

The RA

Chapter Eight: Switches

CULT LEADER. That was the extent of the next morning's "prank." Back in August, I'd made a door tag for myself like everyone else, with the addition of "RA" beneath my name. Now someone had taken nail polish and painted on a new title.

I suppose, after having a pile of giggly girls on top of me chanting the name of the Egyptian sun god in reference to me, it wasn't the least apt criticism.

If it struck me as a bit sad compared to the grandiose acts from earlier in the week, I could take comfort in what it seemed to signify. Namely, that I was winning. Tori and her people had made their case and made it well. As their primary evidence, I should know. It wasn't the victory through reasoned debate and mutual conciliation that I'd wanted, but I supposed it would do. It turned out, apparently, that people who wanted to spend their college years having hot sex with no strings attached out-numbered those who took exception to that lifestyle.

If things weren't as nutty as pre-break, maybe they just needed time. There was no line-up to masturbate in the shower stall next to me, no more stripping with the door open, no walking down the hall to hear the muffled noises of every last Hottie frigging themselves to an unauthorized recording of two of their number blowing me. Just smiling faces and straying hands. For most of them, really, not even that. Most gave the impression that they'd earned their chokers and didn't feel the burning need to do more. Maybe the Spencer effect had even diminished a bit. Bob had said something about how it started with me going through rooms during RA training before the girls arrived, touching everything to do their RCRs, getting my not-pheromones all over their rooms. Maybe the stuff had faded over time, and they weren't stewing in the stuff so much. Or maybe we'd simply achieved a natural equilibrium. Regardless, it was finally becoming a nice place to live again. Once these so-called pranks subsided, hopefully we could all move on happily.

All I had to do was not have any more fuck-ups.

All I had to do.

"Holy *SHIT!*"

Lexi's head cocked to the side, eyes still blank, empty. "What."

It was the first word she'd spoken to me since I'd idiotically asked her if I could see those two stupendous things straining at the delicate wrap of her towel. They were... fuck. Even only seeing the top halves, I was awestruck. Big, round, impossibly perky, the

kinds of tits that struck down the objections of every dude-bro out there who claimed they thought fake boobs were gross. It was possible the towel obscured some imperfections, but what I could see merited my verbal outburst and then some.

“I’m sorry. Fuck! Fuck. I’m sorry. I just wasn’t expecting...”

She waited. Kept waiting. “Wasn’t expecting what?”

Casey squirmed around me to exit the shower. “Hey, Lex. Nice tits.”

As Casey swaggered out of the bathroom, though, Lexi was still watching me.

“Sorry. You’re just... They’re just so...”

Her frown deepened. “So... what?”

Fuck! *All* had to do! “It’s just nice to see you. That’s all. We’ve been missing you.”

“We?”

“I. Sorry. Don’t know what’s wrong with my tongue. *I* missed you. Have you been doing OK?”

With a roll of the eyes, Lexi entered the shower stall I’d just left, brushing me aside and saying nothing.

Jo was in my room tearing me a new one less than an hour later. Tori went to Ramona first, who texted a heads up that I received while she was down in my room, thundering away at what a misogynist asshole I was. Katrina, whom I’d thought had been a weak link, came down later with another lecture no less vehement.

“Katrina, wait,” I said as she went to storm out. “Please.”

She paused, but didn’t turn back around. “What, Spencer.”

“I didn’t mean to. I really didn’t. I’m embarrassed, and there’s no excuse, but I am very sorry.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “So...? I’m not the one you need to apologize to.”

“But she won’t talk to me. Or if she would, Jo would kill me if I tried to get close. Just... tell her I’m sorry?”

“You think she’d believe it? You think that makes it OK, even if she does?”

I shook my head. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned trying to fix fights between people... Nothing makes old wounds OK, but you can’t start on a path to earning forgiveness until you apologize.”

A thin smile formed on thin lips. Then an even thinner laugh. “Sorry, I can just hear Tori saying something like ‘sounds like he lifted that off a damn greeting card’ or something.”

“Cool. Maybe when I get myself fired and have to figure out how to pay down my loans, I can get into the card writing industry.”

Katrina turned back around. “I think we both know you’re not getting fired,” she said softly.

“I hope not. I like living with you guys. And not just because of... that.”

“But that, too.” She sighed. “You have a kind disposition, Spencer. I like you. I just wish I could respect you.”

That burrowed down pretty deep in my head. I locked the door behind her and didn’t open it for the rest of the day. I ditched classes, too.

Well, I opened it for Casey, but only after several hours of trying to ignore her imploring me through the wall. There was no making out individual sentences, but “cock” and “pussy” and “please” and a dozen vulgar terms recurred so often that the theme of her pleading was apparent. I took out my ear buds every half hour or so, and every time she was still at it. It was the middle of the night when I knocked at our shared wall, and seconds later she was in my bed, naked, literally drooling around my cock.

“You’re all I got now, homie,” she murmured, was weeping with relief. “I can’t quit you. Wouldn’t want to.”

I promised not to make her wait like that again if I could help it.

I’d ignored the Lexi problem because it was hard and made me feel things about myself I didn’t like feeling. I’d been doing the same with Tori, with Savannah, with the mountain of doubts I’d cast aside about what I’d resolved to do. I’d ignored Casey until it blew up in my face, and now I was doing it to her again. She didn’t sleep that night. She just sucked my cock, even when I was sleeping, even when it got soft as I dreamed of realer realities.

Something was *wrong*, and in the case of this something, it wasn’t a Spencer problem that I could have a well-planned heart-to-heart to solve.

This was a Spencer *effect* problem.

That was what sold me on what I had to do next.

“I’d say it was a pleasant surprise to see you, but it’s not much of a surprise.”

I smiled hopefully. “So you’re saying it’s pleasant.”

Marisa unfolded her arms and gestured for me to enter her apartment. “It’s not unpleasant. You look well.”

“Is that the Spencer effect talking, or just being polite?”

She chuckled dryly. “I’m sorry, the ‘Spencer effect?’”

“You know, how whatever your bosses did to me—”

“I know what it does. Thanks to this little stunt you pulled, I know better than you.”

I sighed with relief. “So it worked? They really...?”

She nodded. “They did. There I was, sitting at my desk collating survey responses – we’re doing a study on the effects of ASMR on libido – and suddenly I’m being summoned to this creepy basement dungeon to get filled in on my ex-boyfriend’s harem

management efforts to find out if he's going to rule the roost or wither on the vine or... whatever shit metaphor they used."

"Harem?! It's not a harem!"

"No, it's just a group of young, attractive teenage girls who perform any sex act you can dream up on command. Oh, and they're unpaid and they live in a convenient little pod for you to harvest their cum. But not a harem."

"Harem girls have costumes."

Marisa laughed in spite of it all. "Cute. Go on, have a seat. Don't worry, I'll disinfect anything you touch. Though it sounds like I won't need to, maybe. Do you want to start with how on earth you triggered that little meetup?"

"Well, I figured they have to be recording somehow, or there's no data to be gathered. Exit surveys are impractical; there's no way to ask those types of questions without exposing themselves." I paused for Marisa to snort or laugh or do a dry "phrasing!" quip, but she was listening uncommonly closely. "I'm pretty sure there's no cameras. They'd need line of sight, and that's way too big a risk of discovery. All it takes is one girl noticing a camera and all of the sudden it's national news, Lakeview putting spycams in the girls dorm. Clearly the folks doing this don't want attention."

"Clearly."

"So I figured audio makes more sense. Mics can be hidden more easily – in mattresses, concealed under a thin veneer of wood putty, or even parabolic mics around the vicinity. Same with infrared scanners, so they know where to point them. Ramona – my boss, she's, um working with me – agreed it makes the most sense, since using a few devices remotely is a lot cheaper and less conspicuous than bugging the entire floor."

Marisa shook her head. "You know, I haven't *not* been thinking about it all, but... This is some serious shit, fucking Jason Bourne shit. OK. Go on."

"Well, that's pretty much it. I invited one of my girls in, had her wear some headphones while she..."

"Sucked your dick? How many times do I have to tell you, if you can't say it, you shouldn't be allowed to do it."

"Apologies to the sex police. Anyway, I figured that'd get their attention, so I made sure she couldn't hear and told them – through whatever they're using – I needed to know what happened to one of my girls."

Marisa nodded. "And I want to know more about that, but... how did that get back to *me*?"

"I mean, it had to be Hancock. It's an experiment on human sexuality, so who else could it be? I've looked into every research foundation for a hundred miles, and nobody else makes half the sense as them. There's one other person I know who's connected to them, our housing director. He helped place the women, covering for the red flags it could raise in the system. I don't trust him, though. So I told them to go

through you. I said if they didn't pass on what I need to know in three days, I'd start making things difficult. Felt like the sort of vague threat I could figure out how to satisfy if they tried to treat it like a bluff."

"Ballsy. Then again, your balls are probably one of the reasons they picked you."

I gave a perfunctory laugh. "So... what happened? You said... dungeon?"

"A modestly furnished windowless basement room, to be clear. But it sure felt like a dungeon. Led down there by some creep in a mask, confiscated my phone so I couldn't record anything or call for help. Nobody even came to talk to me. Just used this TV on the wall, typed words and flashed docs and pics and shit. Like I said, it was something out of a spy movie, right down to the amiguously brown hot girl romantically attached to the hero."

"I'm definitely not a hero, Marisa. And I'm really sorry that happened. It sounds terrifying."

"It was. But..." She grinned. "But it was pretty fucking cool, too. I thought it was pretty sweet working for one of the world's foremost authorities on human sexuality. Finding out they're even more than that... heady shit."

"So what did they tell you? Did they say how to fix Casey?"

"Casey...?" She shook her head. "No. I asked a lot of questions, and they ignored most of them. They prepped what they wanted me to know, and ran through their little presentation. There was... a lot of data. Most of it moved faster than I could even read, unfortunately."

"But what *did* you read?" I pressed.

"Chill, OK? I'm getting to it. Unlike them, I didn't get the chance to work up a slide show."

I held up my hands apologetically. "Sorry. Take your time."

"I was going to."

Yet she dove right in, passing along everything she'd seen the best she could. I didn't have her background in the sciences, and it sounded like they'd gone well over her head, too. Me, I sat back and tried to keep from losing my goddamn mind as she told me the story of my story.

Her eyes had caught a "date of insertion" on one of dozens of rapidly transitioning reports they'd flashed before her. Sure enough, Bob hadn't been lying about my wisdom teeth removal. Right there in the health center, while I was under for the dental work, they'd stuffed in their insidious little implant. As for why it hadn't done anything in the months between then and Welcome Week, she inferred that it had some kind of switch, could be toggled on and off. From what she'd seen, she surmised that the intensity of the effect had something to do with my own physiology, though she admitted that she could be wrong.

The how of it was, needless to say, complex. Still, what they'd said to her was that it wasn't *only* chemical. As she launched into an explanation with so much jargon I mentally prepared an apology letter to my high school chemistry teacher for not having paid more attention, she finally saw I was overwhelmed and tried another tactic.

"OK, so you know how chemistry is everything, right? The whole universe, atoms and molecules and reactions."

"Sure."

"Now inorganic matter, the chemistry is comparatively simple. Sodium meets chloride, makes salt. Hydrogen sticks to everything. Et cetera. But when you get to biochemistry, you have molecules that took billions of years to progress and evolve. As organisms become more complex, the reactions become more complex. Still with me?"

"I think so."

"Good. Get to sufficiently evolved life forms, and the chemical reactions can start to blur with psychosocial reactions. Take pencillin, at one end of the spectrum. Breaks down most bacteria's capacity to form cellular walls that can hold in their gunk. At the other end, take something like, say, zoloft. It stimulates production of neurochemicals that change how dozens of things work throughout the whole body. Messes with your appetite, your serotonin, your energy levels. But there's so many little things happening that it can take months before the dosage is right for a given person, and it can be hell until it's right."

"Yeah, all those commercials, with the side effects. Take this for depression, but it might make you suicidal. Like that?"

She nodded. "Like that. And that's medicine, but the brain takes social cues from all kinds of stuff. Classic example is a crying baby. Most people's brains react pretty negatively, part of an evolutionary mechanism so we're less likely to neglect our kids. Some people, especially pregnant or recently pregnant ones, have chemicals that make them react more strongly. It could trigger mood swings, depression, or stimulate lactation. It's reacting to our physiology, yes, but also to things as complex as our memories and lived experiences."

"OK..."

"So this stuff is deeply at the second end of that spectrum. From what I could gather, it stimulates neural activity tied to sexual arousal, obviously, and perhaps most prominently, but it's other stuff too. It breaks down social inhibitions, similar to the way alcohol does. It even hits some of our dormant social triggers that we mostly stop using after infancy – feelings of need, calm, safety, belonging. The shit we get from being held and breastfed and lullabied by our parents, you know? Except here, those feelings are being projected onto you."

I shook my head. "No. I'm not *that* bad at my job, that my residents only feel comfortable around me because of some chemical sludge. No way."

Marisa smiled sympathetically. “Hey, nobody’s saying that. Honestly, that might be part of why they chose you for the experiment. You’re conventionally attractive, yes, which I suspect played a big role. The ‘sludge’ isn’t some love potion that magically points horniness at you specifically, but having a hot, slightly older but not creepily old Daddy figure, and no other male presence in the building, I’m sure helped point a lot of it at you. But the fact that you’re a natural nurturer, empathetic, protective—”

“All the stuff you usually only bring up to make fun of me, you mean?”

“Right, that stuff. That stuff is in there, making sure your girls don’t just want to fuck you. They want to *belong* to you. The connection isn’t merely attraction – not to discount the potency of attraction! Listen to a murder podcast. It’s also social and emotional. It’s probably why your girls aren’t staging a mutiny now that they’ve switched you off.”

Marisa started to say something else, but must have seen a look on my face. I don’t know what it might have been.

“Spencer...? Spencer, say something.”

Switched me... off?

“Spencer! Whoa, baby, take a breath for me. Holy—”

Off?!

Marisa caught me just in time. It took two cups of tea before I felt stable enough to be allowed to continue our discussion. “I wasn’t going to faint,” I grumbled, taking another sip.

“You said that. And what did I say?”

“I was listening, OK? I’m fine.”

“What did I say.”

“That you don’t let liars or idiots in your home. Har, har.”

“So if you saying things like that, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. So drink your tea, and then try saying something that makes sense.” She raised her own mug to me.

I downed the rest of mine, and finally tried to put it into words. It came out in a babble, one she listened to without interruption. I wouldn’t have described Marisa as a great listener when we were dating, but girlfriend Marisa and sex researcher Marisa utilized two distinct standards of attentiveness. Tonight, she was the latter. She heard me out about all of it, from the insanity of massage night, the situation with Ramona, and everything that happened since break. I even spoke plainly about my fuck-ups with Lexi, though I’d forgotten where Marisa’s prejudices lie.

“Ugh, girls who shell out for gigantic tits and then get embarrassed about people taking interest in them can tongue-fuck my asshole.” She made a thoroughly displeased face. “And I mean right first thing in the morning, too, not some rosy post-shower rimjob. We’re talking—”

“Yep, I get it. And maybe cut her a little slack, since she only did it because the Spencer effect convinced her to go the extra mile to get my attention.”

“Bah, you don’t even like huge boobs.”

“For one, they’re not ‘huge,’ they’re just a lot bigger than boobs that perky are supposed to be. And for two, I like huge boobs just fine.”

“No you don’t, honey. That’s not just my ego talking, either – though if we wanted, we could enter me into evidence as exhibits A, B & C.”

“C...? Do you have a third boob I never noticed?”

She pointed to each breast respectively, then swept across both. “A. B. And they’re C cups. Why do I even bother being clever with you? But the point is, you like *hot* boobs, hence your fixation on mine. Size is one factor, though several studies have shown that’s only true to a degree and to a certain size, at which point it tapers off. Furthermore, issues such as asymmetry, sag, perception of excessively sized nipples and areolae – they’re all negatively perceived and correlate positively with larger bust size.”

“Just... fucking fascinating, OK? But did you hear what I said? My residents had a whole week to cool off, but in two weeks they’ve gone from united in demanding my head on a plate, to a rising tide of wanting to pleasure me for a token of membership in the Spencer’s sluts club. Casey started having some kind of sexual panic attack at not getting to fuck me for most of a day. I am not ‘switched off!’ Those fuckers lied to us!”

Marisa nodded, transitioning back to the topic at hand smoothly. “That’s certainly one possibility.”

“Possibility?! I have a resident who had a meltdown because she had to wait a few hours to get me off!”

“Yeah, that’s a tricky one. Hmm.”

I waited, but she was thinking. I didn’t have the patience for Marisa’s silent introspection. “What? You don’t really think they meant it, do you?”

“I’m thinking. Shh.”

Getting angry wasn’t going to help, and while I wasn’t going to faint, and hadn’t been going to either, another cup of tea sounded better than pacing around like a caged animal. By the time I was seated again, Marisa’s not-quite-scalding I [heart] Hancock mug in hand, she at last deigned to speculate aloud.

“I agree that it seems suspect. They obviously got your message or they wouldn’t have contacted me. They also obviously want to keep this on the DL, or they would have ignored your threat. Only, if they take your threat seriously enough to tell me what they did... why lie?”

“Because they’re a bunch of–”

“And don’t get all histrionic on me. I’m serious. Why gaslight you? We don’t know what hypothesis they’re testing, whether their focus is on the efficacy of the tech, or something less obvious. Personally, my sense is that this implant works much too

effectively for them not to have already ironed out a lot of the kinks. Or ironed them in?" She chuckled.

"Marisa..."

"OK, thought experiment. What if it's true, and the 'Spencer effect' has been offline since sometimes during fall break."

"Which it can't have been, or my boss would have snapped out of it."

"You say that, but how do you know? She falls for you because of it, or in part because of it. But when you stop pumping it out, it's not like she's suddenly not attracted to you, or doesn't enjoy great sex with a reasonably talented lover like yourself."

"Reasonably...?"

"Eight out of ten, can recommend." She smirked fetchingly. "But I'm saying, it's not like there's some sudden dropoff or system shock to it. At least, I didn't see anything in there about withdrawal symptoms. Plus, this is a synthetic organ, not some machine. Biology doesn't really 'switch off' so much as it becomes more or less active. Your penis doesn't switch off when you're not using it, but what it's doing right now versus what it would be doing if I settled into your lap..." She shrugged. "If you spent a whole week fucking night and day, maybe there's still trace amounts leaking out that help maintain things."

"That doesn't explain Casey, though! She ignored me just fine for a whole week, and then out of nowhere..."

"We'll come back to Casey. Look at the rest of them. They show up to a freshly decontaminated building—"

"Yeah. Didn't I say? I mean, you were there all week. They didn't sneak a bunch of guys in hazmat suits past your vigilant RA gaze, did they...?"

I groaned. "The fucking exterminators! 'Ants.' Ants! I should have figured!"

"There's nothing obvious about this. Though... Well." Nobody I'd ever dated had condescended to me quite as adorably as Marisa. "Anyway, they come back, and no more of you sticking to everything. They haven't had a dose in a week. Socially, plenty of them probably had some jarring experiences. Catching up with their family and high school friends, sharing stories – only nobody else's stories involve weird massage orgies or being so persistently turned on they stopped caring about when and where and why they were masturbating."

I nodded, trying to follow her reasoning despite Casey's case looming in my mind. "Then they come back, sobered up, feeling embarrassed, self-conscious, whatever. Add to that the Casey and Lexi situations..."

"And it's enough to push through past experience. You said Tori had already been on your case before break. Probably some others who choked down their doubts, too, not to be contrarian, or to jeopardize their shot with cutie RA boy. In a world with flat

earthers roaming the streets, some girls in denial about their crushes getting out of hand...”

“OK, but then Casey makes her speech, and they’re back to their old habits just like that. Explain *that*, if I’m turned off.”

“Let’s stick to switched. ‘Turned off’ means something else, and something not inconsequential to our discussion.” Marisa stroked her chin, looking like she wanted to do her usual contemplative thing and strike a sexy pose. I was glad for it. “So... Hmm. It’s all conjecture, really, but if they were attracted to you before, made themselves vulnerable and available to you before, and now there’s reasons not to be, that leaves two options. Change their minds, admit they were wrong to feel what felt so real only a week before, and embrace a new reality.”

I saw her point, and finished it out. “Or, keep quiet during a low ebb in my polling numbers, then when they see an opportunity to revert and tell themselves they were right all along, re-embrace the happy bullshit...”

Marisa nodded. “He didn’t do it; or if he did, he didn’t mean to; or if he meant to, he had his reasons; or if he didn’t have good reasons, well we all make mistakes; seems like the kind of guy you could grab a beer with.’ If there’s one thing people hate—”

“—it’s admitting they’re wrong.”

We raised mugs to each other. “OK, so... maybe. I still think if you’d seen some of what I’ve seen, it’s really pushing it, but... Sure. Say they were horny for me for months and just kept on being horny. I guess. Kyu-Ri invited me to bend her over for a spanking and whatever before break, so I guess maybe she just didn’t dump the fantasy just because it stopped feeling as visceral. But Casey...?”

“Yeah, then there’s Casey. Nothing like this before break? You’re sure?”

I shook my head. I’d thought and thought about this, and I was certain. “We had a lot of sex before break, and I know Bob said something about the steam in the shower spreading things, but I’ve neglected Ramona for days at a time with no such problems. Savannah was swallowing my cum, actual ingestion, multiple times a day for weeks, but nada.”

Only I could see I’d said something thought-provoking. She took a moment, but at least I didn’t have to prepare another mug of tea before she spoke. “Ingested, you say. Hmm. Not that’s interesting. I’m trying to remember, but it was too fast for me to rely on it. I definitely saw there were a couple slides referencing what seemed like dosage methods. Ingested, cutaneous exposure, respiratory – there’s that steam you mentioned. And... fuck, it went by so fast! But I’d swear there was something about the excretion type.”

I made a face. “The... what? I didn’t pee on them or anything, Jesus.”

“First off, don’t kink shame. For a guy who had to adjust his boxers after thinking back to spanking the little Asian girl, that’s some nerve. Second, excretions aren’t just

toilet stuff. Your sweat is an excretion. The oil on your skin, which seems to work especially well. Semen. Blood.” She snickered. “And not to break my own rule, but from an aesthetic standpoint, I really don’t want to imagine her drinking your blood.”

“My...? No. No vampires.”

“Hmm. And you don’t think she’d try to go into a bathroom stall after you—”

“Yikes, no! God no.”

Her lips pursed, but in frustration instead of her nasty suggestion. There was no such thing as objectively nasty sexual urges to Marisa. “You said you did mouth to mouth?”

“No. She didn’t need CPR – she was choking on her vomit.”

“And since we can assume there’s been plenty of saliva exposure in the community – I know how you get when somebody lets you start kissing on them – then... Hmm. OK, any chance of a vomit chain reaction? You know, how someone starts going *hwuhhhhh, hlurrrrg, hyummmngk*—”

“Would you stop that?! And no! No, I didn’t puke on her and forget to mention it.”

“All right, all right, don’t get your dick in a knot.”

“Besides, what would it matter if I did, if I’m turned – sorry, *switched off*?”

“Spencer, I’m not the mad scientist here, OK? I’m the ex-girlfriend of their guinea pig, so I make for a convenient messenger, disposability and all. Thanks for being concerned that I’m neck deep in this top secret covert woman sex slave cabal, by the way.”

Oh shit. “Oh shit, Marisa. I’m so sorry. I just... Sorry, it’s been crazy, and I’ve been... I’m sorry. I’m sorry you got involved. But I knew if you were working for someone who could do something like this, you’d want out of there.”

“How about I get to decide who I want to intern with, OK? Plus, if I quit, who’s going to get you the inside scoop on what the big bads are up to?”

“I’m not convinced you have, but...” I nodded. “I won’t involve you again without your permission. I’m sorry. I figured if I was wrong, you’d never know, and if I was right... Well. Sorry.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t start crying on me now – heaven only knows if that’s the magic excretion.” She laughed. “I don’t suppose Casey’s some sort of goth girl, gets off on twisting your nipples and licking up your tears or something.”

“Much more of a Cali stoner chick if we’re stereotyping. Blonde, tan, hardly any nipple twisting, even less tear drinking.”

Marisa’s eyes narrowed, trying to see through to the truth of it, but ultimately she shook her head. “So we’ll have to put a pin in that. Still, it could be an unintended side effect. Allergy, something activated by all the drugs in her system, a negative reaction to some inhibitor that’s keeping you switched off...? I don’t know. Those are guesses, and

they may as well be sci fi for all I really know about how this works. The rest of them, though... I guess you have a decision to make.”

I nodded. Then, “Wait, what? What decision?”

“I mean... whether you want it turned back on or not. I told you when you first came in, remember? Whether or not you want to go forward with it. Your out.”

I blinked. “What? Out? What does that even...? What?”

“For a guy who prides himself on being a good listener, you don’t pay much attention. Like I told you, they brought me down there, gave me enough I could pass on to let you make an informed decision, and then, yeah. Like I said, rule the roost, or rot on the vine. Id est, do you want it switched back on, or left off?”

I stood up. “What kind of question is that? I asked them to help me fix Casey, not...”

“Sounds like Casey’s getting her fix as it is. So when they blackbag me and demand your answer... what do you want me to tell them?”

I planted my hands on my hips. “What do you think I want you to tell them?!”

Marisa nodded, a little smile sneaking onto her lips. “I’ll be sure to phrase it as a *no thank you*, so they’ll believe it came from you.”

“And if Casey doesn’t snap out of it soon, they’ll get a lot rougher language than that.”

“Heaven forfend.”