

## [Fractured Heart: The Tale of the Pop Star and the Pauper]

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### ~Chapter Two~

An hour later, the concert was in full swing. Swarms of attendees ranging in age from eight to sixty covered every inch of floor space, though most of them were in their teens. The stage itself was awash in a dizzying display of lights in multiple hues, the network of LED light strips stretched over the back of the stage depicting geometric shapes that flexed and pulsed in time with the music blasting towards the audience from the enormous speakers on stands just beyond the edge of the stage.

Lysander was in the middle of all the lights and glamour, the rhinestones on his pink-and-white outfit almost blinding as they flashed in the chaotic illumination. Theo was far enough away that he couldn't make out all of the singer's facial features, but Lysander's grin was obvious even from the back of the room, flashing whenever he wasn't belting out an impressive range of octaves. Through every song, the musician's fingers danced across the strings of his guitar, melding with the music from the background performers and his own lyrics into a perfectly designed cohesive whole. He was *made* for this.

Though from a technical standpoint Theo could see the craft behind the arrangement, he still couldn't say he *liked* the music—it was nothing he'd ever load up on a song-playing app or look for an online video playlist to jam to while cleaning house or riding the bus for the hour it took to get back to the tiny apartment he shared with Siti halfway out towards Pasadena. Still, even he had to admit to the magnetic energy that radiated from Lysander, drawing in the gaze of every onlooker like planets orbiting a sun. And, if he was being *very* honest with himself, Lysander was hot as hell, even in all his pink feathers and sparkles—but only in that plastic airbrushed “Hollywood ideal” kind of way. Not like the dark and broody boys that usually caught Theo's attention while DJing at a rave.

Another hour passed, exceeding the time the concert was supposed to have ended by more than twenty minutes, but the crowd was still going just as wild as they had been at the beginning of the set. Surely Lysander must have been getting tired by then, but he was too much of a consummate professional to show it—still jamming and singing on stage with his glowing smile and irrepressible energy undimmed. As he reached the end of what was *supposed* to have been his last song, the singer grabbed the mic to address the crowd, who fell into hushed silence once Lysander began speaking as if they'd suddenly stepped foot into a church.

“I'm afraid our time has come to an end, my friends,” the singer purred into the mic, sounding at least slightly breathless. The crowd cried out their displeasure at that fact—a few girls even started outright sobbing. Lysander swept them all with a remorseful smile, the guitar hanging about his neck and shoulder by the strap as he emotively pressed a hand over his rhinestoned heart. “I know, I know. I'm devastated by it, too. But—you've been *such* a wonderful crowd, let's throw in one more song. Yeah? Shall we do one more?”

Theo had to pull his hands away from the mixing board to clap his hands over his ears at the outcry that erupted at that—he was wearing headphones to accurately keep track of sound levels of course, but teenage girls had a talent for reaching high pitches that one would think had the power to shatter

glass. As it faded back to a sensibly deafening roar, Theo couldn't help glaring towards the stage, though of course Lysander couldn't see him with all the lights shining towards the performers. Of *course* the prick would throw in an encore—the most arrogant headliners almost always did.

The “unexpected” nature of the encore was a façade, of course—it was just as planned out as the rest of the concert had been, and the audience would have left dissatisfied without one. Still, Theo played into the charade, knowing that this was how things were done in the modern music concert world. It wasn't as if the audience wasn't hungry for “one more song,” given how many of them had burst into tears the moment Lysander had announced the end of the show.

As the last—hopefully *actually* last—song began, the audience started singing, louder at some parts than Lysander himself, but the singer hardly seemed put off by that. Theo had no idea what the song was, of course—hadn't known *any* of the songs—and the chant of the crowd was discordant enough that he couldn't quite understand the words. Some sappy shit about “loving and letting go” it sounded like...standard pop garbage. Thank God this draining night was almost over. Soon, he could finally head back to the apartment, feed his cat, and get some goddamn *sleep*. For once, he hadn't been scheduled at the warehouse until the second half of the following day—he might even manage to get a full six hours of slumber this time if the bus ride home didn't get stuck in traffic.

Praise Vishnu, Allah, Zeus—any of the gods really, he wasn't choosy—that by the time the encore song ended, that *actually was* the end of the concert. Ten minutes later after a few final words of parting from the headliner, the curtains had fallen, the almost painfully bright house lights had flipped on to drown the venue in illumination, and the ecstatic crowd had started to reluctantly filter out of the doors at the opposite side of the wide open room. Theo lingered in the booth even though his feet were aching, having no desire to swim through that stream of zoomers when he could just wait ten minutes

longer for the floor to have mostly cleared while any stragglers were politely but forcefully ejected from the premises.

He knew he'd be expected backstage again to help break everything down just as he and the other crewmembers had set it up, but as he leaned lightly against the side of the sound panel, waiting for the last of the crowd to trickle out, he found that he just *did not* have the energy to see through that final task. Jim would be furious if he dipped early—of course he would, Jim was always mad about something. But fuck it, Theo was planning to quit anyway; maybe this would be the excuse he needed, although he'd miss getting to hang out with Siti whenever there was a rare period of downtime before shows.

Yes, it was exhaustion that had him yearning to risk his boss's wrath to go home a little early. Definitely not cowardice at the thought of facing that beaming smile and those sparkling emerald eyes again. So Lysander was sexy and magnetic—so what? He was still a *celebrity*, a stage performer who soaked up adoration like a flower soaks up sunlight. The complete *opposite* of Theo's type—as if he'd have the chance to catch the eye of someone that beloved worldwide even if Theo had desired such a thing.

Dropping down from the booth at last, Theo made a beeline for the box office, slipping into the door then closing it to lean against it with a long sigh.

“Long night?” Siti asked in a teasing tone, swiveling her chair about to face him with a smirk. Unlike Theo, Siti didn't get saddled with the same range of extra duties that Theo did—her job description was specifically limited to working in the box office, and she would never have put up with the level of bullshit that Theo endured when it came to Jim stacking on extra responsibilities above what she was actually getting paid to do. Even when she was cleared to leave once a show ended, though, she'd often linger anyway to ride the bus home together with him, given that they cohabitated the same apartment so it made perfect sense.

It was rare for them to reverse those roles, given how relentless Jim was on Theo and most of the other employees. Feeling guilty about the idea of leaving Siti to go home alone on the city bus—she'd *probably* be safe, and he knew she carried pepper spray on her in case of emergencies, but one never knew what kind of crazies they might encounter on public transport in the early AMs—nonetheless Theo forced himself to ask, “Hey, uh...I’m feeling kinda sh-shitty. Uh...would you, uh...w-would you tell Jim I had to leave early?”

Her smirk faded, dark brown brows drawing together as she looked him over in concern. “Shitty?” she echoed. “Shitty how? ..You’re not catching a cold, are you? I have a final exam on Monday—I *cannot* get sick right now.”

“N-no, no, nothing like th-that!” Theo waved his hands dismissively, the knife of guilt twisting deeper as he delved further into the lie. “Just, uh, a s-stomach ache. P-Pretty bad one,” he added, adopting an appropriately green-at-the-gills sort of expression. “Too much c-caffeine, I think.”

She still wore a look of deep concern, either for Theo or for her looming final exam, but after a moment she nodded slowly. “Yeah, I’ll tell him,” she murmured, then, pressing her lips together, one brow arched as she asked, “You don’t want to stay to see that Lysander dude set off, though? Who knows. Probably be our only shot to get this close to Entertainment World Royalty.” Her teeth flashed white in contrast to her umber skin as she snickered, “Maybe he’ll be so impressed by your mixer work that he offers to introduce you to his dad.”

“No th-thanks,” Theo said flatly, a little harsher than he meant to. The thought of Lysander talking to him at *all* started to turn that imaginary stomach ache into a real one, hastening him to say, “Well then, s-see you at h-home.” Then he badged out, stepping briefly into the lobby-side bathroom to change from his uniform into street clothes—long black dress shirt and tight black pants, covered by a knee-length black leather trench coat that flared out dramatically at the collar, his standard attire. Siti said nothing, only nodded her farewell, and Theo quickly slid out of the front door and towards the bus stop without allowing himself a backwards glance.

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Theo was stressed on top of exhausted when he got off his shift at the warehouse two weeks later, impatiently drumming fingers tipped with black-painted nails on his knees while the bus lumbered homeward. The shift had run long today and he scarcely had three hours left to get home, change into something less blandly corporate and get his sound mixer and other equipment packed, then haul it with him to Svartalfheim to play his Thursday DJ gig. It would have been so much easier if he had a car but everything in LA was expensive as hell, and even with two jobs he barely made enough to cover rent, food, cell phone bill, with a little left over to save up for plugin apps or better mixing gear.

An older woman a few seats down from him was openly staring at him with her eyes slightly narrowed, but he ignored it—he was used to stares like that even just for having a dramatically spiked side-part fringed haircut and black nails. That was until he heard her lean over to the other woman at her elbow and mutter a comment containing not one but two derogatory slurs, just loud enough that Theo could clearly make them out. He only lifted his eyebrows and smothered a smirk, more impressed than offended that she could find it within her dried up husk of a soul to be so openly racist *and* homophobic in a place as metropolitan and multicultural as southern California.

She was only right on one count anyway—though half of his ancestry came from South Korea, not China, he *was* a fag, something he'd mostly learned to stop feeling ashamed about since he'd gone off to art school with no plans to ever move back to a place where he'd felt unsafe so much as growing his hair long. Not that his parents had any idea he was gay—something he had no intent to change any time this century, knowing how the deeply conservative Christians would likely react if he tried to tell them.

Theo's relationship with his parents was...complicated, to say the least. But then, wasn't that always the story with kids who moved from small towns in middle America to Hollywood, dewy-eyed with dreams of stardom and wealth? Not that that had *exactly* been his plan...he wanted to make music

professionally, yes, but not for the purpose of “getting famous.” He didn’t even have particular aspirations for wealth either, though not having to struggle to pay rent and the ability to afford at least a clunker of a car would have been nice. He simply loved music—*some* kinds of it—loved listening to it, loved making it, loved sharing it with others, and he wanted to base his whole existence around doing that, something he couldn’t have if he’d stayed at home.

At last the bus came to a stop at the closest intersection to his apartment complex and he sprang from his seat to stride for the exit, though he did linger just long enough to pass by the racist old bitch with his middle finger extended upward and his most sneering smile in place. Rogue was meowing and tangling between his legs as soon as he opened the apartment door ten minutes later, and Theo cursed as he tried not to trip over the lanky black cat. “Stop it, I’ll feed you in a s-second,” he chided, gently but firmly nudging the cat out of the way with his foot.

Luckily he’d had the foresight to get all his mixing gear packed and ready to go the night before—it was a pain in the goddamn ass to carry it by bus, but he’d gotten the process down to a science, loading the heavier items onto an old-fashioned metal suitcase carrier and carrying the smaller loose ends slung in a heavy backpack over his shoulder. He supposed it must be awful nice to perform in venues where they already had the equipment ready for you, or mayhap if you had your own stretch SUV to carry the gear with you—and maybe someday he’d have that luxury, but not today.

Siti wasn’t at the apartment—probably at her boyfriend’s, as she was most of the time that she wasn’t at work or in school. She’d started dating her current beau some six months prior, and while Theo missed getting high and watching dumb horror movies with her on the rare nights they both had work off, he supposed he was glad she seemed to be relatively happy. Certainly she was too much of a spitfire to put up with any guy who wasn’t at least moderately adequate in the “boyfriend material” department.

Theo wished he could say he had a similar track record of good taste, but the handful of exes whose contact info he still hadn't remembered to remove from his phone proved otherwise. Most of them were just idiots—pretty faces with nothing going on behind them, a fact he hadn't realized until after that initial lust-masquerading-as-love phase had run its course.

All except the last one...He Who Shall Not Be Named.

Enough time and distance had passed within the last year that he knew, at least on an intellectual level, that he had put up with way more than he ever should have, and Siti had said over and over how proud she was of him for finally getting out of that toxic hellscape. Still, he'd read enough pop psychology blog articles to know there was underlying trauma fucking up his gray matter—maybe someday he'd be able to afford therapy and sort that shit out. In the meantime, he'd do what any good American in a country without affordable healthcare does, and keep that shit buried *deep*.

Somehow surviving the treacherous and exhausting voyage from apartment to rave venue, Theo sighed his relief as he at last pulled his gear around to the tiny outdoor window that served as the venue's box office, nodding in greeting to the stoic-faced goth girl who barely acknowledged him in return.

Theo wasn't really sure what "category" he fit into—probably somewhere between "goth" and "emo," though he changed his mind which style he wanted to lean into weekly if not daily. Really, it was the creative aspect of it he liked—why should women have all the fun when it came to experimenting with makeup? Not to mention how *badass* stomping around in a big, clunky pair of boots covered knee to ankle in buckles made him feel.

Svartalfheim was barely large enough to even call itself a music venue—unlike Halo, it couldn't hold more than maybe two hundred people, two-fifty if they risked breaking fire code to jam in as many bodies as possible, and he frequently had to deal with occasionally backing into the wall if he moved too far away from his DJ gear due to how narrow the stage was.

Still, unknown as he was, it was the best he could so far manage to book—and anyway, he preferred to test out his music on a smaller crowd. Even if half or more of the audience was usually so blitzed out on MDMA that he could have blasted mall muzak and they'd have writhed and danced just as enthusiastically.

Finally, he saw a friendly face as he wheeled his heavy mixer board back through the small dance floor, under the square industrial metal frame that stretched over the center of it, then over to the stage itself, lifting each piece of equipment onto it with a grunt.

“Theo!” a very short, pleasantly plump girl with her hair sectioned in blonde and black stripes that branched off into two spikey pompom-ponytails squealed enthusiastically, throwing her arms around him—well, his waist, anyhow—and squeezing tightly enough to make him cough.

“Hi, J-Juniper,” he grunted out, waiting until she finally released hold of him to lug the last piece of equipment onto the stage. “It’s been a w-while.”

“*Too* much ‘while,’” she agreed, slipping into assistant mode with the practiced ease of a fellow DJ as they worked together quickly to get everything plugged in. A few times now, he’d come to see her performances just as she’d come to see his, and he always marveled at how adept she was at it, even if she had to use a stepstool to reach the furthest knobs on her boards. He was of fairly average height himself, but he felt like a giant whenever he stood beside her; not a sensation he was used to. “What’chu been up to? Anything exciting happen lately?” she chirped at him, ramming an XLR outlet into its corresponding socket with a satisfying click.

Green eyes and a dazzling smile flashed unbidden through his mind all of a sudden, and Theo swallowed hard as he gave an exaggerated shake of his head. “N-nope. Same old s-same old.”

She clicked her tongue at that, pausing in her task to put her small hands on her hips and level him with a disappointed frown. “Really? No new cuties to add to your arsenal?”

Juniper knew that he'd been single for over a year now, but that was about it—as friendly as she was, Theo still didn't feel as if he knew her well enough to go into detail about what sort of person he'd been with before that breakup, and how badly the relationship had fucked him up. Only Siti knew, and that was mostly through her own witnessing of the situation whenever He Who Shall Not Be Named would come over to the apartment—usually to berate Theo for not immediately heading to *his* place after work instead.

Theo was fine with keeping it that way—he didn't need to be airing his dirty laundry out to everyone, especially when it wasn't like more people knowing about it would somehow alleviate the trauma. So he only smiled at her and again shook his head slowly, then turned back to the mixing board, testing out a few knobs. She shrugged and did the same on the other side of the board, then as they got the mix of devices set up properly, she dropped down from the stage to the audience floor just as the first few early bird attendees were starting to filter in.

Another benefit of DJing at such a small venue was how no-frills it was—he didn't have to deal with any loud announcers, didn't have to address the crowd directly, he could just focus on mixing together songs the best he could and if the audience enjoyed it, well, that was icing on the cake. It was why he kept bothering to book these gigs, even if they paid little and getting his equipment over to them was such a chore—it was his one chance to see how his music affected people aside from comments left on his crewcamp page, which more often than not were insults from haters who he doubted had even listened to the songs before leaving a note of their displeasure. Those, too, he'd long ago learned to tune out—he had to, or he'd never survive if he *did* somehow achieve the right connections to produce music full time.

The venue was a quarter-filled by the time the house lights went down, only a handful of spotlights left to illuminate the sound mixer sufficiently to find the knobs he needed to adjust between songs. Darkness settled over the growing crowd, and it was the perfect audience for it, too—an assortment of outfits and makeup styles featuring reds, whites, purples and blacks (but mostly

blacks), hair in an equally wide medley of styles. He'd barely started playing his set before the audience began melding together into one writhing mass, swaying in disparate undulations like seaweed under a gentle tide.

Theo started sweating halfway through his set, but he endured it—crowded underground areas like these tended to warm up quick, and wearing a leather jacket didn't help. But “looking cool” was part of the gig, and anyway it was fun—even if he had to indulge in taking his jacket to the dry cleaners every few weeks so it didn't reek of sweat.

He thought he saw a few more familiar faces as the set went on, but it was so dark within the audience that he couldn't be sure. Anyway he was focused on the music, his head bobbing as if physically compelled to by the beat of drums and synths and bass drops woven together in a hypnotic, transcendent litany of sounds. At least, he *hoped* it was hypnotic—that was more or less the point of trance music; it was in the name, for chrissakes.

As the second hour dragged on and his four hours of sleep before his preceding work shift started to weigh down on him with a vengeance, Theo stepped away from the board to hide a yawn under the crook of his arm lest the audience think he was bored of his own set. As he turned, he saw a tall figure sliding their way between bodies along the side of the room, wearing only skintight black pants and a white hoodie with the hood drawn tight around their face—not a scene kid then, or not yet, but curious about the rave scene, perhaps. Theo paid them no more attention than that, turning back to the sound mixer to finish out his set.

Fading the last thumping song out to a gentle denouement at the end of the second hour, Theo glanced up at the audience, realizing the set was over, roused from their trancelike stupor enough to raise their arms and cheer. Theo smiled despite himself—they were cheering for the music, not *him* specifically, and that pleased him just fine. The lights stayed low, but as soon as the cheer petered off, Theo set to work unhooking his devices to clear the way for the next performer to take over the small stage—the rave would go on for hours, though he, of course, was more than ready to struggle his way home

so he could finally get some sleep before jumping back into the rat wheel at noon tomorrow at his next warehouse shift.

As he unplugged devices, he thought he saw the hooded figure hovering somewhere nearby, but a cursory scan of the crowd didn't reveal them and so Theo turned his attentions towards his task. As soon as his set had ended, the venue had started pumping out pre-recorded rave music over the wireless PA so the patrons still had something to dance to between sets. Maybe someday, it would have been nice to stay for the rest of the night, but Theo knew he'd be lucky if he managed not to fall asleep on the bus.

Jumping down the edge of the stage to pack his gear onto the suitcase carrier, Theo startled slightly when he looked up from binding his equipment with bungee cords to find the hooded figure suddenly standing very near to him, close enough to touch if he'd reached out. The figure still had their hood drawn tight, and they wore a simple black mask—hardly unusual even in the waning years since the pandemic—but their impressive height marked them as (probably) male. And there was something about the shape of their eyes that seemed vaguely familiar, though in the darkness he couldn't tell what color they were...

“Hi, Theo!” the figure—the man—yelled over the music, loud enough to be audible through his mask, and as an errant curl of golden blonde slipped into view on the man's forehead, Theo almost choked on his own spit in shock. “That was awesome! What is it—dubstep? Sounded great!”

*The motherfucking Lysander Delion* had, for no reason Theo could immediately fathom, shown up to his gig at a 200-person underground rave.

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