

I come home to a house shrouded in darkness. My partner's car is in the driveway, so I know they're home, but none of the lights are on. Faintly, I hear the shower running.

*Ah, I think. One of those days.*

I toe off my shoes in the dark, one hand braced against the wall so I don't fall onto the cats curling around my feet. My eyes have adjusted enough to the darkness that I can successfully pour the cat food into their bowls without spilling it everywhere. They don't leap upon the kibble with their usual enthusiasm. They take an extra moment to look up at me, plaintive, as if to say, *Take care of them.*

I pad toward the bathroom, away from the windows, further into the inky darkness of my partner's struggle.

When I open the bathroom door, a wave of heavy, hot steam wafts over me. "Robin?" I whisper.

There's no response. I enter the bathroom and tug off my clothes. The candle on the sink is lit, but two of the three wicks are no longer burning. The water in the air is too thick for the candle without the fan running to clear the steam.

When all my clothes have joined the pile on the floor, I pull back the shower curtain just enough for me to slip inside.

My partner is sitting on the floor, head bowed into their lap, hot water burning pink lines down their back. I sit behind them so I don't block the water from hitting them.

"I'm here, Robin," I say softly. "Do you want me to stay?"

There's only silence for a few heartbeats and then they sigh. "Yes. If the water's not too hot, you can hug me."

I know words can be a lot for them at times like this so I don't tell them there isn't water hot enough to keep me from embracing them. I just scoot across the wet floor of the shower to wrap my arms around their waist and rest my head against their back.

"Can I wash your hair?"

Robin stops breathing for just a second. When their breath stutters back to life, one of their hands comes up to hold mine. "Please," they whisper brokenly.

I sit up and reach over their shoulder for the shampoo, pouring a generous amount into my hand and then lathering it steadily into Robin's hair. I take my time rubbing soothing circles into their scalp, because I know they like the feeling of the soap in their hair, fingers on their skin, the smell of subtle freshness.

I rinse slowly too, one hand on their forehead to keep the water out of their eyes. Robin doesn't even open them, trusting and sure of their safety in my care. It's been long enough that I've adjusted to the temperature of the water and it's no longer burning, just warming down to my bones. I tug my fingers gently through the tangles that have formed in Robin's hair from the washing.

I'm attentive in keeping the water out of Robin's face even while I squirt conditioner into my palm and rub that into their hair too. Once the conditioner is in, it has to sit for a couple of minutes. Robin's hair is bleach damaged and crunchy from dyeing it often and the conditioner needs all the time it can get.

Sometimes while we wait, Robin will wash my hair or we'll chat about our days or we'll do body wash, but today I just hold them a little closer under the water, safe and close and steady.

When it feels like enough time has passed, I tilt Robin's head back again and rinse the conditioner from their hair, now smooth and silky again, careful to keep wiping any water droplets away from their eyes.

I treasure their trust like the gift it is; precious and delicate and whisper-quiet.