

The image is a book cover for 'Invictus' by Harley Austin. It features two muscular men in a lush, tropical jungle setting. The man on the left is shown in profile, looking towards the right, wearing black briefs. The man on the right is shown from a three-quarter view, looking down, wearing purple briefs. The background is filled with green foliage and a soft, golden light, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The overall aesthetic is sensual and dramatic.

HARLEY AUSTIN

BOOK FOUR

# INVICTUS

A WAKENED SERIES



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## INVICTUS

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AWAKENED SERIES

BOOK FOUR

# INVICTUS

HARLEY AUSTIN

HARLEY AUSTIN PUBLISHING

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*For my beautiful angel;  
the love of my life and the very best friend  
anyone could ever hope to have.*



INVICTUS



# PRELUDE

**T**hrough alleyways and shadows, the lone figure dressed in black moved like a cat making hardly a sound. Barely noticed by the outside cameras that spanned the well-lit parking lot of a twelve-story ornate building, its corner balconies now became little more than stepping stones as the figure leapt and swung from floor to floor until they'd reached the topmost outdoor patio.

The thick glass of the double-door entrance made not a sound as one of the doors was gently ripped from its thick steel hinges and then set neatly to one side; allowing the figure to slip into the upper-floor office.

He looked around while moving quickly deeper into the expansive office and laboratory areas, keenly avoiding the infrared security beams and moving too far too quickly to trigger motion sensors.

Finally, he moved into the area he had been looking for. Swiftly settling into an office chair, he began to type at one of the terminals, his fingers moving at inhuman speed.

Suddenly the alarm system disarmed itself and the lights of the laboratory flickered on revealing a kind of ultra-clean room filled with computer servers, access terminals and medical testing equipment.

Removing a USB drive from under his clothing, he connected it to the terminal and began rapidly typing while watching the screen once again.

Several of the testing systems and computer servers began to spring to life, booting themselves up and coming online from months and months of slumber.

He opened terminal window after terminal window and began pushing the now live data onto the tiny drive.

It wasn't long before he heard footsteps moving down the outside hall, his senses telling him that danger was coming. Still, he didn't move from his chair as he continued his rapid typing and downloading still more data into the tiny drive.

Suddenly the door of the well-lit lab burst open as four Dominion Security officers quickly entered, their guns drawn—and all of them aimed directly at him.

“FREEZE!” one of the officers ordered.

Lucas swiveled slowly around in his chair, still sitting, making no attempt to hide his face. He looked at the officers, his face in full view of them.

“Bite me.” He replied, calmly.

“On the floor! NOW!” the officer ordered.

Lucas was visibly annoyed. Not one of the security officers recognized him. Had he really lost his luster within the Dominion so quickly?

“Fuck off.”

“Your choice, asshole.” The lead officer discharged his service weapon at the intruder.

In a blindingly fast blur, Lucas' hand moved, plucking the chemically-accelerated, armor-piercing hot depleted uranium round out of the air and deflecting it harmlessly into the back wall. It was doubtful any of them even noticed the blindingly fast move. It simply appeared as if the officer had missed.

"Oh, nice shot. Two out of three?" Lucas asked, now slowly standing while lifting his hands into the air as if surrendering.

"Cuff him," the sergeant of their small squad ordered.

Lucas found himself surrounded by three of the officers as they took hold of his arms and cinched the heavy steel cuffs down hard on his wrists behind his back.

"Command. We just picked up an intruder at Tel Aviv and Lexington; twelfth floor ..."

The dispatcher picked up the radio communication in his headset. "Roger that sergeant. Can you give me a description of the intruder? We don't have video access to that building. It's registered as Apostolic."

The dispatcher waited for the reply.

"Sergeant, can you provide a description?"

"Actually, he can't," came another and unfamiliar voice over his headset. "He's having difficulty breathing at the moment."

With one hand, Lucas held the short stocky officer by the neck, the officer's feet dangling well off the ground while the man struggled for air under the steel vice grip of Lucas' fingers. The doctor relieved the officer of his own service weapon and then pumped several rounds into the hapless officer's chest, watching as the bullets exited and struck the surrounding walls, splashing them red. He let the lifeless body fall onto the

## INVICTUS

floor with the others, his gun neatly landing on his unmoving black uniform.

“Prick.”

Lucas returned to his chair to quickly survey his downloads.

A minute later, the room was empty of anyone moving as the lights automatically dimmed low.

# 1

**B**eau relaxed into the chaise, one of the many that neatly bordered the massive cruise ship's topmost outdoor pool deck. Although throngs of people gleefully splashed and frolicked loudly in the water under the late afternoon sun, he tuned-out the noise; closing his eyes beneath his Ray-Bans. It had been a long day that was thankfully almost over.

Earlier in the day, below decks, the ship's main auditorium had been a spectacle of scores of male and female model contestants moving through yet another round of elimination within a new reality show featuring "the world's most extraordinary" modeling talent. At least that was how the British promoter had billed the competition. Eventually, the contestants would move their way toward becoming one of the coveted "top ten". The winners would be the new faces and bodies for the launch of an up coming online store. With ten million dollars in prize contracts at stake, a guaranteed million-

dollar contract for each winner, the competition had become fierce.

An avid bodybuilder since his late teens, Beau had used the hobby to help pay his way through school by working in various Seattle strip clubs. The bar scene was seamy and he hated it, but the money was good enough to keep him out of debt and even get his own online venture off the ground.

With his six-foot-three deeply muscled frame, thick dark-brown surf-tossed hair, lightly tanned skin and dimpled smile, Beau had easily cleared the first two elimination rounds in L.A. and New York. Now he had settled into a prime slot aboard a week-long island-hopping cruise filled with ninety-nine other contestants from all over the world.

While the cruise was a relaxing getaway for the majority of the other families, some of who were now splashing in the pool beside him, his schedule as part of the competition onboard the massive ship was far from anything close to a vacation.

As if the insane schedule wasn't bad enough, the show's camera crews were everywhere, following and filming the show's contestants wherever they went. As part of his contract, the contestants were obligated to wear various branded styles of sportswear, swimwear and designer underwear all over the ship during various times while the brand's professional photographers and the reality show's paparazzi followed him and the other scantily-clad models wherever the producers needed them to be.

While many of his fellow models appeared to be eating up the limelight, Beau was not in any way an extrovert. He could indeed warm up to the audience and perform on cue, but lying here in front of the cameras, at least for the moment anyway, he could pretend to relax and breathe; even if the ever-present cameras were snapping and shooting video in the background.

His eyes still closed behind his sunglasses, Beau heard someone taking the chaise next to his. He hoped it wasn't

someone with loud kids or yet another impromptu interview with one of the ship's general population who'd been 'specially selected' to get chatty with one of the competition's "glamorous contestants". It was still only day three of the cruise and so far he'd had more conversations with chunky women in bikinis, old women in sun hats, and even some missionaries who wanted to lead him to Jesus, than he cared to recall.

In the distance Beau could hear the photographers snapping images of himself and whoever had just taken the chaise beside him. Beau looked over to see another popular contestant within the competition.

"Oh, Jeeze, Ian," Beau smirked. "Really? Again? They're making you take the chair next to mine?"

"Sorry. Talk to Damon. He's the director, not me."

Beau had met Ian in L.A. where both had advanced after making it past the competition's first call. Thousands of young men and women had tried out and only a couple of hundred from all over the U.S. had been selected to move on to New York.

Beau's well-defined abs and handsome features were well suited to this kind of competition. His bulky but deeply cut twenty-something body pleased not only the camera but the crowds in the audience as well.

Ian, on the other hand—Ian's body and the way he moved and handled himself before the cameras were exceptional. Everywhere Ian went, someone from the media was following not far behind. With his thick black hair well-trimmed in a nice 5th Avenue style, a great dimpled smile, a thin-waisted build and well-curved ample backside, Ian more resembled a hero from a Marvel comic book than even the rest of models onboard. His looks had sentenced Ian to be snapped and videoed by every professional and amateur photographer aboard ship at some point during the cruise. Everyone within

the competition already knew that Ian was going to be one of the winners at the finals. All he had to do was just smile and show up.

Beau sat up, flexing his nicely-cut six-pack abdominals for the cameras while looking at Ian. "You know you're wearing the same thing I am?"

"They're a different color." Ian half grinned.

"Nice. Why do they keep putting us together in the same things?"

"The brand wants to see you and I doing the twin thing—again."

With the both of them together and each wearing the same latest French-cut brief from one of the more well-known California labels, the cameras were snapping and recording furiously from a distance.

Posing professionally on his chaise while turning toward Ian, Beau smiled confidently for the cameras while wishing he was somewhere, anywhere, but in front of them.

"I guess someone thinks we work well together." Ian casually posed, giving the photographers the eye candy they were looking for.

"Has your personal media detail given you a break yet?" Beau picked up a Fiji water bottle and drew a long drink from it for the cameras, making sure the brand's label was unobscured by his fingers.

"Hardly." Ian wasn't happy that he'd somehow acquired his own small band of personal paparazzi that shadowed him almost continuously all over the ship. "We're all supposed to be done at five. But these guys just keep following me everywhere. At five o'clock I'm going to disappear."

Beau finished his drink. "Yea, good luck with that."

With the afternoon moving closer to the dinner hour, Beau stood at the glass railing of the ship looking out over the wider deck below and the open sea beyond. The cameras continued to snap and record from a distance as he stood with a pensive look; still wearing the package-hugging designer branded briefs.

Ian walked professionally to the railing, posing with Beau for both the paparazzi and the brand's official cameras. "The women over there wanted you to know they really like your ass."

Beau looked over his shoulder, smiling provocatively at the middle-aged trio of bikini and one-piece-clad ladies the promoter had selected to chat with Ian.

"Great; women my mom's age like my ass." He smiled plastically at Ian.

"I thought that's what you did? Strip clubs?" Ian leaned casually against the railing right next to Beau, shoulder-to-shoulder and hip-to-hip, each showing off the backside of the red-hot designer brand.

"Used to. It's been a while now. The older ones are always the most rowdy."

"School going okay?" Ian asked, looking over his shoulder with a smile, skillfully flexing his well-defined backside for the cameras—and the tittering ladies.

"One more semester. What about you?"

"Still in my MBA program. I'm stuck for another two."

"MBA, huh? In what?"

"Believe it or not, online marketing."

"Well, at least it'll be useful." Both turned professionally in unison to face the cameras while Beau staged another close pose next to Ian by the railing. Ian stood partially behind Beau as one of his hands gripped around side of Beau's briefs pulling one side of the high-cut underwear down from his

waist in a playfully provocative kind of pose, revealing most of Beau's very trimmed pubic area for the cameras.

"You're going to get me in trouble if my mom sees this." Beau gazed confidently with Ian at the cameras.

"You? My fiancé is already having kittens."

Beau took hold of Ian's briefs and mimicked the pose, pulling his briefs down as well, just not quite so far. "Fiancé? I thought she was just your girlfriend?"

"Yea, well, more like girlfriend now. She wanted to come along but she didn't have the money for the trip. We had a huge fight about the whole competition and she called off the engagement."

"Yikes. She really junked your engagement over a cruise?"

"I know, right? But since she couldn't afford to come, she didn't want me going either. Neither of us could really afford it, actually. Most of the argument was over the money."

"So how did you pay for it?"

"I sort of borrowed from my tuition funds."

"You're not the only one who did that." Beau stood still while Ian got a bit closer, giving the eager photographers a great product shot of their designer briefs. "A few of the other people I talked to are using their college money to do this."

"Yea. I just hope it's worth it. I'm going to hate it if I get eliminated and have to pay it all back." Ian leaned against the glass railing, mimicking a new pose with Beau.

"Hey," Beau caught Ian's attention while he was setting up another pose. "Looks like the camera crew is finally starting to pack up."

Ian grinned, for real this time.

Both young men watched at a distance as the cameras were carefully packed into their bags and everyone but the paparazzi group began leaving for the day.

Beau looked over his shoulder at the deck below and watched a few of the other contestants gathering their things. "So where are you going? To get away?"

"The engine room."

"Right."

Ian sighed.

Beau could see the events of the past few days had begun to really wear on Ian. "You look like you need a vacation instead of a break."

"Tell me about it. I mean, I love the cameras; I'm just not used to all of this attention twenty-four seven."

Beau turned leaning close to Ian against the railing. "I know exactly where you can get away from all of this."

"Really? Where?"

"Follow me."

Beau and Ian gathered their things and walked barefoot indoors, still parading through the ship in only their branded body-hugging briefs as they passed other passengers who by now were mostly used to seeing the sports-, swim- and now under-wear-clad models everywhere. Their personal paparazzi were still in tow but didn't follow them into the elevator. Beau and Ian ascended a couple of decks, almost to the top floor. The doors opened onto a nicely carpeted, elegantly upscale and oddly empty hallway.

"What deck is this?" Ian stepped out of the elevator with Beau.

"You won't find any of the show's cameras on this deck, I guarantee it," Beau smirked. "I overheard one of the producers complaining that the Captain had banned them from the first-class decks so I upgraded and got a cabin up here."

"Really? The show let you do that?"

"I didn't tell the show I was doing it. Besides, they didn't say we couldn't upgrade."

Ian followed Beau to a cabin door that opened into a nice wide suite.

“Jeeze, you must have *really* upgraded.” Ian looked around, obviously impressed at the roomier space, the fine wood finishes and plush bedding that included an overstuffed couch and a fully stocked mini wet bar. “My cabin has a window that’s like—this big.” Ian motioned with his fingers sizing the small window.

“At least you got a window. The tiny rooms they gave all of us were just way too small. It felt like I was being canned.”

Both walked to a glass door that opened out onto a private balcony overlooking the waves many stories below and a stunning view of some unknown island shoreline in the distance.

A light cool breeze blew past them while both gazed quietly at the setting sun. Ian let out a deep sigh as he watched the waves in the cool breeze and listened to the near silence. It felt good to just finally relax and unwind.

“I think I could get used to a view like this.” Ian sighed, a handsome smile crossing his lips.

“That makes two of us,” Beau agreed, grinning as well.

Both stood for long minutes just watching the waves and the shore.

“Do you think we’ll make it to the finals?” Beau looked out over the water, surveying the shoreline in the distance.

“If we keep doing this twin thing we will.” Ian rested against the railing. “You’re really good at this, Beau.”

“Thanks, but I’m not the one with the real talent here. I just do whatever you do.”

“But you pick it up and make it your own. That’s what real talent does. I think the producers like how you and I work. We’re like the bad boys of the competition now. Everyone’s talking about us. I think we could land a couple of those contracts before this is all over.”

"You don't need me, Ian. You could do that all on your own."

"No, not true. The sum is greater than its parts with you and I. Trust me. Besides, I like working with you. The women think you're really hot." Ian grinned at him.

"No, they think *you're* really hot. I'm just along for the ride here."

"But that's what I'm saying, Beau. *Both* of us get a lot more looks when were together than apart."

"Maybe. But I'm just an amateur lifter pretending to be a model. You've been doing modeling since you were a kid. I saw your portfolio online."

"Don't sell yourself short, Beau. You've made it a lot further than the thousands of other guys who tried out. And you did that without me."

Ian smoothed his hand over the skin of Beau's back. "You're a lot better at this than you realize."

## 2

**I**an flopped backward onto the plush comforter within the private suite, closing his eyes. Silence. No cameras. No crowds. No paparazzi. It felt good to not have someone following him everywhere he went, even if only for just a while.

He felt Beau relax onto the other side of the bed with a long sigh. Ian looked over at him. Beau's hands rested behind his head while Ian watched him stare at the low ceiling of the cabin.

"That was a deep sigh." Ian propped himself up onto one arm, watching a look of concern wash over his friend's face.

"Yea. I guess I just have a lot on my mind."

"Beau, you look like some professor just buried you in homework. You're supposed to be relaxing, remember?"

Beau glanced over at him. If only it were just homework that preoccupied his thoughts. Beau wished he could talk to Ian about all of things that weighed on his mind about work, his new company, writing code, venture capital; but he doubted Ian would be able to relate to his corporate geek side. It was the dark side of being a young entrepreneur; so many thoughts, desires, dreams and fears; and no one to talk to. Beau sighed as he pushed aside the concerning thoughts. “Yea, you’re right.”

“So, what do you do for fun? Dating, anyone?” Ian asked.

“Fun? Dating? Ha,” Beau grinned. “Dating is a non-starter for me at the moment. I don’t really have time.”

“Maybe you should make time.”

“I don’t need the distraction right now, Ian, honestly.”

“Beau, I just saw the look on your face a moment ago. Trust me, you *need* a distraction.”

Beau sighed again. “Mmm, maybe.”

“I bet you get asked out a lot.”

“Actually, I don’t. I mean, a few women have asked me out, but, I’m not really into the club scene these days anymore. Been there done that.”

Ian nodded. “Ever been asked out by any guys?”

Beau looked at Ian. “Yea. A few. What about you? I bet the guys hit on you all the time.”

“Yea, I get asked out by other guys.”

“Ever go out with any?”

“No. I mean, I might have, but they—weren’t exactly my type.”

“Oh?” Beau leaned up, looking at Ian. “So, what is your, ‘guy type’, exactly?” He grinned, not really being serious.

“Well—” Ian paused. “Probably someone more like you.”

Beau looked at Ian, a little surprised. “Me?”

"Yea." Ian nodded "You're kind of my type, Beau. Actually. I'd have probably gone out with a guy before this if any of them had been like you."

Beau thought about Ian's words as his eyes briefly traced the well-cut masculine lines of Ian's body. He thought how the two of them just seemed to really gel together both on and off camera. It wasn't the first time Beau had felt an unmistakable chemistry when he was with Ian. The fact was, Ian could do more than just raise 'feelings' within Beau while the two of them were working in front of the cameras wearing snug sportswear or next-to-nothing swimsuits.

"What about you?" Ian continued. "Would you ever want to go out—with another guy, I mean?"

"I'd go out with another guy," Beau assured, still looking at Ian.

"Really?"

"Sure."

"Maybe you and I should go out then, sometime." Ian smiled. He hoped Beau didn't take it as a joke. He really did like being around him. A lot.

"I think going out with you would be fun, Ian; but it kind of feels like we've already been going out. Ever since we started doing the twin thing aboard ship. We practice together; work out together; I think everyone thinks we're already dating."

Ian nodded, a warm feeling rising softly within him. Like he'd just met someone new who was just as interested in him as he was in them. Beau was right. Since they'd begun working together onboard ship only a few days ago, both had teamed up—and also steamed up—more than a couple of the shipboard shoots.

Ian moved closer to Beau on the comforter. "So maybe we should just make it official then." Ian rested his hand on Beau's chest.

Feeling Ian's skin on his own seemed to stir feelings within Beau he didn't really know what to do with—all he knew was that he liked the way Ian touched him and how Ian made him feel inside when he did. With Ian this close and his hand resting warmly on him, those feelings were easily catching fire.

"I always like it when you and I are touching during shoots." Beau breathed a smile. "How we move right next to each other."

Ian nodded, now smoothing his hand over Beau's chest. "I like touching you, Beau. It's just—the only time I felt like I could get away with it was when we were in front of the cameras; you know, as part of the act. I didn't know you liked it."

Beau reached out and smoothed his hand warmly over Ian's pecs. "Yea. I do. A lot." Beau's fingers moved over Ian's skin, teasing one of his tanned oval nipples, hardening it quickly.

Ian drew a short breath. "Oh, Beau. You know what that's going to do to me—"

Beau grinned as he watched Ian let out another soft audible sigh. He watched as Ian began to softly flex from the sweet tingling sensation. It was intriguing to see Ian's body react to something so simple as a tiny kneading touch. Ian took a long breath.

"I don't think I've ever turned on a guy before." Beau grinned. He smoothed his fingers softly over Ian's chest again and began lightly teasing his other nipple.

Ian relaxed onto his back. "Ohhh, the way you look, Beau, trust me, you've turned on more guys than you know." Ian exhaled lightly. Beau's touch felt magical. Ian could feel the gentle tingles all the way down between his thighs; he felt himself already softly firming beneath his briefs.

Beau watched Ian's thin waist and back arch softly under his teasing touch and the tingling sensations he sent into Ian's

firm nipples. He couldn't help but notice the light material of Ian's briefs as they slowly stretched to contain his growing male. It didn't take long for the front of those briefs to well fill with a long wide firmness; but the light stretch fabric held his thickening length at bay.

Beau had been on enough shoots with Ian now to know that the well-cut guy was also well-endowed. Beau watched, intrigued by the size of Ian's arousal pushing out defiantly from beneath the contoured, high-cut designer briefs. Beau continued his mischievous assault on Ian's nipples, captivated by how Ian's hips and thick legs softly moved, as if trying to free his trapped manhood.

But Ian wasn't the only one feeling the front of his briefs growing taller. Laying beside Ian, just watching him becoming so aroused had sent Beau's own cock into a similarly trapped arousal. Beau drew a deep breath, pulling himself closer to Ian.

Ian's breathing had grown deeper. "I hope—hmmm—" Ian flexed his smooth legs while arching his hips; his pulse quickening, "—you're not just going to leave me all wound up like this?" Ian's breaths had become deeper and his eyes gazed now into Beau's with a pleading look.

"I don't know. I think I really like watching you all tensed-up like this." Beau grinned while his fingers continued their delicate assault over the tips of his pecs.

"I think you just like torturing me." Ian rocked his hips softly again, as if still trying to free his well-swollen male.

Beau smoothed his hand down from Ian's chest and then over his perfect taut abdominals. Beau's hand moved cautiously along his skin, past Ian's softly rocking hips and then over his thigh.

Ian looked into Beau's eyes taking a rippled breath as he finally felt Beau's fingers glide lightly over the well-firmed front of his briefs, touching him curiously, for the first time.

Gazing into Ian's eyes, Beau's fingers warmly smoothed over his firmly bulging manhood. It felt strangely alluring, touching another guy this way. He watched Ian draw deepening breaths while taking in the pleasing sensations.

"You okay?" Beau's fingers moved delicately over the long hard arousal beneath his briefs.

Ian drew a slow breath. "Yeahhh," he nodded softly while still looking into Beau's eyes, his hips rocking tall with Beau's touch.

Taking hold of Ian's briefs, as he'd done in their shoot earlier in the day, Beau drew one side of them down almost revealing Ian's thick hard length beneath them. Ian felt Beau's hand moving over his neatly cut pubic trim.

"Ohhh, Beau." Ian arched his back softly feeling the warmth of Beau's fingers move next to the base of his shaft. Ian's tense longing to be freed from the torturous briefs ended as he felt Beau's fingers slipping beneath the stretch material; gliding smoothly, warmly over his bare, hardened length and finally freeing his manhood from the briefs.

"Ahhh," Ian breathed, lifting his hips again and flexing his hardening cock as Beau pushed Ian's briefs down around his well-built thighs. Beau's fingers glided gently, magically over and around Ian's commanding manhood as he watched his body move and arch softly under Beau's lightly teasing caresses.

Beau drew an unexpected breath his own. "You're—ah—really impressive." Beau admired Ian's fine fully aroused male form.

Ian softly rocked his hips deeply, feeling Beau's fingers delicately lingering over his very sensitive tip making his thick male lightly throb with each tease. "Your touch is—ahhh, damn, Beau—ooohhh—really nice."

Ian turned toward Beau, his own hand smoothing softly over the ridges of Beau's broad chest, then over his side and then down to the waist of his briefs.

Beau continued to warmly caress Ian's very hard male while feeling Ian's fingers moving over his own trapped firmness through his briefs.

"You are so not keeping these on." Ian breathed heavily, looking into Beau's eyes as Beau's exploring fingers sent yet another firm throb of desire rocketing between Ian's muscular thighs.

Pushing Beau's briefs down around his thighs, just as Beau had done to him, Ian ran the backs of his fingers along Beau's imposingly thick male shaft. Ian moved himself closer to his warm skin while feeling Ian's fingers wrap intimately around his thick well-hardened male.

"Ohhh, Ian," Beau breathed a quiet sigh, full of desire as he felt Ian's talented fingers move softly all around his unusually thick manhood. Feeling Ian close like this sent Beau's desire fully ablaze. He felt Ian's full handsome lips brushing gently next to the side of his.

"Beau?" Ian breathed, feeling Beau's fingers smoothing sensuously all over his bare manhood. "I am really going to need to seriously kiss you in a moment."

Ian drew himself closer. His lips met the front of Beau's hungrily as both models drew deep passionate kisses from each other.

"Ahhh, Ian." Beau kissed. "I think," he warned in a deeply bated breath, his lips drinking fully of Ian's, "we're both about to get seriously—mmm, seriously fucked."

"Oh, you think—?"

Beau drew himself up fully to Ian as both young men strongly embraced; their briefs around their thighs, their legs warmly locking with each others, and their thick full cocks

softly sliding against each other's while both dove deeply into a warm-soft and intensely impassioned, hip-rocking makeout.

\* \* \* \* \*

"His name is Ian Diamond."

A series of sharp color images of the handsome young man dressed as a typical college student on campus and in a number of various print ads for different clothing and shave products flashed across the screen as the assembled military and smartly suited government executives looked on.

"We picked up his signature as he was moving through security at LAX several months ago. Normally, when we see an awakened individual moving through the backscatter we see a pattern that looks something like this—"

A colorless video image of a lightly glowing and rather shapely naked female being scanned by the x-ray device appeared on the screen.

A soft whistle left Harlan's lips. He leaned over to Frank, whispering. "Why don't the assistants you send me ever look like that?"

Frank ignored him.

"However, this is the image of our Mr. Diamond moving through the same security station."

The image of the muscular youth walking across the screen was almost too brightly blurred to see.

"The machine is out of calibration." One of the executives from the manufacturer piped in. "No one looks like that on a properly calibrated node."

"Normally I would agree, Dennis, but this unit was calibrated only sixteen hours before this scan was recorded."

"Oh, so you picked up a god moving through security at LAX. Right." The handsome executive smiled mockingly,

looking at the others in the room who began chuckling at his joke.

“Yes, very funny,” the senior analyst scowled. “There’s only one problem with your assessment.”

“Oh?”

“This is Mr. Diamond’s girlfriend thirty seconds later.”

The image showed a typical busty female standing naked on the screen in the typical detailed full-motion monochrome x-ray.

“Jesus,” Harlan leaned closer to Frank again, whispering. “I’m not letting you screen my assistants any more.”

Frank smirked.

“I don’t get it?” one of the generals began. “The gods *know* we’re monitoring airport security. Why go though one of our checkpoints?”

“Because General, our Mr. Diamond *isn’t* a god. He’s mundane.”

Murmurs broke out within the room as people began whispering back and forth to one another.

“Listen,” the analyst calmed the room. “I know what you’re all thinking. Believe me, we’ve been running diagnostics backwards and forwards on this node to make sure there was no malfunction. A few weeks later we followed Mr. Diamond to New York where, as most of us know, he was one of the finalists in a modeling reality show.”

“A modeling reality show?” another of the more youthful female members of the staff chimed in. “That’s not just another reality show. It’s the *only* reality show worth watching right now. I don’t know what the rest of you watch, but Ian Diamond’s the *reason* that show has been a hit. Have you seen the guy in a swimsuit? Whooo—” she said, releasing a deep breath.

Some of the others in the room were nodding. Not all of them women.

The analyst ignored the comments. “Regardless, these are the images of Mr. Diamond getting scanned moving through security at LaGuardia.

A slightly different x-ray image appeared but equally brightly distorted.

Dennis looked carefully at the image. “Are we sure he’s still human?”

The analyst nodded. “Oh, he’s very human. We’ve been tailing him for months now. There’s no indication of him ever being awakened.”

“Jesus,” fell out of the engineer’s mouth.

“So—why haven’t we picked this guy up?” Harlan interjected. “He’s obviously a super.”

“We don’t call them ‘supers’ Mr. Harlan,” the analyst corrected. “The proper term is ‘enhanced’.”

“Yea, whatever.”

“We were about to. But evidently Operations is handling this one, personally. We were told to stand down and monitor only. Hence the reason for this little clandestine meeting. I thought all of you should know that we seem to have run into a different kind of newblood. Something that none of us has ever seen before.”

“Zere’s nothing new about zem.” Someone from the group stood up; his accent obviously German or Eastern European. No one had ever seen him in any of their meetings before. Although older looking, the gentleman was articulate, spry and well dressed. “He is *Invicti*.”

“And you are—?” the General asked.

“General,” the analyst broke in, “this is Dr. Hans Warshauer. Our resident expert in the histories of the enhanced.”

“Enhanced. Bah. I have no use for such labels. Zey are vhat zey call zemselves—Ra. Ve humans call zem gods. It is vhat zey are.”

The analyst said nothing.

“Finally, someone with some brains around here,” Harlan quipped to Frank under his breath.

“Dr. Warshauer,” the General swung around in his chair. “This ‘Invicti’ as you call him. Is this a new threat? And how do you know so much about them?”

“Ve have many pages of ze Books of God, Heir General. In five passages ze ‘unconquerable of god’ are mentioned. Ze *Solis Invicti* or Invincible Sun Gods are described vividly vom our Latin copies.”

“Sun Gods?” the General mused.

“Zey are ze heirs; ze leaders of ze Reborn.”

The general looked again at his analyst. “And why isn’t Operations moving in on this one?”

“We don’t know, General. They’re keeping us in the dark at the moment.”

\* \* \* \* \*

A warm sea breeze filtered into the cabin through the open balcony door along with a bright moonlight that glistened off of the tanned skin of the two young men, their well-defined bodies locked around each other. Their designer briefs long since tossed somewhere onto the floor, both moved in a slow rhythm with each other softly over the duvet.

A small open vial of glide gel sitting on the nightstand, the full length of Ian’s long, thick male slipped wetly through Beau’s fingers as Ian’s hips rocked slowly against his.

Ian’s breathing had grown heavy against Beau’s lips and his skin glistened with a light moonlit sheen. His hands gripped Beau’s hard body as he whimpered softly under the growing ecstatic pain that trickled slowly from his solid manhood and then deeply all through his flexing muscles, curling his toes.

“Are you okay?” Beau asked as he felt Ian’s body arching, tensing more strongly all over his own.

Ian exhaled deeply, drawing another breath quickly, his heart racing. “Beau—ahhh—how do you make me—ooh—feel like this?” Ian breathed heavily as if running a marathon. “I just—hfff—I can’t believe how I—mfff—ohhh, I just need to fuck you.”

“Fuck me, Ian.” Beau kissed his lips between his heavy breaths. It was amazing how Ian was all over him in the way he made love. Feeling Ian like this sent Beau’s emotion for him soaring. He wanted to make Ian feel like this—all the time.

Ian had been deliberately moving slowly, savoring the intimacy of their warm embrace. But now his hands were gripping Beau’s ass, squeezing him firmly as he pulled Beau tightly to himself. Ian began to tense strongly and move more powerfully against Beau’s skin with the near unbearable ecstatic feeling now shooting through his body. Ian was fully at the edge of his ecstasy; deeply exhaling a quiet, whimpering moan. “Ohhh! Beau!”

Beau felt Ian’s long solid shaft suddenly pulse heavily as his passion shot warmly between them onto their wet skin.

With his hard slick length wrapped in Beau’s fingers, Ian’s hips pushed forcefully against him, rocking strongly, again and again. “Ohhh—God—Beau!” Ian breathed intensely but quietly while spilling his passion over and over between them. Ian’s cock slid even more easily now through Beau’s fingers, well wetted by his erupting warmth.

Finally Ian drew a long and badly needed deep breath having expended himself fully between the two of them. Ian drew several more deep breaths against Beau’s lips, his body glistening, bathed in a recovering euphoria while his hips rocked more softly now.

“Ohhh. God, Beau.” Ian relaxed into his arms.

"Feel better?" Beau smiled as he smoothed his fingers wetly over Ian's rock hard and now very sensitive cock.

"Ahhh. Wow." Beau felt Ian nodding while still breathing heavily. "We need to go on dates more often. You fuck way better than Christie," he whispered against the side of Beau lips.

Beau chuckled softly. "I like feeling you close to me like this when you're coming. How you move all over me. I'm about ready to come myself."

"Yea?" Ian continued to rock himself softly through Beau's very wet fingers while both deeply kissed between Ian's still recovering breaths. Ian flexed his legs that he'd wrapped around Beau's, trying to uncurl his toes. His feet were still tingling.

"God, Beau; I've never felt like this before." Ian cuddled closely, holding on to him tightly, letting out another deep recovering whimper.

"Neither have I."

"I think I've been wanting to fuck you since we stayed across the hall from each other in L.A."

"Really?"

"Yea." Ian nodded.

"Why me?" Beau slipped his hands down Ian's warm back and then over his smoothly rounded and glistening ass. "There were hundreds of hot guys in L.A."

"I'm not sure." Ian breathed. "I just liked you, how you looked and how you moved. I was afraid to say anything, but I was really interested in you. I've never actually been attracted to another guy before. I guess it's why I started hanging around you as soon as we got aboard ship."

"I'm glad you did, Ian."

Sliding off of Beau to one side, Ian doused his own fingers in gel and intimately pushed Beau's thick hard cock into his slickly warm grip.

“Ohhh—ooh, Ian.” He heard Beau exhale softly.

Ian smiled as Beau began pushing himself softly into his intimately teasing and gripping fingers, moving his muscular body closely against Ian’s. After being with Ian and posing with him for the past couple of days, and then watching and feeling Ian go-off next to him, Beau was more than well charged; he was ready to explode.

“Ohhh, God, this is going to hurt.” Beau stretched sensuously. He could feel a pained euphoria already building deeply within his jewels.

“Are you going to be okay?”

“Yea.” Beau exhaled as another intensely intimate sensation rocked deeply from within his overloaded glands. “This has been building for a while.”

“I didn’t know you were so loaded?”

Beau nodded. He rocked his hips slowly, his cock sliding thickly through Ian’s talented fingers. “It’s all the skin we’ve been having to show for the past few days. The way the producers keep pairing us up. It’s everything I can do to keep myself from getting hard when I’m standing so close to you. The way you touch me when we’re posing. I really like the way you touch me.” Beau exhaled deeply.

“I didn’t realize.”

“You didn’t notice how I just let you touch me however you wanted?”

“Yea, I noticed. I didn’t know it was turning you on.”

“Ahhh—yea! You’ve been turning me on this whole time. But I couldn’t let myself get hard around you, dressed like we were.” Beau breathed heavily, his heart beating more quickly now as a soft wave of building euphoria rippled through him.

“It’s okay now, Beau,” Ian began. “It’s just the two of us here. You can be as hard as you want now with me.”

Ian’s words gave Beau a new feeling of intimacy and confidence. “Ohhh, Ian,” he sighed heavily as he moved over

on top of Ian, and wrapped his body and his legs around his. "I love being hard around you, Ian," Beau breathed, fucking slowly but strongly against Ian's body; his thick male growing so hard now it throbbed.

Ian's other hand slipped around Beau's heavy-laden jewels, cradling his large glands delicately, sensuously, while Beau's shaft ran easily through his fingers. The new sensations of both of Ian's hands working slickly, intimately over the whole of his manhood quickly pushed Beau's overloaded desire to the breaking point.

The ecstatic pain Beau knew was coming arrived with a vengeance. His entire body flexed backward as a deeply painful euphoria erupted from within him. "Ahhh! Ian!" he called out as softly as he could, as every built muscle all over his cut body seemed to tighten with the sudden powerful release that exploded from within him. Ian felt Beau's warm seed shoot forcefully from him, splashing over his pecs and then spilling onto his abs. Beau gripped Ian strongly as Ian's talented fingers continued to tease intimately over his thick pulsing shaft, as if pulling his seed from him with each new stroke.

Beau called out Ian's name again and again, deeply feeling Ian's fingers drawing each wave of the intense release from him. But just as Beau thought he was finished, Ian's teasing fingers brought another unexpected and intense 'after release' that suddenly rocketed through him as well.

"Ohhh! God, Ian! What are you doing to me?!" Beau breathed heavily as the last of the intense after release fell from him and the deeply pleasing sensations waned like intimate aftershocks through his body.

But Ian wasn't finished with him. With Beau wholly empty, his shaft became more than sensitive now, Ian continued to tease his still tingling hardened male.

“Ohhh—Ian! God! Stop! Jeeze! You’re killing me!” Beau was suddenly flexing and gripping Ian’s ass, Beau’s back arching powerfully as Ian relentlessly tortured him along his ultrasensitive shaft. Ian felt Beau’s body flex beautifully, strongly around him as Beau whimpered his name while he endured the intimate torture.

Ian’s fingers slowly relented. “Had enough?” Ian grinned.

Beau looked at him, nodding quickly through several deep exhales. “You were doing that on purpose; torturing me.”

“It’s your own fault,” Ian began. “I couldn’t help it. If you weren’t so fucking hot when you’re coming. You know you got my chest wet?”

Beau smiled at him while still trying to catch his breath.

“Sore?” Ian watched him recovering from his large spill.

“Yeah.” Beau exhaled deeply, his chest rising and falling heavily over Ian’s. “Oooh.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t wait so long next time.” Ian looked raptly at the still heavily breathing Beau.

Beau nodded. He took another deep breath and then took Ian’s lips with his own.

Cleaned of their passion, both lay still and unclothed atop the soft sheet, intimately wrapped around the other in the warm tropical night air.

“Thinking about tomorrow?” Beau asked in the dim moonlight of their cabin.

“That and wondering what I’m going to do about Christie.”

“You can’t date both of us?” Beau grinned.

“I—don’t really see that working for her.” Ian admitted.

“I wasn’t wanting to break up a relationship.”

“Oh, Beau, no. Don’t. Don’t worry about that. We were kind of on the outs as it was over this whole competition. She really didn’t want me coming on this cruise. Things were fine

between us as long as she was with me, like when we were in L.A. and then New York. But the argument we had about the whole cruise thing, when she found out she couldn't afford to come along, that was way over the top."

"I guess she wanted to keep her eye on you?"

"Right. She's really jealous of all the hot women we hang around with during the competition."

"Hmmm." Beau nodded but didn't actually say anything. He'd met Christie only a few times and she'd seemed a little clingy then, but he wasn't going to insult Ian.

"I guess she should have been more worried about the guys." Beau grinned.

"Yea," Ian breathed a smile. "So what about you?" Ian began, "Mr. I-don't-have-time-to-be-dating-anyone."

Beau grinned audibly.

"So. Are we dating?" Ian smiled back.

"Ian, you just fucked my brains out."

"I guess we're dating then." Ian grinned and smoothed his hand over Beau's chest.

"I haven't been serious with anyone for a while," Beau admitted. "Between classes, work, and now the competition. You're kind of a nice surprise, Ian."

"You too, Beau." Ian pulled him close.

"We should get some sleep. Morning is going to be here way too early."

Ian nodded folding himself into Beau's arms as both drifted softly off to sleep.

# 3

**B**oth young men had sprawled next to each other warmly under the covers when the five AM alarm unceremoniously booted them from sleep. Beau tapped the alarm app's snooze button and then dropped his smartphone onto the bed.

"I'm not getting up." Ian announced sleepily, half of his face still buried in the thick pillow. He felt Beau snuggle up and spoon warmly behind him.

"I take it you're not the morning person type?" Beau asked way too chipper for so early in the morning.

"Don't tell me you are?"

"Yea." Beau smoothed his hand over the front of Ian's chest.

"Oh, don't do that to me. You're so gonna wake me up doing that."

"That's kind of the idea."

Ian groaned. But feeling Beau's hand moving over his skin, sliding from his chest, down his abs and then slipping intimately over his firm morning arousal lifted him pleasantly from his sleepy fog.

"Hmmm," Ian sighed, feeling Beau's fingers gripping warmly around him. "That's a much better wakeup than the alarm."

Beau grinned as he lightly teased Ian awake.

"I don't think we have time for a reprise of last night? Do we?" Ian asked still feeling Beau's fingers gently flirting over his now well-aroused male.

"No. Probably not."

Beau slipped from the sheets and stretched vocally. Ian watched Beau flex muscularly in the full early morning light, his arms above his head with his own half-aroused manhood sticking straight out.

Ian half sat up, his eyes tracing Beau's more than fine male ridges. "We don't have to be there until seven; we have time."

"We should probably save it for tonight." Beau continued his brief yoga exercise.

"Oh? Am I going to stay with you tonight?" Ian smirked.

"If you want to." Beau twisted into another yoga pose. "So, do you want to show up for breakfast together or separately?"

"Good question."

"Are we a couple or in the closet?" Beau twisted into another position.

"Ugh. You did not just ask that." Ian flopped back onto the bed and then buried his head under a pillow.

Beau emerged from the tiny shower and bathroom still wet and drying his hair. At least Ian was sitting up on the side of the bed now.

"You okay? You look upset. What's wrong?" Beau walked up to him still drying himself off as Ian stood.

"I'm—conflicted." Ian didn't look at him.

"About us?"

Ian nodded.

"Hey. Ian. Listen," Beau began.

Ian looked at him.

"If you want to forget this ever happened, I'm fine with that. I keep secrets like a dead man."

"I don't *want* to forget it, that's the problem." Ian stood close to Beau smoothing his hands over his chest.

"Still worried about Christie?"

"No. Her I can handle."

"So—?" Beau looked at him.

"I guess I didn't know I was gay."

"You're not gay."

"Hello!? Beau, we just fucked each other into oblivion last night."

"You're bi, not gay."

"Oh, thanks." Ian didn't hide his sarcasm.

"I guess I don't know what the big deal is?"

"You live in Seattle, Beau. I'm from the Midwest. I come from a very Catholic family. They are *not* going to understand."

"I see." Beau nodded.

"I just don't want to disappoint them."

"Hey." Beau looked again at Ian and the conflicted emotion moving over his face. "I'll stand with you; or I can disappear. However you want to handle it. My family already has more than our fair share of gay couples. It's not a big deal with us. Well, I guess it sort of is to some of us, but it's not exactly unprecedented."

"They'll kick me out of school if they find out, Beau." Ian's face was troubled.

“Wow. Really?”

“I’m in a private Catholic college on a full-ride church scholarship funded by the Knights of Columbus. Trust me, it would *be* a big deal.” Ian frowned.

Beau nodded his understanding. “Look, ah; we should talk more about this later. The last thing I want to do is destroy your life.”

“You’re not destroying it.” Ian moved close to him, giving him a cautious smile. “It’s just we sort of happened really fast. I didn’t exactly plan on making love to you last night. I usually think things through before doing them. You kind of surprised me—I mean, *I* kind of surprised me, last night.”

Beau nodded. “You were a nice surprise, Ian. I think I’ll get dressed and head down for something at the breakfast bar—alone. I brought a ton of clothes; find whatever you need and we’ll circle back later today and talk. We’ll be going ashore for a few days. I’m sure we’ll have some time at the hotel to talk later.”

“I’m sorry about all of this, Beau.”

“I’m not.”

“Are you sure?”

Beau dropped his towel and embraced Ian tenderly. Ian closed his eyes as he felt Beau’s warm body and soft lips move over his as a strong cinnamon scent filled his senses.

The both of them pulled away to look deeply into the eyes of each other. Ian nodded.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ian emerged from the bathroom freshly showered to find Beau already dressed and gone. Searching through the closet, he found Beau’s taste in clothes quite a bit more expensive than he’d be able to afford. Ian was pleasantly surprised to find that they looked and fit just as well on him as they did on Beau.

Ian stopped by his own cabin to pick up his phone and schedule for the day. He was glad to see that the paparazzi were still not up yet. Meeting up with a number of other contestants on their way to breakfast, he entered the dining room and saw Beau sitting with some other guys at a table. Ian decided that it would be better to avoid him, at least for now.

Ian's phone suddenly buzzed in his pocket. It was Christie. He sent her call to voicemail. The last thing he needed was dealing with her drama at six in the morning.

\* \* \* \* \*

Their ship had docked at St. Lucia. While the rest of the cruise guests readied to go ashore and be bussed to a sunny public beach for a few hours of fun, the show's remaining eighty contestants would now be whisked off to a private beach resort hotel for yet another round of eliminations grandly staged at the *Regency La Toc*.

\* \* \* \* \*

A late mid-morning found Ian once again standing next to Beau and two other tall male contestants. While the women were dressed in designer string bikini's, all of the men had been dressed in different colors and slightly different styles of one brand's new "freedom" swimwear, a brief-style swimsuit with a snug-fitting back and a very loose fitting contour front pouch that allowed one's male equipment move more or less freely about the cabin. The lighter colors of the thin loose fabric did little to hide the guys' natural details in the bright sunlight. In fact, it looked to Ian like the producers had gone out of their way to select models with heavier endowments to model the new line.

While the cameras clicked and recorded from the sidelines, the guys and ladies were made to move and stretch playfully as they prepared to go head to head in a faux game of volleyball.

Although no one was officially keeping score, it was clear early in the game that the ladies were neatly handing the men's team their collective asses. One of the beautiful bikini-clad women seemed to be exceptionally skilled at the game.

"Those are not just co-eds," Ian mumbled to Beau as he prepped the ball and served it over the net forcefully.

The girls returned the fast serve back over the net with one of the guys popping the ball up so another of their team jumping high in his freedom swimwear could slug it back over the net for a rare point.

"We're probably playing against some varsity players." Beau grinned. He didn't really care who was winning. He admired their skill, not to mention how all of them looked in the hot bikini swimwear. Beau watched Ian and the rest of his distracted team get seriously trounced by the women.

After an hour of volleyball for the cameras, all of the contestants were given a few hours of break for lunch. Beau waited as he watched Ian talking with one of the women on the other team. They seemed to be exchanging cell numbers.

"Get yourself a date?" Beau asked with a smirk as Ian caught up with him. Both began walking back to the hotel, still dressed in their anatomically conspicuous designer swimsuits with the show's paparazzi in tow well in front of and behind them.

"Just a swimsuit pic and her number. Her name is Elle. We've sort of been talking since L.A."

"Man, I wish I had your charisma. Women just throw themselves at you." Beau pulled his towel tautly around his

neck as both strode along the path. Both smiled handsomely as they passed a group of well-to-do middle-aged beach-dressed ladies on their way to the shore while the cameras clicked in the distance.

“Well, she wanted your number too, actually.”

“Really? Did you give it to her?”

“No. I told her I didn’t *have* your number. Why don’t I have your number?” Ian asked rhetorically with a grin.

“I don’t think Christie would want you having my number.” Beau joked.

“Ohh,” Ian groaned. “Thanks for the reminder. Elle was one of the reasons Christie didn’t want me coming on this cruise without her. I need to call her. The voice mails she’s been leaving me are insane.”

“Like what?”

“She’s gone all guilt-trip on me. I just need to break it off. She won’t leave me alone.”

“Uh-oh. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m done with it. I was done with her antics a while ago.”

“So what are we doing for lunch?”

“Elle.”

“Really?” Beau chuckled.

Ian grinned. “Actually, she wanted to see if you and I wanted to meet her for lunch.”

“Sure.”

Ian looked around to make sure they were well out of earshot of the paparazzi on the path leading back to the hotel.

“How are you doing?”

“You mean about last night?”

“Yea.”

“I’ve been thinking about it. I mean, Ian,” Beau looked around to make sure no one could hear their conversation, “I’d

make love to you again, in a heartbeat. But, are we really in love or is this just our wound-up hormones?"

Ian nodded. "Right."

"I mean, just a moment ago, watching Elle standing next to you, I was more than a little interested in her, I mean, how she looks. She's really beautiful. I have to admit, I'd have no problem making out with her—or you."

Ian nodded. "You and me both—trust me."

"See? I don't know what to think about us. It's confusing." He frowned.

The two of them walked into the lobby of the main hotel.

"Listen, Beau, I've *got* to call Christie. I'll meet you back here at one. Elle said she'd meet us in the lobby. Wait for me if I'm a little late."

# 4

**B**eau stood in the main lobby of the regal beach-front hotel wearing lighter Seattle-style khaki long shorts and a dark olive, fine-spun cotton short-sleeved button down. The untucked fitted shirt didn't do much to hide his build and it well matched the canvas boat shoes he'd slipped into barefoot.

It wasn't hard to spot Elle. She emerged from the elevator wearing a nicely snug white jersey-knit sundress that hugged her every curve as she began walking gracefully toward him. Her thick and very long sun-bleached light brown hair flowed like billowing waves of silk over her smoothly tanned, perfect-skinned shoulders and down behind her back. The tall busty model looked much more athletic than some of the other runway types that were part of the reality show's competition. She didn't seem to wear much makeup, if any; she didn't need it. Elle's high cheek bones, very full pout and tiny but noticeable beauty mark just above her lip were only some of

the features that left the men breathless and the other women envious. She walked up to Beau with elegant steps and a beautiful smile.

"Hey, Beau. I'm Elle." She held out her hand which Beau graciously shook politely. She shook his hand firmly and smiled as she gazed briefly at him with a curious look.

"Hello. Nice to meet you."

"Yea. Nice to meet you too." She seemed to look at him oddly again, but still with smiling eyes. She then turned to look around the lobby. "Where's Ian?"

"He had to make a call. He said he might be a few minutes late."

"So—how are you liking the competition?" She asked, obviously making small talk as they waited.

"I hate it."

"Brutal honesty. Nice. I'm with you on that. Someone needs to give the producers a few lessons in project and time management. This schedule's insane."

"You sound like a business major."

"I was. I've been out of school for a while."

"Joined the rat-race did you?" He smiled at her.

"I did. Then again, so did you. How is business these days?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You own a dot-com, right?"

"Yea, well—I didn't think that was common knowledge. How did you know?"

"I always know my competition, Beau. You should too. You had twenty-two million in sales last year with projections on-track to do more than triple those numbers this year. Sequoia wanted to drop a third of a billion into you but you told them no. Not bad for a company that's barely three years old."

“Jesus, Elle—” Beau stammered quietly. He wasn’t sure how or even where she got her information but it was dead-on. No one knew about Sequoia outside of his executive team. “—that’s not for broadcast.”

She smiled wryly at him.

He couldn’t help but grin back at her. “Your sleuthing skills are impressive. And here I thought we were doing a pretty good job of flying under the radar. Let me know if you ever need a job.”

“Thanks, but I have one too many already.”

The two of them looked around the lobby still waiting for Ian.

“So, you don’t really need to be here,” Elle began. “Why did you try out for the show?”

“Probably ego, mostly. It looked like an interesting challenge. I just wanted to see how far I could get. I didn’t think I’d make it this far, to be honest.”

“You’ll get to the top ten; I’m sure.”

“I’m sure Ian will. I’m still learning how this whole modeling thing works.”

“You’ve picked it up pretty well so far, Beau. The way you two work the camera. I think the producers have already chosen both of you.”

“I thought the audience was supposed to choose the winners?”

“Please. Beau, it’s reality TV. It’s everything *but* reality.”

Beau was a little surprised by Elle’s revelation; but then again, their contract was close to three hundred pages. He figured the producers could do just about whatever they wanted.

“So what does the amazingly beautiful Elle do, besides audition for a reality show she hates?”

Elle smiled again at Beau. He was cute. "Right now, I'm a bodyguard." She looked away taking in the surroundings of the lobby and then back at Beau.

"No, I mean seriously."

Elle smiled at him again. "I am being serious."

Beau grinned a little sheepishly at her.

"I know. You don't believe me."

"You're right. I don't. Maybe if you weighed like two-fifty I might think twice." He grinned.

"Appearances can be deceiving, Beau."

"Sure. So who do you usually bodyguard?" He played along.

"Mostly high-value targets."

"Targets?" Beau grinned widely at her. Her whole cloak and dagger routine was getting deep. But she acted it up convincingly.

"*High-value* targets." She reiterated.

"Okay, I get it. You're a *really* good actor. I bet you're one of New York people we picked up from Broadwa—"

Elle stepped in front of Beau as she took hold of his wrist a little painfully. Even though he was twice her size, he felt himself being walked backward by Elle against one of the lobby's main support pillars. The light grip she had on his wrist was getting more painful by the moment.

"That's starting to hurt." Beau looked at her with surprise in his eyes as she held him firmly and a little painfully against the pillar. He outweighed her by well over a hundred pounds, yet she seemed to have more than full control over him with the way she now held his arm, keeping him against the cool stone.

"We're going to play a little game, Mr. René. You do exactly what I tell you or I send your wrist into more pain than you have ever known in your life; just before I fracture it in two places. Am I clear?"

Beau felt a slightly more intense throb shoot through his forearm. It hurt. He nodded quickly.

“Put your arm around me and kiss me like you mean it.”

She didn’t have to tell him twice, the throbbing in his arm was growing worse the longer she held onto his wrist. Beau pulled Elle close to himself and buried his lips into hers.

The moment their lips touched she released his wrist. The pain in his arm faded quickly. He thought to pull away but—Elle’s lips—they were intoxicating. It was as if he could feel her all over inside himself, playfully revving his emotions. He couldn’t help but bury his lips warmly, sweetly, into hers as they kissed now like lovers for long moments.

“God, Elle—what are you doing to me?” he kissed her ravenously. They kissed passionately now, their tongues slipping smoothly over each other’s, each of their kisses filled with emotion while Elle’s fingers held his face and combed through his hair.

Elle felt his hands move warmly down her back and then down over her well-curved ass. Beau was indeed a talented kisser, but she didn’t need him going overboard. She’d done what she needed to do.

Beau felt her softly withdraw from their kiss as the feeling of her inside him faded.

“Really? Really, guys?” Ian walked up and stood a few feet from the two of them. “I leave you two alone for five minutes and you both go in for the kill?”

“Just showing Beau some of my moves.” Elle smiled, stepping back from him.

Beau pushed away from the pillar looking a little disheveled. The pain in his wrist was gone, but his arm was still tingling as he moved his hand over his forearm.

“I—I guess we got a little carried away.” Beau offered a bit sheepishly, looking at Ian and seeing the disappointment on his face.

Lunch with Elle proved to be a fantastic time for all of them. The conversation was light as the three of them shared soap-opera-class dirt on who was who and who was doing whom within the competition. Beau was glad Elle had kept quiet about his company; and neither he nor Ian mentioned their own budding new relationship. After lunch, Beau walked back with Ian to their hotel.

"You seem a little distracted." Beau walked beside his friend along the beautifully manicured palm-lined pathway.

Ian frowned.

"Did I do something?"

"No. Not really."

"But you're upset."

Ian sighed. "I didn't say anything at lunch, but—I just broke up with Christie."

"It didn't go well?"

"No. Do they ever?"

"Probably not. Was she crying?"

"Yelling. I just hung up. And then blocked her number."

"Wow."

Both walked quietly.

"How was Elle?" Ian wondered out loud, but didn't look him.

"I knew you were going to ask me that."

"I guess you were kind of the reason I got the courage to finally break it off with Christie. Then I come down stairs and you two are lip-locked, Frenching."

"She made the pass, Ian, not me."

"She make you grab her ass as well?"

"No." Beau admitted. At least he didn't think she had. The memory of feeling her all over inside him was still very vivid.

“Look, Beau. I’m—just really stressed at the moment. Between Christie, you, Elle, the competition and being worried about school—” Ian sighed heavily.

Beau nodded. “I get it. I would be too. I’m sorry.”

“Listen, if Elle made a pass at you, I get that. I’m pretty sure my hands would have been all over her ass too. Especially after seeing her in the bikini she was wearing today.”

“Ian, let’s just forget about Elle. Really, it’s you I’m concerned about. We only have a three-hour gig for the rest of today. Let’s hit the spa afterward and get a massage. It will knock out at least some of this stress you’ve been feeling. My treat.”

“Really?”

“Yea. And then afterward—” Beau stopped and grinned.

Ian stood looking at him.

Beau leaned in close to Ian’s ear whispering alluringly. “You’re going to fuck me like there’s no tomorrow.”

Ian breathed a smile.

# 5

**T**he two of them woke in Beau's hotel room as they had the morning before aboard ship, sprawled next to each other warmly only somewhat covered with a white satiny cotton sheet.

Ian rolled sleepily onto his back while Beau sat up and silenced the seven AM alarm. He looked over at Ian's uncovered chest and then smoothed his hand over his amazing pecs.

"That was brutal—" Ian breathed, feeling Beau's hand moving over his skin.

Beau smiled. "How do you feel?" He dropped back down onto his pillow looking at him.

"Sore."

"Still?"

"Beau!" Ian opened his eyes to look at him. "You do know men weren't built to go off more than once, right?"

“Apparently that’s not exactly true. You went off a few times.”

“Yea, empty. And I’m paying for it now. Ooh.” Ian’s fingers gently smoothed over his still sore glands.

“I stopped.”

Ian closed his eyes, a soft sigh floating from his grin as the memory of the previous night with Beau came flooding back to mind.

“You were beautiful last night, Ian. Honestly. I love watching you go off. You were more than hot last night.”

Ian looked at him. He reached out his hand to Beau’s, locking their fingers. “Sorry I was such a mess yesterday.”

“Forget about it. I—”

Both of them heard their hotel room’s door unlock and then open as someone entered and then closed the door. Both young men looked at each other with sudden surprise. There wasn’t time for either of them to slip out of bed before they saw her just abruptly enter their room.

“Elle.” Beau leaned up onto his elbows looking a little bewildered to see her.

“You two look cute.” She smiled beautifully at them, both still cuddled holding hands. She’d dressed in a kind of safari inspired outfit with khaki short shorts and a low-cut cleavage-revealing black tank with a button-down top. She parked herself elegantly on the plush couch, spreading her arms across the back, looking at the both of them still undressed in bed and still only barely covered by the sheet.

Ian leaned up on both of his elbows first looking at Beau and then back at Elle. “What are you doing here? How did you get a key to our room?”

“I don’t have a key to your room. These locks are ridiculous. It wasn’t hard.”

“That still doesn’t answer why you’re in our room,” Beau retorted, now a little annoyed.

"Bodyguard." She replied simply.

Ian looked at Beau. "She's your bodyguard, or mine?"

"I don't *have* a bodyguard." Beau glared at her.

"Guess again. You both do now." Elle corrected.

"Both of us?" Ian still looked surprised.

"Is the show paying for you?" Beau asked.

"I don't work for the show, Beau. This is a little outside of their purview."

"And why do we need a bodyguard?" Beau softened his glare, still a little perturbed that she'd somehow been able to just walk in on the two of them.

"You've both been identified by the Seven. As special envoy to the Goddess of War, I've been sent to protect you; *both* of you."

Ian flopped back onto his pillow. "God, Elle, not this again. And I thought Christie was nuts."

"Wait a minute; Ian, Elle's told you this bodyguard story already?"

Ian looked over at Beau, nodding. "Back in L.A."

"Beau, the Dominion has been tracking Ian ever since he flew into LAX. I entered the competition at the last minute as cover to keep an eye on him. But then you sort of showed up. I wasn't sure who you were yesterday. You're really bright; even a little brighter than Ian is. I needed a DNA sample." She shrugged. "It was a great kiss."

"You kissed me to get a sample of my DNA?" Beau looked at her incredulously now.

"I could have stuck you with needle. The kiss was a bit more fun."

Beau followed Ian's lead in flopping back down into his pillow. He wondered now if he needed a real bodyguard to protect him from Elle.

"Don't try to figure it all out now," Elle continued. "The only agents they've sent are mundane and they're keeping their distance now that they know I'm here."

"You're not going to tell anyone—I mean, about us?" Ian looked at Beau and then back at Elle.

"I'm a bodyguard, Ian, not a tabloid."

"Did you just say the *Dominion* was tailing us?" Beau sat up again looking at her.

"I did."

"What has a church got to do with this?"

"The Dominion is more than just a denomination, Beau. We're tracking people like you all over the world."

"Like me?" Beau asked.

"Oh, now you've done it," Ian groaned, pulling the pillow over his head in a vain attempt to not hear what Elle was about to say. He'd heard more than enough of it on the last trip.

"You'll figure it out." She quipped. "Eventually."

"What is she talking about?" Beau lifted the pillow off of Ian's face. "People like me how?"

"She thinks you're a god."

"What?!" Beau couldn't hold back a sudden smirk.

"The church's apostles think people are being 'born again' as gods," Ian began, not holding back his cynicism.

"You mean like reincarnated? I thought Dominion was Christian?" Beau asked.

"They're whatever they need to be to bring in the most money. That's how the Dominion works."

"So that's what this is? Some kind of religious con game?" Beau glared at Elle.

"Hardly. Your boyfriend here isn't exactly rolling in dough. We've been tacking and protecting him for months. This isn't about money, Beau." Elle assured.

"So what *is* this all about?"

"Don't go there," Ian warned him.

“The gods of old are returning, Beau.”

“Gods? You mean like Zeus and Poseidon?”

“Something like that.”

“I told you not to go there.” Ian groaned.

“And your church thinks we’re like a couple of these reincarnated gods?” Beau stared at her, grinning incredulously.

“It’s not *my* church, Beau. I’m agnostic.”

“But you work for them?”

“It’s complicated, Beau. I’m not going into it. The bottom line is we’ve informed the shows producers that Dominion will be providing undercover security for some of their contestants. They don’t know who I am or who we’re actually protecting and we’d prefer to keep it that way.”

“So the show knows about this?” Beau asked, his eyes widening now.

“Only the show’s executive producers. Everyone else is on a need to know basis.”

Beau flopped back down onto his pillow. “Jeeze, I’m being dragged into a cult.”

“Hardly. I’m not asking you for anything, Beau. Except that you *not* blow my cover.” Elle got up from the sofa and made ready to leave.

“So what are we supposed to do?” Beau asked just as she was about to open the door.

“Nothing. Just have fun with the competition—” she looked back at the two of them still laying cutely next to each other, “—and try not to get yourselves killed.”

\* \* \* \* \*

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