

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

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~Chapter Eight~  
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Theo was still wondering what the fuck he'd been thinking, inviting the famous celebrity to his shabby little apartment as he had, even as they approached the street outside of the complex. There was a designated spot associated with their apartment in the complex parking lot, but Theo and Siti had never used it, both of them lacking a car as they did. Theo had to look up his own address on his phone to remember which lot number it was—written down just in case he *did* someday manage to afford a car—and Lysander pulled into it smoothly, his “incognito” sedan blessedly plain-looking enough to fit in with the other similarly priced vehicles in the nearby spots.

Theo's hands were almost shaking as he led the pop star up the outside cement-step stairwell to the front door of his apartment, and he had to stop and steel himself with a slow, controlled breath before he managed to jam the key into the lock and open the door with a slight rattle.

At least the apartment was clean—both of them were hardly home enough to make it dirty, aside from the cat box in the corner of the living room that he sifted every morning and evening to keep the smell from suffusing the room. Still, he couldn't help feeling embarrassed as he led the celebrity into his modest little apartment, entirely too aware of the tears and stains on the couch they'd gotten years ago from a thrift store, of the cheap laminate surface of their kitchenette counter, of the fact that the TV they rarely had time to watch was at least a decade old. It was all hideous compared to the designer furniture and tastefully soulless décor of Lysander's penthouse apartment.

Still, the celebrity hardly looked put off as he cast an observational gaze about the place, hands loosely in his pockets. He said nothing—no judgement, either good or bad—but let out a startled noise as a black streak launched itself off of the couch to run towards them, paused on the carpet a few feet away, then darted under the coffee table, glaring up at Lysander and releasing a loud hiss.

“Oh...hi, kitty,” Lysander greeted the cat, seemingly unbothered by the feline's immediate hostility.

“Ah, yeah. Th-that's Rogue,” Theo announced as he dropped his backpack onto the floor just on the other side of the counter that stretched out perpendicular from the wall, separating the kitchenette from the small living room. “Sorry, he...h-he takes a bit to warm up to n-new people.”

“Hmmm.” Lysander slid him a smile that was vaguely feline itself. Theo got the impression that there was some kind of teasing comment playing in the blonde's mind as he looked at Theo, but whatever it was, the singer kept it to himself.

Belatedly realizing they hadn't actually picked up food yet, Theo reached for the fridge door but paused, reminding himself that he'd mostly been eating instant ramen for the past two weeks. No way in hell was he offering the famous celebrity something as pathetic as *that*.

“I forgot, I h-haven’t been grocery shopping in a wh-while,” Theo admitted finally, too embarrassed to meet Lysander’s gaze so he stared at the countertop instead. “I, uh...I d-don’t really have much to e-eat.”

“Grocery shopping,” Lysander echoed, tilting his head with a thoughtful expression. “Should we go grocery shopping, then?”

Grocery shopping...with Lysander Delion. What the *hell* was his life right now?

Then a funny thought occurred to him and Theo found himself asking before he even had a chance to think better of it, “H-Have you ever been to a g-grocery store before?”

Side-eyeing him with a sardonic smirk, the world-famous pop star chuckled. “Yes, Theo. I’ve been to a grocery store before.”

Probably some ridiculously fancy delicatessen, then. Maybe he’d done late-night snack runs with his friends or something. Were there grocery stores on Rodeo Drive?

There was nothing so lavish around this area, nor would Theo have had the money for anything they’d have for sale if there had been. Plus the thought of walking around the grocery store aisles side by side with Lysander like some kind of...some kind of *married couple* summoned butterflies so intensely that Theo almost wanted to barf. “I-I wouldn’t want to p-put you through that.”

Lysander only laughed, ignoring another hiss from Rogue as he crossed round the counter to rest his elbows on the other side of it, leaning towards Theo until their faces were almost close enough to kiss. “What, like grocery shopping is some kind of torture?”

Was he...*playing* with Theo? Maybe for a famous celebrity like him, mundane chores were some kind of fun diversion. A little experiment at pretending what living like a normal person was like.

Running out of excuses to deter the singer from this insane notion, Theo finally muttered his reluctant acceptance, deciding that if the celebrity

thought grocery shopping would be an entertaining activity, then fuck it, might as well go along. Thus, ten minutes later, Theo found himself riding in the sedan towards the local cheap grocery store—of course Lysander had insisted on driving there, saying it would be much easier to bring the groceries home that way—and for the first time ever, he arrived at the store’s parking lot by car rather than by bus.

He was hyper-aware of Lysander’s presence the whole time that he was pushing the rickety metal shopping cart down the store aisles, though the singer once again had his hood and mask in place, keeping his identity secret. His lanky frame and loping stride were still so magnetic that the clusters of girls or women they occasionally passed looked up with interest. They weren’t only looking at Lysander, though, Theo realized after the third group they’d passed by—girls were looking at *him* as well, and not with the usual stares of curiosity rather than attraction that he was used to getting when dressed up in his customary style.

“Wow, that Asian guy is hot,” a blonde girl in a tight red tube top and jeans whispered to her friend as Theo and Lysander strolled past, her voice just loud enough to be audible over the clanking of the cart wheels.

“Yeah, but I think he’s gay,” her friend replied in a slightly less soft whisper, already behind Theo so he couldn’t guess what expression she wore, but her voice sounded vaguely disappointed. “Look how close the other guy is standing next to him.”

Theo almost jumped away from the cart at that, startled to find that it was true—Lysander was *right next to him*, close enough to hold hands if he’d reached out.

Did that look “gay”? Theo didn’t hang out with other guys in public often enough to determine that—at least in the last few years, he’d only ever gone grocery shopping with Siti, and he supposed a presumed heterosexual couple wasn’t nearly as interesting to gossip about.

Glancing sideways instead, Theo stole a look at Lysander, but the singer's stride had scarcely broken. His hands were still in his pockets, green eyes looking at the food products they were passing by, not at Theo. If the pop star had also heard the girls, he showed absolutely no signs of being upset by what they'd said.

"What're we getting, anyway?" Lysander asked conversationally as they neared the end of the aisle closest to the store entrance, and Theo blinked as he recalled the purpose of why they were there in the first place. "Do you have a list?"

A list—right, grocery list. Eggs. Milk. Cat food. Theo tried to think of what else they were short on—everything, pretty much. Siti was always eating at school or at her boyfriend's, and Theo had been surviving off ramen.

So he decided to go for the basics, which were about all he could afford, anyway. While groceries were part of the monthly budget he'd accounted for, and he shared groceries freely with Siti instead of bothering with the hassle of marking individual items per roommate, he still had to be judicious in his spending. No surprise purchases, not unless he'd been able to secure a slightly better paid DJ gig that month.

They happened to be in the pasta aisle—spaghetti was cheap, so his arm shot out to snatch a few cans of the cheapest red sauce, then an equal number of spaghetti packets to go with them. The next aisle was dried breakfast goods, so he went for plain oatmeal—also cheap—then on to the produce aisle, where he grabbed celery, carrots, and a small selection of fresh fruit, though the bananas weren't on sale at the moment so he only went for a bushel of four.

As they neared the deli at the back of the store, he felt Lysander slowing down beside him. So he stopped to keep an eye on the celebrity while Lysander looked consideringly at the premade items on display behind the transparent plastic counter.

“That looks good,” Lysander announced, pulling a hand out from his pockets to point at the square metallic tray full of assorted sauteed vegetables. “How about that?”

Theo rarely bought from the deli—it was generally cheaper to just make the items himself—but he hesitantly nodded, figuring it was at least still a lot more affordable than eating out at a restaurant. Lysander turned to him briefly, probably flashing a smile under his mask though Theo couldn’t be certain, then approached the counter and asked for a container of the stuff. The singer ordered four other containers of different deli items as well, and Theo couldn’t help cringing, both at the expense and the concern that the celebrity might try it and find all of it tasted terrible compared to the caviar or salmon pate or whatever else he was used to eating.

But Theo said nothing as Lysander placed the tubs into the cart, reluctantly starting towards the dairy aisle once the pop star fell back into step beside him. While reaching for a tub of strawberry-flavored Greek yogurt, he caught Lysander looking with his eyes narrowed distastefully at the milk next to it. “Wh-what?”

“Oh...just jealous.” At Theo’s look of befuddlement, Lysander laughed. “I’m lactose intolerant.”

Theo’s jaw almost dropped at that. The golden god was...*lactose intolerant*? Lysander had *flaws* like that?

“S-so...no ice cream, th-then?” he asked haltingly, struggling past his shock at the fact that the celebrity was actually a human being, at least in some ways.

“No ice cream,” Lysander confirmed, sounding devastated. His eyes brightened again as he added, “I can have non-dairy Italian shaved ice, though.”

Italian shaved ice was way too fancy for the cheap grocery outlet to carry so Theo only frowned in apology, moving on from the aisle so Lysander needn’t

continue suffering the sight of foodstuffs his body apparently wouldn't let him consume, though Theo had intended to grab milk as well.

Finally, they made their way to the check-out counter, though Theo left his cart in line briefly to grab a loaf of bread from the aisle facing towards the check-out lines. When he returned to the cart, he found Lysander leaning forward in front of it while interacting with the baby in the seat of the cart before them, comically wiggling his eyebrows and cooing at her about how adorable she was in a silly voice that had the baby giggling wildly while the mother cast back a subtly amused expression, so long as the strange man didn't actually try to *touch* her child.

Lysander liked kids? Another bizarrely human thing about him. Theo tried not to gawk as he loaded the items onto the conveyor belt, Lysander turning from the baby at last to reach his long arms into the cart and retrieve the bottom later that Theo would have had to halfway crawl inside to reach.

Soon enough, Theo had the cart on the other side of the conveyor belt, loading the groceries into bags while the check-out clerk tallied up the rest of the items. After the last item, she announced the price--\$25 over budget, thanks to the deli food—but just as Theo started to cross to the other side of the check-out counter to pay for it, Lysander slid suddenly between him and the card reader, shoving his debit card in before Theo had a chance to push in his own.

Theo sputtered, but, not wanting to make a scene in front of the other customers, waited until they had made it back to the car to round his glare towards the celebrity. “Y-you didn't have to d-do that,” he muttered, halfway towards a hiss.

“I know,” Lysander replied lightly, ignoring Theo's glare as he started loading items into the back of the sedan. “But I wanted to.” The singer paused with one of the bags in hand, using his other to pull the mask down briefly and flash him a smile. “I was going to pay for the meal anyway, remember?”

“Y-yeah, but...” Paying for a meal at a restaurant and paying for groceries were *different*. At least the meal could ostensibly be considered a “business expense,” but groceries were...groceries were so fucking *domestic*.

Theo still wasn't sure how he felt about the whole thing as they pulled back in front of the apartment, loading his arms with as many bags as he could handle once they'd parked so he wouldn't have to make two trips. Lysander retrieved the rest, then smoothly reached in front of Theo and loaded his arms with two more that Theo had been in the middle of grabbing himself.

Okay, fuck, this was getting ridiculous. Lysander was acting like his boyfriend, and they hadn't even officially said if they liked each other that way or not.

That terrible feeling of self-consciousness was back, and Theo almost dropped his keys as he unlocked the door. He was so distracted that he didn't notice Siti's shoes were on the rack—didn't realize she was home as he dropped the bags onto the floor of the kitchenette and started putting groceries away until he heard her say softly from the hallway, “Oh, wow...Hi again.”

“Hi,” Lysander greeted her as he dismantled his incognito costume, flashing her a smile. “Been a while. How are you?”

“Fine, fine,” Siti answered, raking her stare back and forth between them. “You...went grocery shopping together?”

“Yup.” Stooping to reach into one of the bags Theo hadn't put away yet, Lysander grabbed all the containers from the deli at once, stacking them on the end of the counter as if showing off a large fish he'd caught. “Got dinner. You hungry?”

Siti paused for a long moment, still looking them over before she said finally, “Sure.” Her eyes were burning with questions when she caught Theo's gaze, but he only blushed and shrugged, putting away the last items.

She moved to his other side and reached into the cabinet, pulling out plates and silverware, enough for the three of them. Their dishware was as cheap and mismatched as the rest of the apartment—ceramic from the thrift store, but all in different sizes and patterns, and half the fork tongs were slightly bent. Siti, at least, seemed unashamed as she set the dishware onto the counter and started opening up the containers from the deli.

Lysander, meanwhile, had lowered onto the thin carpet on his hands and knees, smiling patiently at the black cat who'd finally stopped hissing, but who still stared at the unknown human with wide yellow-green eyes, tail flicking in irritation. Even still, Lysander made no movement towards Rogue, only watched him quietly, as if waiting for the cat to decide on his own whether he would allow the singer to pet him or not.

“Um...h-here,” Theo mumbled, opening a cabinet door, and Rogue’s attention shifted towards him as soon as Theo pulled out a small bag. “These are his f-favorite.”

Approaching Lysander from the other side, he tilted the bag to drop a few cat treats into his own palm, then passed them off to the blonde, barely able to prevent himself from jerking his hand back shyly when their fingers briefly touched. Rogue looked torn between approaching for the treats and remaining out of range of the stranger, one paw stepping uncertainly forward and whiskers twitching in the air while he carefully sniffed in the treats’ direction.

“Why Rogue?” Lysander asked as he continued to patiently wait for the cat to approach him on his own, holding the treats palm-up with his hand resting on the carpet.

“Oh...f-from X-folk.” Theo cringed internally, wondering if that was nerdy. Then again, Lysander had had that video game character cardboard cut-out in his apartment...maybe he didn’t totally abhor “nerdy” hobbies.

“X-folk?” Turning quickly at that, which had the unfortunate effect of scaring Rogue into retreating further under the coffee table, Lysander bathed Theo in a

bright smile. “That’s so funny. My niece is named after an X-folk character, too.”

Niece? Ah, well Lysander had demonstrated in the grocery store that he apparently liked interacting with children...and there was real love and affection in the singer’s expression while he mentioned his niece. Theo found himself wondering what age this niece was and what she looked like—not enough that he’d violate Lysander’s privacy by doing a web search about it though.

“Oh?” he mumbled, not knowing what else to say to that. Lysander was already focused on trying to entice Rogue out again anyway, seemingly dead-set on earning the cat’s approval of him before he left. Which, speaking of... “Um...s-sorry grocery shopping t-took so long.” It was already well into dinner time—surely Lysander had some fancy party or other function to get to, even though it was a Thursday.

“It’s fine.” The singer set a few of the treats closer to the table while keeping the rest in his palm, laying out a trail Hansel-and-Gretel style. “I already cleared the rest of my schedule for the day.”

An unexpected burst of pleasure wracked through Theo at that—though Lysander hadn’t specifically said *he’d* been the reason for the cleared schedule, that seemed to be implied nonetheless. Biting his lip to keep from smiling, Theo busied himself loading up a plate with items from the deli, stomach rumbling in excitement at the chance to eat something that actually had substance for once.

“Are you going to eat or keep trying to play with Rogue?” Siti chastised Lysander with her usual lack of deference. “Hurry up before it gets cold.”

Laughing perhaps at her bluntness, Lysander finally rose, leaving the treats on the ground beside the coffee table for Rogue to ever so slowly poke his head out then dart after, and moved towards the kitchenette to wash his hands. Given the narrow confines of the apartment, that required passing very

closely by Theo, and Theo tried not to react as his skin rippled with gooseflesh just from the sensation of Lysander sweeping past.

Theo hastily left the counter before Lysander went to the end of it to load his own plate, looking about the living room hesitantly before lowering himself onto the furthest edge of the couch. They didn't have a proper dining table—only the couch with its coffee table, which served well enough. Still, the idea of the famous celebrity's well-toned butt touching such a stained surface was a little...

"It's too quiet in here," Siti announced, and she grabbed the TV remote as she sat on the other side of the couch from Theo, turning it on and navigating to the music-playing app. For a panicked moment, he thought she might load up Lysander's music just to mess with Theo—but she only went to one of her usual stations, an eclectic mix of grunge, alternative, and 80's rock ballads.

Given that Theo had sat on one side of the couch and Siti had dropped into the other, that left only the middle spot for Lysander to take. He did so without hesitation, holding the plate balanced delicately with one hand and flashing Theo a smile from right next to him.

Every fiber on his right side *burned*, and Theo coughed, staring at his plate. He didn't trust his hand not to shake as he held a fork, so Theo forced himself to say instead, "Sh-shit, I forgot drinks." One of the items they'd purchased had been a twelve pack of root beer—one of the few vices he allowed himself, other than the occasional cigarette or bowl of weed. But they didn't have a working ice maker, and neither of them ever remembered to fill the small plastic tray in the freezer, so he had no way to make it cold. God...his apartment *really* wasn't set up for entertaining someone who was used to luxury.

"Oh, yeah, soda would be nice," Lysander responded, already dipping into his food with gusto. No look of horror crossed his face as he ate, so Theo chose to take that as a sign that he didn't think the food was disgusting—or maybe the singer was just really, really hungry.

“Me too,” Siti called, then turned to Lysander with a slightly mischievous smile. “I have a bottle of tequila in my room. You want some?”

Theo’s eyes widened in horror, but Lysander only shook his head with a laugh. “I shouldn’t. I still have my car here to drive back.”

Siti’s cheshire smile dropped into a pout. “Boring. Theo won’t drink with me and I don’t want to drink alone. Can’t you just get, like, one of your servants to drive it back for you?”

“One of my ‘servants’?” Lysander echoed, sliding her an amused smirk. “I’m not royalty, you know.”

*Might as well be*, Theo thought to himself, but kept silent as he pushed up from the couch again and went into the kitchenette to get three cans of soda, ruing the fact that he hadn’t thought of getting a bag of ice while he was at the store.

And just as she had managed to the first time they’d hung out together with Lysander, Siti’s imperturbable manner broke the tension sufficiently enough that even Theo was able to slowly relax into something akin to camaraderie. Although he couldn’t stop sneaking glances towards Lysander as the three of them listened to music and ate, still marveling that Lysander was in the apartment in the first place.

It had only been, what, a little over a month since he’d first seen Lysander glowing on stage at Halo, had assumed he must be the most arrogant prick Theo had ever met—and now here he was in Theo’s crappy little apartment, having pleasant conversation with his roommate, long legs stretched out leisurely to cross at the ankle under his coffee table while his cat peeked at the three of them from behind the TV stand. It all felt so detached from reality—that someone with Lysander’s wealth and fame could be this personable, that Theo could already *like* him so much.

“Well...been great talking to you again and all, but I have a test on Monday for protein-mediated cell signaling that I need to study for. You kids stay out of trouble, you hear?” Rising from the couch with her empty plate in hand, Siti

gave them a finger-wagging as if chastising small children, even though she was two years younger than Theo.

“Protein-medi...what?” Lysander laughed, shaking his head in bemusement as he set his own empty plate on the coffee table then eased back into the couch with his arms stretched across the back of it, dangerously close to touching Theo’s shoulders while Theo kept his back ramrod straight. “God, I’m glad I got to avoid those advanced classes in college.”

Lysander in college—that was a funny mental image. Dressed in a pink feather boa and eyeliner, crouched over a desk in the student library cramming for a test...

Theo realized he ought to head to his bedroom soon as well, especially if he wanted to work on the track at all before he had to sleep so he didn’t pass out at his job the next morning, but he wasn’t ready to kick the handsome blonde out of his apartment yet—not unless Lysander showed some sign of needing or wanting to go.

Though his desire to keep Lysander there for a little longer faltered once Siti disappeared into her room, leaving just the two of them in the living room where Lysander was currently facing him with a sly little smile.

Whatever thoughts were going on in his pretty blonde head, Theo couldn’t guess, unable to look at him for more than a second before Theo jerked to his feet, took the dishes to the sink, and started to wash them with jittery hands. Moments later, he felt a presence next to him, behind him, everywhere—he almost gasped as Lysander reached over him, but it was only to grasp the roll of paper towels atop the fridge at his side.

“Made a mess on the couch,” Lysander offered with a low chuckle, giving Theo the distinct feeling that the singer knew exactly what sort of effect his closeness was having on Theo, and that he was enjoying every minute of it. “I’d be a terrible houseguest if I didn’t clean up after myself.”

“I-It’s fine,” Theo mumbled, pretending as if they weren’t playing some sort of game with Lysander’s stealthy flirtations and Theo’s shy retreats. *Fuck—*

should he just give up on the pretense and whip around to throw his arms about Lysander? Or maybe the challenge was what kept the singer interested, and as soon as Theo responded eagerly, Lysander would get bored and the charade of friendship would end? “S’not like one more s-stain would matter.”

“Oh, don’t say that.” Lysander was already back at the couch, gently rubbing a spot that had nothing on it with a paper towel as he said, “Stains have stories. I bet this couch has seen some shit.”

Theo whirled around, thinking perhaps Lysander was making some sort of insinuation that Theo had done *dirty things* atop the couch, but the singer was already laughing, eyes crinkling with amusement. “I-It’s used,” Theo stammered anyway, feeling his cheeks heat up despite himself. “W-we didn’t—I n-never—”

“Relax.” Gradually, Lysander’s laughter eased, and he gave Theo a practiced wink that made his knees weak. “I’m just messing with you.”

That little bit of “messing” already had Theo’s heart hammering in his chest, and he decided maybe it was time for the singer to go home after all. Not sure how to broach the topic without coming off as unbearably rude, Theo hesitantly announced, “A-anyway, thanks for the payment, n-now I can get the board fixed a-and start mixing the...the new p-parts in...” Yes, work. The song he’d signed a contract to create with Lysander. *That* topic would save him from having to come up with more excuses for himself to avoid pouncing on the handsome blonde.

He *really* needed to get back onto the hookup apps.

Disappointment filtered across the singer’s expression, but he nodded slowly and rose to his feet, taking the hint. “Sounds great,” he said, then held up the dirty paper towel balled into his fist. “Where’s your trash?”

“I-I got it.” Theo reached out to snatch the towel from him, very careful not to let their fingers brush again as he did. Jerking open the cabinet door beneath the sink and thrusting the towel into the waste bin inside it, he forced himself to face Lysander again as he did his best to play his part as the

gracious host. “Um...th-thanks for...all of it. I’ll, uh...I-I’ll send you something to r-review as soon as I’ve c-composed it, okay?”

“Okay.” In three loping strides, Lysander was at the exit to the small apartment, turning towards Theo with his hand on the knob and a small smile on his beautiful face. “I’m looking forward to it. Goodnight, Theo.”

“N-Night,” Theo mumbled in automatic reply, waiting with wide eyes until the singer had fully left the apartment before he halfway sank back against the counter, the sharp edge of the laminate top cutting into his back. *Holy shit.*

This was a dangerous game they were playing, and Theo still wasn’t sure if he was the prize or the sacrifice.

It was titillating, terrifying—quite suddenly, Lysander had become a major fixture in his life, on his mind almost always, certainly a frequent guest in his dreams—especially the ones that he awakened from in a sweaty, turned-on mess. And yet, Theo had no idea if Lysander thought of him at *all* as the singer floated through his own busy life—as he faced his legions of fans, strumming his heart out on that pink and white electric guitar, as he lived a sort of existence Theo couldn’t imagine, let alone want for himself...

He *had* to finish that damn song, had to hold up his part of the deal and conclude the business end of their arrangement—*then* Theo could see how Lysander behaved once the only excuse to see any more of each other would be if Lysander simply wanted to be around him for Theo’s own sake. In whatever capacity that might be.

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