

Floral

There is an odd beeping sound. It's somehow familiar, but I'm not sure where I might have heard it from. I only remember the blue wetness of my cocoon and then being pulled out of it by a dark-headed man with a hard, cold arm. He held me so tight. It felt... good. I don't remember ever being held like that. I don't remember anything. Nothing except for that wet dwelling.

When my eyes flutter open, I realize I'm lying on a hard bed. The beeping noise is coming from a box with squiggly lines that run up and down on its face. I'm mesmerized by it for a moment before I realize I'm covered in thin, colorful vines that peek out from a thin robe. I tilt my head in confusion at the vines before standing up. I'm bare foot and feel claustrophobic in the robe, so I yank it off. The air is cold and smells like chemicals, another strangely familiar note. The room, other than the beeping boxes I am attached to, is empty. I see a door across the room and feel the sudden urge to distance myself from this stale, white room.

But when I take a step forward, my legs buckle and I fall to my knees. I'm weak. I have to get out of this room. *What is this feeling?* My palms are tingling and my heart is racing and I'm helpless but I need to get out of this room.

I stare at the door, longing to be on the other side. There's a warmth encircling my hands and feet, and when I look down, roots are growing out of the white tiles and wrapping around my limbs. They slowly push me back upright. When I take another step, I stumble again, but this time, they catch me.

Ah, I remember this. I smile at the roots. *Thank you.*

With their help, I stagger towards the door. The closer I get, the more vines pop off my body, and a few that were embedded under my skin rip away, red liquid runs down from their previous dwellings. The beeping box's steady rhythm switches to a high pitched, prolonged tone. It frightens me, and I urge the roots to hurry. I grasp the handle and turn it, using all of my strength to pull the door open, only to find a man with yellow hair and blue eyes standing in its place.

He's saying something. I can't understand him. Why can't I understand him? His voice isn't angry, but it's firm, and somehow that frightens me even more. The roots seem to react to my fear and dig into my calves and forearms. They are ready to defend me.

He says something else, this time in a softer tone and with a concerned look. He tries to grab onto my shoulders, but my roots shoot out towards his hands. He retreats before my roots can pierce his skin. He's staring at me now, hopefully realizing it's better if he keeps his distance. Then there's a familiar voice calling out to him. My eyes widen as the man with the cold arm steps beside the yellow haired one, only casting a quick glance at me before his attention is on the yellow haired man. He is cleaner than he was when he first held me. His hair is pulled back, and he's wearing a red shirt that tightens across his broad chest each time he inhales. The shirt's sleeves are rolled up enough for me to see the glint of his silver arm. I shiver and suddenly feel how naked I am.

I recognize his smell, too. Mint and blood. I can smell him even over the scent of the yellow haired man. It's intoxicating, and I feel the need to be closer to him. But he's talking with the other man now, quarreling I think. My body quakes as an unpleasant tickling sensation ripples from my feet to my head. He's not noticing me as much as I'm

noticing him. I was unaware until now that, as I'm feeling this, and as they're too busy quarreling in the doorway, one of my roots that was connected to my left arm has extended its way over to the dark-haired man. It begins to tentatively wind around his metal forefinger. I can feel the cold, hard surface of the finger through the root and I shiver in delight. He still is too busy with the other man, so I let my root curl around more of his fingers, up his wrist. The root begins to spread, and little leaves and flower buds sprout across his hand.

It's not until he raises his arm to point an accusing finger in the other's face that they both realize what is happening. I sigh in relief as I now have his full attention. He whispers something, a question maybe, and stares back and forth from my eyes and my roots. I smile and feel the heat rise to my cheeks as my roots unwind themselves from him and back to my arms, this time extending to my bare chest and thighs to give the illusion of some modesty.

He's still staring as he walks up to me, towering over me. I tense, more out of excitement than fear like before. He crouches down to eye level and asks me a question. But I still don't know what he is saying. He repeats himself a few times before I fully comprehend.

"Will." He points to the yellow-haired man still standing dumbfounded in the doorway. "James." He brings his hand to his chest. Then he points to me with a questioning look.

He wants my name. My name... I don't remember... Was I ever called anything? Did I ever have anyone to call me anything, anyway? What was the point in a name if you

were always alone? Was I always alone? When the questions in my head become too much, I try to focus on their names instead.

“Wuh-ill.” I point to Will. “J-James.” I rest a hand on his chest and blush at how warm he is. I hesitate before bringing my hand to my chest. James is smiling at me. It’s such a gentle smile. I don’t want it to go away. I want to make him smile more. So I give him the only answer I have. I cup my hands in front of my chest and look to both of them.

“Will. James.” And when I look down at my hands, I bid with all my strength for my answer to appear. My palms begin to ripple, skin tightening and loosening again and again as if the insides are poking their way out. It starts out as sprouts, little vines growing through, widening and tickling my pores. They wrap around each other and fight for dominance and stability. Then the sprouts turn to stems. Then leaves. The blue and dark red flower buds. They grow until my palms and arms are covered in bright, fragrant flowers. The flowers overflow out of my hands and spill onto the floor and caress over James’s feet until the floor beneath us is covered in a carpet of soft blooms. When I look up, James’s mouth is hanging open. I frown before he looks at me again and shakes his head. He smiles again, wider than the first.

“Flora,” he says.