

Without a Net

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Chapter One

"Captain," Ollie said as he stopped at the office door.

Captain Greyson ran his fingers over the display, searching for something Ollie couldn't see. However, from the thunderous expression on Greyson's face, the report wasn't good. Oliver hoped the captain wasn't looking up his arrest statistics. He didn't have the worst stats in the unit, but he didn't have great numbers either. That came up in every review.

After a second, Captain Greyson wiped his hand over the surface of his desk, erasing the display. "Detective Robertson, come in." He gave Ollie a dark frown.

"Yes, sir." Ollie went to parade rest in front of the captain's desk and did a little praying. Ollie might not be religious, but when a situation looked bad, he believed in covering his bases. *God, if you're out there, I could use some help.*

"I read your 5-60s from the last undercover op." The captain leaned back in his chair.

And that was the sound of prayer failing. Ollie had hoped the paperwork would go into the system without anyone noticing and then sit there. That way, when Ollie had something big enough that he could make a formal complaint about, the 5-60s describing questionable behavior would be there to show a pattern. He kept his face neutral, though. "Yes, sir?"

Greyson rested his elbows on the desk. Some of the higher-ups got their positions by keeping their heads down and kissing political butt. Greyson was a different sort. He'd been a beat cop and then a vice detective and a lieutenant over in narcotics. He'd earned respect, and Ollie had no idea what the man would do with the information Ollie had dropped in his lap.

After a second, Greyson's expression softened. "How bad is it, really?"

Ollie took several deep breaths. Greyson was a captain, so he probably had bioreaders around here somewhere, all tracking Ollie's respiration and sweat and calculating probabilities about whether Ollie was lying. So the best bet was to say as little as possible. "You have my reports, sir."

"Drop the *sir* and give me some truth here, Detective. Your report seems to suggest that Lieutenant Huda has a problem with members of my department. Would you like to elaborate on that?"

Ollie lifted his chin. "No, sir."

An uncomfortable silence stained the air, and Greyson stared at Ollie. "No, sir? That's what you're going with?"

Ollie had no idea if the captain wanted him to rewrite the 5-60s to take out the implications of impropriety or if he wanted more details on what Lieutenant Huda had done. No matter what Ollie said, he ran the risk of being wrong—career-endingly wrong.

With a sigh, the captain stood and went over to the windows, and with a swipe of his hand, he turned the glass dark. "Time for some honesty," he said before he dropped the thick, rolled curtains. They would stop anyone from using the vibrations of the glass to try to tell what was being said in the room. "I think Lieutenant Huda is a first-class asshole, and other than his ability to choose the right wine to go with some politician's dinner, I have no idea how he got into my department, much less as one of my lieutenants."

"Captain?" Shock flowed through Ollie. Higher-ups simply didn't talk about each other like this. Ever.

"Give me the honest truth. Those 5-60s imply he was slow to react to changing circumstances and that he didn't give you the backup you requested. Tell me the whole story from the beginning." The captain returned to his seat.

Ollie still suspected this was a trap, but the captain had a solid reputation, not like Lieutenant Huda. "We were down on the docks investigating a series of rapes when I saw suspicious activity. I reported it to my backup, and Detective Kemboi told me to hold position. I followed a short distance, but then I risked leaving my assigned area. I called again for support to follow what appeared to be criminal activity, and my backup refused. I told them I might be seeing a kidnapping, and my backup ordered me to hold position. After my suspects turned the corner, I went running after them."

"So you abandoned your assigned backup, and your part of the dragnet for the rapist was left with a hole," Captain Greyson said.

All the blood left Ollie's face.

"Detective, that is Lieutenant Huda's interpretation, not mine. I read your report, and you could have been looking at a friend helping a drunk buddy home, you could have been looking at a control game, or you could have been seeing a kidnapping. I would have done exactly what you did, only I would have done it quicker so I caught up with the guys before they disappeared."

"Yes, sir," Ollie agreed unhappily. He had waited too long. But his partner on backup had more experience, and he had been ordering Ollie to stand down.

"Now, explain why you think the lieutenant shares any blame for that."

"Detective Kemboi said the order to stand down came directly from the lieutenant, who was not even on scene."

The captain smiled. "Police work is not like it was in my day. You can sit at a screen and see what you need without going into the field. Hell, give me the name of an officer, and I can look through his eyes right here and right now." He tapped the glass display screen on his desk.

"But I wasn't wired," Ollie pointed out. That sort of equipment would have been obvious down on the docks.

"But you weren't wired," Greyson agreed. "Is there bad blood between you and the lieutenant?"

Ollie rubbed his hand over his face. He didn't want to be having this conversation. "I don't know, sir."

"That answer will require explaining." The captain gestured toward one of the chairs. "Sit, make yourself comfortable, and tell me what the hell is going on in my squad room."

Still not happy, Ollie sat and used a finger to trace the edge of the desk. "The lieutenant hasn't liked me from day one."

"What did ya do to piss him off?"

"Nothing," Ollie said. "The first time he noticed me, we were going over a case I was working with Kemboi's team. Detective Kemboi called me *cover boy*, and one of the others pointed out that I'd been on the cover of the Children's Charity gay calendar. Huda looked at me like I disgusted him." Ollie found the calendar a bit embarrassing, and if he'd known the charity wanted him for the cover, he never would have agreed to do it. Ollie was firmly planted in his late thirties, so he'd figured one of the twenty-something hot bodies would pull that honor. Instead, his striking combination of blue eyes and black hair had won the day. The photographer had airbrushed in the six-pack. But the lieutenant's disgust... That was uncalled for.

The captain sucked air through his front teeth. "Are you suggesting that one of my lieutenants is a hetero-pride asshole?"

Ollie shook his head. "I don't have any evidence to suggest that, sir."

"Does he treat you different from the others?"

"Yes, sir."

"We have to have other gays in the department. Has he given them any shit?"

"Patrics is on leave after breaking his arm. Cooper and Dory are both bi, and they play up their interest in females around this guy."

The captain narrowed his eyes. "We must have more gays and bis than that. We have close to twenty detectives assigned to the sex-crime unit."

“They’re all cisgendered,” Ollie said. He was shocked at how cis-heavy the department was, but Clemens had transferred to major crimes, D’Bargi had retired, Flemings took a private job, and that had left Ollie and Patrics as the only gay detectives in the unit. Worse, most of those transfers had taken place shortly after the new lieutenant showed up. Ollie wondered if he was the next gay on the man’s agenda. Hetero haters were like that—targeting gays only when they thought they could get away with it. They were cowards, no different from white hate groups.

Of course, that was not how they explained things. To hear them talk, they were the poor abused souls who weren’t allowed by society to wallow in their hatred. When the Supreme Court had recognized the right to self-identify gender and sexual orientation, the bigots had wailed like banshees and accused the government of passing laws to snatch the children right out of cisgendered folks’ hands and give them to perverts. They never figured out that most gay and bi and gender-fluid and asexual kids had cisgendered parents. One man and one woman was not only the statistical norm, but it was also the easiest way to have a kid.

“Well, crap on a cracker.” The captain activated his desk, and a holographic keyboard appeared. He started typing, but from the guest chair, Ollie could only see blurred colors. “So, you filed an objection to the new mission. Give me details.” The captain kept his gaze on the desk, and he pulled out a manual keyboard.

“The lieutenant asked me to go undercover in a shade club. He believes there are drugs and possibly rape going on inside.”

“Shade clubs are dangerous places for newbies,” the captain agreed. “I don’t hear anything particularly surprising there, and with your looks, you’ll catch someone’s eye.”

Ollie blushed. “I don’t mind the undercover work, but my backup won’t have line of sight on me.”

The captain glanced up while still typing. “Where will they be?”

“Two buildings down in a vacant garage.”

“Electronic surveillance?”

Ollie nodded. “Yes, sir. They plan to plant a few listening devices inside and then hijack the wiring to amplify the signal, but these clubs are loud. I don’t know that they’ll be able to isolate my voice and track me, and the things that go on in shade clubs...” Ollie let his voice trail off. He didn’t need to get specific because everyone knew what happened. Lots of people were into control play, but the shade clubs were for the rough end. Those people liked to push limits and sometimes crash right through them. Even experienced players sometimes had trouble telling the difference between negotiated violence and rape in those places.

Of course, that was why the police tried to keep an eye on them. A dozen standard control clubs with a little S&M to go with the B&D didn’t generate half the trouble of one shade club.

“What’s your cover as?”

“New server, fresh meat... Someone looking for something more exciting than a control club and someone who is low enough on money that he might be tempted to do something dangerous.” Ollie’s cover was one Olan Roberts, recent college graduate. His background had Olan in the military for eight years, which explained why he was trying to get his life together at thirty-four.

“Has the lieutenant briefed you on the target?”

And that was why this assignment was creeping Ollie out. If this were a matter of going in and bird-dogging some drug dealer, he wouldn’t care about the lack of backup. “Several men have vanished. There’s some worry that a slaver ring has set up to take advantage of people who don’t have many ties to the community – people who won’t be missed. And Huda wants me going in there with no weapon.”

“I saw the wardrobe request he put in. You won’t have any place to hide a weapon,” Captain Greyson said. “What’s the exit strategy?”

“Pull a fire alarm,” Ollie said with disgust. It was the stupidest plan ever, especially considering places like this tended to disable the fire alarms so disgruntled

clients couldn't disrupt business by pulling them. But Ollie had put in an official request for more backup, and he only had to wait until Huda refused him to file a formal complaint. He could handle working a job mostly naked, and he had no problem putting his life on the line. It was his job to put himself at risk to protect others. He absolutely believed that. But he couldn't justify taking stupid risks, and Lieutenant Huda was asking him to take incredibly moronic chances.

"Do you think he's trying to give you a rough exit?" Captain Greyson asked.

That was such a serious crime that Ollie didn't want to believe it. Was Huda trying to get him killed or injured badly enough to be removed from duty? "Maybe," Ollie admitted. "I would rather have eyes on me during the op or have one of the cis detectives take the job as bait."

"You think he's going to turn down your request for more backup?"

"Yes," Ollie said firmly.

Captain Greyson nodded. "You're in a tough spot here," he said, and Ollie's stomach dropped. He wasn't in a tough spot if the captain approved putting a cisgendered detective in his place, and if that happened, Lieutenant Huda would probably find a way to get more surveillance and backup into the room. "You're a good cop, and sometimes I have to ask my good cops to do some risky things."

"Sir?"

"Lieutenant Huda already filed a denial on your request, which is what caught my eye. Now, you can file your protest, and I will officially see that you're getting screwed over and make Huda put more protection on you. That's one choice."

"And the alternative is?" Ollie asked. Unless there was some damn good reason, more backup sounded like a wonderful idea.

"The alternative is that we give him enough rope to hang himself," Captain Greyson said. "I would wire you up with a panic switch—a dermal pressure patch—and if you hit it, I have a secondary backup team ready to come in hot. If I veto Huda's plans, that's a small mark on an overall excellent record. If one of the detectives has to

hit a panic switch because his backup has failed due to the pathetic quality of Huda's planning, that's a black mark that will probably get him demoted. If nothing else, it will make him a lot more careful about bringing his shit into my precinct."

For a second, shock robbed Ollie of his words. The office felt oppressively silent. "You want to run a sting on Lieutenant Huda?"

Captain Greyson leaned forward. "This is your call. If you aren't comfortable with it, I won't ever mention this conversation again. However, there are too many pieces that aren't adding up. If we can get him to stick his neck out farther, I think we can get rid of this phobic little shit that's slimed his way into my police department."

"You're working with IA," Ollie said. It was the only thing that made sense. No way did a captain decide to target one of his own lieutenants.

"Whether I am or not will not affect you," Greyson said softly.

There were a lot of cops who didn't appreciate having an IA rat in their ranks. There were too many little ways to break the regs, and too many IA guys would rather harass a patrol officer about taking a few free coffees than go after the ones taking kickbacks from drug dealers.

"I'm not afraid to do the right thing," Ollie said.

"No, but you have a long career ahead of you. Me, on the other hand, I'm old and cranky, and I don't give a shit what other people think. I'm also close to retirement, so if we do this, you tell people you followed your captain's orders. In fact, your captain never mentioned IA in conjunction with this investigation."

Captain Greyson wasn't that old. He was pushing sixty, but he was a fit and healthy sixty and still very attractive. The gray hair made him more distinguished, although he did have the heavy chin that suggested he'd have jowls in five or ten years. That was not a look Ollie went for.

"So, what do ya say, Robertson? Are you in?"

Ollie swallowed nervously. Honestly, he didn't want in. The idea of playing two sides against each other while he was standing in the middle sounded pretty damn stupid. But he had his duty. If Huda was some hetero-pride jerk, or worse, part of a hetero hate group, he could be hard to root out. Even though his stomach was churning with acid, Ollie nodded. "I'm in, sir."

Chapter Two

Ollie pulled into his parking space and cursed when he found Mrs. Dennison had commandeered his solar-charging outlet again. A long cord went from the solar shade above his space right up the wall and into her apartment.

Something inside him snapped. Ollie couldn't take it anymore. The solar was free, but he'd asked her not to jack his power. It drained the reserves, and some days his car barely charged enough to get him to work and back. And today was cloudy, so he needed every ounce of energy he could get out of the station.

He parked and stormed over to the charging post. While ripping the plug out of the socket felt good, it wasn't enough. He'd asked her a dozen times. He'd threatened to have the code people out for her illegal extension cord. He'd filed a complaint with the apartment house, and she still had her damn shit plugged into his charger.

Captain Greyson could ask Ollie to stick his neck out. Lieutenant Huda could walk all over him. But Ollie would be damned if Mrs. Dennison and her damn sunlamps would push him one more inch. Ollie marched over to the wall, grabbed the part of the extension cord that hung down from an upper window, and pulled. Mrs. Dennison was on the second floor, but he could hear something crash and then several more dull thuds and an ominous bang. Feeling very satisfied, Ollie went back to his car and plugged it in. A quick check of the levels told him that he was at 17 percent charge. *Fuck*. Well, he wasn't going anywhere tonight. He'd be lucky to get enough charge to run the car through tomorrow comfortably.

A door slammed, and Ollie wasn't surprised when Mrs. Dennison came around the corner looking ready to claw his eyes out. She raised herbs and shit for her magical charms and Wiccan jewelry, and that was fine with him, but not on his charging station.

"I'll file a complaint! Do you have any idea how much damage you did? That is my workplace, and you damaged hundreds if not thousands of dollars in equipment. I'm going to get you fired." She stopped several feet away from him. Even mad as a wet hen, she wasn't about to get too close to him. First, attacking a police officer was stupid. Second, Ollie was built well, and she was about 110 pounds of nothing.

"I tripped and caught myself on the cord, which is why there are codes against having extension cords out windows. I've told you that before," Ollie said. Right now he wanted a fight, and if she called the station, that would give him a great one. "And if you are running a business out of a residence, that is a whole new issue." He took a step forward.

"Don't you dare bully me," she snarled at him. "I will have your job for this."

"You go for it and try," Ollie suggested. "And while you're at it, you can keep your plugs out of my outlets." Ollie walked away.

"It's not like you pay for it, asshole." She chased after him. Thank God he had the parking space nearest the building, so his front door was close. He was ready for a drink and a lot of loud music—something that might disturb her chi or whatever the hell she called it.

"Hey!" Darla Canterbury called out. "We're all neighbors. Let's be nice to each other." She hurried over. Maybe she'd lived in some happy-happy place in her last apartment, but around here everyone pretty much ignored one another when they weren't throwing around blame. Being nice was not high on the agenda.

"He destroyed my workstation!" Mrs. Dennison nearly shrieked. For a woman in her forties, she had a mean shriek. Usually that tone came out of teenagers at rock concerts.

Mrs. Canterbury smiled soothingly. "I'll help you get it back in order. I was watching out the window, and he did trip. He looks like he's had a hard day, so let's cut him some slack, okay?"

Ollie was shocked. Then again, Mrs. Canterbury was married to a retired cop, so maybe he shouldn't be surprised she stuck up for him.

Mrs. Dennison stopped at the low rail that marked the beginning of Ollie's apartment line. Stepping over the threshold would make her a trespasser, and maybe she knew Ollie was angry enough to arrest her.

Mrs. Canterbury threw an arm around the woman's shoulders. They were a study in contrasts. Mrs. Dennison was blonde with delicate features and a tiny frame. While Mrs. Canterbury was about the same age—midforties—she was tall and broad-shouldered with long black hair and a mix of ancestors that must have included some damn attractive Africans and Indians. "I bet you're frustrated. I'll help you clean up the mess. What do ya say?"

Ollie glanced up, and Mr. Canterbury stood leaning against the third-story railing. A handsome man a few years older than his wife, Mr. Canterbury looked like he was somewhere in his forties. Gray was showing at his temples, but he was one of those square-jawed masculine men who kept their striking looks well into old age. Ollie had no idea if the Canterburys had children, but if they did, those must be gorgeous kids. They were probably out breaking hearts in college.

Mrs. Canterbury urged Mrs. Dennison up the stairs, and Travis Canterbury came down. Ollie considered heading into his apartment, but that seemed rude when Mr. Canterbury had made such deliberate eye contact. The man's wife had lied for Ollie; the least he could do was have a friendly conversation.

Mr. Canterbury stopped on the last step and leaned against the rail. "Hard day?"

"To say the least," Ollie admitted.

Mr. Canterbury offered his hand. "Travis."

"Ollie. Oliver Robertson. We met when you were moving in."

"We introduced ourselves, anyway," Travis said. "No offense, but you look like you caught a hard case."

Ollie rubbed his face. "Yeah, it happens. You know the job. Anyway, thank your wife for intercepting the shrew. When she tells people she's a witch, she should tell them she means that in more than one way." It was horribly un-PC, but in Mrs. Dennison's case, it was also true.

Travis chuckled. "She's sometimes hard to take. Between the sage and the marijuana she burns, my house smells like a smoke shop. She's not good at respecting other people's boundaries, but I think that has less to do with her religion than the fact she's a bitch." Travis stopped and gave Ollie a curious look, and that was when Ollie realized he'd been staring at a married man.

Fuck.

Okay, that was a new level of awkward. Ollie turned to study his front door instead of Travis's broad shoulders. Travis chuckled again.

"True. She'd be a bitch even if she were Buddhist." Ollie headed toward his apartment and stopped at the sight of an advertisement hanging from his doorknob. The Bridle Club. Artistically arranged leather implements made it pretty clear what they were promoting. Ollie froze. Either everything in his life had just taken on a sexual overtone, or he was really having trouble getting his head screwed on straight.

"Some of the families are angry about those. They say it's a shade club and don't want that garbage hanging from their doors," Travis commented.

Ollie held the paper, and a tremor went through his body. It was like some sort of omen, only Ollie didn't believe in omens. He believed in facts.

Travis didn't seem to notice anything, because he kept right on talking. "I don't have a problem with the control clubs. My wife and I enjoy playing, and a club is a good way to work out frustration, especially if you have a committed partner and you're spicing things up with a new setting. But when I was on the job, I hated the shade clubs. Let some nineteen-year-old wander into the wrong one, and he or she would get so turned around that reality wasn't reality anymore, ya know?"

Ollie nodded. He did know. For a time Ollie stared at the ad, and the weight of the paper seemed to hold him in place.

“I had a case once—a twenty-two-year-old right out of university,” Travis said softly. Something in his tone broke the spell the paper had over Ollie, and he looked up at his neighbor. “Some asshole had violated her redlines so many times that she didn’t know where they were anymore, and he’d convinced her that she wanted more. She’d signed a twenty-four-seven contract as a pet, never allowed to stand up. When we raided his place for drugs, we scooped her up, and it took the psychologists a good two weeks to get her to admit she hadn’t wanted any of it. She was so ashamed of what he’d made her do that she would have rather clung to him than face the real situation. I almost wrung that guy’s neck.” Travis grimaced, and the hatred practically radiated off him.

“Was she okay in the end?” Ollie asked. For some reason, he needed to know the girl had gotten her head back on straight. Dominating was a dangerous business, and in control clubs where sex was all negotiated, that danger was attractive—it was a spice that made sex more exciting. But the shade clubs were different.

“Sorta,” Travis said. “She filed charges against him, but I’m pretty sure she planned to avoid sex for the next sixty years. She was one of those cases that hit me.”

Ollie nodded. He didn’t have anything to add to this conversation. For a time they stood in silence, and then Travis cleared his throat.

“If you ever want to talk about whatever’s eating you, you know where my apartment door is. This job is hard. Don’t make it harder by trying to carry the load all yourself.” Travis silently studied Ollie for a good minute before he turned and headed back up the steps.

When he was halfway to the second floor, Ollie called his name. Travis turned.

“How high up were you before you retired?” Ollie blurted the question out, almost before he realized he was going to ask it.

Travis gave him an odd look. "Plenty high. I could have been captain, but I refused to leave the field. My place was out there investigating leads with my team, not stuck watching through some damn vid feed." He came down several steps. "But there's nothing you could say that would shock me. If you want, you could come upstairs and have a couple of drinks, and we can talk about your hard day."

Ollie wanted to do that, but he wanted it too much. Lusting after a married man was not Ollie's normal MO, and he was afraid the shit at work had left him too off balance. He wanted someone on his side. Travis gave off a supportive vibe, and Ollie wished he worked for the department because Ollie would trust Travis at his back. He wasn't sure he could trust the captain who was using him or the lieutenant who was out to get him or even his fellow officers who wanted to stay out of the line of fire.

But no matter how much he wanted some strong shoulder to lean on, he had to handle this on his own. He could not violate operational security on two active cases—the investigation into the kidnappings and the internal review of Lieutenant Huda's actions.

"No, thanks. Besides, I don't think your wife wants to hear some old war stories from a couple of cops."

"Don't kid yourself. Darla's got more stories than both of us put together."

"She was a cop?" Ollie asked. She seemed too caring to be a cop.

"She was a dispatcher," Travis said. "She heard crap that would make my toes curl, and she was helpless to stop any of it as long as she was on the other end of a vid or a phone. Sometimes when the bad guys were high enough or stupid enough, they even committed crimes in front of the camera, and she got to see it. She may be soft and tender on the outside, but inside that woman has a core of steel. You can trust her to handle whatever you've got to say and keep it confidential."

"That's a kind offer..." Ollie let his voice trail off. Something here wasn't right. Yeah, cops stuck together, but this was a little over the top. Ollie's feelings were too unpredictable for him to spend too much time with a very attractive male. In Ollie's

experience, anxiety and stress never led to good choices. The very fact that he found Travis attractive was the best reason to run like hell. He put on an apologetic expression. "It was a hard day."

Travis leaned against the rail. "Look, Darla's always telling me I come on too strong, more like one of those shade Doms than an in-control and sane sort. So feel free to tell me to fuck off if you want, but you're putting out some sub vibes, and it bothers me to see someone spinning out of control."

Sub vibes. *Fuck*. Yeah, that was exactly what Huda had said when he insisted Ollie had to be the one to go under. Apparently he reeked of submission. The worst part was that Travis was the sort Ollie would want under better circumstances.

"I can take care of myself, thanks." Ollie put a whole lot of unhappy in his voice.

Travis raised his hands in surrender. "No problem. You can take care of yourself, and I don't doubt that, but if you need some relief, Darla switches, and she always loves to have playtime as the Domme. No sex, of course. I mean, that's my wife—but we do have some fun toys." Travis offered him a kind smile, a sort of come-hither expression that made Ollie yearn for some connection.

Ollie's face got hot as his imagination turned to what it would be like to feel Travis's hands holding him down. *Great*. One neighbor hated him, and the other thought he needed babying. Ollie's life couldn't get any better. "Fuck off," he said before he headed into his apartment. He didn't need to play, especially not with this new job coming at him like a freight train. What he needed were a few beers, some loud music, and a night of killing electronic zombies. That would make him feel better. Without another word to Travis, Ollie went into his apartment and slammed the door.

Chapter Three

This was a bad neighborhood. Scratch that. This was a terrifying neighborhood. The difference between a bad neighborhood and a terrifying one was that one had poor people and overpriced grocery stores and the other had body-mod shops, shade clubs, drug dealers lounging on the corners, and a general sense of doom hanging over the place like a cloud. Ollie honestly didn't understand why people were drawn to these islands of horror that hid in every city, but they were.

The "why" was for psychologists to figure out. As a cop, he needed to enforce the law.

He looked up at the sign over the Happy Whip club. Reputable places had lists of rules posted up front—which activities were and weren't allowed. They had sign-in sheets where someone checked in with each sub to make sure he or she could articulate limits, and every Dom had to sign a nonharm agreement.

Like most shade clubs, this one had none of that. Ollie walked in the front door and looked around at the shadowy interior. Two side stages were set up with bondage horses. The narrow plank of wood that served as the seat would cut into someone's genitals quite cruelly, and the wooden horses were set high enough that anyone sitting there couldn't touch the floor. Hooks and chains dangled from the ceiling here and there, and a long, raised stage came halfway out into the main floor, dividing the area into different zones. One side had a number of spanking benches, and the other had suspension points and pulleys that could obviously be used to drag a hanging submissive from one point to another.

Ollie's nuts were trying to climb back up inside his body while his dick hardened. The pills he'd taken helped with that. He had to put on a good front, after all. Besides,

he did like toys. He'd simply prefer it if the people in charge weren't utterly insane. Maybe that wasn't fair, because some people liked to have boundaries pushed and enjoyed giving up their safe words and their contracts. That was their kink. Ollie didn't have that kink.

"We're not open yet," a guy called from the back of the bar. "Did I ask you to look up? Get to work, you piece of shit!" he yelled at his feet, and he grabbed a whip from the counter and swung it several times. There was a muffled cry and a scrambling.

"I was looking for work, but hopefully the sort that gets paid with money and not lashes," Ollie said with his best smile. The bartender was a bear of a man wearing a leather harness and a thick collar, so he either subbed for someone or wanted other Doms to keep their hands off without permission. In this kind of place, subs didn't get much of a chance to say no. They got used unless they had a collar and a Dom to tell others to back off.

"You ever work a place like this before?"

"No," Ollie admitted, "but I might have one or two problems that make it hard for me to get work other places."

The bartender aimed a kick at whoever was at his feet and then walked out from behind the bar. "This ain't no playground, and the men and women who come here aren't into flowers and candy and treating subs like they're precious. You might be in the wrong place, sweet cheeks."

"I'm not in the wrong place, and if you can't see a hard dick in a man's pants, you're blind."

The bartender moved quicker than Ollie expected, and before he could do or say anything, the man had him by the neck and was forcing him back into the wall. Ollie hit so hard the wind whooshed out of him.

"You still hard, boy?"

Ollie pulled against the man's arms as he slowly lost the ability to breathe.

"You like that?" the bartender asked as he tightened his hand more. Ollie knew these were standard games for a shade club, and he still couldn't stop the small and panicked prey instinct deep in his soul.

"If you want to breathe, you put your hands at your sides. Do it, or I'll choke you until you pass out, and tie them there."

Ollie fought down his instincts and let his hands fall to his sides. His vision was getting fuzzy now, and the bartender held on for another couple of seconds before he let up. Ollie gasped.

The bartender leaned close and whispered in Ollie's ear, "So tell me, do you want a job, or do you want out of here?" It was such a disturbingly intimate thing to do, especially after the brutal assault. The false tenderness and the pills Ollie had taken ganged up on him, and his cock got even harder. The bartender ran his free hand down Ollie's shirt and over his stomach to grab Ollie's cock. "Well, it seems like I have a vote for staying. Is that right?"

Ollie swallowed. "Yes, I want a job." The words made his sore throat ache. These people weren't playing.

The bartender took a step back and studied Ollie. "Worm! Turn the main lights on!"

A man scuttled out from behind the bar. His head was completely encased in leather or latex, and he had mitts locked around his hands, each with scrub brushes attached. He awkwardly crawled over to the wall and knelt up to hit the switch.

Light flooded the area, and Ollie narrowed his eyes as they adjusted. The bound man fell back to his hands and knees. A huge plug was sticking out of his ass, and his ankles were locked onto a rod, which was why he had such a strange gait when he crawled. The man turned and struggled back toward the bar.

"You want to be my new worm?" the bartender asked.

"I think that's too big a step for me," Ollie said. "I was thinking more like serving drinks."

"You're pretty enough. A little long in the tooth, but you have a wide-eyed sort of panic that will make some of the regulars eat you up."

"They can't... I mean, I don't mind touching, but they won't..." Ollie had no idea how to ask the question. Actually, he did, but he was supposed to be a washed-out college student, not a cop. So he let his stuttering ask the question for him.

The bartender crowded closer until he had Ollie pinned against the wall with his chest. Putting his hands on either side of Ollie's face, the guy leaned in. "They won't what, fishy? They won't fuck you? They won't pass you around like a joint at a party? They won't tie you to one of those horses and leave you to scream? What won't they do?"

Ollie opened his mouth and then closed it again. It was amazingly easy to play someone in over his head when he was six feet under and sinking deeper. And here the lieutenant had been worried about his acting skills. There was no acting required.

The bartender chuckled. "Yeah, you can't even say what you want, so those nice safe clubs aren't the place for you, are they?"

Ollie shook his head. "They don't like that I had drug charges."

"Pansy-ass players who don't know how to give in to the sexual need, that's what they are." The bartender stepped back again. "No way I'm taking you to the boss dressed like that. He'd take a switch to my ass. Strip. I'm Buck, by the way. Worm back there is just Worm."

"Olan. I'm Olan Roberts. Strip all the way? I mean, I brought a loin cloth for the interview."

"If you didn't wear it in that door, that means you aren't comfortable in your own skin. I'll teach you better," Buck said, slapping Ollie on the shoulder. "Now strip, or I'll sit on you and cut your clothes off. Got it?"

Ollie shivered. "Got it," he agreed. He unbuttoned his shirt with shaking fingers. This was a hard-core shade club, more than Ollie had suspected. However, if he walked out, he would have the lieutenant and the captain pissed at him.

Buck turned around and headed for the bar. Leaning on the end, he pulled out his phone as Ollie stripped. Ollie was sitting on the floor and pulling his shoes off when Worm came around the opposite end of the bar from Buck. He was pushing a wide two-chamber bucket with his head and crawling. He stopped and dunked his scrub-brush hands in one side of the bucket and cleaned the floor.

It was hard to tell if the servitude was voluntary since his whole head was covered. He had a hole over his nose, and he could look out through a narrow slit, but the rest of his face was hidden. The only thing Ollie could tell was that Worm either had a very long horsey sort of face or his mouth was stuffed full enough that his jaw was open, giving him a long face.

“Hurry up, little corporal,” Buck called.

Ollie jumped and tugged his socks off. “How did you know? Military records are sealed.”

“Not if you know the right people,” Buck said. “Oh, you were a bad boy. You couldn’t stick with beer and marijuana, not you. You’re into sun. That shit will kill you.”

“I didn’t die,” Ollie said in his most petulant tone.

Buck looked up from his phone. “Someone is going to get his ass tanned before the first interview. You bring any sun in here, and I’ll make your punishment so bad that Worm’s job will look like heaven by comparison, got it?” To illustrate his point, Buck walked down the length of the bar, picked up his whip, and brought it down several times on Worm’s exposed back.

Worm twisted and screamed, but the sound was so muffled Ollie could barely hear it.

“Kneel up,” Buck ordered. He grabbed a ring on the back of the hood and pulled Worm upright before whipping Worm’s hard cock. Worm writhed so desperately he probably would have fallen, except Buck kept a hold on the hood. Ollie held his breath and thanked God it was a flogger and not a long-tailed whip, or else Worm would have

been seriously injured. Through it all, Worm was hard as a rock. "I like torturing you, Worm. The bottoms of your feet are looking too good. Tonight I plan to lock you into the cage and whip them raw."

Buck let go, and Worm fell forward onto his hands. He quickly twisted around and put his forehead on the floor at Buck's feet and wiggled his ass. With a chuckle, Buck brought the flogger down again. "Whore," he said in a fond voice. "You don't love me; you love how I hurt you." Worm wiggled harder.

Buck kicked his hip. "Get to work, or I won't have time for you at all."

Worm went back to his buckets and scrubbed twice as fast. So was this their game—two people who cared for each other getting some mutual kinks met—or was this abuse? Ollie had no answer, and he had no way to get an answer unless he talked to Worm. He suspected that wouldn't happen anytime soon, but Ollie put it on his to-do list. The backup team was tracking every person in and out of the building, so they'd be able to identify Worm eventually, and then a social-services worker could check with him.

Ollie was naked now — all his clothes piled up on one of the chairs.

"Nice. Not too muscled, but well formed. You have some softness around the middle, but then lots of men prefer a little curve when they're getting their rocks off. Good prick, a nice five or six inches."

Ollie blushed. He was that long because he was hard.

"Let's get you into one of our uniforms and see what the boss thinks," Buck said. "Worm, if that section of the floor isn't clean when I come back, I'm going to piss all over you and make you clean it again. Got it?"

Worm nodded and scrubbed faster.

"He's... That's more than I could handle," Ollie said as he passed the bound man.

"Nah. It takes training and practice to do what he does. If I tried tying you up like that, yeah, you'd be in some pain. But muscles stretch, and skin gets tougher the more

you play with it." Buck was talking like this was all so normal that Ollie had no trouble playing the wide-eyed innocent.

"Here we go," Buck said as they reached a room. Inside were dozens of toys and restraints and probably hundreds of dildos and plugs. Ollie would have run for it, but he also spotted two industrial toy sanitizers.

Buck went to the wall with the hoods and gags. "We need something that will let those pretty eyes of yours show through. No face masks for you."

"I want to talk to the boss, not play," Ollie said. His voice rose in alarm.

Buck laughed. "You aren't worth anything to us if you're not okay with some toys. Now to answer the question you couldn't ask before, none of the clients get to fuck you or torture you, not without permission in advance, and the boss will talk to you about that. They are going to touch and pinch and fondle. They'll push it as far as the law allows. And if you're plugged and gagged, that's the best way to defend the holes. So the boss needs to see you can handle that."

"But... Oh, shit." Ollie let out a long breath. There was no fucking way Lieutenant Huda didn't know this. Before an undercover detective was sent in, a scene was thoroughly vetted and surveillance put in. Hell, that meant the team was hearing this whole conversation. Ollie blushed so hard he was fever-hot.

When Buck turned around, he had a bit gag in his hand. "Keep blushing like that, and you'll get lots of tips. Now this is a pretty comfortable setup." He brought the head harness over, and before Ollie could object, he had slipped it over Ollie's face. A U-shaped plastic rod went into his mouth, and that was the end of any objections Ollie might have made. The rod was small enough that he could close his lips, although it was awkward. Ollie had worn less comfortable gags for fun, so he could handle it.

"Servers are always restrained," Buck said as he went to the restraints wall. He pulled off simple cuffs and brought them back. Ollie sighed and held his hands out while Buck locked the cuffs in place. Ollie had about twelve inches of chain between his wrists, so it wasn't terribly constricting.

“Okay, time to defend the back hole. If you don’t have something shoved up there, that’s like an invitation. We have one guy who loves to slide ice up submissives’ holes. He puts on a nice show when he does public display.”

Ollie shook his head. The rest was pretty traditional. Very few people didn’t experiment with cuffs and gags. Hell, they showed gagged people on sitcoms all the time; it was a comic standard. But a plug was less mainstream. Buck grabbed the chain between Ollie’s wrists and dragged him over to a spanking bench. Ollie didn’t fight too hard since he wanted the job, but he did put up a token resistance as Buck bent him over and locked the cuffs to the bottom bar.

He couldn’t do anything now.

Buck vanished for a second, and when he came back, he shoved a slick finger up Ollie’s ass without so much as a warning. Ollie squealed, but Buck wiggled his finger around. “Tight, but you have some stretch in the muscle. I have just the plug.” He slapped Ollie on the ass so hard Ollie was sure he had a red handprint.

Completely helpless, Ollie could only relax against the spanking bench and wait for Buck to pick out whatever he wanted. Maybe Ollie had taken too many of the go-go pills, because his cock was hard as a rock. Of course that would help his cover, but it was doing strange things to Ollie’s sexuality. He had always had some sort of say in how he was restrained, and he squirmed at how much he didn’t mind this. Then again, he’d spent last night thinking about a married man, and that was definitely on the forbidden list, so maybe he was having a sexual identity crisis a little late in life. Yeah, that’d be about *perfect*.

Buck returned and pressed something warm and hard against Ollie’s ass. Ollie pressed back, and soon his muscles were stretching to take the plug. At its widest point, the plug was large enough to make Ollie’s eyes water, but then it slipped in, and his ring of muscle closed around the neck of the plug.

“That looks good on you,” Buck said with another slap to Ollie’s ass. “If you get the job, we’ll talk about whether you want any stripes on your ass. I swing a mean cane,

and some Doms like to fuss and cluck over the wounded ones." Buck came around to the front and unlocked Ollie's cuffs from the bar before encouraging him to stand.

It had been a long time since Ollie had been plugged, and he squirmed as he tried to get comfortable.

"Now for the uniform," Buck said. He had something in his hand, and Ollie watched him suspiciously. Buck wrapped a belt around Ollie's waist, and then he attached what looked like a handkerchief done in chain mail to the front. "Spread your legs."

Ollie hesitated.

"Spread your legs, or I will put a spreader bar on you and then make sure you're in even more pain," Buck said.

Another tremor went through Ollie. This would never happen at a control club. However, Ollie needed to get this job, and he needed to do it without taking too much punishment. He spread his legs.

Buck smiled. "Good boy. You are in the right place." The chain mail ended in a long metal cord, and Buck brought that up between Ollie's legs. He fussed with the plug, so Ollie assumed it had an attachment point on it. That meant Ollie couldn't take the plug out without unlocking the belt. It was a standard piece of equipment, but Ollie had never seen it in metal and chain mail.

Buck tugged at the belt, and then the triangle of chain mail over Ollie's cock tightened. Ollie whined in fear as he watched the hard metal bits dig into his dick. *That should not feel good.*

"You'll train up real nice," Buck said as he reached around and arranged Ollie's cock so it was facing up. He then tightened the cord more and more until the chain-mail G-string pressed into his sensitive flesh. Buck did something else, and then Ollie heard the ominous click of a lock. *Fuck.* The belt held the metal underwear in place, and only Buck could get him out of it. That shouldn't be making Ollie harder.

Buck took him by the shoulders and guided him over to a mirror in the corner. "Look at you. You're gorgeous. If we hire you, I'll get you an employee collar, and then during working hours, you'll belong to the boss. I belong to him too, so we can play." Buck ran his hands over Ollie's sides.

Ollie had to admit he did look hot. The black straps around his face drew attention to his blue eyes, and the chain mail was gorgeous. It was uncomfortable, but it was sexy.

And the bit in his mouth gave him a pouty look.

"I do know how to dress my boss's toys," Buck said as continued feeling Ollie up. Hopefully he wouldn't spend too much time doing that, or he might find the dermal patch on the inside of Ollie's thigh. Ollie let his bound hands hang in front of him, his fingers centimeters from his hidden panic button.

"I need to pierce your nipples. We have a nice nipple chain with blue glass that would look wonderful against your skin, but we can do that later if the boss hires you. Come on."

Buck grabbed the wrist chain and pulled Ollie back out into the hallway. Ollie wanted to ask about his clothes, but at this point, he didn't think Buck cared, and he wasn't sure he could even make himself understood around the gag. After passing through a small kitchen, they reached a heavy door. Outside were the normal clips that most managers had so people could leave them paperwork that needed the boss's approval. Buck pushed Ollie so his back was to the wall and then lifted Ollie's hands high into the air. He clipped a dangling chain to Ollie's wrists and then hit a switch on the wall. The chain started retracting.

Ollie cried out as he was stretched more and more. His heels barely came up off the floor, and Buck stopped. "The boss isn't expected in until eight, and this is what you have to understand about shade clubs, Olan. You're here to serve the Doms. They won't cater to you and give you all the power. You're here to make them happy, and that means you wait and put your own needs off until they feel like getting around to you.

So you can do what one of our subs would do, which is stand there and suffer until the boss has time to check you out." Buck twisted Ollie's nipple. "Or you can shake your head, and I take everything off and send you running out the front door without meeting him."

Fear crashed through Ollie. He couldn't reach his panic button. He couldn't defend himself. He couldn't even yell for backup, assuming they'd hear him. He couldn't do anything, but if he shook his head, he got out. Buck would let him go, and he could race for home. And then he could deal with the shit landing on his head at work.

"Last chance, Olan. Are you going to shake your head?" Buck grabbed him by the chin, and Ollie stared back without trying to move his head.

Buck chuckled and then slapped him on the face twice. It wasn't hard enough to hurt, but it did sting. "Good boy. I bet the boss is fond of you." And with that, he walked away. Ollie was left with only a few people in the adjoining kitchen, and they were all more interested in potatoes than in a sub chained to the wall.

Ollie sighed and closed his eyes. He was looking at a very long night.

* * * *

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