gotten the inside joke.

Even Eli. Sweet, exhausted, pressure-cooked Eli--the guy who used to collapse onto the couch with a hyper-caFFEinated energy drink and groan about his insomnia and his asshole swim coach. Now he had a *radiance*. Now he had *Kendall*. Now he had ... whatever *that* was Crash had seen happening on the couch last night.

And Crash couldn't stop watching him.

The next time he passed the common room, he paused, heart suddenly hammering. No sex, not this time. Just Eli, curled into Kendall's lap, eyes closed as Kendall stroked his hair. Gentle. Intimate. The kind of quiet that men never admitted they want.

Crash stood there too long. Brent wandered by, stoned and smiling--gave a lazy nod toward the couch and said, "Feels good when it's real, right?"

Crash blinked. "What?"

Brent was already walking off, like he hadn't spoken, or maybe Crash hadn't heard him right.

Either way, Crash couldn't stop thinking about it.

Chapter 33

All of this started with the bracelets. Well, probably not, since something had to happen first to make the bracelets a thing. But all of this always came back to the bracelets.

By now, Crash was certain *something* was going on. Not just the sex--though, fuck, *the sex* was everywhere--but the way those guys *looked* at each other, like they were tuned to some private frequency he couldn't hear.

Eli and Kendall. Johnson and Milo. Noah and Drew.

That last one really got to him.

Because Drew was the most normal of the bunch. A junior. Played that football video game like it was his religion. Laughed too loud when he was high. Hooked up with a string of girls his sophomore year, sometimes two in one weekend. Just a dude's dude, through and through.

Now?--Crash caught him the other night in the kitchen, holding Noah's waist like the guy was Drew's anchor in a storm. They weren't even talking. Just standing ... and touching. Still and connected, like something deep was humming between them. That bracelet on Drew's wrist had a soft polished leather shine under the light like it *meant* something.

So Crash did what any self-respecting, non-hippie sex cult, possibly-paranoid frat bro would do: He asked.

"Hey," Crash said, catching Drew as he was coming back from a run: shirt off, of course, towel slung over his shoulder, sweat still drying across his chest. "Can I talk to you about something?"

Drew's smile was casual, friendly. "Yeah, man. Shoot."

Crash tried to sound casual, too. "That bracelet, the leather thing. I've seen, like, a bunch of guys wearing it now. What's the deal?"

Drew didn't miss a beat. "Brotherhood bracelet."

Crash frowned his confusion. "Seriously?" Because wasn't this fraternity a brotherhood too? What the fuck?

"Sure," Drew said, grin widening. "You jealous you didn't get one?"

"I mean ... Is it, like, a pledge thing? A secret society? Do you guys chant Latin at midnight and sacrifice virgins or something?"

Drew snorted a laugh. "Man, I wish. We haven't had a virgin in this house since last year at Homecoming." But his eyes?--That smile? Too calm. Too *easy*.

Crash couldn't explain it, but Drew seemed to be in on some private joke--and did he think Crash was the punchline?

"What if I want one?" Crash asked, pushing just a little.

Drew tilted his head as if this needed thought. "Well, then you'd probably already be wearing one."

Before Crash could respond, Drew clapped him on the shoulder and trotted off toward the stairs, towel flipping behind him like some smug little victory flag.

Crash watched the rest of the day. Watched as Milo leaned over and whispered something in Noah's ear that made Noah blush and bite his lip. Watched Eli close his eyes and exhale when Kendall rested a hand on the back of his neck. Watched Johnson walk through the house, quiet and calm, like some unbothered prince who *knew* the tides were going to rise in his favor.

And he watched the other brothers--the ones without bracelets--laugh and drink and go about their day,

oblivious to how many around them had ... what?--shifted?--joined the cult?--gone over to the other side? He wasn't even sure what that might mean. Were any of those even applicable?

Fear wasn't exactly what had crawled under Crash's skin. What bothered him was the *being left out*, the *not knowing*. The way Drew hadn't *lied*--he just hadn't answered, like Crash hadn't earned an answer, not yet.

Chapter 34

He hadn't *meant* to follow them, nothing like that.

Okay, maybe he kind of did. But this wasn't stalking. This was *observation*. Like anthropology. Or ... wildlife tracking. He was a chill guy. He wasn't gonna judge anyone's weird kink, right? He just needed to *know*.

So later that night when he saw Drew and Eli heading down the hall toward Johnson and Milo's room--quiet, barefoot, briefs that left them nearly naked--Crash waited a beat, then followed.

The hallway lights were off, just the red emergency bulb in the Exit sign. He didn't go all the way to their room, just enough to lean into the wall by the fire extinguisher, where he had a view through the cracked-open door.

But inside--*fuck*, inside--the room looked like a fever-dream wrapped in sex wrapped in something heavier. Milo and Noah were already on the floor, naked and kneeling with their cocks out and hard, like they'd been *waiting*. Johnson in sweatpants sat on the edge of the desk chair, back straight, eyes steady. Eli, naked now too and cock half-hard, moved into the slice of the room that Crash could see and dropped to his knees beside Milo. Drew followed a moment later.

From where Crash hovered, he couldn't make out the words, just some low tone and sometimes a few words from Johnson. But the room felt *still*--not the awkward stillness of people being silent. Something else, something intentional, like a hush with *importance*.

Their breathing had lined up, he realized. A slow, deliberate rhythm, like they were exhaling in unison. Like they were *sinking* into something.

Crash's stomach twisted.

He wasn't even sure what tipped him over the edge. Maybe the cause was Johnson's voice, low and steady, slipping under the background noise from downstairs. Maybe it was Milo's eyelids fluttering, like he was trying to stay awake and couldn't. Maybe it was the bracelets--each of them wearing one, braided black leather against bare skin. Or the way Drew leaned, head resting lightly against Noah's shoulder, like that one point of contact was *everything*. Whatever the cause, the energy in the room was seemed to be shifting into something thick, tactile. Crash felt as though he was watching a spell being cast in real time.

Crash's skin prickled. He wanted to look away. He couldn't. He shifted his weight, felt the uncomfortable tightness in the crotch of his jeans--and, *fuck*, what the hell was *that* about? He wasn't into cults. He wasn't into mind control. He wasn't even into dudes. Except, apparently, when four of them were kneeling in front of a fifth, moving like a single animal, stripped naked and beautiful and *so far away from anything Crash fucking understood*.

A flicker of movement from behind, a sudden presence, shocked Crash--Kendall silently barefoot, in shorts, eased past him in the hallway--"Sup?"--on his way to Johnson and Milo's room.

Crash backed off, heart thudding. He'd been caught looking! But Kendall just glided through the door like a

late arrival to church.

And once Kendall had passed through, the door swung mostly shut but stayed open a bit. The trance inside stayed unbroken.

But something inside Crash broke and he fled downstairs, because what the *fuck* was that?

And why did he kind of want to see it again?

Chapter 35

Crash found Brent out back, stretched across the sagging patio couch like a cat under the night sky. Brent was shirtless, as usual, board shorts riding low, one ankle propped up on the armrest, flip-flops slipping down his feet. Brent had a half-drunk bottle of Gatorade in one hand and a look on his face like he'd settled all his debts with the universe and still came out ahead.

Perfect. Brent didn't care about anything--plus he wasn't wearing a bracelet. He'd likely be a little stoned, as usual, but he wouldn't be weird. He wouldn't start chanting.

Crash sat beside him and tried to sound casual. "You notice anything ... off lately?"

Brent didn't even blink. "Dude, I live in a frat house with a bunch of guys who have an unhealthy relationship with alcohol, a bio major who ferments his own kombucha, and a guy who uses compulsive brownie-baking to deal with the stress of finals week. Define *off*."

Crash huffed. "Okay, like ... the whole house vibe's changed."

Brent scratched his bare chest absently. "Oh, you mean the whole *everyone's got a boyfriend, wears matching accessories, and sometimes gets frisky on the common room couches* thing? Why? You thinking of trying it after all?"

Crash rolled his eyes. "No way. I mean, I guess I just didn't realize it was happening. I'm surprised you caught on before I did."

"Why, because I like to get high sometimes? Bro, I noticed when Drew started using that awful banana-scented lip balm last year. You think I missed the whole group hypnosis club?"

Crash's heart skipped. "You think maybe it's a New Age hippie sex cult or something?"

"Would that be so bad?" Brent sipped his Gatorade and leaned his head back. "Seriously, dude, it's harmless. Sexy, maybe. Definitely louder than things used to be--a lotta happy moaning in the plumbing, y'know? But not, like ... culty. Unless it's a *fun* cult. Like the *shirtless hugs* kind."

"You're joking," Crash said flatly.

"Kind of?" Brent shrugged. "Look, I'm not *in* it, but I'm not trying to *stop* it either. Let the beautiful weirdos do their thing. They seem happy."

"They seem *replaced*, like in that old movie where people got replaced by robot doubles or something," Crash muttered.

Brent gave him a lazy side-eye. "'Replaced'? You okay, dude?"

Crash shifted. "No. I mean--I don't *know*. I saw ... something. Upstairs just now. Johnson and some of the others. Trance stuff. *Real* trance stuff."

"Yeah, I heard Johnson's majoring in hypnotic bro-ology." Brent scratched his neck, sipped his Gatorade again. "He any good at it?"

Crash stared. "You're not even a little freaked out?"

Brent pulled a joint from somewhere. "Dude, I saw Milo walk into the kitchen naked last week with Noah hanging off his back like a backpack. You think a little synchronized breathing's gonna make me freak?" He lit the joint and offered it over. "It's a fraternity, man. Everything's weird."

Crash shook his head and didn't take the joint; he just stood. "Forget it."

Brent exhaled smoke and squinted through it. "You know you're kind of obsessed and spiraling, right?"

Crash didn't answer. Because, yeah, he kind of *was*.

That night, Crash avoided the common room. He avoided the far end of the second-floor hallway. He avoided Johnson's door like it had teeth. But in the back of his imagination, they were always there: Milo, sweat-slick and smiling; Eli, biting his lip as Kendall moved against him; Noah whispering words Crash couldn't hear into Drew's open mouth.

And Johnson. Always fucking Johnson. Eyes dark. Voice low. Saying Crash's name like he was *already his*.

Chapter 36

Crash wasn't trying to spy on them, not really.

He'd just been heading to the stairs on his way to grab a protein bar. That's all. This late, the house had finally stopped vibrating from whatever bro-down had brothers in at least two different rooms blasting competing EDM into the drywall. Crash was in mesh shorts, barefoot, hair messy. Just passing by. Even though being here, outside Johnson and Milo's room, wasn't the fastest way to the kitchen.

But then he heard ... something like a whisper behind Johnson and Milo's door. Not words. Just low murmurs, the kind that didn't try to be heard but still pulled at the skin.

The door was cracked an inch, just enough maybe to be an invitation.

Crash could've walked away. Should've. But he didn't. He crept closer, and the moment held him there--rooted, breath quiet as he could make it, his gaze narrowing through that inch-wide slice into something private.

Inside, the light was dim, golden like candlelight caught in muscle. Milo was there--pressed against Johnson's bare chest, naked and shining like he'd just finished a workout. Johnson's hands were on Milo's sides. Johnson had his mouth near Milo's ear, whispering things Crash couldn't hear but could almost somehow *feel*. The way Milo slow-nodded and looked at Johnson like an act of devotion. The way his chest rose with each pleasure-moaning breath. The way his body rode rhythmically up and down on Johnson's erection. The way his eyes fluttered.

Milo was not asleep--but not truly awake, either--not anything Crash had ever seen before.

What Crash was seeing wasn't just sex. That wasn't the word for it. *Reverence*, maybe?--That seemed closer.

How long had Crash been watching? Surely only a minute?--Maybe more? His pulse beat in the side of his neck, steady and sick and hot. His hand gripped the doorframe.

He was hard. Not raging. Not full-on. Just ... there.

Heat low in his gut. Horny pressure he couldn't ignore. Not from the idea of their sex--not exactly. But from the *power*. The closeness. The certainty.

He imagined being Milo. No--he imagined *being seen* like Milo, having someone look at him the way Johnson looked at Milo. Imagined being held like that. Being whispered to. Told what to do. Told who to be.

Crash's stomach flipped. He stumbled backward, away from the door, heart hammering against the walls of his chest. He wasn't into guys.

He wasn't.

He *wasn't*!

Back in his room, Crash stripped off his shirt, yanked the damp waistband of his shorts down to his ankles as though that might cool him down. He didn't touch himself, didn't dare. But he stood in front of the mirror on his closet door, naked except for his own heat and confusion. He stared into his own eyes.

Sweaty. Flushed.

Hard.

"What the fuck is wrong with me?" he whispered.

The mirror didn't reply. Only his own breath answered, fast, unsteady. And for a moment--just a blink--he felt *off*, like something was missing in the room, like some part of him that hadn't followed him back when he fled from that golden-lit room.

He pressed both palms to the mirror, fingers splayed, breathing like he'd run a mile. He looked into the mirror and wondered: *What if I've already been under?*

Or worse: *What if I want to be?*

Chapter 37

The incident happened in the kitchen. At midday, many of the brothers away at lectures, the house was weirdly quiet and the scent of bacon from breakfast was just beginning to dissipate. Crash sat on kitchen counter, chewing dry cereal out of the box, shirtless between classes, jeans, scrolling videos on his phone and trying not to think about anything--especially not about *them*.

Drew walked in, whistling tunelessly, hair wet from a shower, wearing nothing but baggy shorts and the bracelet. That same leather coil that at least half of the house, probably more, had adopted like some stupid new accessory fad. Except it wasn't. Not anymore.

"Hey," Drew said easily, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge.

Crash nodded, tried to look uninterested.

Drew leaned against the counter. "I meant to catch you last night."

"Oh? What's up?"

Drew just smiled, lazy and calm and so unbothered that the simple act made Crash want to flinch. "I was thinking," Drew said, and his hand slid out of his pocket, "that you'd look good in one of these."

And then, it was just there, held out between two fingers like it meant nothing at all.

A bracelet: Black leather, braided, silver ring, simple-looking. Not glowing or humming or magical. Just ... waiting.

"What the hell is that?" Crash's voice came out rougher than he meant.

Drew grinned. "You've seen them."

Crash shook his head. "No, thanks. I'm good."

"No pressure." Drew set the bracelet gently on the counter beside the cereal box. "Just feels right when you wear it. That's all. Thought maybe you'd like to try. No pressure at all." Drew said that like a casual thing, like the bracelet wasn't a coiled snake or a trigger or whatever, like it hadn't turned half the house into golden-eyed, sex-dazed boyfriends curled up in hypnotic piles. Well, maybe not the bracelet itself, but what it represented.

Crash stared at the bracelet. "I'm not--," he started, but Drew just stepped past him, close enough to brush Crash's knee.

"No one's saying you are. You'll know when you're ready." Drew popped a piece of cereal into his mouth. "Or maybe you already are."

And then he left. Just like that.

Crash sat there for what felt like an hour. Didn't touch the bracelet. Didn't throw it away, either. Eventually, he picked it up, turned it over in his fingers. Just simple braided leather. Then he carried it upstairs and shoved it into the back corner of his desk drawer beneath some condoms and loose change.

That night, Crash couldn't stop dreaming. Drew's voice in his ear, low and warm. *It'll feel right when you wear it. You'll know when you're ready. Maybe you already are ... You'll know ...*

He woke up sweating, hard-dicked, the dream already fading except for one thing: Crash had been on his knees in it, his cock so achingly erect--and someone had just fastened the bracelet around his wrist.

Chapter 38

Crash stopped sitting with the others.

That hadn't been a conscious decision, not at first. Just a shift. An inch of distance here, a delayed response there. His laugh was always a second too late now. His eyes darted away too quickly, assessing. He stopped walking into rooms where bracelets outnumbered bare wrists. Which, by this point, meant he stopped walking into most rooms.

Even Brent had one now. *Brent*--who used to float around the house like a stoned raccoon in board shorts and flip-flops--was wearing the mark and *smiling* like he meant it. He'd been sprawled on TV room couch that afternoon, shorts around his ankles, half-asleep, his head on Jake's lap, murmuring something with a dopey grin as Jake combed fingers through his hair and Noah slow-sucked Brent's cock. Like this was all the most

natural thing in the world. Crash had paused in the hallway, unseen, watching. Jake leaned down and whispered something to Brent that made him blush and laugh and pull Jake in closer, and they kissed, and then Brent arched his back and groaned as he began to cum in Noah's mouth.

Crash turned away before he could see more.

It was just sex--just sex--just sex. Except ... it wasn't just sex. Just sex would've been easier to dismiss. He knew sex--he *understood* sex. But this was different. This was guys who looked *happy* in their bodies, in their skin, in each other's company. Like every touch meant something. Like the closeness was healing instead of performative.

And the worst part? They looked so *good* like that.

That night, Crash sat on the edge of his bed with the bracelet cupped in his hands. He hadn't worn it, not once. But he hadn't thrown it away either. He'd kept it. Carried it with him in his jeans pocket sometimes, like a coin or a stone or a worry he couldn't shake. He didn't understand what scared him more: the idea of wearing it and what it might *do* ... or the idea that it might do *nothing at all*.

Downstairs, the living room was softly chaotic. Crash could hear music, the rise and fall of conversation, occasional laughter. He crept halfway down the stairs and paused where the railing turned.

From here, he could see Kendall and Eli on the couch in the common room--legs tangled together, laughing about something Eli had just said. Then Kendall pulled Eli close, murmured something in his ear. Eli melted into him like butter in a warm pan.

Farther across the room, Milo had Johnson pressed up against the wall, Milo nude of course and whispering something, Johnson shirtless. Crash couldn't hear the words, but Johnson's low-lidded stare of pleasure was unmistakable.

Crash's heart ached, almost a physical hurt. He wrapped his arms around himself, breath refusing to budge from somewhere just below his ribs. What, he wondered, would being on the *inside* of all that feel like?--To not be looking in from the outside anymore?--To touch and be touched without flinching?--To stop wondering what it meant and just *feel it*?

His fingers slipped into his pocket, found the bracelet, curled around it. He didn't put it on. But he didn't let go.

Chapter 39

Nearly midnight, and the house was still buzzing--music low, someone laughing distantly down the hall--but Crash felt as though he was moving through water. Every sound came muted. Every step felt heavier than the one before.

He was holding the bracelet. Not in his pocket this time--In his palm. Exposed. As if daring the world to ask why.

He stopped in front of the door he'd walked past a hundred times before. Johnson and Milo's room. The door was closed, but light spilled beneath it. A low hum inside. Someone speaking. Not clearly. Like it wasn't for ears, just minds.

He knocked once. Then again.

After a moment, Noah opened it. He was shirtless, his chest lightly flushed, curls damp with sweat; his shorts

appeared to have been hastily pulled on. A haze of pleasure still ghosted behind his eyes--whatever Crash had interrupted in that room must have been intense.

Crash didn't look past him--didn't have to. He could *feel* Johnson inside, that calm gravity, that presence.

"Is it real?" Crash asked. His voice was raw. "All of it. What you feel. What they feel. The bracelet. The ... everything."

Noah didn't answer. He just stepped aside. And opened the door wider.

Crash stared at the threshold like it was a cliff's edge. His body wanted to bolt. But his heart--His heart just wanted to stop twisting.

Inside, Johnson was seated on the bed, shirtless, boxer shorts, cross-legged. Milo was there too, naked and draped across the floor like he'd melted there, cock mostly hard, head resting lazily against Johnson's knee. He didn't even flinch at Crash's presence. Just gave a slow, sleepy grin. "Hey, man," Milo murmured. "Took you long enough."

Crash's throat tightened. He stepped inside. One foot, then the other. The bracelet seemed to tremble in his hand--not from power, but from *meaning*. No, Crash's hand was what trembled.

He didn't kneel. He didn't even sit. But he didn't leave.

Johnson looked at him--casually, like someone watching a bird that might still spook. "You don't have to decide anything tonight," he said quietly. "You're not here to prove anything."

"Then why *am* I here?" Crash whispered.

Noah's voice answered from behind. "Because you don't want to be outside anymore."

Silence.

Then: Crash's breath shook out of him. Like a weight dropped. Like a surrender he hadn't planned but couldn't stop.

He didn't kneel.

But he *did* cross the room and sat on the floor. Close enough to touch them. Close enough to be touched. He hadn't meant to, hadn't planned it.

But when Noah sat down slowly beside him, when Drew's bare foot nudged Crash's knee, when Milo gave him that low, teasing smirk from where he sprawled, the shifts didn't feel like pressure. They felt like gravity.

"I still don't know what this is," Crash said.

Johnson tilted his head. "Do you need to?"

Crash swallowed. "No, I guess not," he admitted. "I just ... You're right--Noah's right--I don't want to be out there alone anymore."

He didn't have to say what *out there* meant. The cold. The distance. The waiting for someone to see him, without ever asking to be seen.

"Then come here," Johnson said.

Crash hesitated. And then he crawled forward. One motion, then another, until he was kneeling in front of Johnson, every nerve tingling and waiting.

Johnson reached down and Crash passed it to him: The bracelet. Their fingers brushed as Johnson took it, as though the bracelet was something sacred, intimate, inevitable. Milo rose to sit cross-legged beside Johnson's knee. "Heh," Milo whispered, "this is the best part."

Drew's fingers were stroking Crash's wrist. Noah leaned in and kissed Crash's shoulder. Johnson held the bracelet; "Are you ready?" he asked.

Crash thought he might cry. Instead, he just nodded.

Johnson tapped something on his laptop. The sound began. Music--but not music--sound and whisper and breath. "Just listen," Johnson said. "You don't have to do anything else. Let your head go quiet for a while. Let us do the rest. Hold out your hand."

Johnson placed the bracelet on Crash's wrist, slowly. Then, with one fingertip, he tapped the center ring. "This," he said, "is yours now. But it's also ours. And it means you're never alone in here again."

Crash's chest felt as though it was cracking, not in pain but in pressure--cracks spiderwebbing outward from the center of his sternum, a fluid heat blooming in their wake. Something *inside* him was shifting, giving way. He blinked. Swayed slightly. Felt some weird heat unfurling up along his spine. His head felt foggy, foggier, as though the sounds were lassoing his thoughts and gently pulling them, one by one, down into some darkness where they couldn't be reached. His balls tingled; his cock stirred, starting to harden.

Milo's hands were on his waist. Noah's lips brushed his neck. Drew pressed in from the other side, his breath warm at Crash's ear: "Don't think, buddy. Stop thinking."

"Just feel it," Johnson murmured. "When you're ready, let yourself drop."

Milo's thumbs stroked small circles just above the line of Crash's shorts, sending sparks up through his ribs and into his chest. Drew's hand slid along Crash's flank, guiding him--no force, just a presence. They weren't moving fast. They didn't need to. Every touch felt like a lit match against skin already primed to burn. Crash moaned. Noah's lips against his neck. Drew pressed in. Crash moaned again. He felt--*Fuck*, he felt--

Hands, lips, breath. One brushing over his nipple, another guiding his hips into a slow rhythm. His body moved *with* them, not against. Noah kissed under his jaw, open-mouthed, wet. Drew licked and mouthed the shell of his ear, murmuring, "That's it, buddy; that's it ..."

Crash stopped trying to understand, stopped trying to track who was doing what. He let go. Let the sound lasso his mind too, and pull it down. Let them take his body apart with mouth and touch and voice. Let the horniness and desire and sensations roll over him like a slow wave breaking. Kisses and nipping teeth dragging gently along his collarbone. His shorts slipping away from his hips. Someone's fingers digging into Crash's sides as his hips, his whole body, thrust his hard-on into the friction of someone's palm, gasping. Words, so many voices, poured over him: *Good. Just like that. Let go. You're safe. We've got you.*

And then all at once, something just *hit*--Crash had been vaguely expecting an orgasm, and that was there too, mixed in, but what exploded was something in his head, a burning outward from the core of his mind, as his body tightened, cock spurting, breath stuttered into stillness, a groan escaping as this transcendent pleasure surged outward from the core of him, making him helpless to do anything but just *experience*. It lasted, lasted ... and as it began to ease, he shuddered once, then sagged forward, his mind and his body going weightless, pliant, dazed. "That's it," Johnson said from a great distance. "Let yourself drop." The sound dragged Crash's mind down into darkness.

An unknown time passed. When Crash rose back to wakefulness, his head rested in someone's lap. Johnson. Fingers in Crash's hair, slow and comforting. "There you are," Johnson murmured. "Good boy. Welcome back."

Crash blinked up at him, lips parted, but still too blissed-out to speak.

Johnson smiled. "That was round one. Need a breather?" His thumb traced the edge of Crash's cheek. "Or are you ready for more?"

Crash blinked but didn't answer, couldn't answer, not with his mouth. But his eyes felt needy and his hips arched, just slightly. Maybe that would be communication enough?

"Well, then, here we go," Johnson smiled, nodded, touched his laptop. The loop changed to a new pattern, deepened--and pulled Crash under again.

His last thought, before the darkness wrapped him like the plushiest velvet imaginable, was: *Whatever this is, I want in.*

And then, finally, he was.

Chapter 40

Months later: The following fall semester, first day of the pledge period, when all the shiny new pledges reported to the fraternity house to be given their bunk assignments in the makeshift "pledge room" in the basement. Crash, the newly crowned pledge-master, stood at the top of the stairs, watching them gather in the common room below him like a herd of confused, nervous golden retriever puppies. Wide-eyed. Overdressed. A little too eager, and a little too unsure. That enthusiastic, pre-housebreaking energy. Perfect.

They were so *clean*, so *unmarked* ... for now. He gave them a week. Two, max. Some would fail out or leave on their own--frat life wasn't for everyone--but some would stay. Crash saw potential in several of them already.

He ran through the obligatory *welcome, pledges* speech, then: "Okay, pledges," he called, clapping once. "Shoes off. Shirts off. Pants too. Strip to your underwear. It's the house rule. We'll be issuing each of you your very own pair of boxer shorts and crocs, and those will be your pledge uniform."

A few blinked at him, unsure if this was a joke.

"I'm serious," Crash said, grinning, and cocked his head. "C'mon. If you're gonna live here, you might as well start dressing like it. And, yeah, that means less. You'll look weird *with* a shirt on around here. Welcome to fraternity life, boys."

They laughed, awkward but obedient. Crash watched as they stripped down: a mix of briefs, boxers, the occasional designer jock-strap that screamed either *overconfident* or *overcompensating*. One guy was commando, having apparently not expected to be stripped on day one, and tried to conceal his cock and balls behind a casually draped hand. One guy had abs too defined to be a freshman. Another was trying not to stare at everyone else's crotches. Crash noted it all, assessing. *Adorable*.

And of course, the pledges had noticed the bracelets. Every brother in sight--hanging off the banister, walking by with a protein shake, texting on his phone--wore one. Braided leather. Simple. Present.

So of course, when Crash asked if the pledges had questions, the questions started.

"Is this ... Are you all ... Is this a sex cult?"

Crash raised an eyebrow, grinned. "What we are," he said, "is a fraternity. And you're pledging. That means you get to learn first-hand how things work."

"Uh ..." One of the pledges, blond and clearly too polite for his own good, raised his hand to get Crash's attention. "Is that, like ... a sex thing?"

Another pledge coughed. "No, seriously. We heard rumors. About, y'know, mind stuff. And, like ... sharing ... stuff."

Crash bit back a smirk. "You'll see." He turned and started walking toward the stairs that led down into the basement. "Bundle up your stuff and follow me."

"Wait--," called the bold naked one. "Are we getting hazed?"

Crash laughed. "Nah. What you're getting first are your bunk assignments and your pledge uniforms. Trust me: If we do haze you, you'll *want* it."

That shut them up. He heard some muttering, a laugh that sounded nervous, the slaps of bare feet on wood floors.

They followed him. The stairs into the basement stretched downward to a concrete floor, a space that had weight equipment over here and, over there an area separated off by walls of wire storage shelves, boxes, random ephemera of frat life from prior years: the "pledge room" where they'd sleep.

Crash led them through the wide gap and into the interior space.

Johnson was waiting there, of course, shirtless, calm, seated on a bottom bunk with legs crossed like some half-monk, half-gym coach hybrid. Noah leaned against the bedpost, grinning. Drew was stretched out on his back on a nearby top bunk, tossing a tennis ball up, catching it, tossing again.

Crash stepped aside. "Come in," he said. "Take a seat on the floor wherever you can find space. You'll have to squeeze in, so don't be shy." The half-naked pledges flowed in, one by one. Some wide-eyed. Some skeptical. "Don't worry," Crash said, once they were all inside and finding spaces to sit, "no one's gonna bite you."

Drew tossed the tennis ball lazily and muttered, "Not unless you ask real nice."

A ripple of laughter, but fading already. The air was shifting.

Crash: "Come on. Sit wherever."

The pledges squirmed around, finding space to fit on the floor. A few stuck close together. One sat cross-legged. One perched like he might bolt. Crash waited until they were settled.

Then, casually, he motioned to the brother at the top of the stairs, who closed the basement door behind them. *Click.*

Crash turned slowly, grinned at them. All their young, dumb, perfect faces. They'd never know what hit them. "Brother Johnson, if you will, please."

Johnson cleared his throat to catch their attention. "We're going to play you a focus loop," he said, his voice calm, almost warm. "All you have to do is listen." A pause. "When the time is right for you, you'll drop. It's different for everyone. Some fast. Some slow. But you'll know." He let the moment stretch, let their nervous

glances settle into something just slightly heavier. "And, trust me, you *will* drop."

"What do you mean by *drop*? Drop what?" One of the overconfident jock-strapped ones, confused as a puppy encountering the *pretend to throw the ball* trick for the first time. Crash smirked; he was going to enjoy watching this one succumb, then watching him break.

Johnson answered the question with: "Be patient. You'll understand soon enough."

Silence.

Then--"Ready?" Johnson didn't wait for an answer, didn't need to.

The loop began. Low, vibrating tones. Not words yet. Just suggestion. Just possibility.

A couple of the pledges sat straighter, listening. Or slouched, feeling. One blinked too slowly. Crash smiled and leaned against the storage rack at the entry; Johnson had told him this loop was built to hit inexperienced minds smooth and fast, to slide them down before they understood what was happening. Already, the mood was shifting. Already, two of them were breathing in sync, now three. Crash didn't know which one would drop first. Which one would fight it. Which one would cry when he finally realized what being seen, being held, meant and how good it all felt.

But he knew one thing for sure: They'd all belong soon.

"Welcome to Delta House, boys."

Part 5: Pledge Shane and Pledge Leo

Chapter 41--Shane

The house was already louder than Shane expected. Bass-heavy music tromped from someone's room upstairs, someone was laughing too hard in the kitchen, and someone else ran by in just a jock-strap, shouting *Trevor, you fucking asshole* before vanishing down the hallway.

Shane blinked. He adjusted the strap of his duffel, suddenly less sure about everything. This wasn't like the tour. This wasn't like the website. This was actual, real-life shirtless college chaos, happening in real time around him. Did he still have time to change his mind?--Probably not. He'd agreed to pledge; he'd just have to accept his fate.

Looked like most of his fellow pledges were already here. "Pledge intake starts here in the common room in five minutes," someone called. "Put your bags in the TV room there. Bathroom's down that hall there if you need it. Feel free to look around, but stay close; don't make us come find you."

Leo appeared beside him like a summoned demon--grinning, cocky, dark curls already mussed from whatever corner of mischief he'd been rifling through. They'd met as randomly assigned roommates in the dorm, and Shane had been surprised when they'd both been given bids to pledge this fraternity. Shane had known him just a couple of weeks but already had Leo pegged as a major troublemaker, definitely not fraternity material. Well, *probably* not. The chaos around the perimeter of the common room had Shane rethinking.

"Hey, roomie," Leo smirked. "This the part where we sell our souls?"

"I think we already did," Shane said. "When they took us aside for the interviews before we pledged, and played us"--he gestured vaguely toward his head--"that audio thing."

Leo's grin got wider. "Oh, you mean the *focus loop*. Capital F. Capital L. Spooky shit, huh?" How did Leo's grin keep getting wider and wider like that?

Shane frowned. "You think it was real? Like, actual hypnosis?"

Leo snickered. "It felt good, didn't it?"

"That's not an answer."

"You're right," Leo said, breezing past him. "It's a dare."

They dropped their bags in the TV room. Shane decided to piss, because who knew when he might get another chance, and afterward trotted back to the common room because apparently being late meant push-ups. Not that Shane would have considered push-ups a punishment--he'd been a multi-sport athlete in high school, had worked hard to make sure his body was golden-boy perfect, all swimmer shoulders and abs like he had sculpted himself out of dedication and sweat. He knew he had the kind of body the other freshmen would try not to stand next to shirtless for fear of unfair comparisons.

Leo for his part was lean and wiry, with a glint in his eye that suggested he *liked* being underestimated. Shane hadn't known him long enough to tell whether Leo was joking half the time or was truly committed to living like a chaotic bisexual demigod. Either way, Leo was the only person here Shane knew, so he stood close, but not too close. He wasn't sure how the brothers would interpret Leo's sarcastic attitude, and Shane didn't want any potential bad impressions to splash over onto him.

Just as Shane settled, someone slammed the front door and someone else banged theatrically on what sounded like an actual gong. What the fuck?

Crash, the pledge-master, stood halfway up the stairs and looked over the group of pledges. He wore no shirt, no shoes, just mesh shorts and confidence--seriously intimidating, Shane thought.

"Welcome, pledges," Crash said, and his voice had an easy, been-through-it swagger. As he smiled, the room quieted; as he spoke, the assembled pledges listened.

"Okay, pledges," Crash called. "Shoes off. Shirts off. Pants too. Strip to your underwear. It's a house rule. We'll be issuing each of you your very own pair of boxer shorts and crocs, and those will be your pledge uniform."

Some of the other pledges murmured, stalling nervously. Shane started removing his shirt. Before he even finished that, Leo was down to boxer-briefs, as if daring others to look at his wiry nearly nude body on display. When Shane and the others were stripped to their underwear--well, one guy was naked, which was simply *bad planning* on that dude's part, because every frat movie ever should have warned him that frats liked to have their pledges stripped to underwear a solid percentage of the time--When the others had stripped to their underwear, Crash asked if anyone had questions.

Shane raised his hand. "Uh ... Is that, like ... a sex thing?"

Someone else coughed and added, "No, seriously. We heard rumors. About, y'know, mind stuff. And, like ... sharing ... stuff." Shane couldn't tell whether the other guy wanted the answer to be *yes* or *no*. He shifted nervously, unsure whether he himself wanted the answer to be *yes* or *no*.

Crash gave some evasive answer--"You'll see"--and distracted them by sending them downstairs to the basement to get their bunk assignments.

The "pledge room" was a joke, right? The space was basically a quarter of the unfinished basement, with wire storage racks to cordon the space from the surrounding area. Crash herded them into the space. Bunk beds lining the inside perimeter of the racks. "Take a seat on the floor wherever you can find space," Crash ordered, and, "You'll have to squeeze in, so don't be shy."

Of course that meant Shane got mashed up to Leo. The two of them had just enough space to sit cross-legged on the floor, and of course Leo in bisexual chaos demon mode made a big deal of looking over at Shane's crotch in his briefs and then grinning, theatrically wiggling his eyebrows. Like he hadn't already seen Shane in his underwear several times already in their dorm room. Shane steadfastly refused to counter-glance at Leo's red-and-black boxer-briefs decorated devil heads and flaming skulls. Had any of the brothers seen Leo looking at his crotch? Shane scowled but had no room to pull away.

Back behind them, someone closed the basement door ominously--not slamming it, but a loud *click* that echoed. Okay, this was it; now they were all committed to this, to being pledges, doing whatever the brothers said, proving they wanted to belong, deserved to belong, could hang with the big boys.

Johnson, the Johnson held in respect and awe by all the brothers, was there, waiting. Shane hadn't met him yet. Before he got his bid to pledge, Shane had been hauled away from a rush party and interviewed by--what were their names?--brothers named Noah, Drew, and Brent, but as they returned to the party, Noah had pointed to the man across the wide room and said above the loud music, "That's Johnson, you'll like him," with no explanation, as if the name alone was sufficient.

Johnson was talking, saying "We're going to play you a focus loop," and "All you have to do is listen," and "Trust me, you *will* drop," whatever that meant, because of course he didn't bother to explain.

That was when Shane recognized it--similar low hum from the night he had his interview. Noah had played it like background music while asking questions. At first Shane had thought it was intended to drown out the distant mid-party *thumpa-thump* of the whatever dance remix, but it was barely there. Still, it seemed to make Shane feel space-headed and drifty. Noah had called it a *focus loop*, though Brent called it a *vibe check*. Later, comparing notes with Leo, his roommate had called it *hypnosis*. Which was weird because Shane hadn't felt mind-controlled at the time, hadn't barked like a dog or clucked like a chicken; he'd just felt a little space-cadet-ish and happy. No big deal, right?

Now he heard the same warm tones that had slipped into his brain that night, felt them like gentle fingers massaging his thoughts. Leo made a low noise of excitement. "You remember this," Leo whispered beside him, nudging bare shoulder with bare shoulder. "Looks like we're in for round two, baby."

Shane didn't answer. He was already swaying a little, thoughts being guided somewhere quiet. Eyes heavy-lidded. Safe. Hot.

The sound was low, steady, made a comforting warmth seem to pour into Shane's bare chest. A heat in the pit of his groin, like a fuse had been lit somewhere between his ribs and cock. He didn't remember the moment his breathing synced with Leo's. Didn't remember closing his eyes. Didn't remember when the barely there words in the loop stopped being just background noise and became *his* thoughts.

He just remembered opening his eyes and seeing Crash smiling at them, at him, saying, "Good boys." And Shane wasn't sure if Crash meant all of them. Or just the two of them, Shane and Leo, still slumped into each other as they sat cross-legged on the floor.

When the others were getting up and stretching and joking like it had all just been a weird nap, Shane held back. Leo did too. They hadn't said anything. They hadn't *needed* to.

Leo leaned close and whispered: "You ever been hypnotized? I mean, not this lightweight stuff, but *really*

hypnotized?"

Shane laughed and decided to fight shock with shock. "No, bro. Why, you offering?"

Leo's smirking eyes twinkled. "You wouldn't last two minutes, pretty boy."

And Shane--golden boy, poster child, teacher's favorite--felt his skin flush in places it shouldn't.

Chapter 42--Leo

Leo wasn't jealous. He just didn't like being left out.

So when Shane started acting weird--quieter, slower, way too into those bracelet bros--Leo had to do something. They were pledges. Sure, Leo also thought wonder-boy Shane was competition, too friendly, too effortlessly cool, too pretty, too sexy, too everything Leo wanted to be, too--too *much*--that was a secret Leo would never have admitted. They were pledges, so weren't they supposed to be sticking together? How was Leo supposed to use Shane to his advantage if they didn't stick together, right?--Because Leo was hoping some of Shane's shine would splash over onto him by association. But no, Shane had been hanging out instead with the cult of blissed-out and sleepy-headed shirtless obedience bros like he wanted to be adopted by them and disappear into their ranks, like that was Shane's golden ticket to being fast-tracked for initiation into the fraternity.

And Leo?--Leo had questions.

Not that he minded the shirtless part. Hell, half the fun of rushing was going to be the *frat house vibe*--sweaty, hot guys flopped across every surface like they and their cocky smirks had been born to lounge around in barely there underwear or totally naked. And, sure, this fraternity provided plenty of great naked fantasy fodder, but the place's vibe was just a little too different from what he expected. Not in a bad way, but too still. Too quiet. Too ... *willing*. Maybe he should liven things up!

Thursday night, the house was noisy, drunk, and chaotic--shirtless or naked frat bros, pledges in their "uniforms" of boxer-shorts and hand-me-down mismatched neon plastic crocs. Which made the pledges good scenery too, at least physically, but who was the fashion sadist who decided on boxer-shorts and mismatched crocs as the pledge uniform, and how the hell had this become a tradition? Questions for later.

Right then, though, the Thursday night chaos made for perfect cover. Leo had seen Noah unlock Johnson's new "focus room" earlier. Leo waited. He watched. And when the coast was clear, he slipped inside.

The air was warm, the lights dim. Leo had been expected incense and recordings of chanting. Or maybe pendulums and giant video screens of swinging watches or spiral--typical spectacle, right? But, no, just a boring room with two beanbag chairs, some sitting pillows on the floor, a side table with a couple of bottles of water, a networked speaker probably connected to the house's wireless.

And the hum.

That sound. A not-exactly-voices sound, barely there, almost hidden in a strand of ambient music. Not really a beat; more like a pulse: low, smooth, like someone dragging silk across his thoughts.

He didn't recognize the voice at first--until it said: *Good boys listen*. Leo snorted. "Yeah, okay. 'Good boys.' *That's* totally normal."

He flopped back onto the beanbag like a challenge. "Bet I could fake it better than half these dudes."

The loop purred in his ears. *Let go of thinking. Let go of trying. Just listen. Feel how easy it is to drift ...*

Leo blinked. His laugh caught in his throat.

Wait.

His fingers were twitching. His spine was warm. There was heat *everywhere* in his body and ... Shit, was he getting hard?

"Nope. Nope, nope, nope," Leo muttered, trying to sit up.

But the air was thick, like trying to move through honey. The voice whispered again: *You like the voice, don't you? You like to just relax and listen. Give yourself permission: just relax and listen.*

Leo's cock pulsed. His hips shifted without permission, searching for friction. His throat went dry. "Fuck," he whispered. But the word didn't even sound like a curse; it sounded like a confession.

The air felt hotter, closer. Leo's arms wouldn't quite move the way he wanted. They hovered, then settled at his sides, limp. His head lolled back slightly, catching the soft hum of the loop, sinking into it.

Every syllable vibrated through his ears, his chest, down his stomach, lower. Leo bucked once, just once, but that was enough, enough to feel the ache sharpening into pressure, enough to feel his skin tighten, his pulse roar in his ears.

The voice kept dripping into him: *It feels good to stop pretending. You don't need to be in charge here. Just let go; let it happen. Let go. Let it happen. Let it happen. Let go ...* Leo gasped as pleasure seized him like a live wire and his hard cock throbbed against the fabric of his boxers, setting a spark to his pleasure, as his glans slipped under the elastic waistband, throbbed again, and he began to cum. His orgasm wasn't fast or sharp--it *rolled* through him, hot and slow and helpless. His hips jerked once, then again, and then--*release*--ejaculating ...

He didn't remember cumming, not really, but he *had* cum. When he blinked back to himself, his abs were sticky where his cock-head had pushed past the waistband of his pledge boxers, his head was swimming, and the voice was still going--slower now, softer, almost sweet. ... *Good boy.*

Leo sat in silence once the voice faded away. His hips were still shifting, like the memory of thrusting. Bare chest rising and falling too fast, not panting but not fully settled yet. Sweat cooling along his ribs. Eyes wide. Fuck, that loop was a damn *trap* and his cock was *aching* and--oh, fuck--he just *came*, didn't he? Yep, his abs were sperm-streaked. His head was still fogged. His breathing sounded obscene in the quiet.

He didn't know how long he'd been there like this, sprawled out on the beanbag, cum all over his stomach, loose-limbed and lips parted like he'd been--

And *why the fuck* had that felt better than anything he'd ever done with a girl?

Leo blinked, dazed, sticky, bare skin cooling. He rubbed a trembling hand across his stomach and winced at the mess. He needed something to clean up with. "Fuck," he whispered again, still not sure if the word was a curse or a prayer. He stood slowly, tugged his boxers back up over his softening cock. His legs wobbled. His pride felt shredded. But the worst part?--He *wanted* to go back in.

Then the door creaked open.

Leo didn't even have time to hide before Noah stepped into the room, cool, unhurried, smirking like he

already knew. "Oh, hey," Noah said casually, as if instead he was catching Leo in mid-study session or post-nap. His eyes swept the room once, then landed back on Leo, the cum on his belly. "Good loop? Good cum?"

"I didn't--!" Leo scrambled to cover himself--too late, too slow. His arm knocked a water bottle off the side table. It clattered against the floor--*clack-clack-clack*--too loud. "I--I was just--," Leo stammered, trying desperately to find an excuse.

"Testing it?" Noah offered, tone perfectly innocent. "It's a new loop; Johnson said it needed testing, so thanks. Glad it worked for you." Matter-of-fact tone, like he was offering Leo an escape.

Leo's mouth opened. Closed. Opened again.

Noah stepped closer, eyes sharp but not unkind. He picked a cloth from a shelf, held it toward Leo. "You looked pretty gone there, man." Paused. "Hot."

Leo flushed to the tips of his ears, took the small towel. "You're not gonna tell anyone, right?" He wiped himself quickly.

Noah's grin was pure sin. "Afraid I might ruin your bad-boy rep?" He tapped Leo's chest, just above the heart. "Besides ... I think the loop's already *got you*."

Then Noah turned and walked out, leaving Leo hard again, blushing, and very, very confused about whether he'd just been blackmailed, flirted with, or sucked in deeper without a single command.

Possibly all three.

And what did *got you* mean? Did he want to find out?

"*Fuuuck*," Leo swore softly, then flopped back onto the beanbag and covered his eyes.

Chapter 43--Shane

The house in mid-party was loud, alive, impossibly full. Shane stood at the edge of the living room, trying to feel like he had a clue, trying not to feel like a guest. He stood tall and athletic in his pledge uniform boxers, bare-chested. His smile came easy. So did the jokes. So did the shoulder claps, the *yo, bro!* greetings, and the way those three girls from the Sigma sorority kept glancing his way, flirtatious and hungry, even though he was a lowly freshman, a lowly pledge. Shane knew he looked good stripped to his boxers, knew he was showing a promising hint of cock-line in the front of those boxers; but he'd been told to stay attentive, stay ready to get drinks or whatever a brother told him, and he reminded himself he wasn't going to throw away his shot at lasting brotherhood by disobeying orders and chasing a one-night hookup.

And none of this distracted his mind from returning over and over to what he'd seen.

Upstairs, just a few minutes ago on an errand for a brother--*Hey, pledge, make yourself useful*--Shane had passed a partly open door. Inside sat a cluster of four brothers and two of the pledges sat on the floor, not partying--just ... *gathered*, maybe? They were shirtless, relaxed, backs resting against thighs or knees. A soft rhythm pulsed from a speaker: low tones threaded with something that might have been a voice, difficult to heard over the party noise.

One of the loops.

Like the brothers, one of the pledges in that gathering was wearing the bracelet now, black, small, understated. That made three of the pledge class wearing them now--Shane had paid attention. He wasn't sure

what the bracelets meant. No one talked about them outright.

But he knew this: the pledges who wore them had changed. They weren't blank-eyed zombies or weird cult freaks. If anything, they were just ... *more chill*. Smiling more. Focused. Getting fitter. Still hot as hell--maybe hotter--and still horny as fuck. But ... different. They moved as if the stress of classes, the insanity of pledging, the weight of the world, none of it touched them.

And Shane, despite every outward sign of having his shit together, hadn't slept a full night since pledging started. He kept up the act. The golden boy. That was his thing. Make the swim coach proud. Make his parents proud. Crush his grades. Be cool. Be wanted. But every time he bedded down on his bunk in the pledge room, something cracked a little deeper under the stress; his thoughts scattered and he clenched his fists under the covers to stop from shaking.

And tonight, the loop had drawn him like gravity.

He didn't enter the room or join the circle. He stood just close enough to the door to sort-of feel it. The bass and party roar from downstairs rumbled under his ribs and almost drowned out the loop, but it seemed to be summoning him, smooth and low, flittering like a snake's tongue across his thoughts: *You're safe here. You don't have to perform. You don't have to hold anything in.*

Something tickled in Shane's head, a temptation, a pressure behind his eyes. He couldn't blink.

Jake looked up from the gathering, saw Shane through the partly open door. Jake smiled placidly and patted the space on the floor beside him: *Come and sit.*

Shane's feet didn't move.

On the other side of Jake, another braceleted brother murmured something inaudible into Jake's shoulder, and Jake laughed--deep and slow--and they both *looked* at Shane. Their eyes didn't pierce; they *invited, lured*.

And in that moment, Shane felt their gazes in a way that burned, like they could see the cracks he tried to keep anyone else from spotting. *You don't have to hold it all together here*, Johnson had said to him once, a few days ago, just a casual statement in passing. At the time Shane hadn't understood. But tonight, remembering, Shane felt the words curve hard inside him.

Because Shane wouldn't be able to hold everything together much longer.

His thighs ached. His cock was half-hard for no reason at all. His chest was too tight. But as he was about to take a step toward the door, toward the open space beside Jake, two partygoers thundered down the hallway, laughing too loud, pushing past him, and the spell on Shane's thoughts broke. He backed away from the doorway. He'd been sent on an errand and now he needed to get back to the brother who'd sent him, to the party, retreating downstairs, spooked, wide-eyed, heart pounding.

He needed to cum. He needed to sleep. He needed to be hugged and told he wasn't crazy. And part of him--some twisted, needy part--really wanted to go back and crawl into that circle and let go. But golden boys don't crack in public, so Shane kept walking, kept smiling at whoever he passed.

And tried to pretend he hadn't *almost* given in right there on the spot.

Chapter 44--Leo

Leo had always been the flirty one. The loud one. The one who made jokes about blow-jobs while in line for at the food court and could make even the RA laugh. His default state was turned-on and turned-up--always

up, always edgy, always a little too much. But lately, something about the house had shifted. The way certain brothers looked at him. Like they already knew what he wanted before he did. Like they were seeing deeper into him than they were supposed to.

So he doubled down. He wore the loudness like armor. Walked through the house in his pledge boxers and crocks like he was walking a fashion runway in Milan, trailing intentionally too much body spray and overstated confidence. Made deliberately offhand comments like, "Bro, if you don't stop looking at me like that, I'm gonna pin you to the floor and make you thank me after."

Most of the brothers laughed, appreciating his performance. But some--like Drew and Crash, Milo and Noah--just smiled, calm and sure, like they didn't need to challenge him because they were already *inside* his head.

And that was the worst part. He could never seem to rattle them. They didn't take the bait. He was throwing matches against stones, but instead of them, he was the one burning hotter.

One afternoon, he found himself back in the new loop room, the previously unused meeting room that the brothers had been refurnishing and repurposing. Leo naturally pretended he'd wandered in by mistake. A couple of older brothers were leaving, zoned-out and smiling. Noah stayed behind. Shirtless, of course. Black bracelet with the silver disk gleaming. Languid like a cat, sprawled on the pillows. The air was silent, no loop playing.

"You always this loud?" Noah asked, without looking up as Leo stepped fully inside.

Leo smirked. "Only when I want attention--which is all the time, so yeah."

Noah nodded. "You have mine."

Leo paused. That threw him. "I'm just checking the room out," he said, recovering with a shrug. "Didn't realize it was in use."

"You sure?" Noah's tone was lazy but locked. "You've been here before, and you've been walking by, peeking in, for days."

Leo licked his lips. "Maybe I just like the sound of that loop music."

Noah smiled like a man with a secret. "Or you want to know what real control feels like."

Leo rolled his eyes. "Dude, I *am* control. You should let me hypnotize you sometime."

Noah tilted his head, appraising. "No, thanks. But you can sit," and he pointed to one of the beanbags.

Leo was already moving, sitting. He hadn't meant to, but he wasn't about to walk away and let Noah win ... whatever this competition was between them.

Noah pressed a button and that same low pulse started--bass and tone, something under the sound that made Leo's skin want to hum along.

"This is stupid," Leo said. But his hands were already loosening on his thighs. His knees spread, casual like always. His fingers were twitching, clenching.

Noah moved to sit in the other beanbag facing him, two meters away, eyes calm. "Close your eyes, Leo."

Leo opened his mouth to quip, but nothing came out. His legs felt relaxed and loose, arms oddly heavy,

getting heavier. He couldn't joke. He couldn't even sit up. Sinking back, into the beanbag, into his own head. He was realizing too late that control of his body had somehow slipped from him.

Because Noah's voice was wrapping around his thoughts like warm silk. "Let the tension go."

Leo's breath held for a second before continuing, falling into a new rhythm.

"Let the need show."

Leo's cock stirred in his pledge boxers, hardening faster than he could comprehend. *What the hell?*

The loop had been soft at first--barely there, more hum than melody--but by now it had crawled under Leo's skin like warm breath on the back of his neck, not *demanding*, not exactly, but *insistent*. Noah hadn't moved, just watched.

Leo's cock twitched. He needed to shift the mood. He couldn't move, but for now he could still talk. "You know," Leo murmured as his body relaxed a little deeper into the beanbag, "if you want to get me out of my clothes, I can think of easier ways."

Noah said nothing.

Leo wolf-grinned. "I mean, I'm not usually this easy, but I'll make exceptions for cute guys with eyes like yours."

Still no reaction.

The blatant sexual affrontery should've rattled Noah, but somehow Leo was the one sweating. He tried to grin, aiming for a smirk. "We gonna talk about our fetishes and what we're going to do to each other now? Want me to go first? Cool. I'll start ... You're kneeling, ... and I've got this rope ... and I ... I ..."

Noah almost invisibly shook his head and said, "You're trying way too hard."

Leo's mouth twitched. *What the fuck?*

Noah leaned closer. "Let go, Leo. You don't need to be in control here."

"Dude ... Told you ... I *am* control," Leo muttered, but his head was beginning to spin and even he didn't believe what he'd just said anymore.

Noah said again, "Let go, Leo. You don't need to hide the need right now, not from me."

Leo's hips bucked as a hot wave of arousal rose and crashed through him. His cock was stiff, visible through his boxers. It felt hungry; his ass felt hungry. His balls tightened. How was Noah doing this to him? No loop was playing, so this wasn't that. Was this some kind of subtle hypnosis?--If so, he didn't even know what special trigger words Noah had said. Or maybe this was some sort of cheesy post-hypnotic instruction?--*Sit in the beanbag and get sooo horny?* Except this felt too ... too absolute to be cheesy.

"That's better," Noah coaxed. "Let go. Let the need show."

Leo's eyelids were sagging, threatening to shut, and his breath felt too slow. "This ... not fair ... not ..."

"This isn't about being 'fair.' This is about how you stop pretending," Noah murmured. "You don't have to prove anything here. You don't have to perform."

Leo whimpered as his back arched. His cock felt so good, balls too, his whole body. How was he so aroused, so stimulated? "I'm not ... Fuck ... Not performing," he gasped, still trying to cling to the role he'd built for himself.

"You're begging without knowing you are," Noah said gently, leaving his beanbag, moving closer.

Leo's whole body jerked when Noah's palm cupped the back of his neck. "I'm not ... I don't ..." Leo bit his lip, rolled his hips, his cock now straining and slick inside the pre-cum soaked crotch of his boxers.

"You don't have to be the loud one. You don't have to be the one hypnotizing or in control," Noah whispered. "You just have to feel good."

And Leo did. Too good. He moaned as the tension cracked, as his hard cock-head rubbed against fabric--and without warning, he came hard, shuddering, spraying his spunk into the front of his boxers with a long and broken groan.

Afterward, the silence was not awkward, just quiet, like the hush after a thunderclap. Leo's hands relaxed their grip on the beanbag. His loosened chest rose and fell, skin flushed, the front of his boxers dark and sticky with cum. His head hung limply and his thighs twitched with little aftershocks. His lips parted like he might say something--laugh it off, maybe--but nothing came.

Noah didn't move, just stayed beside him, a comforting hand gripping Leo's shoulder. Watching. Steady.

And for once, Leo didn't crack a joke. His fingers curled weakly on the beanbag. That just happened. He hadn't posed for it, hadn't orchestrated it. He had not built up the theater of it, hadn't controlled the staging. No performance. Just ... him. His pleasure. Needy. Breathless. Real.

"I didn't ..." Leo licked his lips, tilting a little into Noah's grip. "I didn't mean to--"

"You needed it," Noah said quietly. "That's all that matters. You let it happen."

Leo's clearing eyes darted down at his body, the proof, then back to Noah. "Fuck. That was--That really happened, didn't it?"

Noah nodded.

Leo's throat tightened. He felt exposed, not because he was mostly physically naked, and not because he'd just made a cum-shot mess of himself with someone else watching, but because he hadn't performed. He had been stripped of his masks, his smirks, his scripts of cocky, confrontational shit to say. He had been left with just his naked need. "I don't know if I'm okay with that," he whispered, dropping his head back again.

Noah leaned back slightly, giving him space. "You don't have to decide right now."

Leo stared at the ceiling. "I always thought if someone really saw the real me--got past all the bullshit and the drama, past the kinky stuff--they'd be disappointed."

"And now?"

Leo looked down at himself. At his soaked boxers. At the way his body still trembled with aftershocks. "I think you got under my bullshit."

Noah gave a small, sincere smile.

"I didn't scare you off?" Leo said, softer this time. "Even like ... like that?"

"Nope."

Leo laughed once--low and strange. "Well, shit. I'll have to try harder next time." But he couldn't muster anything like his usual sarcasm when he said that. Just like that, for the first time in his life, Leo didn't feel like the one holding the chain, didn't feel like he had to be, either. And somewhere, under the afterglow, under the heat, under the shock of having given in without even realizing it?--He ... liked it. A lot.

After, Noah whispered, "Next time, you'll beg for release before I even touch you."

Leo couldn't remember how to argue. He couldn't think of words, so he simply listened to the sound of his own breathing, still panting. He felt the heat of Noah's palm moving to his neck, Noah's brief kiss on his forehead, and the slight arousing of his cock in response. Dammit, did Noah have his dick on a leash now?

And the thought: *This isn't what I expected. But, fuck, I want more.*

Chapter 45--Shane

When he wasn't busy with pledge challenges or chores, Shane immersed himself in the social lives of the brothers, spending time with them, talking to them, laughing at their jokes. Face time was the key to getting his name out there, making sure they knew who he was, making sure they liked him and would initiate him into their brotherhood.

Still, Shane had told himself he wouldn't come back to that room upstairs, the one where he'd seen the gathering--not yet, not when his head was this messy. But his feet had walked him here anyway. The door he'd seen during the party was again partially open, others inside; and this time, without waiting to be noticed, he stepped inside.

The room was quiet, warm, too warm. Jake, having looked up, again patted a spot beside him. Shane sat between Jake and Toby on the edge of the rug, cross-legged like the others, trying not to flinch when someone else's thigh brushed his. Five brothers, one other pledge, and everyone but Shane was already marked.

A loop was already playing. Low pulses. That sound again, almost like a voice at the edge of hearing. It coiled through the room like a fog, whispering fragments and nonsense that sounded too much like truth. *You're safe. You're wanted. You don't have to be perfect. You don't have to be strong all the time.* Shane clenched his jaw. He shifted, tried to focus on the wall, anything but the voice. He wasn't weak. He wasn't fragile. But, fuck, his chest hurt, like something was locked tight behind his ribs and didn't know how to get out. And he was tired, so fucking tired. And somehow the voice *knew*.

Noah, across from him, was already deep. Eyelids fluttering, body slack with need. Another minute and he'd probably be laid across someone's lap, and Noah could rest here. Shane wondered how long until he himself--

"Shane."

His name, quiet, unmistakable.

Shane's eyes slid toward Johnson, who was already crouching in front of him, calm, bare chest and feet, like some gentle storm had manifested into human form and put on sweatpants. "Welcome," he said.

Shane swallowed. "I'm ... not--"

"You don't have to be," Johnson said.

From beside him, Jake's hand squeezed Shane's shoulder, thumb stroking the skin lightly, barely there. Shane gasped. That touch was all the cracks needed. Shane's gasp--the moment he lost control--came as the cracks fragmented. His thoughts seemed to misfire. His spine straightened, eyes widening, lips parting. His hands twitched in his lap. The warmth from Jake's fingers stayed with Shane even after they pulled away. Shane blinked rapidly, unable to focus, losing himself in the loop, the voice, Johnson's voice.

"Let go," Johnson said. "You're ready. Let yourself drop. Just for now. Just to see what it's like."

Shane didn't understand, but maybe he didn't need to. His eyelids slid shut. The loop coiled under his thoughts, pulling away the underpinning. *You don't have to hold it all together. You don't have to hold it all together. You don't have to--*

And then he wasn't. Wasn't holding anything. Wasn't resisting. He was sinking slowly, then faster, then falling, not like tripping--Was this *dropping*?--It felt like an easy surrendering, like lowering a weight he hadn't realized he'd carried for so long.

The loop and its pulse were inside him now, not just in the air, not just around him, but *inside*. Every breath came slower, heavier, needier. Every brush of skin felt brighter. Johnson's voice--still low, still steady--guided him like a lifeline in water too deep to swim.

"Feel them," Johnson whispered. "Let them in."

A hand was on Shane's ribs, another on his thigh, and someone's mouth brushed against his neck, not kissing, just breathing against it--like they knew he was seconds from unraveling. His back arched. Not for anyone else. Not to perform. Just to feel more, to expose more skin to their touches and mouths. Pleasure curled through him, tight and aching. His legs trembled. His throat made a sound he'd never heard himself make before.

"Good," murmured someone, maybe no one.

His body tilted, and gentle hands laid him down. His hand slid on the rug. The air in his lungs turned sharp, shuddery. His pledge boxers were slipping away, and his revealed cock was so hard.

Johnson's voice again, low and molten: "You're not performing. You're not pretending. You're not alone."

The words anchored him just as a warm mouth closed over his dick, slow and certain. Shane bucked his hips into it, helpless and needy, wanting so much more.

The tension broke. Shane's whole body went still and wild all at once--head rolling back, thighs tensing, heart thudding against his ribs like it had never been touched before. He came hard into that mouth and the throat behind it, came with a moan that turned halfway into a gasp, the pleasure stretching out impossibly long, spunk squirting in hard blasts, over and over, chest heaving, legs shaking.

The loop kept playing. The hands kept holding him. And for once, in the middle of everything, Shane didn't feel like he was falling apart; he felt like he was being held together.

Lips found him; hands found him too. Touches that weren't demanding, weren't perfunctory--were about connection. Pressure without expectation. His dick rose again.

He moaned as everything rose too, the arousal, the sensations. Cried out once more as he climaxed again, then minutes later, again. Felt someone whisper against his throat, "That's it. You're doing so well."

What was happening didn't feel humiliating. It felt like *release*.

Later, when the room was quiet again, just bodies breathing and soft skin and shared heat, Shane curled in the aftermath, arms looped loosely around his knees. He didn't speak. How many times had he cum? Or had everything been one long cum with a lot of little ejaculatory peaks? He had no clue. Jake, beside him, had a comforting hand on Shane's shoulder, like they were buddies--buddies who had just experienced a prolonged, intense trance and three or four, maybe more, soul-cracking orgasms.

Bare feet in front of him. Shane looked up to see Johnson crouching again, still calm but naked now.

"You didn't break," Johnson said softly.

Shane blinked, unsure when the tears had started. "I didn't?"

"You *opened*."

Shane laughed once, a little cracked. "Doesn't feel that different."

Johnson leaned in, kissed his hair. "It will."

Somehow, Shane believed him.

Later, with Jake's hand still on his shoulder, Shane blinked slowly, coming back from a brief nap, trying to orient himself in the soft haze of afterglow from having his world, his self, broken apart--or *opened* in Johnson's words. Shane was still on the floor, sprawled half against Jake's chest. The loop had stopped. His heart was still racing. His breath, still shallow. But Jake's hand was firm on his shoulder, grounding.

And Johnson was still here. "You did well," Johnson murmured, his voice low, not hypnotic now--just praising.

Shane couldn't speak yet. He felt limp, strength still gone. Raw. But he felt no panic in it. Just the lightness after a weight of something had finally been let go.

Johnson and Jake helped him sit up, and one of them said, "Take your time."

Shane leaned forward, elbows on knees. He was still naked. That didn't bother him. What bothered him were the cracks inside--the ones that had split open in the quiet. "I didn't think ..." Shane swallowed. He stared at the simple leather and silver bracelet around his right wrist. When had that been put on him? He didn't want to take it off, maybe not ever. He swallowed again. "I didn't know it would feel like that."

Johnson gave a small nod. "That's how you know it was real."

Someone knocked at the door. Johnson didn't answer, just reached back and opened it. Leo stepped in--shirtless, pledge boxers, damp hair, a faint smirk on his lips. But his expression faltered when he saw naked Shane. Leo looked at Johnson, then at Shane again. Whatever Leo had planned to say changed to an expression of concern. "Hey, golden boy, you good?"

Shane tried to nod. "Yeah. I think so."

Leo walked in slowly, glancing at Johnson for permission, not asked out loud, but Johnson gave a faint tilt of his head--an invitation.

"You need me?" Johnson asked Shane quietly. "Or do you want a minute with him?"

Shane hesitated. "You can stay. But ... I don't mind if he does too."

Leo dropped down beside them with more grace than expected. His usual cocky energy was muted, but not gone. Just ... softened or rubbed smooth.

"You look like someone broke you open," Leo said. "In a good way."

Shane released a shaky laugh. "Yeah. That." He looked harder at Leo. "You look like you've been through some shit too."

"Yeah. That," Leo echoed with a smile, the first Shane had ever seen that wasn't a smirk.

They sat in silence for a moment, Shane between the four of them, Johnson, Jake, Leo. Not exposed--held. He didn't know what would happen next, but he knew he didn't have to face it alone.

Chapter 46--Leo

And now the bracelet bros had gotten Shane? Not good, Leo thought. Not unexpected, the way Shane had been hanging out with them, but not good. Sure, Shane looked good as one of them, but he'd looked good before too. More importantly, if the golden boy was already sucked in, Leo might not be able to use his *benefit by association* plan to get accepted as into brotherhood. Which would mean Leo would have to earn brotherhood on his own merits. And frankly, Leo knew he was kind of an asshole, maybe too much of an asshole to get initiated. He kind of liked Shane as a person, maybe more than he wanted to admit, but he told himself the excess was because he'd liked using Shane's golden glow as a tool. Now he needed a new strategy.

Leo felt like he needed to regain control of this situation, regain his momentum, starting with Noah. He needed a plan, so he chose a reliable one that always worked.

Step one: Go to the room Noah shared with Johnson and Milo, and strut in like he owned the place.

Step two: Tease Noah, taunt him, maybe even pin him down, whisper filth, make him blush.

Step three: Win.

Easy.

Noah was already seated when Leo arrived, cross-legged on the rug, his lean chest bare, his bracelet glinting in the low light. He looked up at Leo without a smile, but not unkindly. Steady. Settled.

"There you are," Noah said.

"You say that like you expected me." Leo grinned automatically, the practiced chaos demon following his familiar plan. He parked himself in the desk chair, still higher than Noah--because sometimes spatial superiority was important too.

Noah nodded as if only vaguely paying attention. "I did expect you." A pause. "I just wasn't sure how ready you'd be."

Leo snorted and threw himself into a cocky stretch, arms over his head. "Ready for what? You? C'mon, I've been topping guys like you since sophomore year of high school."

Noah just looked at him, and his expression and the casual tilt of his head reminded Leo of Johnson. Noah seemed calm, a little amused. "Really."

"I mean, yeah. What, you think I'm gonna melt the second you say *submit* or *obey me* or some shit?"

"We use a different word for that, but you already have. You already know you will," Noah said quietly.

Leo's laugh stalled in his throat. "What?" The beauty of his plan was that it could unfold in a number of ways and still reach a successful end--but what seemed to be happening was ... not that.

Noah didn't rise. Didn't raise his voice. Just opened a hand in a slow, inviting curl and pointed to the floor. "Down."

Leo's body flowed like water before his mind even realized, out of the chair and toward the floor. His knees landed hard--"Ow!"--heart hammering, breath snatched from his lungs. His body had assumed a classic kneeling position. "What the fuck--!"

"Be silent for a while." Noah stood slowly. Came closer, close enough that Leo could smell the warmth on his skin, the faint musk of sex from a few hours ago. Close enough that Leo's mouth watered.

"So you want to know what real control feels like, right?" Noah murmured.

Leo wanted to say something. Anything. A joke. A barb. A snarky line. But the words wouldn't come. *Be silent for a while ... Be silent ...* His mouth opened. Closed. Opened again.

Noah touched his cheek. "You can talk when you're ready," Noah said, almost a whisper. "Or not. You don't need to prove anything to me."

Leo shivered. The tension in him twisted and crinkled. No hands had forced him down. No overt submission commands held him there. Just Noah's words, this connection, their interlocking body heat.

Then Noah knelt, too, right in front of him, eye to eye. "You want to be in control?" Noah asked softly. "Then let yourself go. Letting go is your ultimate act of control, because only you can do it. Only you can release everything. Let yourself feel it. I won't push. I'll just be here."

Leo felt like a live wire, heart raw. No one had ever said that to him, not in those words, not like that.

Noah leaned forward, lips brushing his ear. "All you have to do?--Is say yes."

The arousal hit Leo like a fuse lit inside his gut, burning toward his cock and balls. "Yes," he sighed. "Fuck, yes--"

Noah kissed him. The kiss wasn't aggressive, wasn't even that deep. Just lips touching his like a question, like a promise, like maybe Leo was worth slowing down for. Leo knew he should say something. Anything. A joke, maybe. Something about mind control and cult orgies and how he was *so* going to write a one-man show about all this. But the words tangled in his throat like cotton.

Noah didn't say anything. Just looked at him, quietly, steadily, as a loop played. Had it been playing before, too softly for him to register? Leo knelt on the floor like some frat-house altar boy with a hard-on and no clue what came next.

The silence wasn't empty. It *thrummed*.

Then Noah moved. Just a little. His hand rose, fingertips tracing the side of Leo's face--not possessive, not guiding. Just *there*, present.

"You don't have to impress me," Noah said, voice low. "Not here."

Leo's breath hitched as the loop wove through his thoughts. A flush of energy rolled over his skin. Not the cocky kind that always got him laughs or a hand down his jeans--but something heavier. Slower. His stomach clenched. His chest ached. His dick throbbed without moving.

"You don't have to lead," Noah murmured. "You get to follow."

Leo swallowed hard. His hands twisted loosely in his lap; he couldn't hold a fist because his fingers kept relaxing.

"You get to feel good," Noah finished, and that was somehow the one with the most impact.

Leo tried hard to smirk. His plan ... He needed ... He tried to summon the little shit he usually was--the flirt, the performer, the shameless tease, the confrontational role. But all he could manage was a breathless whisper: "Fuck ..."

Noah smiled, just a little, then reached forward, one hand resting lightly at the back of Leo's neck. His thumb stroked the soft hairs there, grounding him, anchoring him.

And Leo let his forehead drop against Noah's chest. His knees went weak, even on the floor. His cock was so hard it ached, leaking against the curve of his thigh. But he didn't move. Didn't rut. Didn't beg. Just ... *existed*. Surging with need, but safe inside it for once.

Leo could hear Noah's heartbeat, like a different kind of loop. Noah's hand moved again--over his shoulder, down his arm, each touch a permission, not a command. A signal. *You're allowed to feel this. You're allowed to want this.*

Leo's body shivered as Noah's hand caressed his cock. "Cum when you're ready," Noah murmured near Leo's ear. "Cum when you need to." Fingertips stroking his cock lightly through his pledge boxers.

When Leo's climax hit, it wasn't messy or wild or theatrical. His cock throbbed, pulsed, and suddenly Leo felt the rise and he came. His orgasm was quiet. Controlled. Devastating. Like a sigh made of pure sunshine tugged from the deepest part of his chest as his cum squirted.

When the blaze was over, when the world seemed to return to a new normal, Leo didn't move right away. He stayed kneeling, even after Noah stood and stepped away. Leo's breath came slowly. He wasn't dizzy, not exactly--but his balance had gone strange, like the floor had learned to tilt under him. His limbs felt warm. Not sore. Just ... pliant.

Noah came back into view with a bottle of water and an unreadable expression. "Here," he said. "Drink."

Leo took it; when their fingers touched as the bottle passed hands, his spine reacted as though he had stuck his finger into an electrical outlet. His fingers twitched. His thighs clenched. He brought the bottle to his mouth because doing so gave him something to do besides tremble.

Noah sat in front of him again and watched him drink. Not staring, not smug. Just *there*, watching.

Leo wanted to speak. Joke it off. Be cocky. Be fine. But all he managed was: "What the hell was that? I didn't think I could give up control like that. I just got ... fucking ... wrecked by a guy who didn't even raise his voice."

Noah leaned in, kissed his jaw. Noah's hand traced lazy shapes on his shoulder. "You didn't get 'wrecked.' And you liked it."

Leo looked away. "I didn't say I didn't. I just ..." He tried to find the words. *I just dropped because you said a single word. You barely touched me and still made me just give you everything. I just--*

His voice finally emerged, small and stunned. "I didn't know I could feel that much. That vulnerable. That ... gone."

Noah nodded.

"I thought I was playing," Leo admitted. "Like, I thought I was *acting*. You know? That I could control it. Flirt my way out of it."

"And now?"

Leo swallowed. His lips still tingled. "Now I want more."

Noah stepped closer. "More what?"

Leo looked up. "Of that. Of whatever you just did. Of whatever the *fuck* just happened to me."

Noah smiled, a warm welcoming one. He touched Leo's jaw, and whispered, "You don't have to perform here. You can just be."

Leo's eyes stung; was he crying? He had no idea why. He let himself lean into the touch, body still loose, soul still bare. He wasn't hard anymore, but that didn't matter. He felt high. He felt recognized. He whispered, "So what happens now?"

Noah's fingers moved into his hair. "Now we help you figure out who you are. Without the noise. Without the mask. Just you."

Leo wanted to laugh, or cry, or curl up in someone's arms and sleep for a year. Instead, he nodded and let Noah's words settle. Leo had always thought being wanted meant being wanted *for something*--his looks, his mouth, his cock, his confidence. But here? Maybe he was wanted *just because*.

And damn if that wasn't the scariest, sexiest thing he'd ever heard.

Chapter 47--Shane

Shane hadn't slept, not really, maybe twenty minutes at a time, jolting awake with his heart racing.

Every time his head hit the pillow, his mind started sprinting. Had he done enough? Leo had found him there, but how much did he suspect? Was Johnson disappointed about how Shane had broken open? Had his moans been too loud? Too needy? Did anyone else see? Did they *know*?

By mid-morning, he was messed up: under-eye shadows, jittery fingers, hiding behind a baseball cap and a hoodie even though the weather was hot outside and sunny, even though hoodies in the frat house weren't part of the pledge uniform. Screw the rules for once!

Jake found him slumped on the couch, watching a rerun of some game on a sport network. Jake started with: "You okay?"

Shane shrugged. "Sure."

Jake tilted his head, studying him. "You're lying."

Shane managed a crooked half-smile. "Yeah. Kind of my specialty."

Jake didn't push, just sat next to him, close enough to make Shane's skin prickle. Not threatening--just *nearby*.

After a long pause, Shane whispered, "I can't stop thinking. My brain won't stop."

Jake nodded slowly. "Do you want it to? Come with me."

They ended up back in the loop room. No one else was there. The lights were low. The hum was already rolling, soft and slow and steady.

"I don't want the full trance," Shane said, nervous. "Not--not like last time."

"Then we won't go that deep," Jake said gently. "Just enough to make your brain shut the fuck up."

Shane barked out a surprised laugh. "Yeah, shut up, brain. Sounds like a plan."

Jake smiled. "Sit down. You trust me?"

Shane hesitated, then nodded. "Sure, I guess."

They sat on the floor, backs against the beanbags. Jake took his hand--not dominating, not controlling, just *holding*. Their thighs brushed.

"Just breathe," Jake said. "You don't have to be perfect right now."

Shane had heard those words before, but this time they slapped at him harder than he expected. "I always have to be perfect," Shane whispered. "That's the whole point of being me."

Jake turned and met his eyes. "That's not the point of being you."

Silence stretched. The loop continued to hum.

"Close your eyes," Jake said. "Just listen. Just breathe. I've got you."

And as he listened, something inside Shane cracked. Not big. Not loud. Just a final seam splitting open. A pressure he didn't realize he'd been holding suddenly vanished. Tears surprised him. Slow, hot, shameful. But Jake didn't pull away. He pulled closer.

"I've got you," Jake whispered again, hand still wrapped around Shane's, thumb tracing small circles across his knuckles.

"I don't know how to stop," Shane whispered.

"You don't have to," Jake murmured. "That's the loop's job. That's *my* job."

Shane choked back a sob and let his head fall against Jake's shoulder, all his breath coming out at once like he'd been holding it for years. He was ready to let someone hold the pieces.

The hoodie came off. Shane's torso was bare now, skin buzzing from more than just exposure. He wasn't chilly. He was ... *aware*, of his body, of Jake's, an athlete's body like Shane's, of the heat building between them. Jake leaned in until their chests touched--skin to skin. And everything slowed.

Their foreheads pressed together. Their noses brushed. Their breath synced, slowly, *deliberately*. Shane could feel Jake's exhale before he heard it, warm against his cheek. Hands moved, gentle and exploring. One of Jake's traced the curve of Shane's ribs, the line of his side, then came back to rest just over his heart. It stayed there.

"You're right here," Jake whispered. "Don't run from it. You don't have to be anywhere else."

Shane's eyes fluttered closed. The touch wasn't about control, wasn't about permission or punishment. It was *presence*.

Their hips brushed. Nothing rushed. Nothing forced. But the arousal was there--building not from dominance, but from connection.

Shane leaned into the next kiss, a soft one, barely open-mouthed, but it ran through him like lava.

Jake shifted until Shane was in his lap, their legs tangled, bodies pressed together, lips grazing between slow breaths. Arousal buzzed under the skin, steady and warm--not urgent, but waiting to be *earned*.

One of Jake's hands found Shane's waist. The other rested on the small of his back, holding him like something precious. "I've got you," he said again.

Shane's whole body responded to the words--hips twitching forward, breath catching, a low noise slipping from his throat, mingling with the loop playing in the air around them.

They kissed again, deeper, messier. Jake's hand slid to Shane's chest, palm flat. Shane gasped. The pressure and body heat there felt ... what? Comforting? Arousing? Like Indian food, too many spices muddled together to identify? That last thought nearly made Shane snicker, but Jake's other hand found his cheek, fingers gently but firmly guiding Shane to look at him. Jake's gaze was steady. "Breathe for me," he said.

Shane obeyed. Jake moved his hand lower. Shane didn't stop him. Jake's fingers curled around Shane's cock, a slow reverence, like Shane was something sacred instead of shattered. Jake didn't stroke hard, not yet, stroked just enough for Shane to feel it, enough to let Shane's body *feel* instead of *hold*. Jake's lips pressed to Shane's temple, feather-light. "You don't have to think right now. You don't have to be strong. You just have to feel me."

Shane's hips twitched. He whimpered. "Fuck--Jake--"

Jake's hand moved steadily now, a little tighter, a little faster--still no urgency, just rhythm. Shane melted into it, his whole body trembling, unraveling. Shane's hand found Jake's erection too, applied the same pressure and rhythm. Jake whispered again, just above his ear: "That's it. Good boy. Drop, good boy; let yourself drop for me."

That sparked something inside him. Shane's mind began to cloud as his body launched. He moaned, guttural and honest, and came hard, breath punching out of him in a stutter as his hips jerked, body seizing with release. His cum spilled across his stomach and Jake's hand, hot and messy, as Shane's thoughts went foggy and dim. Jake kept holding him through it, didn't stop stroking as the shudders began to slow and Shane's awareness sank into a heavy erasing numbness. His last impression was of Jake stroking his own cock and beginning to anoint Shane's chest with his cum.

Later, when Shane began to drift upward toward consciousness again, he found his head pressed into Jake's shoulder. He didn't speak, probably couldn't. Didn't move, even when the loop faded to quiet or when Jake ran fingers through his hair, comforting. Didn't flinch when Jake leaned in and whispered, "Good boy. You're safe. Are you still with me?"

Shane nodded, barely, against Jake's shoulder. He whispered into Jake's neck, "Thank you."

Jake just pressed a kiss into his hair. "You don't have to thank me for being here for you."

Shane didn't know what to say. So he just let himself breathe. His mind was quiet for the first time in what felt like forever. He didn't feel broken anymore. He felt raw, stripped down--not in a humiliated way. Just ... open, for the first time in a long time.

He felt *held*.

And that was enough.

Chapter 48--Leo

Leo woke up floating, his cock hard. Neither of those situations was new.

But the light was wrong for morning--too warm, too low. His head was thick, limbs heavy. He shifted slightly and realized with surprise that he was not in his own pledge bunk--The wrong mattress beneath his back, too soft and too warm, a faint citrus scent in the air, the sound of one other person breathing instead of a squadron of pledges.

Leo's eyes snapped open.

Yeah, Johnson and Milo's room, where Noah also stayed. And, yeah, Leo was very naked.

As was Noah, curled behind him, one leg hooked around his own, one arm heavy across his chest. Leo had never been the little spoon before. He wasn't even sure he *believed* in little spoons. But here he was, cock stiff, whole body aching in that lazy, used way that said: *Every orifice got wrecked last night*. Maybe multiple times, too.

Backtracking along his memories: he didn't remember falling asleep here, or the sex his body absolutely proved they'd had. Didn't remember a lot after the moment Noah told him to kneel.

A vague heat flushed through him--not embarrassment, not quite--something closer to recognition, like his body already knew why he was here and had agreed to something his brain hadn't caught up to yet. He didn't want to ask.

Because maybe, maybe he didn't want to know, not yet anyway.

Noah shifted behind him, still half-asleep, and whispered something low, something Leo didn't catch entirely but felt more than heard. Noah's breath stirred the back of Leo's neck. Warm. Intimate. Soothing.

Leo had never seen anyone look so happy just being near someone else. He tensed. Then--

"Mm," Noah hummed, not moving much. Just enough to nestle closer. Without opening his eyes, Noah pressed his lips softly to Leo's shoulder and whispered, "You're where you need to be. Just stay right here."

Leo should've made a joke. He should've made a crack about how he was too hot to handle, or about how he was obviously Noah's new spoon of choice. But instead he just lay there, letting Noah's dangerous mouth rest near his neck, their legs tangled. *Dangerous* because of the things that mouth could make him do, make him feel ...

But the true danger was more subtle: Leo *didn't want* to move.

Noah whispered again. "You don't have to be anything but right here, right now. Don't worry--Johnson and Milo found someplace else to spend the night. We have the room, and privacy, 'til we tell 'em they can come back."

The words curled into him, slow and perilous. "I didn't mean--," Leo said, voice low, trying to summon his usual bravado, failing. "I didn't mean to, like, want all this."

Noah's hand stroked gently along Leo's ribs. "But you do. Everyone says they don't mean to want it, but they do."

Leo made a helpless sound under Noah's hand as it found his nipple, something between a sigh and a whimper.

"Just let it happen," Noah breathed, and leaned in to kiss him. Not a teasing kiss. Not a challenge. Just ... permission and something deeper than either of them had planned.

Leo melted under it.

His hips shifted, brushing against Noah's thigh. Their skin slid hot and bare. Noah inhaled sharply and pressed in, close enough that Leo could feel every inch of his cock--hard, wanting, steady.

He let Noah guide the rhythm. Hips grinding slow. Mouths opening, swallowing each other's dicks, sixty-nine, the mattress a blur of urgency and friction beneath them.

No words now. Just breath and sweat and tongues and the undeniable truth of *this*.

Leo pulled his mouth off Noah's cock, buried his face in Noah's thighs, his body coiling tighter and tighter as he stroked Noah's dick by hand. This arousal wasn't rough or fast, but instead it was *inevitable*.

Noah's fingers had replaced his mouth on Leo's cock too. "Cum for me," Noah whispered, before cupping his lips over Leo's glans again.

Leo shuddered once, hard, and ecstasy burst from his balls and dick and burned outward. A gasp he couldn't hold back, as his orgasm sent him skyward, everything spilling out of him--lust, confusion, craving. His whole body trembled, propelling his cum into Noah's mouth.

Noah came soon after, his semen quiet and warm against Leo's skin.

They lay tangled, dazed, breaths synced again. Leo blinked up at the ceiling. "This isn't what I thought I wanted," he said, voice hoarse and raw. "This isn't what I meant to want."

Noah didn't laugh, instead kissed Leo's temple. "Yeah," he murmured, "that's kind of the point."

Chapter 49--Shane

He still caught himself staring at the bracelet on his wrist.

Even now, even after everything--after the drops, after the times he'd woke in Jake's arms, Jake calling him his *good boy* like Shane was a happy puppy--Shane would glance down and lift his wrist, run his fingers along the braided leather like it was still new.

He wore it openly now: The sign, the mark, the bond. The strange part was how easy liking the bracelet, the bond, was becoming. He *wanted* his mark to be seen.

He noticed the want most when Jake looked at him. That *look*: slow and steady, like Shane wasn't just hot or tall or well-hung or good at looking good in nothing but a pair of boxer-shorts, but someone *real*. Like Jake saw right through the smile, past the jokes and the hair and the abs to the core of him, and kept wanting him anyway.

Tonight, the common room was half-full of shirtless or naked brothers and faint music with no discernible source. Shane had just finished a quick set of push-ups in the hallway to get a quick *lookin' good* pump--old habits--and trotted in sweaty and flushed.

Jake and casual Brent were on the couch, looking at something Jake's phone, the flicker of light caught in Jake's hair. They looked up as Shane entered. Brent made a smiling joke about not standing in the way of *shirtless bro-ology*, in spite of being nearly naked in underwear and braceleted himself, and happily scooted over to make room for Shane. Meanwhile, Jake's eyes were landing on Shane with that familiar intensity.

"Please don't look at me like that," Shane said, still catching his breath, dropping into the vacated couch space beside Jake.

"Like what?" Jake didn't even smirk.

Shane wiped his forehead with the back of his arm, which had the effect of framing his bare torso. He didn't miss how Jake's eyes tracked the movement. "Like I'm a walking thirst trap, or an aesthetic, or--whatever."

Jake turned toward him. "You think I look at you that way?"

Shane snickered. "And you think I don't notice?"

Jake leaned in, and his body heat felt like a furnace to Shane. "I think," Jake said slowly, "you're aching to be seen. And I'm seeing you. All of you, my good boy."

Shane's mouth went still. "I--" He meant to say something cocky. Something light. Something shallow. But his thought were swirling and nothing came out. Being called Jake's *good boy* increasingly made him feel ...

Jake held up his phone. "You want to try the loop again, puppy?--The special *good boy* one that's just for us?"

Shane hesitated. The first time, the special loop Jackson had made just for them had so easily taken him apart. Actually, Shane admitted to himself, *every* time it had taken him apart, but he was getting used to coming apart with Jake there. This time?--This time he wasn't afraid of falling. He looked at Jake and nodded. They were on a couch in the common room, others around, but Shane didn't care who saw. Everyone else had their own situations; everyone else understood.

Jake gave Shane one earbud, kept the other for himself. The loop was a simple one: A slow tone, a whisper fed into their minds under the sound. *Open up*, it seemed to say, *and let yourself be seen. Two become one.* Over and over. Gentle. Seductive. Bonding.

Shane leaned back into the cushions, his body touching Jake's from thigh to shoulder, more than enough, not nearly enough. He told himself: *Breathe in. Breathe out. Let go.* The initial tones of the loop softened in his ears. His muscles unlocked. His chest rose and fell, slower now, thoughts slowing too.

Jake's fingers brushed his wrist. "I'm right here, my good boy," Jake said, voice thickening with trance too. "You can feel whatever you need to feel. Tell me what you feel."

Shane's lips moved before he could censor. "I used to jerk off to the thought of someone watching me sleep."

Jake didn't blink. Just leaned closer.

Shane whispered, eyes half-lidded, "I don't want just sex. I want safety, and then sex, in that order." The loop hummed. Shane's pulse followed it.

"Good boy. I'm still here," Jake said.

Shane turned, neck loosening, forehead resting against Jake's, their breath shared. "I thought if I was hot enough, nobody would ask if I was okay."

Jake touched his jaw, slow and reverent, and kissed him. This was definitely not their first kiss, definitely not the deepest--just warming up, but already feeling earned. Shane gasped into it--because he could hide nothing now. His mind was opening up, and Jake was still right there.

They kissed harder. Hands roamed. Heat flared. Jake pulled Shane into his lap, and Shane straddled him without thinking, the loop echoing through his body like permission.

Clothes were discarded--Shane's pledge uniform, Jake's shorts and briefs. Moans built. Someone passed a bottle of lubricant.

Shane's legs straddled Jake's thighs on the couch, and Shane lowered himself onto that cock he'd come to know so well. His bracelet pressed tight against his wrist as he rocked against his ass against Jake's hips, slowly at first, Jake's dick finding the best sweet spots inside him, and Shane's cock thumping against Jake's abs, finding friction there, the ripples of pleasure from his cock echoing a physical kind of truth. As the loop played in the shared earbuds, Jake's hands had settled on Shane's hips. A promise.

Shane rocked against him a little faster now, their familiar rhythm, and Shane savored the sensations in his ass, his cock, his head, gasping into Jake's mouth now that their bodies and breathing pushed at each other. The heat wasn't overwhelming; it was soothing, making Jake the center of Shane's universe again. Their kisses deepened. Shane's hands tangled in Jake's hair. Jake groaned and slid his hands up Shane's back, drawing their chests together, skin to skin.

They parted only long enough to swap, limbs fumbling awkwardly as they shifted on the couch, Shane sitting, Jack crouching over him, causing some of the brothers on the couches to snicker, watching them, maybe jacking off alongside them. Shane felt his cock enter Jake, and he felt greedy, wanted to be inside Jake the whole time. Shane ground up harder into Jake's ass, pleasure sparking. He wrapped a hand around Jake's cock, felt it pulse in his grip, hard and eager and perfect. Jake's fingers traced the edge of the bracelet on Shane's wrist, his thumb circling the skin there as if memorizing it. *Two become one*, the loop whispered in the earbud.

"I *want* this," Shane said, voice rough, the last words he would be able to form for a while. "I want *you*."

They moved together, rhythm synced, friction building. Shane's head tipped back and he moaned, hips jerking, every nerve on fire, helpless against the slow up-and-down glide of Jake's ass on his rod. Jake whispered a low command--not a trigger, just devotion--and his voice made Shane's cock twitch in his grip. "Let yourself cum," Jake murmured, reverent now, like worship, and "Good boy."

So, yes, Shane came first--loud, hard, unguarded--spilling his cum into Jake's ass as his body convulsed, head thrashing back before falling forward against Jake's skin. Jake followed seconds later, pulled into orgasm by the sight of Shane undone, the feel of Shane bucking in his arms. Jake groaned against Shane's neck as he came, spurting cum between them, clutching him close, their bodies locked in that moment.

Afterward, breathless and grinning, they collapsed together on the couch, surrounded by their witnessing

friends.

Shane lay with his head on Jake's chest, mind still numb, no words yet--not capable of words yet. The loop still played somewhere in the earbud like a background, fainter now, replaced by something stronger and more immediate: The way Jake's fingers ran through his hair. The way Jake whispered, "You were never just pretty to me, puppy." And the way Shane believed him.

Chapter 50--Leo

Leo wasn't performing anymore.

He had no need. Not here. Not now. Maybe didn't even have the *ability* to perform here, not when the air itself already knew who he really was, when every breath from Noah coaxed out another truth he hadn't realized he'd swallowed. Leo knelt on the floor of Johnson and Milo's room, naked, both his body and mind stripped down to nothing but skin and trust. His chin tipped up, mouth parted slightly as he breathed in rhythm with the loop pulsing low from the speakers. Not much effort was needed now. Not for him. Not after everything.

Johnson and Milo were there too, simply observing. Noah, also naked, circled Leo slowly. Not like a predator--Leo had expected that the first time, remembered steeling himself for it--but Leo was orbiting like a moon, tugging at Leo's tides with nothing but presence and gravity. Leo couldn't even tell what loop was playing anymore. That didn't matter. Noah's voice had overwritten them all.

"You're still a cocky little shit," Noah murmured.

Leo smiled. "Takes one to know one."

"But you're my cocky little shit now. *Our* little shit."

Leo's breath had mirrored Noah's rhythm a while ago. His cock pulsed, hard and aching in the air over his thighs. The words weren't a command, not technically, but Leo's body obeyed anyway, because it always did now. That was the difference. He wanted to, *needed* to.

Noah stepped behind him and bent low. His breath passed across Leo's ear like a ghost, as Noah said, "Drop."

Leo dropped. Eyes fluttering. One word, hitting fast and hard, not like simply a key in a lock but the entire door. His eyes shut. The floor vanished from his thoughts, though he was vaguely aware of his knees hitting the rug, arms slack at his sides. His brain turned to white fuzz, then went molten, then *quiet* in a way he hadn't even known he could achieve, could need.

"Good," Noah said, voice warm and edged with steel. "That's right. Let it all go."

Leo didn't simply let go--he released, he tumbled, he *fell*. Each word peeled him open. Each breath in Noah's voice sent another layer of performance, of armor, of smart-ass flippancy *melting* out of Leo's mind, draining off his skin.

"Too much thinking," Noah murmured. "Too much trying. You don't have to try with me. You just have to feel. Just have to be."

Leo twitched, shivering slightly as something uncoiled in his mind, answered by a release of tension in his chest.

"Feel this," Noah said, and touched Leo's bare sternum--just two fingers pressed there, light and absolute.

"Feel my voice moving inside you."

Leo whimpered. The sound might have surprised him, had he been conscious enough. The sound felt like something sacred ringing.

"Drop again. Deeper. You can do it," Noah said, and Leo did fall deeper. Hands twitching. Cock hard but ignored. Mind splintering in the most *glorious* way.

Words weren't just sounds now--they were *touch*, curling through his ribs and groin and spine. Suggestions becoming sensations. Permission becoming *pleasure*.

He heard the word *good* and his whole body clenched.

He heard *open* and every part of his mind and body obeyed.

At some point--he wasn't sure when--he was on his back, hips tilted upward, Noah's hand resting over his heart like an anchor, Milo's voice joining in from the side, a steady loop: "You're safe. You're wanted. Let it happen."

Leo's moans weren't loud. They were simply *helpless*. Breathly, cracked, involuntary. Every hypnotic suggestion was a fuse. Every brush of skin was a spark. His body begged for release, but Noah just smiled. "Not yet. Feel it longer. Feel everything." So Leo did.

And then--*when* was unclear--Noah finally said, "Now. You may cum now."

And Leo shattered. Not a scream, not a shout--just a long, raw gasp, his back arching, his whole body spasming with an orgasm, mental and physical, that felt like it had been waiting his whole life. His brain seemed wiped clean, every nerve lit up from within. He pulsed against nothing and everything all at once.

Leo was panting by the end of it, starting to rise from the depths and wake, naked and flushed and so beautifully, ruinously spent that even Johnson looked impressed from his seat in the corner. Milo grinned and tossed Leo a clean towel, which Leo mostly ignored for now, instead folding forward to rest his cheek on Noah's knee, dazed and pliant.

"You did well," Noah said softly, stroking through Leo's sweat-damp hair. "Good boy."

Leo gasped out a half-laugh, half-whimper. "Why does this keep getting stronger? Why didn't I know how strong ..."

"You weren't supposed to," Noah murmured, thumb brushing Leo's temple. "Not until now."

They sat in silence for a while longer, the loop still playing, though quieter now--almost a background, almost a lullaby. And then, Noah reached to the nightstand and pulled something small from the drawer: A second bracelet. This one identical to the one Leo already wore--braided black leather, a single silver disk that shimmered when the light caught it.

Leo blinked, still fuzzy. "Wait, I've already got a--?"

"*This* one is for someone else," Noah said. "Someday, when you find someone who needs what we gave you, you'll give it to them. You'll know when it's right."

Leo stared at the bracelet in his palm. It felt heavy, not physically but like a promise, a responsibility. Like a new kind of power. He swallowed. "Me? You trust me with this?"

"You're trained," Noah said simply. "You're ours. And one day, someone else will be yours."

Leo looked down at the bracelet again, heart thudding with something too big to name. He closed his fingers around it, and nodded.

Chapter 51--Shane

The house was alive in a way Shane hadn't fully seen before. Bodies draped across couches. Bare legs tangled. Underwear on some. Others with towels low on hips, loose, likely to slip at any moment--maybe on purpose. Others naked. Someone was making waffles in the kitchen, humming. Someone else was dancing, oblivious as he tripped over someone else's legs and fell into a beanbag chair with a crash and a howling laugh.

And in the middle of it all, Shane stood naked except for his leather bracelet and the necklace Jake had given him, all the clothing he needed. His necklace was different from the ones Johnson and Milo and Noah wore, but the purpose was similar, a signal of a special kind of belonging. Jake, calling him *puppy* and *good boy*, had given him a thick necklace that sat close to his throat, like a dog collar, with a small padlock dangling. Jake wore one too, only his featured a tiny key. When Jake put Shane's on him and donned his own, Johnson had said words, lowered them into a semi-trance, given the necklaces meaning. Shane never wanted to take his off.

Shane saw Noah sitting on one end of a couch, watched Leo kneel on the floor beside him, both of them naked. Leo's grin was devastatingly pure, devastatingly wrecked, and his head leaned against Noah's thighs, arms resting on his knees, like being right there was the most natural place for him to be in the world. On Leo's right wrist, a bracelet, recent. Noah ran fingers through Leo's hair in idle patterns, not ownership--more like pride. Like affection.

That used to feel impossible, but didn't now.

Shane felt Jake pad up behind him, just a towel across his shoulder, damp from the shower, key dangling from his necklace, a half-eaten waffle in Jake's hand. Jake didn't speak at first, just curled one strong arm around Shane's bare waist and kissed the side of his neck just above Shane's collar, like they'd done a thousand times before.

Shane didn't pull away, didn't stiffen. He leaned in, whispered, "Mmm, waffle breath!"

Jake chuckled. "You're one of us now," he murmured, voice low against his skin. "You know that, right?"

Shane did. Fuck, he really did.

Shane exhaled, letting his head drop briefly to Jake's shoulder. Around them, the chaos buzzed louder--someone shouted about running low on syrup, someone else laughed and said lick it off a chest instead--but these sounds didn't rattle him anymore. They made him smile, because the sounds weren't just noise. Not anymore. They were the music of belonging. Shane didn't have to be perfect here, didn't have to pose, or pretend, or prove anything. He just had to be here. And he was.

He kissed Jake without thinking, just a quick, grateful press of lips, before stealing the rest of Jake's waffle and dragging him back toward the couch.

The couch where Leo was now whispering something, probably filthy, into grinning Noah's ear.

The couch where everything was stupid, and hot, and loud, and safe.

Where Shane finally believed he wasn't broken.

He was home.

Chapter 52--Leo

The time was past midnight when Leo found Shane. The house had quieted into its usual low hum of afterglow. A few brothers snored softly from couches. Someone in the kitchen was cavity-searching the refrigerator for a snack. The hallway lights were dimmed to that dark hush that made everything feel quieter. Closer. More real.

Shane stood by his bunk in the empty pledge room, wearing nothing but the necklace and the bracelet; his pledge uniform boxers and crocs lay on the floor by his bunk, his naked body on display like what they'd come here to do was no big deal. And maybe it wasn't, not anymore. No one else was here--the other pledges were likely upstairs sleeping in their Bigs' rooms or sprawled out in the common room or TV room. Welcome to frat life.

Leo stopped in the doorway. He'd come down here as a joke. Had something stupid lined up to say, something like *Hey, pretty-boy, miss me?--or, I'm surprised Jake agreed to let you off your puppy leash for this*. But the words never reached his mouth.

Shane turned. Their eyes locked. Everything else fell away. Not a joke, not anymore, not a game, just need and the recognition of connection.

Leo crossed the room like a towline dragged him; he slipped off his pledge boxers as Shane watched. Shane didn't move, didn't breathe, just waited, wide-eyed and glowing.

Leo inhaled. "I owe you a lot of apologies. I was a major asshole when we met," he murmured. "I was a real mess. Still kind of am."

Shane laughed, barely audible. "Yeah. Me too. Crash said the first time he saw me I looked like an Abercrombie ad with emotional issues. That sounds about right."

"So ... you and Jake, huh? I mean, I get it. He's hot; he's got all those jock muscles and that dick. We've all seen you two fucking on the couches, and the way you get all bleary-eyed when he calls you *puppy*. Some of the guys have a betting pool for how long until he puts you on an actual dog leash. You look good with him. I get it."

Shane grinned because Leo had asked Jake for permission to *take his puppy for a walk, wink-nudge* before asking Shane to meet here. Shane wondered what he would have said if Leo hadn't cleared this with Jake first. Just how much control had he handed over to Jake without realizing? And--*fuck!*--why was the idea wearing Jake's leash and being parading around the house so *hot*? They'd had sex in public in the common room a few times, but dammit, how did the idea of a leash sound even more intimate? Shane needed to change the subject before his libido overheated. "What about you and Noah? You two seem kind of tight. You've toned down a lot lately thanks to him, right?"

Leo grinned and blushed, so mission accomplished for Shane. Leo replied, "Yeah, it's fun. I mean, Noah and me, it's not long-term or anything. He's tight with Jackson and Milo, but they're not exclusive; they let other guys come in for a while. But the three of them have something special. Noah and me, we'll move on sometime, but for now, yeah, it's good for me. I'm learning a lot from them, about the loops, about how to ask for what I really want--it's different from what I ever imagined."

Shane returned Leo's grin. He understood, and he understood why they were there, why Leo had asked for permission for them to be there. They kissed like they meant it. Not performative. Not for an audience. Just two men connected by shared experiences, a shared bond of lips and breath and the press of want. Both wore the sign on their right wrists. They had others, but they also had each other.

Leo tangled his fingers in Shane's hair. Shane pulled him in by the bracelet. "Say it," Shane whispered.

Leo hesitated, only for a second, before grinning. Then: "Drop."

Shane shivered. His body went pliant. Loose. Not like trance had collapsed him--but like it had caught him, like Leo's voice was a rope he'd been waiting for. Shane lowered himself to his knees, naked, eyes wide and calm.

Leo knelt too. Pressed his forehead to Shane's. "No one's watching," Leo said. "No one's making us do this. This is just for us."

Their hands found each other's. This close, their breaths merged. No loop. No commands. Just the imprint of what had come before--working from inside them now. Permanent.

Leo leaned close. "I'm not performing."

Shane whispered something too soft to hear.

Leo pressed him back onto the floor with a kiss that trembled with too much feeling. They sank into each other--gasping, biting soft noises into shoulders and collarbones. They didn't rush. Didn't talk. They just moved, like instinct, like memory, like they'd been waiting all year to stop pretending they didn't need this.

Their sex on someone else's pledge bunk was not some porn video on fast-forward, but slow. Hands dragging over warm skin. Breaths gasping with every newly explored inch. Leo laughed--real laughter, the kind that came from his chest and said *We're allowed to enjoy this*. Their bodies pressed together wasn't frantic rutting, but the thick, unbearable sweetness of two men who had tried so hard to be something they weren't--and had finally stopped trying.

Their bodies moved in rhythm. Arousal and sensation built between them, slow and steady. Sweat-slicked skin. Hushed moans. The kind of kissing that wandered--over ribs, collarbones, the sensitive patch behind an ear.

Shane gasped when Leo bit lightly at his throat. "Are you always this good when it's not a joke?"

Leo smirked, but the expression melted instantly. "Are you always this beautiful when you stop pretending to be fine?"

Shane didn't answer; he just pulled Leo back down and arched up to meet him. The world narrowed to sensation. To hips grinding, hands clutching, mouths open against each other's necks. They didn't need to talk. Their sex wasn't silent or perfect or polished, but it was real. Their sex wasn't about getting off, or who came first, or how loud.

It was about the look in Shane's eyes when Leo whispered, "I see you now too."

It was about the way Shane whispered, "Don't stop," like it wasn't about the sex at all, but the closeness, the belonging.

And when they both came--tangled, skin to skin, breathless, foreheads pressed together, Leo's dick squirting

first, Shane's moments later--their orgasms weren't quick explosions. Leo rode out a climax that left him shivering; Shane buried his face against Leo's shoulder and gasped through his own. No scripts. No labels. It was *right*.

After, they stayed there, bare, twined, breathing each other in, touching--a hand, a forearm, then hips pressed close. Not out of romance and not because anyone told them to. Just because. Shane traced the edge of Leo's jaw with two fingertips. Leo kissed the bracelet on Shane's wrist. For once, neither of them had anything left to prove.

Later, tangled and wrecked and grinning in the dark, Leo traced the bracelet on Shane's wrist and said, "We're not playing anymore, are we?"

Shane smiled. "No, we're not."

Leo kissed him once more, slow and open-mouthed, and thought *Not broken. Not alone. Safe. Finally.*

Nothing had ever felt more real.

Epilogue--Brent

Brent didn't know what was in the loops. He'd tried them a few times--still dabbled now and then when he was horny, because who doesn't like a friendly blow-job or two. Brent wasn't into guys like that, not really, except sometimes, when he was horny. Living in a fraternity house meant guys were always available--convenient.

Brent didn't pretend to understand the mechanics of whatever was going on behind Johnson and Milo's door or in the focus room. But he'd seen enough.

When the shirtless bro thing started, of course Brent noticed, but not at the very first. He would sometimes watch Milo, the thirst-trap horndog who used to chase anything where the concepts of *blonde* and *female* overlapped, coming downstairs progressively naked-er and naked-er as the first couple weeks of fall semester went on.

First Milo abandoned shirts around the house as if his nipples considered coverage a declaration of war. But shirtless had been textbook Milo fashion sense before too, so who noticed?

Shoes and socks next? Sure, but this was a frat house, so bare feet were everywhere, no big deal.

Pants?--Ditto, because *fraternity house* and *casually strutting around in just underwear* seemed almost redundant. Hey, someone long before Brent's time had had the bright idea of making the pledges wear nothing but boxer-shorts and crocs around the house and *that* idea just kind stuck, for fuck's sake, right?

But losing the underwear too?--Seeing Milo parade around in the buff took a little getting used to for some of the guys; they kept half-expecting Milo to be running some kind of in-your-face prank, and statistically speaking they might not have been wrong.

Now? Milo still laughed, just less loudly, like his joy was real and didn't need to be performed and broadcast to everyone in range anymore, like maybe someone had taught his nervous system how to exhale.

The sex stuff? Brent remembered Milo sitting naked at Johnson's feet in the TV room one night, cross-legged, back straight, eyes half-lidded, practically purring when Johnson had casually stroked the back of his neck. Brent felt something shift in his own chest and crotch. Not arousal exactly. Not jealousy either. Just a

warm, curious ache. A wish to know how being wanted like that felt. And if sometimes the sex stuff turned into bros stroking each other's hard-ons in the TV room, or swapping blow-jobs on those uncomfortable common room couches, well, more power to them! And if someone offered?--Brent had sometimes accepted a blow on a couch, because who doesn't like blow-jobs?--Didn't have to mean anything ... except it kinda did.

Belonging was a strange thing.

One night, Brent passed Room 206, Johnson and Milo's room. Door open. Milo inside, and that pledge Noah too, both naked, kneeling, hands behind their heads, cocks sticking up hard and proud as flagpoles. Johnson speaking low, over some noise like static. And standing beside them, Drew--yeah, *that* had been a surprise. Drew, naked, cock mostly hard, cheeks flushed, eyes glassy, mouth parted, sinking to his knees alongside the others like he wanted to be there, which he must have. Brent didn't interrupt, just kept walking, but the image shimmered in his mind like heat rising off pavement.

Later that night, the image returned. Not like a fantasy. Not jerk-off fuel. Just something ... magnetic. Milo on his knees. Noah and Drew too. That stillness in them. That *rightness*. Like their bodies had tuned into a collective frequency and decided, *Yeah, I like this song; I'll listen to this*.

Someone, Brent didn't remember who, had once asked if he thought this was some kind of sex cult. Brent had answered something like *If this is a cult, it's the fun kind. You know--shirtless hugs and lots of good moaning*.

The first time Brent was invited in had been late one night a couple of weeks later. By then most of brothers were sporting the bracelet, a black woven leather band, a bit of silver. At first Brent told himself the bracelets didn't matter. But they kind of *did*, didn't they? The bracelets meant something.

Johnson and Milo had found him in a chair on the back deck, shirtless, coming down after three days of being high as all fuck, because the next day was Monday, which meant classes, and sure, he got high a lot but Brent had *some* dedication to his GPA. Johnson had said something casual, like, *You ever want to just let go for a bit?* And Brent, halfway through rationing his last gummy to ensure a gentle landing, had grinned and replied, *Only every fucking day, man*. So they'd invited him to come listen. The loop hadn't been loud. It had been ... *patient*. Like it wasn't trying to persuade him, more like waiting for him to catch up. And when Johnson said *drop* the word landed in Brent's chest with unanticipated force. He came harder than he expected, and afterward, someone curled around him like he mattered.

Afterward, Brent had felt ... well, not *clean*. That word was something people said when they went vegan or tried a colon cleanse or a new shampoo. Maybe *refreshed* was closer?--Like his insides had been wiped down and given a gentle polishing. Not brainwashed. Not controlled. Just *quiet*. The kind of quiet he didn't know he'd needed until it arrived. The whole experience was nice, like being very stoned and very wanted at the same time.

He'd listened a few more times, and then one day, Johnson had slipped a simple black band around Brent's wrist and said, *You can take it off if you want. But I don't think you will*.

He hadn't. He'd heard the focus loops a few times. Hadn't asked for more, hadn't been offered. That felt fair. These things had layers, tiers, gravity wells. You didn't jump into the deep end unless something inside you needed to. This thing wasn't that deep for him, he told himself. The bracelet didn't glow or pulse or whisper secrets at night, nothing supernatural. It was just ... comfortable. A reminder. A vibe. Brent liked vibes.

And the house had slowly *changed*. The vibe had shifted. He'd seen guys fall, one by one.

Some went under laughing, expecting a joke.

Some dropped in shuddering silence.

Some came apart and found they liked it.

Sooner or later, they all dropped, like belonging was inevitable. Maybe it kinda was.

But Brent didn't need it. That was the difference. Like with being high and his coursework, he'd kept his balance, his footing. He hadn't asked to go deeper. Not like Milo. Not like Noah, or Drew, or pretty much this year's whole damn pledge class. But that didn't mean Brent hadn't *thought* about it. He'd always thought frat life ran on noise, shouting, music bleeding through doors, beer pong, reheated pizza. It still did. But now? Beneath it all was something steadier. A *hum*.

On more than one night, lying shirtless on his bed, a dull ache in his chest and a heavy buzz in his groin, he'd felt the edge of it. The *want*. Not to get off. Not to surrender. Just to *be let in*. To swim out and be caught in the current, instead of watching from shore. He never reached for his cock on those nights. That wasn't the point. Instead, he'd pressed his fingers against the bracelet like it might press back. And sometimes he felt like it *did*. Not with a command. Not a whisper. Just a feeling: *we see you*. Maybe that was enough for now.

He wasn't chasing trance. He wasn't chasing anything. But he wasn't running from it either. And when Johnson walked by and said *Hey, Brent* in that low, effortless voice, Brent's pulse would twitch. His breath would go shallow. And he'd wonder, *If he told me to drop right now, would I?* And the honest answer, the one he didn't say out loud, was: *Yeah--probably, yeah*.

Brent had nothing against any of it. He believed in chill. He had faith in touch. He believed that if getting hypnotized by another dude and edged for five days in a row helped someone feel like a *person* again, then maybe that was therapy and everyone else just hadn't caught up yet.

And it was working.

The house still reeked of stale beer, aggressive amounts of body spray, and bad decisions, but something deeper had shifted. The brothers weren't just quieter now; they were closer. They leaned on each other, sometimes literally. Hugs lasted longer. *Shirtless* and *nude* had become the default continuum of being and everyone found their comfort spot somewhere along it--not for preening display, but for comfort, because exposed skin meant *No secrets here, dudes*. Eye contact happened. So did murmured words like *Good boy*, and *I've got you*, and *Breathe with me, man*. This wasn't performative, wasn't even particularly sexual, though yeah, the brothers seemed to be having *a lot* of sex. But the sex wasn't just *about* the sex. It was about bonding ... and connecting, synching.

Brent didn't wear his bracelet as a badge of honor. He wore it because it felt good. The bracelet reminded him to notice things. Like the way Milo's breath changed when Johnson said his name. Or how Eli curled toward Kendall during common room couch naps like he was obeying the most natural gravitational pull in the universe. Brent didn't need to be part of it; he didn't need to be *claimed*. But damn if their devotional services weren't beautiful to watch.

And if someone asked him again whether this place was a cult? He'd probably grin and say something like *Sure, if you want it to be. Lots of beautiful weirdos and fun shirtless moaning. Ten outta ten. Would definitely recommend*. Because from where Brent sat, usually cross-legged in the TV room or out back on one of the deck chairs, stoned and smiling under the sky, watching the glow spill out of his fraternity brothers felt like holy light--this looked more like a church of love than anything else on campus. Maybe they were hypnotized. Maybe they were just *home*. He saw no reason not to root for that.

They'd invited him into their church of love, and he'd stepped inside a little way. Maybe he wasn't part of their choir, but he'd learned to recognize the music, and he liked listening to them sing.

And sometimes he liked to sing along.
