

## oh my love, don't forsake me

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/17960792) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/17960792>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Not Rated</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings</a>
Category:	<a href="#">F/M</a>
Fandoms:	<a href="#">The Black Tapes Podcast</a> , <a href="#">Tanis (Podcast)</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Alex Reagan/Richard Strand</a> , <a href="#">Alex Reagan/Nic Silver</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Alex Reagan</a> , <a href="#">Richard Strand</a> , <a href="#">Nic Silver</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Angst</a> , <a href="#">Post-Season/Series 03</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence</a> , <a href="#">haven't written fanfiction in 15 years</a> , <a href="#">Alex and Nic are more than friends</a> , <a href="#">that sleep doctor is a major sketch bag</a> , <a href="#">Other Additional Tags to Be Added</a>
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2019-03-01 Updated: 2019-03-05 Words: 5,754 Chapters: 3/?

# **oh my love, don't forsake me**

by [existential\\_crisis\\_katie](#)

## Summary

Alex and Strand are players in a bigger game they thought possible. One that extends past the Order of the Cenophus and potentially into the forest of the Pacific Northwest.

# Chapter 1

*"How are you feeling?"*

*"Fine."*

*"Fine?"*

*"As fine as I can be. I don't know, tired? Exhausted?"*

*"How many hours of sleep did you get last night? Alex?"*

*"One? Maybe two? I drifted off at one point, but then..."*

*"Then?"*

*"I... I don't stay asleep very long anymore."*

*"Do you want to talk about that?"*

*"No."*

*"And you've been following the sleep hygiene routine we talked about?"*

*"Yes. No screens past eight o'clock, light exercise, warm milk. Ambien. I've done everything. For weeks."*

*"You seem agitated, Alex."*

*"I'm sorry, I'm... I can't keep going like this. I'm making mistakes at work. I dozed off at a stop sign the other day. I'm afraid..."*

*"Afraid of what?"*

*"That I'll never sleep again. That I'm turning into a shell, sleepwalking through my life. Jesus, I can't-"*

*"Take a deep breath, Alex. You're in a safe place."*

*"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have come today. This isn't working. I just thought- Nic said it worked for him but clearly this is not for me."*

*"Alex, sit down. Let's talk through this. Nic is your producing partner?"*

*"He's my friend, my best- yes he's my producing partner. He said that your sessions were helpful. I know he's deep in some weird shit too - sorry - so I just thought it would help me too."*

*"It's okay, no need to apologize. You know that I cannot discuss another patient's sessions with you."*

*"I know that. I'm not asking-"*

*"But I can let you know that Mr. Silver is using a different treatment plan than you. Has he talked about his sessions with you?"*

*"The hypnosis, yes. I've heard the recordings."*

*"Does he find them helpful?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Would you like to try a hypnosis session? It could help clear whatever is blocking you from staying asleep."*

*"I don't know if anything will work at this point, I'm not sure."*

*"Just one session. If you don't like it, we can go back to cultivating healthy sleep habits and working through your challenges."*

*"What would I have to do?"*

*"Just lay back and close your eyes and listen to my voice."*

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"I still think this is a bad idea."

"I'm aware, Nic. Can you reach that box for me?"

"Can I list the reasons why again?" Nic stretched to reach the shoebox in Alex's closet she was pointing to. It slid heavily off the shelf into his hands. She didn't answer him.

"That's going to weigh down your carry on," he noted as she took the box from him without meeting his eyes. She dropped it onto her bed and began rifling through the contents, choosing a couple of items and tucking them into the small duffel bag next to her.

"You can't ignore me forever, Alex." He sat down on the bed next to her growing pile of clothes and books that she was packing.

"I didn't ask you to help me pack, Nic," she said tightly, rolling a t-shirt and tucking it into the bag, "I didn't ask you to drive me home from the station. I just asked you to post the podcast once we were gone."

"Hey," he grabbed her hands and pulled her so she was standing between his knees. She didn't pull away, but she kept her eyes firmly on the window behind him. "It's me, Nic. Not your producing partner, not your sort-of boss. Your friend. Your emergency contact. Your 'come-pick-me-up-from-this-date-gone-sour' guy," the corners of her mouth perked up and

she clamped her lips down in an effort not to smile, "your person. And I'm worried." He frowned and moved his head so she would have to look at him. Her small hands were cold and clammy in his. There were dark circles under her eyes. He wanted her to stop what she was doing. He wanted to wrap her up with a blanket and force her to nap while he kept watch over the dark corner in her room. He didn't want her to run off to Geneva with their enigmatic podcast subject.

"I know," she relented, softening her gaze and finally meeting his eyes, "and I know this plan is crazy and a little unethical." Nic raised an eyebrow, "And maybe a little dangerous. But..." She trailed off with a shrug, "the story. I can't let him go off alone. He'd be walking right into a trap. You heard Simon's voicemail."

"So you walking straight into that trap with him is a better idea?" Nic mused, "I'm sure Strand isn't thrilled at the idea of you being in harm's way."

"If I'm there, I think he'll be a little more... cautious. And I think he understands my line of thought. After Turkey..." Alex grimaced, remembering Strand's outburst after he found out she had traveled to Istanbul alone at the behest of a killer teenager. She pulled her hands out of Nic's and squared her shoulders, "He understands why I don't want him to go alone. And he also knows I can buy my own plane ticket and show up in Geneva anyways if he skirts off in the night." She returned to her packing.

Nic sighed deeply and leaned over his knees, rubbing his face. How had it come to this? "So there's nothing I can say to make you stay."

Alex put the last of her belongings in her duffel bag and started pulling the zipper shut. She was quiet for a few minutes as she collected her passport and wallet and tucked them into her purse. At last, she sat next to him on the bed.

"I keenly remember them pulling you out of that cabin," she started quietly, "covered in blood. After leading a search for you for a week. I don't remember getting a phone call from you asking if I was cool with you disappearing into the woods with a team of strangers."

Nic didn't have an answer for that. His disappearance and reappearance in the cabin was still a sore spot between them. Other than the odd narration, he tried to keep his Tanis work separate from Alex. Probably for the same reason she was trying to sneak off to Geneva without letting him get a word in edgewise. When she showed up at the studio that morning with a USB drive containing the final episode of The Black Tapes, he was sure she expected to slip into her car without a second word. Fortunately he was able to pin her into the studio long enough to listen to what she had put together and convince her to let him drive her home.

Alex leaned her head onto his shoulder and yawned. Her phone buzzed. "That'll be Strand, he was going to meet me here once he was packed and we were going to take a cab to the airport."

"So not after a night of wine and..." he trailed off and waggled his eyebrows at her. She slapped him on the chest, but didn't argue.

"Let me drive you to the airport," he said as she stood and gathered her bags, "It'll give me peace of mind. And I can give Strand a piece of my mind."

Alex frowned, "He is still the subject of our podcast."

"Is he? After the last episode?"

"You know what I mean."

"Relax," Nic stood and stretched, following her to the porch, "I just want him to know that if he doesn't return with you in one piece, he'll have more to fear than shadowy figures."

Alex gave him a once over and rolled her eyes as she pulled her coat on.

"Hey!" Nic whined, "I don't look like much, but I'm scrappy."

A sharp knock on the door interrupted their exchange. Alex opened it to reveal the good doctor standing on the other side, a similar duffel bag slung over his shoulder.

"Nic," he said, taken aback, "I wasn't expecting to see you here." He looked to Alex for confirmation. Nic stepped in front of her before she could interject.

"If anything happens to her while you're gone," Nic started. Strand looked from Alex to Nic and back to Alex. Alex shrugged her shoulders and yawned. Better to let him get it out of his system now. "I swear to god I will use all my resources to make your life miserable."

Strand frowned, clearly thinking about what kind of resources the short Canadian reporter would have in his arsenal to affect his life in any way. He bit back his response and nodded.

"I have advised Miss. Reagan that in light of the new revelations, it would be safer for her to stay in Seattle," Alex opened her mouth to interject but Strand put up his hand to stop her, "and she has insisted on joining me on this trip. I think we both know her well enough to know that she won't stop at any means to get to the end of her story," he looked her pointedly, "even if that means jeopardizing her own safety."

Nic stared at him, and he continued. "Rest assured, I will put her safety before mine."

"That's not fair," Alex interjected, "We're both equally important here. We can watch each other's backs."

Nic and Strand shared a look.

"Well, now that that's out of the way, I'll be driving you to the airport," Strand opened his mouth to interrupt, but it was Nic's turn to stop him, "and I will be waiting at the airport until your plane is gone. That's the very least I can do." He then brushed past Strand and headed for the stairs.

Alex came to stand next to Strand and touched his elbow. He turned towards her, stepping into her space. His hand reached towards her arm like it wanted to touch her or pull her to him. He settled for laying it on her shoulder.

"You can still stay here," he murmured, looking down at her. Alex gave him a sad smile.

"You know I can't. Let's go." She ushered him out the door and locked it, the deadbolt sliding into place with a clunk.

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*"Close your eyes and listen to my voice."*

*"Okay."*

*"I'm going to count down from ten. With each number, feel your body relax. Ten."*

*"Nine, your body is heavy. You're sinking into a warm cloud."*

*"Eight, relax."*

*"Seven, with each breath, feel your tension melt away."*

*"Six."*

*"Five, your body feels so heavy, you can't bear to move. It feels so good just to lay right there."*

*"Four."*

*"Three, sinking deeper and deeper."*

*"Two, almos there. When I say one and snap my fingers, you will be perfectly relaxed, only hearing the sound of my voice."*

*"One."*

*"Now, I want you to think back to a time when you felt perfectly safe..."*

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

Friends, I am a 30-year-old teacher. I haven't written anything but academic essays in 15 years. This is purely a guilty pleasure. I finished listening to TBTP and proceeded to read every goddamn fic in this fandom. This has been rolling around in my head for a few months and it feels good to get it down on paper. This is totally un-beta'd, so mistakes are my own. Enjoy!

*"Where are you, Alex?"*

*"I'm in the woods."*

*"Can you describe what you see?"*

*"There's a campfire. It's down to the embers. It's dark out."*

*"What does it feel like?"*

*"It's warm. I'm sitting on a blanket. I'm wearing someone else's sweater. I feel..."*

*"How do you feel, Alex?"*

*"I feel safe. I'm in the forest at night and I feel totally and completely safe."*

*"Look around. Is there anyone with you?"*

*"Yes. Nic's sitting on a log behind me. There's a dog curled up at his feet. It's his parent's retriever."*

*"What is Nic doing?"*

*"He's smiling at me."*

---

When Strand received the cryptic voicemail from the man claiming to be his father, he made his mind up then and there to cancel Alex's plane ticket to Geneva. He would never forgive himself if he brought her into was now clearly much more than giving a talk in the Alps. When he brought it up to her, he was surprised that she didn't react. She simply nodded and informed him that she had work to do and she would catch up with him later. Dumbfounded, Strand returned to his office.



That night, as he swung into his driveway, the lights of his car illuminated a dark figure sitting on his porch. He frowned and shut the car off. In the dark of the moonless night, he couldn't quite make out who was sitting on his front porch. Whoever it was wasn't large and seemed to be crouched on the top step. He slowly made his way out of the driver's side door.

"Hello?" he called into the night. The figure stirred and stood up.

It was Alex.

"Ah, Doctor Strand! You're home!"

It was a particularly cheery Alex.

"Is everything okay?" he jogged over to her, his leather shoes crunching on the gravel. What on earth could she be doing here so late?

"Oh, yes," she swayed on the spot. Her hand was clutching a bag, "I am outstanding," she announced, biting out each syllable like a person trying very hard to sound like she was sober.

Strand grasped her by the shoulders so she wouldn't topple over. She wasn't wearing a coat, "Let's get inside. You're freezing." He maneuvered her up the stairs to the front door, "How long have you been sitting there?"

"Long enough," she held up the paper bag, which Strand saw contained an empty bottle of wine. He shut his eyes tight against the headache he could feel coming on and pushed her through the door, locking it behind him.

Alex kicked off her shoes and headed for the kitchen. By the time Strand caught up with her, she was standing on her tiptoes reaching for a bottle of liquor she knew he kept on the top shelf.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Strand came up behind her and pulled her down, "you're going to have to tell me exactly what's going on before we get into the good stuff." She turned around so she was chest-to-chest with him and hitched herself up onto the counter so they were at eye level.

"What's going on," she leaned close and whispered, "is that a cult is luring you to Geneva to be sacrificed in some creepy underground tunnel to help them make demons." Strand frowned and opened his mouth to protest. She put a finger to his lips and continued, louder, "What's going on is for some reason you're only now concerned with my safety when I haven't slept in months and apparently have shadow people creeping around my room. What's going on," she was shouting now, "is that Nic thinks I'm in love with you and that I'm running off to Geneva so we can bang in your sponsored hotel room." She hiccupped and covered her mouth, suppressing what was either a giggle or a sob, Strand wasn't sure.

Strand felt his mouth go dry. The words "in love with you" rang in his ears (the words "bang in the hotel room" echoing in the background).

"Alex, I-" he stumbled over his words, backing away from the counter.

"Do you want to hear it?" She had fished her phone out of her pocket and was waving it around, "I recorded it just in case." She fumbled with the home button. Strand snatched the phone out of her hand and slipped in his pocket, stepping back into her space, crowding her against the cabinets.

"No," he breathed, bracing himself on her shoulders, "No, I don't want to hear it."

Alex wordlessly leaned forward until her forehead was leaning on his chest. Her shoulders shook softly.

Strand hesitated. Although it had been many years since he had been in close proximity to a crying woman, his first instinct was to pull her close and soothe her troubled mind. However, her reaction to Nic's accusation made him think otherwise. He settled for a soft pat on the shoulder.

"Alex, obviously Nic is seeing something that isn't there," he started, quietly, "or maybe he was joking?"

Alex pulled back from his chest and scrubbed at her face with the sleeve of her flannel shirt. She sniffed loudly and looked up at him with round green eyes. Strand forced himself to remove his hands from her shoulder as she chewed on her lip.

"He's not right," she finally said, "but he's also not wrong."

Strand blinked hard. "What are you saying?"

Alex shook her head and slipped off the counter. She brushed past him and started pacing.

"I have a plan," she announced. Richard reached into the cupboard and pulled down the whiskey Alex was going for. He poured himself a healthy drink and knocked it back.

"We need to go to Geneva," she started, "but we need to have the element of surprise. We know that Thomas Warren listens to the podcast." She turned towards him and slapped her hands down on the counter, eyes blazing, "we can use that to our advantage."

Strand coughed and poured a second drink. He slid it towards her. "And how do you reckon we do that?"

Alex picked up the whiskey and downed the glass in one gulp.

"This is what we do."

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*"Do you remember when this was?"*

*"I do. It's the summer before we started the Black Tapes. We went home to go on a camping trip. It rained the whole way to the park, but when we got there it was warm and sunny and..."*

*"Alex?"*

*"It was the perfect trip."*

---

Strand rapped on the passenger side window. Nic had pulled his green sedan around to the front of Alex's apartment and was idling in the fire lane. He was hunched over his phone, fingers furiously typing. Strand knocked again.

"Get in the back," Nic called through the door, not looking up. Alex reached around Strand and pulled on the handle.

"Nic, let us in. We can't be late for our flight."

Nic finished typing on his phone and shoved it in his pocket. He unlocked the doors and Alex slipped into the front.

"Sorry," she mouthed to Strand, who resolutely climbed into the back of the small car, his knees crowding behind Alex's seat.

"I have to make a quick stop," Nic said as he pulled onto the main road.

"We really don't have time for a pitstop," Strand remarked, annoyed that this was how his last hours of relative freedom were going to be spent. He imagined getting to the airport with Alex fairly early and either plying out an answer to her cryptic 'he's not wrong' statement from a few nights ago or delaying her long enough that she missed the flight and was forced to stay in Seattle. Nic's sudden arrival had squashed any hope for either plan.

"It'll be quick," Nic told him and then turned the music up.

Halfway to the airport, Nic pulled onto a side street and wound through a residential neighborhood until he found the house he was looking for. He honked the horn three times.

"Where are we?" Alex asked, craning her neck to see who was coming out of the house. A second later, a sharp rapping on the window opposite Strand startled all of them.

"Who is that?" Strand asked hotly as Nic pressed the button to roll down the back window. A short and lean woman with a shock of purple hair jammed herself into the window.

Nic met Strand's gaze in the rearview mirror: "That would be my resources."

"MK," Alex sighed in relief.

MK tossed a small bag into the back seat, which Strand awkwardly caught.

"Burner phones," she explained, "some extra cash, the names of a few people in Paris who will help you out."

Alex turned to Nic, "I didn't tell you we were going to Paris." Nic shrugged and didn't meet her eyes.

"I know things," MK drawled. She turned to Richard, "And this must be the famous Richard Strand."

Strand stared back at her, unblinking. If this was supposed to be intimidating it wasn't going to work.

"And you are?"

"Richard Strand," MK continued, "Blood type B-, social security number 305-09-4235, always on time with his taxes, hasn't seen a dentist in two years, favorite take out place is the Vietnamese place on the corner of Harrington and Main and," she turned her gaze to Alex, "has a thing for brunettes."

The car was silent.

"If you think you can rattle off some facts that are easily found by a-

"Is that what you wanted, Nic?" MK cut Strand off with a roll of her eyes.

"Yes, MK, thank you," Nic turned in his seat to smile warmly at her.

"Be safe, kids." And she was gone.

Nic started the car and continued towards the airport.

---

*"What's happening now?"*

*Nic's pulling on my sleeve. He wants to go to bed but I want to stay at the fire. The stars are so bright."*

*"What is he doing now?"*

*"He's pouring water on the fire. I ask him what he's doing and he says we can see the stars better without the light. He's got a blanket with him and he wraps it around us."*

---

Nic pulled up to the passenger drop off and put the car into park. Strand floundered for a moment, unsure of what to say. Instead, he climbed out of the car, pulling his duffel behind him.

"I'll see you in a few weeks," Alex offered sweetly. Nic still wouldn't look at her. She ducked her head and frowned. When he didn't respond, she sighed and went to open the door. Just as she had her foot on the pavement, he darted out and grabbed her wrist, pulling her back into the car, the door shutting behind her.

"I have a really bad feeling about this," Nic said lowly, finally looking at her. His eyes were round with worry. He was still holding her wrist.

Alex put on a smile, "I'll be fine. We'll fly to Paris and get to Geneva on the ground. Warren will hear the podcast and think we've either run off or he'll be expecting us when the conference starts next week."

"I don't trust Strand." Nic blurted, "I think he's been manipulating you-- us-- from the beginning."

"You can't possibly think he's created this elaborate hoax to do-- to do what? To get me to Geneva? To what end?"

"I- I don't know," Nic admitted, "I know that you two have grown close and I think it's clouding your judgment. I'm worried you're going to get over there and something will happen and--" He stopped himself and let go of her wrist, putting both hands back on the steering wheel and resting his forehead.

Alex reached over and pulled on his arm. He looked at her, sheepishly.

"And you won't be able to pull me out of the cabin?" she offered. He nodded.

"Oh Nic," she sighed, reaching up and cupping his cheek. He leaned into her touch and closed his eyes.

"I promise not to drink any suspicious tea or go into the forest or enter any strange cabins." She caught his eye and smiled. The corner of his lips turned up.

"Well, if you promise," he drawled, "and if you text me from that burner phone every day."

Alex nodded solemnly, "Yes, I promise."

"Alex, we have to go," Strand called from outside. He was standing next to the car shifting impatiently from foot to foot.

"Coming!" she called back without turning around. She leaned in and kissed him on the corner of his mouth.

"See you in a few weeks," she whispered again, and then she was gone.

---

*"I'm going to count to five and snap my fingers. When you hear my fingers snap, you will awake feeling well rested and safe, just like in your memory."*

*"One."*

*"Two."*

*"Three."*

*"Four."*

*"Five."*

*"Wake up."*

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

Very motivated by the kudos - drop me a comment!

*"Hello Alex, I wasn't expecting to see you today. My receptionist tells me you didn't have an appointment booked today?"*

*"I thought... I could have sworn it was today. I-I don't think I meant to come here."*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"I was driving to the studio, but I took a wrong turn. When I got here..."*

*"You assumed you had an appointment?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Well, you're in luck. My next patient just canceled. Would you like to come in, since you're here?"*

*"Um, I guess. Let me just text Nic and tell him I'll be late."*

*"How have you been feeling?"*

*"Better, I think. I'm sleeping longer, at the very least."*

*"That's good. You're doing the visualization exercises?"*

*"Yes, right before I sleep."*

*"And you're taking the vitamins?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Good."*

*"It's just..."*

*"What is it?"*

*"I'm staying asleep longer, but I don't feel rested. I wake up some mornings feel like I've been working all night long. But I've been asleep."*

*"Interesting. We can address that today if you'd like."*

*"That would be great. I feel like I'm so close to being better."*

*"Excellent. Lay back and relax."*

---

Sea-Tac was as busy as ever when Strand and Alex entered the airport.

"At least we don't have to check our bags," Alex said. She hiked her duffel bag higher on her shoulder and scanned the crowd for the quickest route to security. Richard watched her carefully. Nic hadn't been as discrete with his parting message as Strand figured he was trying to be. He'd seen Alex lean in before leaving the car, but fortunately, his height stopped him from witnessing the end of that exchange.

"Excuse me!" Someone barreled past Strand, briefly knocking him off balance and making him drop his bag. Glaring at the stranger's retreating figure, he reached down and retrieved his bag.

"Running in a crowd this big, honestly," he muttered, turning to where Alex was...

...Gone.

"Alex?" he shouted. Her legs were significantly shorter than his, but boy was she fast. Strand scanned the lobby until he saw her reddish-brown head bobbing near the entrance to security.

When he caught up to her, she was fumbling with the zipper on her coat. People were slowly making their way through the winding security line.

"Trying to lose me?" he joked, bumping into her shoulder.

"I am not going to miss this flight," she said hotly, "I don't care what you or Nic say, I am going to Geneva and I am figuring this out." Her zipper finally gave and she shrugged the jacket off, slinging it over her arm.

"Hey," he tugged on her elbow so she would face him, "we're in this together. Would I rather have you stay here where you'll be safe from whatever I've brought into your life? Of course. It would be irresponsible of me to think otherwise. But we're in this together." He brought a large hand up to cup her cheek and tipped her head up to look at him. "You and me. We're at the center of this. Together."

"Together," Alex confirmed.

Strand's brow pinched together as he held her face in his hand. Her eyes were determined - a look he was quite familiar with at this point - and she was grinning at him. But her eyes had filled with tears. They were spilling down her cheeks.



"Whoa, what's wrong?" he brushed one away with his thumb and brought his other hand up to her shoulder so he could angle her away from prying eyes.

"What?"

"Alex, you're crying." He brought the corner of his jacket to her cheek to wipe away the tears that were still falling. He showed her the damp piece of fabric.

Alex blanched, "What the fuck?" She started wiping at her eyes, "I- What the hell?"

"Maybe there's something in your eye?" Strand offered. Alex kept wiping at her eyes until all traces of tears were gone.

"I have no idea," she sniffed loudly, "I'm not even sad. How do I look?" She presented her tearless face to him. He grimaced and wiped off some of her smudged makeup with the corner of his jacket.

"Passable." He smiled wryly, "shall we?" He gestured to the line that was now moving around them.

---

*"Alex, can you hear me?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Good. I want you only to listen to the sound of my voice. My voice is all you can hear. Listen to my voice and do exactly as I say. Do you understand?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Good. I want you to imagine that you are laying in a large soft bed. Your body is so relaxed, you couldn't bear to move. Are you there?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Excellent. Laying there, you feel so relaxed. All you can feel is the softness of the bed and all you can hear is the sound of my voice."*

*"Relaxed."*

*"As you lay there, you notice that something is moving in the corner of the room, just beyond the darkness. Can you hear it?"*

*"Yes. It's-It's moving."*

*"Good. In the corner of room, standing in the shadows is the thing you fear the most."*

*"Doctor?"*

*"So relaxed. Laying in a soft bed, listening to the sound of my voice. As you lay there, the thing in the shadows moves closer to the bed. It sees you now."*

*"No... No, don't."*

*"It's next to the bed now. You can hear it. You can feel it."*

*"I-I can't move. I'm afraid!"*

*"That's good, that's so good Alex. What can you hear?"*

*"I can hear it breathing. It's right next to me. I can't- I don't want to look."*

*"It's saying something. Alex, what is it saying?"*

*"No, I can't. I can't!"*

*"Laying in the bed, so relaxed, listening to my voice, obeying my voice. Almost there. What is it saying, Alex? Tell me."*

*"The center. It says I'm the center. Please, please make it stop!"*

---

"There's a seat over here." Alex grabbed Strand's hand and led him through a sea of feet and legs to two empty chairs in the waiting area at their gate. She dropped heavily into her seat. Strand did the same next to her, tucking his legs in close.

"We should be boarding soon," he said as he checked his watch, "we made it just in time."

Alex leaned back in her chair and tipped her head back, staring at the ceiling. The tears had stopped, but her eyes were still damp.

"Alex, about what you said the other night," Strand hesitated. Her words were still echoing around in his head. He's not right, but he's also not wrong.

"I said a lot of things the other night, Richard," Alex said slowly, "You'll have to be specific."

"I- About what Nic said," he choked out. His mental processes ground to a halt. This was a bad idea. They were about to embark on a lengthy trip in an airtight tin can. He should have waited to bring it up until they were on the ground. Or better yet back safely in Seattle once this mess was over.

"About that," Alex said. Strand noticed that her cheeks were turning a delicate shade of pink, "That was really unprofessional of me. I should have apologized for showing up at your doorstep like that." She looked down at her hands in her lap.

"No, that's not what I meant," Strand fumbled, "I mean, you don't need to apologize, Miss Reagan." He cleared his throat, "I'm sure it was just a misunderstanding. I'm sorry if I made

you uncomfortable bringing it up. Your motivations for this trip are entirely journalistic. Of course, there's nothing between us."

Alex's eyes widened for a fraction of a second. If it hadn't been so noisy in the airport, Strand would have heard a sharp inhale.

"Of course," she repeated, quietly. She turned towards him and placed her hand on his sleeve, "You know, Richard-

"Now boarding, Flight 465 to Paris, France."

"That's our flight." Richard jumped to his feet, grabbing for his bag and fishing his passport and boarding pass out of his pocket. Alex shook her head and rose, doing the same. They shuffled through the crowd to the boarding line.

"Wait, hold this would you?" Alex pushed her passport and pass into his hands, "My phone is ringing. Who could be calling me now?" She dug around in her pockets.

"Perhaps it's Nic, seeing if you boarded yet." Strand offered with a grimace.

"I told him I'd text- Aha!" she pulled out her phone, "That's strange," she remarked with a frown, "Why would she be calling- can you just wait one second. Hello?" She answered the phone, shoving her hand over her other ear so she could hear better. "Hello?"

Strand moved along with the line, Alex following behind as she listened on the phone.

"I don't understand, could you speak louder?" she said to the person on the other line, "Yes, that's better."

Strand went to hand his documents to the agent. He turned to usher Alex forward.

Without warning, Alex went stiff as a ramrod. Her feet snapped together and her shoulders pulled back. Her eyes went wide and began to water again.

"Alex?" Richard stepped in front of her, meeting her intense, watery gaze. Her eyes flickered around in a panic. He reached towards her as her phone clattered from her hand to the linoleum tile. She mouthed his name but no sound came out.

And then she collapsed, weightless to the ground and began to shake.

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*"Good girl, Alex. Hear it moving next to you. Open your eyes and look at it."*

*"No, no, I can't!"*

*"You will. Listen to my voice, obey my voice."*

*"I'm so scared. Don't make me do this. Richard! Nic! Anyone!"*

*"What do you see Alex?"*

*"It's... It's a tall shadow. It's the one from the pictures... from my bedroom. Oh god, it's on top of me!"*

*"Excellent. Excellent. Now, close your eyes. When I count to three, you will be back at the campfire. Safe at the campfire. One, two, three."*

*"Oh!"*

*"Where are you, Alex?"*

*"Oh thank god, I'm at the campfire."*

*"What do you see?"*

*"The dying embers. The bright stars."*

*"Who is with you?"*

*"Nic. We're sharing a blanket. He has his arms around me and he's pointing out constellations."*

*"How do you feel?"*

*"Safe. I feel safe. Protected."*

*"And?"*

*"Relief. I feel relief."*

*"Good girl, Alex. I'm going to count to ten and wake you up. When I snap my fingers, you will wake up feeling rested and refreshed. You will only feel the fear you felt before when you are sleeping, but you will not remember where it came from. Ready?"*

*"Yes."*

*"One, two, three, you feel safe and warm."*

*"Four, five, six, you are slowly coming out of a pleasant dream."*

*"Seven, eight, nine, you will feel rested and refreshed with only good memories."*

*"Ten. Wake up."*

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